

CGFM Profile ...

### **County Finance Director Calls MACCY Program 'Phenomenal'**

Technology was not a hot topic when Robert G. Calise earned his undergraduate degree in accounting in 1975.

It was an era of adding machines, debits and credits and spreadsheets the size of a desk. In his 23 years as a finance officer in municipal government, Calise has seen a dramatic shift in his role and in the technology systems that have become the modern tools of the trade.

Calise, who is in his 18th year as the director of finance for Passaic County, NJ, always wanted to get his master's degree to expand his knowledge and update his skills, "but no one's ever given me the kick in the pants to go do it."

The push he needed came from Robert Werner, Ph.D., CGFM, the director of Rutgers University's Master's in Governmental Accounting Program. Calise knew Werner as the coordinator of several continuing education symposiums and as a professor who had put together an advanced degree program that could be tailored to the specific needs of individual students, many of whom are top government financial managers in their own right.

Calise admitted that he entered the program a bit leery about how it would help him, but three years of study and a master's degree later, he calls himself one of the state's most vocal advocates. The program, he said, is "phenomenal."

"It was almost like redoing your accounting program all over again, only at a higher level," he said. The professors are top-notch, and they brought in experts to help the students learn from other agencies. Two examples include speakers from the U.S. Department of Defense and SAP, the firm providing technological solutions for governments.

Now, a year after graduating, Calise is conversant in the latest technologies (he couldn't tell you what Java meant or what a pixel was before) and, with the help of a consulting firm, he led a technological overhaul of the county's financial management systems.

Employees went from keeping manual records to using an Internet-based wide area network to handle purchasing and other tasks that had been paper-intensive and time-consuming.

The course has also brought Calise up to date on the current rules and regulations promulgated by the Governmental Accounting Standards Board (GASB) and more. Now that New Jersey is getting ready to make the conversion to the new financial reporting requirements dictated by GASB Statement 34, Calise is ready. "I'm not fearful of it at all because I had the refresher a year ago."

Not only that, but the program gave Calise his first human resources course after 18 years of supervising employees. He polished his skills in dealing with difficult personnel matters. He also earned a professional license as a school administrator for the State of New Jersey.

He's about to gain another certification. Students must sit for the CGFM Examinations, which serve as the assessment tool to evaluate the program, a requirement for accreditation. The exams not only show how much the students have learned in the master's program, but they also give them a credential that shows employers that they are knowledgeable in all levels of government—local, state and federal.

Calise, who is the Past President of the County Financial Officers Association of New Jersey, believes the credential will be his "ace in the hole" if he decides to look for work elsewhere. He sees the advanced degree and additional credentials as key to his mobility within the field.

Employers nationwide are requiring master's degrees, he said. "It's just not enough to have your license anymore—and justifiably so."— CGFM Profiles by Christina M. Camara