

## **Why Wait? Certification Boosts Career Now**

Stephanie Davis knew she had found her niche in government financial management just four years out of college, and she was ready to advance her career by getting certified.

"When you're so young, you're looking for everything you can to make yourself stand out from the competition," she said. "Professionally, you don't have a lot on your resume." Davis, a Virginia Tech economics graduate, was working as a budget analyst for Chesterfield County, VA, when she heard about AGA's Certified Government Financial Manager (CGFM) Program from a colleague.

Davis not only wanted to give her own career a boost, but she also believed the county would benefit. Excellence in public service is one of Chesterfield County's strategic goals, and when employees achieve certification it not only shows they are knowledgeable in their field, it also supports their employer's organizational goals and objectives.

Davis is now a fiscal data analyst for the county's Comprehensive Services Department, handling all the daily financial management operations, including vendor contracting and negotiations, local and state budgets and accessing various sources of funding including Medicaid.

She is also the first member of AGA's Richmond Chapter and the first employee of Chesterfield County to pass the three CGFM Examinations, and she is the chapter's CGFM coordinator.

The entire process took from September 2000 through May of 2001. Rather than take the CGFM Training Series, jointly offered by AGA and Management Concepts, she decided to study on her own using AGA's list of suggested resources on the website. She set aside five to 10 hours a week to review the material, read articles and take notes.

The exams were tougher than she thought. The first exam, The Governmental Environment, gave her a feel for the format and terminology that helped her in taking the remaining two tests. She also quickly learned where her weaknesses were. She did not pass the third exam, Government Financial Management and Control, which tests auditing knowledge among other things, so she went to the internal audit department at the county, pulled books from their library and studied them. She passed the second time around. She said the exams not only tested her knowledge of general concepts, but how to apply that knowledge to specific real-life scenarios.

"I think the certification says a lot, I really do," she said. "If I was going to hire somebody, I would be impressed if they had passed the exams and achieved this certification."

She said AGA notified the county administrator and her supervisor that she earned the certification, and she also received a formal certificate to hang on her wall. While she didn't receive a pay raise based on her certification, her employer was supportive and paid the \$109 fee for each exam.

Making more money was not the motivating factor, she said, although she does think it will eventually pay off as she has noticed more employers are seeking "CGFM-preferred" candidates. She is also pursuing her master's degree in public administration, which she plans to complete by the end of the year.

Davis views the advanced degree, combined with the CGFM certification, as a forward step for her career since she is so young and doesn't have years of work experience to fall back on. "I'm looking for something to help me stand out."

Through the process, she said, she sharpened her skills in government financial management and learned a lot about auditing, which helps her tremendously as a manager.

The certification has also meant enormous personal satisfaction. "It's nice to have those initials behind my name," she said. – by Christina M. Camara