

CQPA Certification Provides Competitive Edge for New Grads

by Janet Jacobsen

At a Glance . . .

- An introductory quality class is helping undergraduate statistics/quality science majors at Brigham Young University (BYU) prepare for the ASQ Certified Quality Process Analyst (CQPA) exam.
- Once certified, many students are securing internships and part-time jobs with local organizations, giving them valuable work experience with quality methods and improvement processes.
- BYU graduates with the CQPA credential are quickly finding full-time employment due, in part, to the certification and their internship experiences.

With unemployment rates hovering around 10 percent, opportunities are scarce in nearly every field. Job applicants—whether new college graduates or experienced professionals—are looking for something extra to help them stand out from the competition. At Brigham Young University (BYU) in Provo, UT, statistics majors are discovering a competitive edge by earning ASQ's Certified Quality Process Analyst (CQPA) certification.

What Is the CQPA?

A candidate for the CQPA credential typically works under the supervision of a quality engineer or a more senior professional to solve quality problems and participate in improvement projects. This certification is ideal for a recent college graduate or someone new to the quality profession who may be working toward certification as a quality engineer.

Earning the CQPA credential, like all ASQ certifications, involves passing an exam that covers a specific body of knowledge. In this case, the following subject areas are included:

- Quality basics
- Problem solving and improvement
- Data analysis
- Customer-supplier relationships

What sets the CQPA credential apart from other certifications is the education and/or work requirement that calls for either two years of work experience *or* an associate's degree. This opens the door for students, such as statistics majors at BYU, to earn the CQPA credential *before* graduation, thus providing a competitive edge in the employment market.

Incorporating Certification Exam Prep Into Coursework

BYU, an ASQ Site member, became involved with CQPA exam preparation two years ago. Statistics professor John Lawson had assumed the task of recruiting more students into the quality services area of the statistics department. A long-time ASQ member, Lawson felt that the CQPA exam preparation could entice more students to sign up for his course. "I told students that we'd prepare for the exam as part of a class [Introduction to Quality], and that it would help them find internships and jobs," he recalls.

Lawson uses the *Certified Quality Process Analyst Handbook*, by Eldon H. Christensen, Kathleen M. Coombes-Betz, and Marilyn S. Stein, in his curriculum. After classroom discussions over handbook chapters, Lawson quizzes students using published CQPA sample exams as well as Certified Quality Auditor exams that cover the same topics. His semester-long course also incorporates group activities using cause and effect diagrams, affinity diagrams, and other common process improvement tools.

“This gives students a better idea of what these tools are used for and how to use them to attack real problems,” Lawson explains.

The professor says that the CQPA credential is especially valuable for students earning a bachelor’s degree in statistics because most companies that hire statisticians prefer candidates with advanced degrees. “The CQPA credential opens some doors where students [who earn bachelor’s degrees] can use the expertise they’ve gained in our program,” notes Lawson.

CQPA Enhances Job Prospects

In the fall of 2008, 12 students completed Lawson’s introductory class. All nine who took the CQPA exam passed it. A year later, 15 students completed the course and the exam. From the first year’s class, seven of the 12 students secured either an internship or project in the semester after earning the credential. The Utah Transit Authority (UTA) provided internships for three students that year, with another seven students serving internships in early 2010. Gary Kitchen, performance information manager at UTA, says that the CQPA credential “gives them [students] a basic lan-

guage from which they can jump in and start contributing to our improvement teams.” While UTA does not require the certification for its statistical interns, Kitchen says it is certainly preferred.

Recent graduate Scott Merrell is one of UTA’s former interns. The organization hired Merrell to do contract work shortly after he earned his CQPA certification in 2008. “Because I was familiar

with quality practices, they kept me on for a statistical internship the following summer,” explains Merrell, who is now a global operations analyst for Erickson Air-Crane in Portland, OR.

Hannah Westover, a 2009 BYU graduate, believes employers in all industries realize that employees with a genuine commitment to quality are invaluable. She says the CQPA certification not only requires an aptness in basic statistical concepts, but it also demands an understanding of technical approaches to problem solving and quality planning, implementation, and improvement that is applicable in any job setting. Westover, a business data analyst at IXI Corporation, a division of Equifax, notes that the skills required to pass the CQPA exam were relevant to all types of job opportunities, from marketing and teaching positions to research and government contract work.

Another recent graduate, Phil Witt, credits the certification for helping him find both an internship and eventually full-time employment upon graduation. “The comment that I got at a number of job interviews was, ‘Wow, that shows great initiative on your part to get a certification while you’re still in school,’” recalls Witt, who is now working as a continuous improvement analyst at WesTech Engineering in Salt Lake City, UT.

Jacob Wilkes, who plans to graduate from BYU in December 2010, also attributes his job hunting success to his CQPA credential. “It was a valuable addition to my résumé, especially because I had very little experience in the field of statistics.... It helped me to demonstrate that I have statistical knowledge,” says Wilkes, who is working as an intern for Intermountain Healthcare’s Institute for Healthcare Delivery Research, as well as holding a part-time job in the quality department at UTA.

Certification Provides On-the-Job Benefits

Once on the job, either an internship or full-time employment, students are finding practical applications from the material they learned when preparing for the CQPA exam. For example, Sara Gividen, a BYU senior, is one of the seven current interns at

Certified Quality Process Analyst



View the complete Certified Quality Process Analyst Body of Knowledge at www.asq.org/certification/quality-process-analyst/bok.html



Seven of the nine students who passed the CQPA exam in the fall of 2008: (from left) Johnny Ma, Phil Witt, Lindsay Hunt (standing), Mindy Browning (kneeling), Roman Zakharov, Scott Merrell, and Hanna Westover.



Fifteen students took the CQPA exam in the fall of 2009: (from left) Emily Bennett, Chris Barbakos (kneeling), Nathan Scheurer, Jacob Wilkes, Erik Josephson (holding flag), Casey Stoddard, Sara Gividen, Scot Morris, Brad Smith, Mike Ulmer, Tim Perkins, Chad Pharo, Brian Wells (kneeling), Regan Russell, and David Paul (holding flag).

UTA. She views the internship experience as a great opportunity to apply what she learned in preparing for the CQPA exam. “I think the most beneficial knowledge I gained can be defined as a statistical way of thinking and problem solving,” she said.

Westover reports that several aspects of the CQPA Body of Knowledge already have made an impact in her career. For example, she uses flowcharts to communicate process steps and has a better understanding of customer relationships and the need to identify root causes of problems. “Preparing for the certification was about more than calculating a z-statistic. It was learning about the complexities of quality and receiving exposure to various tools and methods I can use to solve problems and make lasting improvements in my job,” explains Westover.

For more information:

- To learn more about earning ASQ’s CQPA credential, go to www.asq.org/certification/quality-process-analyst/right-for-you.html.
- ASQ offers a variety of other professional certifications. To obtain the details, visit www.asq.org/certification/right-for-you.htm.
- Information about ASQ’s Site membership is available at www.asq.org/membership/organizations/site.html. See a list of Site members in education at www.asq.org/education/membership/site-members-in-education.html.
- Find resources for educators in quality at www.asq.org/education/why-quality/overview.html, and join ASQ’s Higher Education Community at http://community.asq.org/networks/Higher_Education_Community.

About the Author

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