

BY JOHN WALSH

A designation worthy of pursuit?

Some superintendents say it's a no-brainer to become certified; others question the value

If you're a certified golf course superintendent, you're in the minority among your peers. Of the 19,889 Golf Course Superintendents Association of America members, 1,895 (10 percent) are certified golf course superintendents, according to the association. Superintendents have mixed feelings about the value of being certified, but the association doesn't. Some members disagree about how much value the association portrays in being certified.

The GCSAA encourages its members to become certified because it's a way to help them substantiate their work and accomplishments through continuing education. The Certified Golf Course Superintendent program is designed to

recognize those accomplishments and members' expanding knowledge as they keep up to date with recent developments in the industry.

Some of the benefits of earning the CGCS designation, besides preparing members for the future demands of the superintendent profession, are:

- Better salaries and jobs, providing an edge in the job market with a proven commitment to producing the best playing conditions;
- Recognition and respect by peers and employers;
- Increased knowledge about the industry, association and profession; and
- A sense of accomplishment, from demonstrating proficiency to contributing to the improvement of the profession.

Completing the certification process also can benefit superintendents' employers because it:

- Is an effective, meaningful and objective measure to determine qualifications of potential employment candidates;
- Shows a willingness to not only commit to long-range self-improvement but long-range improvement of the profitability of the golf facility;
- Increases the chances of having con-

sistently superior course conditions;

- Provides knowledge to manage a golf course budget efficiently and still maintain top conditions;
- Shows leadership skills needed to develop a well-trained, well-managed staff resulting in strong team morale and reduced turnover; and
- Allows them to stay up-to-date in the latest golf course management techniques and products through continuing education.

Historically, golf facility leaders have supported their certified superintendents. Eighty-eight percent of employers support continuing education efforts, according to the GCSAA. Certified superintendents consistently have earned higher salaries in recognition of their advanced level of experience knowledge, skills and abilities. In 2003, the average salary of certified superintendents was 32.6 percent higher than that of non-certified superintendents, according to the GCSAA.

Allen Brissenden, CGCS, at the Dunedin Country Club in Tampa, Fla., has been in the industry since 1980, has been a superintendent since 1989 and became certified in 1994. When he was an assistant, he decided he wanted to become certified shortly after he joined

the GCSAA. When he prepared for certification, he says qualifications included:

- Being a golf course superintendent for five years;
- Meeting educational requirements, which meant a certain amount of GCSAA credits – more credits were needed without a degree or with a two-year degree than with a four-year degree;
- The GCSAA verifying your records once you applied;
- Passing a six-hour test that included knowledge of the certification program, pest control safety, financial and organizational management, the Rules of golf and an agronomy section.

“You had 12 months between the time you sent in your application and taking the test,” Brissenden says. “During that time, you also had to have two certified superintendents visit your course and send in written documents about three projects you completed on your course. Qualifications now are stricter than they used to be.”

Brissenden says it was challenging to prepare for certification.

“You have to be dedicated to be certified,” he says. “You really have to work at it. You have to set time aside to study. You can’t just blow it off.”

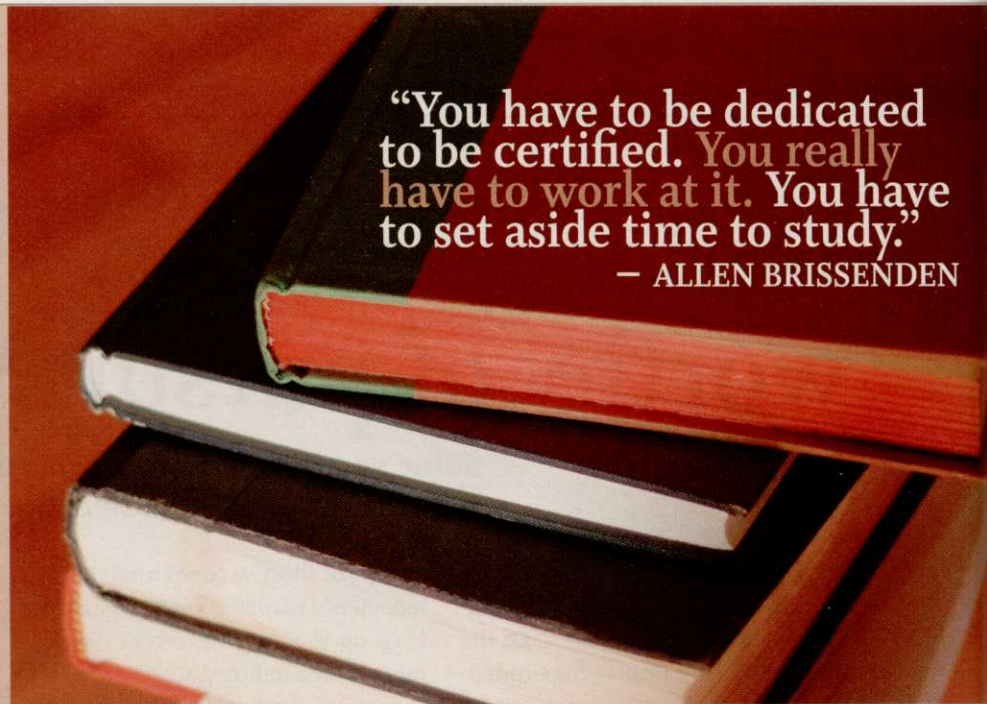
While studying, Brissenden says he learned much about organizational and financial management that he uses daily.

“I learned different ways courses are structured financially,” he says. “I learned how to structure a crew and be more efficient with time management.”

Brissenden says because superintendents work long hours, finding the time to become certified can be difficult. The exam is challenging, too, he says.

“I found that the Rules of golf was the hardest part of the test,” he says. “The turfgrass management part was the easiest. But I had to rewrite two of the six sections within the first year that I took the test before I passed and became certified,” he says. “There aren’t many who pass all six sections the first time.”

Certification is renewed every five years,



which means one has to keep up with continuing education.

Brissenden says his certification was a large part of getting his current job.

“Before this job, I worked for one owner for 12 years, and after he sold the course, I was out of a job,” he says. “There were 100 applicants for the job I have now. Certification really helped.”

Brissenden also says certification definitely helps with pay, citing that those who are certified earn 5 to 10 percent more than those who aren’t.

Tom Lavrenz, director of golf for the city of Cedar Rapids Golf Department in Iowa, is a GCSAA member who has a slightly different take on salaries. He says salaries and promotions are based on being certified in certain parts of the country, such as the East Coast and at some of the bigger, well-known clubs, but that’s not the case in Iowa.

“Experience counts more,” he says.

Brissenden says being certified has been a big plus with Dunedin’s membership, and he says he receives more respect from board that hired him.

“It puts you out as more of a leader in the industry,” he says. “Many certified guys are contacted first when it comes to surveys and things like that.”

PERCEIVED VALUE

Yet Brissenden says some superintendents don’t feel they need certification because they’ve been at a club for 20 years.

“But I say to them, ‘What if you get fired?’”

Darren Davis, director of golf at Olde Florida Golf Club in Naples, Fla., is an accomplished superintendent who isn’t certified. Davis, who was hired at Olde Florida in October of 1992, has been a superintendent for 14 years and a member of the GCSAA for 17 years. Before Olde Florida, he spent time as an assistant at the Loxahatchee Club in Jupiter, Fla., and some time at Augusta National in Georgia and Golden Eagle Country Club in Tallahassee, Fla.

“Although I’m not certified, that doesn’t mean I don’t see the value in it,” he says.

However, Davis says he’s an engaged member of the GCSAA nationally and locally, and he’s been published six times in *Golf Course Management* and has been on-air host for the *Superintendents Video Magazine*.

“I love the profession,” he says. “I dedicate double-digit hours to it aside from my job.”

Davis has been through the certification program twice, but hasn’t taken the test.

“At the time, I had other things I wanted to do, such as be active in the Florida chapter,”

he says. "I personally found the things I do more rewarding than being a CGCS. What I have gained from my involvement in the GCSAA has helped my career.

"My employer has never seen or expressed that value added if I were a CGCS," he adds. "My employer is unaware of the certified program, but it's not the fault of the GCSAA that he doesn't know. If I saw the value in it to my employer, I would do it."

Davis says if he were to leave his job, he most likely would become certified because he wouldn't want not being certified to be a factor in why he didn't get a job.

"It's not a matter of spite, I just never saw the value," he says. "If certification ever became an issue during an interview, I would dispel that. I'll get my foot in the door and sell myself. But if an owner wants me to be certified, I would make that a priority in the first six months [of a new job]. However, when you look at job ads, CGCS isn't required. You don't see that much."

Davis says being certified is a personal choice, and that at one point, eight out of 10 superintendents at the top 10 golf courses in the country weren't certified.

Still, Davis, who's a Class A superintendent, is happy about the GCSAA's promotion of the Class A designation.

"The GCSAA is showing the value of Class A to owners," he says. "It has promised the membership that the Class A designation sets them apart from their peers. The GCSAA doesn't say that about CGCS. Class A is the standard that all superintendents should aspire to be." (See related story about the Professional Development Initiative on page 72.)

Davis says he strives to improve himself daily and currently is working toward a bachelor of arts degree in communication.

PROFESSIONALISM

Lavrenz, a 12-year member of the GCSAA who's been with the city of Cedar Rapids for 29 years, has been a superintendent for 21 years. Being certified has crossed his mind several times during his career, but he says he never had the time to become certified.

"I did serve as a beta tester for the certification test, but I didn't study and missed passing it barely," he says. "I haven't been hindered because I'm not certified, but I won't allow myself to fail."

"Although certification wouldn't have meant a great deal to me, I would advance someone under me quicker if he's certified because that shows me he's willing to take that extra step," he adds.

At this point in his career, Lavrenz, who's a Class A member, has no intention of becoming certified. He has health issues and doesn't know how long he'll be with the city. At age 47 and having worked 30 years for the city, he says he can retire with a nice pension in about eight years.

"The GCSAA doesn't do enough to show members the value of being certified," he says. "If I had 10 years left in my career, I would get

I've never seen that kind of attitude in Iowa amongst my friends. But at the same time, 99 percent of the superintendents who feel they don't get the respect they deserve, don't walk the walk."

More important than certification is image, Lavrenz says.

"If you're not going to represent our profession professionally, certification doesn't matter," he says. "I have one CGCS working for me and another is in the process of getting certified, and it's great, but you better dress the part and carry yourself appropriately."

Two reasons Lavrenz says more superintendents aren't certified is that it takes a lot of time and the perceived lack of benefit of it.

"Superintendents haven't taken the time to promote themselves even though they are the most important person on the golf course," he says. "They undersell themselves. Certifica-

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— TOM LAVRENZ

certified, but it's not going to do me any good at this point. It's just like the college degree was years ago. It used to be that a four-year degree wasn't needed. Now you need one."

Being certified or not, Lavrenz says superintendents should be all about promoting themselves and being professional.

"Generally, if you're a CGCS, you tend to carry yourself with more professionalism that those who aren't, and that's too bad. You'll never see a CGCS attend a meeting not dressed up. Superintendents are perceived differently than members of the PGA because of that professional image."

On a national level, Lavrenz says some certified superintendents throw their designation around in a negative way, and it disturbs him.

"Not everyone does it," he says. "But just because they have a designated title, that doesn't mean they are automatically better.

tion tends to bring out a sellable quality in a person as it relates to his course. I believe in the process but wouldn't turn someone away because he wasn't certified. Titles are good, but image is everything."

Lavrenz says certification has merit but not as much as the way superintendents present themselves to customers.

"Certification doesn't make or break a superintendent, but it's another added bonus to try to take the profession to a higher level," he says. "It's a stepping stone I want to see this profession move toward. You don't have to be certified to be successful, but you need to carry yourself with the respect the profession deserves. As superintendents, we don't do that as a whole. We don't carry ourselves like the professionals we are." **GCI**

For more information about certification, visit www.gcsaa.org/mc/certification/default.asp.