

'CB' equals higher salary, respect for bookkeepers

By Andréa Cecil
Daily Record Business Writer

Tamy Laughman studied vigorously for the national exam to become a certified bookkeeper. She did well, but had to take one particular part of the test three times before she received a passing score.

"I really wish that I had teacher instruction," said Laughman, a certified bookkeeper at Columbia-based Evergreen.cfo, a company offering accounting and business consulting. "I kind of wished I would have been able to...go back and know where I went wrong."

Laughman turned to the American Institute of Professional Bookkeepers, which developed the certification, several times to ask which exam questions she answered incorrectly and proceeded to study more intensely.

Unlike Laughman, Maryland bookkeepers looking to become certified today don't have to go it alone.

Increasingly, community colleges across the country and in Maryland are offering continuing education programs to prepare bookkeepers for the national certification exam as the profession grows.

The demand for full-time bookkeepers is expected to increase as they are asked to perform accounting-type tasks, as well as a wider variety of financial transactions, from payroll to billing, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2004-2005 edition.

"Those with several years of accounting or

bookkeeper certification will have the best job prospects," the handbook reads.

Frederick Community College became the first institution of higher learning in the state to offer a continuing education class for bookkeepers in January. The second class started in June.

Enrollment increased from roughly 10 people in the first class to 15 in the second, said Richard Ammon, director of the conference and business programs at the Western Maryland community college.

Tamy Laughman, of Evergreen.cfo, went it alone when she studied for the national test to become a certified bookkeeper. Today, schools are realizing there is a need for assistance for those wishing to further their careers.

"People were calling us," he said. "We had four or five people who were disappointed they couldn't get in the first class. It was amazing."

At least four more community colleges in the state will begin offering the class in the near future: Carroll Community College in Westminster, College of Southern Maryland in Leonardtown and Hagerstown Community College.

Although certification isn't quite the same as the bar exam is for lawyers, it "tries to raise the bar quite a bit," Ammon explained.

Laughman, for one, already had plenty of experience bookkeeping; certification gave her confi-

dence "that, yes, I do know what I'm doing," she said.

Congress' 2002 passage of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, enacted to tighten regulation of public companies, has put more pressure on the accounting field in general, Laughman added.

"I think down the road there may be more of a demand for bookkeepers to...know what they're doing and be trusted," she said.

For the most part, Certified Public Accountants don't focus on the day-to-day operations of their clients' businesses.

"So bookkeepers are really important in the scheme of things because they're the ones that are digging into the nitty gritty every day. I'm always getting calls from clients every day, asking for advice on activities," she said. "That and credibility is what people eventually will be looking for."

Officials at Carroll Community College decided to offer a continuing education program for bookkeepers after meeting with other community colleges that were also considering a program.

"The primary business in Carroll County is small mom-and-pop shops, and most have bookkeepers," said Helen Choma, director of continuing professional education. "It just gives them the opportunity to offer their employees courses that give more in-depth training and skills."

Plus, a "CB" after the name can command not only more respect, but a higher salary, she added.

Carroll County's course, which is will begin advertising this month, starts in September. The college plans to offer the program each fall.