Do You Want to Be a GISP?

By Christa Campbell

Although I have been in the GIS profession off and on, it has always been my goal to focus my career in the GIS realm. That has not always been easy.

After three years away from GIS, I decided to jump back in and get up-to-date. The first obstacle I faced was how to present myself as a professional. While I have a diverse background with strong GIS skills, relying on just a résumé, especially in today’s economy, didn’t seem sufficient so I decided to get involved again. I enrolled in seminars, went to classes, connected with past colleagues, and attended local user group meetings.

It was at a meeting of the Inland Empire GIS User Group in June 2009 that I first heard about certification as a GIS Professional (GISP). The Southern California Urban and Regional Information Systems Association (URISA) hosted a lunch immediately after the meeting and following lunch, a GISP certification workshop was held. I was curious enough to stay after the meeting and participate in the workshop.

However, even after attending the workshop, I had lots of questions. I was still unsure about GISP certification and decided to find out more.

Some Questions and Answers

What is a GISP? The official definition: “A GISP is a certified geographic information systems (GIS) professional who has met the minimum standards for ethical conduct and professional practice as established by the GIS Certification Institute (GISCI).”

Okay. Now that we know that, what is the GIS Certification Institute? According to the GISCI Web site (www.gisci.org), it is “a tax-exempt not-for-profit organization that provides the geographic information systems (GIS) community with a complete certification program.”

This wasn’t enough for me. Why waste my time and money on a certification that might not mean anything? My first step was to do a little research.

There are four member organizations in GISCI: the Association of American Geographers (AAG), the National States Geographic Information Council (NSGIC), the University Consortium of Geographic Information Science (UCGIS), and URISA. The GISCI Web site states that certification is endorsed by California, Ohio, New Jersey, Oregon, and North Carolina.

In addition, the National Association of Counties (NaCo) has given its support for GISCI and recognition of GISP certification. As of May 25, 2009, there were 4,492 GISPs. It sounded legitimate.

The Bottom Line

My next step was to find out if GISPs found certification to be a benefit. Have employers started recognizing GISP certification? Do employers require or prefer GISP certification when recruiting for a GIS position?

The answer to all these questions was yes. For many of us, the most significant benefit is in the paycheck. Although none of the GISPs I asked reported an increase in pay, URISA’s most recent salary survey (2007) revealed that employees with GISP certification had higher average salaries than their counterparts who lacked certification. Most GISPs I spoke with reported their employer reimbursed them for the application fee.

In addition, GISPs reported they felt going through the application process was beneficial.

Looking for a Job?

Is GISP certification beneficial when you are looking for a new GIS position? I found GISP certification is just beginning to be integrated into the recruitment process when employers are filling a GIS position. While researching job postings, I found only a small number of employers who use GISP certification as a tool to find qualified candidates. Although it was not the norm, I did find several employers that listed a GISP as a requirement to qualify for the position, or desirable.

For example: The City of Raleigh, North Carolina, advertised a GIS technician position that required strong editing skills and GPS field data experience and stated that GISP certification was still beneficial.

Many GISPs have testified that the GISP certification helped advance or redefine their careers. They are proud of the accomplishment and believe certification will continue to become more valuable.

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preferred. HNTB Corporation in Chicago, Illinois, posted a senior GIS developer position that stated candidates with a GISP were preferred. Axis Geospatial of Easton, Maryland, required GISP certification for its senior GIS specialist/project manager position.

The knowledge I gained from this research made me feel I had a chance to do something significant by getting involved in an important part of the GIS community. I was convinced GISP certification would be an asset so I decided to take the plunge and begin the application process.

More Questions (and Answers)
This decision led to many other questions: What would I need to do? How much would it cost? How long would it take? Is it a lifetime certification?

This is what I found out. To apply for your GISP, you need to put together an application packet containing the Application for GISCI Certification 2009, the GISCI Procedures Manual 2009, the GISCI Code of Ethics & Rules of Conduct Acknowledgment Form, and the Application Packet and Payment Form. Application materials can be downloaded from the GIS Certification Institute Web site (www.gisci.org).

The Application Process
Downloading application materials is the easy part! If you have Adobe Acrobat Professional, you can fill out the application electronically. If you do not, I suggest filling out the application in pencil first. The Application Packet and Payment Form should be the first document you review. It contains

- A letter from Wendy Nelson, the interim executive director
- GISCI Application Checklist
- Payment Form (By the way, it will cost you $250 to submit your application.)
- GISCI Information Questionnaire
- Employer Letter Form

The Employer Letter Form can be used if you would like a congratulatory letter sent to your employer once you have received the certification. You also have the option of participating in the GISCI mentoring program.

Next, you will need to read the GISCI Code of Ethics & Rules of Conduct Acknowledgment Form. This 12-page document explains the GISCI code of ethics and rules of conduct. You are required to sign an acknowledgment form and include it with your application.

Reading the GISCI Procedures Manual should be your next step. The 40-page manual tells you step by step what you should be doing to prepare for the application process. The first few pages contain some great tips. The rest of the document walks you through each component of the application. There are three components: Educational Achievement, Professional Experience, and Contributions to the Profession. You will want to have your application available at the same time so that you can review both documents. Most of the work involved in filling out this application will be gathering your data. You will need to be able to answer, in detail, questions about your education, professional experience, and professional contributions. In addition, you will need to provide documentation that supports the information you included in the application.

In total, I spent approximately six hours on the application, not including the time spent requesting documentation from various employers and educational facilities or time spent making copies and compiling the information so that it could be submitted.

Keeping Certification Current
Once you have received your GISP certification, you will be required to recertify every five years. To renew your certification, you will need to show that you have continued working and participating in the GIS industry. The components of the renewal application, very similar to the original certification application, are Course and Conference (educational), Contributions to the Profession, and Work Experience. The requirements for recertification, less than for initial certification, shouldn’t be a problem for someone who has remained an active GIS professional.

My Experience
So, here are my thoughts about applying for a GISP. It takes patience and dedication to complete the application process. You have to be willing to give up more than a couple hours of your time. It’s not a quick and easy way to get an acronym after your name. My advice: Be sure that you review the point requirements for each section before beginning to fill out the application. It is a lot of work just to find out that you do not have enough points in one of the components. If you review the documentation and have a good idea that you do not meet the minimum requirements for a specific component, you can work on obtaining additional points in that area while gathering your data for the others.

Is it worth it? I think so—for personal and professional reasons. After years of experience with GIS, it is nice to see a certification program that gives GIS professionals some kind of recognition. It is a great way for employers to know that an applicant has a certain level of knowledge. In addition, the application process is a journey through your professional past. It was a great experience for me because it was an opportunity to review what I have done and focus on what I want to do in the future. For more information, contact Christa Campbell Tel.: 909-223-8617

About the Author
Christa Campbell has worked in the GIS field for more than 10 years. She began her career working on Digital Nautical Charts for ESRI. Over the next 10 years, she worked in several GIS positions: as a quality control manager reviewing GIS data conversion for the Naval Defense Mapping Agency; as a supervisor in charge of geocoding for Thomas Bros. Maps; and as a technology coordinator responsible for GIS hardware/software, data integrity, data interoperability, analysis, and mapping for the City of San Bernardino (California) Municipal Water Department.