

Newly Certified Financial Aid Administrator: 'Do it Even if it Scares You'

By [Hunter B. Martin, NASFAA Staff Reporter](#)



As a veteran financial aid professional with nearly three decades of experience, you might not think anything could intimidate Brenda Hicks, director of financial aid at Southwestern College in Winfield, Kan.

But there was one challenge in front of her that she said "scared me to death" — pursuing certification through NASFAA's [Certified Financial Aid Administrator® \(CFAA\) Program](#). But her fears were exactly why she went through with it and joined the more than 110 other CFAAs who have successfully passed the exam as of January 2020.

"The prospect of taking an exam that would prove or disprove the knowledge I have in the profession I have chosen was extremely scary ground," Hicks said.

The CFAA program covers the wide range of skills and knowledge required to perform competently in Title IV financial aid administration at any type of institution across the country and assesses a candidate's broader knowledge across multiple subject areas. CFAA recognition brings with it a variety of career-boosting perks, such as invitations to participate in professional development opportunities, becoming part of the community of CFAAs, inclusion on the CFAA Registry, and recognition of your knowledge and experience as a financial aid professional.



To become a CFAA, candidates must first complete an application online demonstrating they meet all the [qualifying criteria](#). Once an application is approved, candidates may schedule their approximately two-hour CFAA exam session during an open testing window — the next testing cycle runs from February 10-24. As soon as a candidate is scheduled to take their exam at a time that is convenient for them, all that's left to do is prepare.

Hicks prepared for the CFAA exam by reviewing the [online materials](#) and NASFAA's self-study guides on topics she doesn't regularly encounter in her daily work. But she mainly relied on her 28 years of experience in the field. Hicks has trained many other people on financial aid regulations and, because she works in a "small shop" at Southwestern College, is able to remain involved in the day-to-day operations of the financial aid office.

"I wanted my experience to prove itself," Hicks said. "My non-traditional approach contributed to the anxiety I experienced surrounding the test and receipt of the results. But when I got that email that said 'PASSED' — man, did it feel good."

After taking the exam, the CFAA will immediately have access to a diagnostic report with their performance in each content area.

For Hicks, one of the best parts of receiving her CFAA designation was adding the initials to her email signature.

"It's a subtle, unobtrusive way of saying, 'This person knows what she is doing,'" Hicks said.

Once certified, the CFAA must recertify every three years, a process that will require an accumulation of points earned by completing various professional development activities. Hicks plans on recertifying by continuing to attend NASFAA webinars and printing her participation certificates.

"I also plan on getting my participation points when I attend conferences and other training programs," she said. "Training is like breathing to financial aid administrators, so I really don't anticipate this being a difficult thing to do. Do it even if it scares you. You'll be glad that you did."

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