

What is the CPS Exam/Rating and What Does It Mean to Me?

When I first began applying for jobs at MTSU, I noticed that several job postings said “CPS Preferred”. Once hired, I came across a memo in our department files from Dr. McPhee announcing that achieving the CPS rating would allow for an immediate 9% salary increase. I was eager to obtain this rating, so I began my search on the internet. Let me tell you, if you do an internet search for “CPS” – you’ll sort through Child Protective Services, the Chicago Public Schools, and a plethora of computer, contractor and consulting agencies!

When I passed the CPS exam in 2006, my accomplishment was noted in The Record; I then received several inquiries from other clerical employees who asked me to share any information about the test. I have compiled this comprehensive list of resources, and I want to thank all of the ASCE members who have shared their insights and experiences taking the CPS exam.

- Kym Stricklin CPS, Center for Popular Music, ASCE member
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Quick Facts about the CPS Exam

- The CPS (Certified Professional Secretary) exam is given twice a year – the first Saturdays in **May** and **November**. The registration deadlines are **Feb. 15th for May exam** and **August 15th for November exam**.
- There are 3 parts to the CPS exam:
 - 1.) Office Systems and Technology, 2.) Office Administration, and 3.) Management
- If you miss the registration deadline for the upcoming exam, but don’t want to wait 9 months until the next exam date, contact IAAP about late registration (two individuals indicated that they were allowed to register after the deadline).
- The current (Feb 2009) cost of the exam is **\$285** (\$210 for IAAP members). The exam/rating is administered by the International Association of Administrative Professionals (IAAP), and MTSU is one of the testing locations.
- Per the MTSU Policies & Procedures manual, clerical-secretarial employees and non-exempt clerical-management will receive a **9% pay raise** upon passing all 3 sections and attaining the CPS rating: <http://hrs.web.mtsu.edu/PDF%20Policies/pdf995/IV0720%20CPS.pdf>.

ASCE Scholarships

The Association of Secretarial and Clerical Employees (ASCE) at Middle Tennessee State University is committed to providing and encouraging staff development opportunities to secretarial and clerical employees. To assist with this endeavor, ASCE now offers a CPS scholarship to help defray the expense of certification. **ASCE will award two CPS scholarships per year (one for May exam and one for November exam), based on available funding (ASCE members voted that 1/3 of our pecan proceeds fund CPS scholarships).**

ASCE Scholarship Criteria

- **You must be an ASCE member for at least 1 full year before you are eligible to apply for this scholarship.** ASCE membership is only **\$5 per year** – visit the ASCE website to print a membership application <http://frank.mtsu.edu/~asce/html/membership.html>.
- **The scholarship amount funded will be the cost of the exam (currently \$210, or \$160/IAAP members); the processing fee (currently \$75, or \$50/IAAP members) will be the responsibility of the member.**
- Visit the ASCE website for scholarship information (to be updated spring 2009) and an application: http://frank.mtsu.edu/~asce/html/cap_cps.html.

IAAP Links

The International Association of Administrative Professionals (IAAP), the certifying organization, has a tremendous amount of information about the exam and preparation on their website: <http://www.iaap-hq.org/prodev/certification/exams.html>.

Following are the dates and deadlines for future CPS exam administrations:

Exam Dates	Deadline Dates
May 2, 2009	February 15, 2009
November 7, 2009	August 15, 2009
May 8, 2010	February 15, 2010
November 6, 2010	August 15, 2010

- 1. Application Packet:** <http://www.iaap-hq.org/prodev/certification/CertAppPacket.pdf>
There are eligibility requirements that must be met in addition to passing the exam. For example, you must meet experience and/or education requirements – 4 years administrative experience if no college degree, 3 years with associate degree, or 2 years with bachelor’s degree. Experience (part-time/20 hours per week qualifies) does not have to be all at one place; however, you must have at least 12 months experience with at least one employer. Note that you can take the exam even if you don’t have the required experience; although, you won’t receive CPS rating until eligibility is met.
- 2. Review Guide:** <http://www.iaap-hq.org/prodev/certification/examrevw.pdf>
Excellent resource! The Review Guide provides an outline of topics, a bibliography of current textbooks to study, and sample questions and answers for each of the three tests. If you have not registered to take the CPS exam, try answering the sample questions – this might help you determine whether you can prepare for the exam in 2-3 months, or whether you would benefit with 6 months or more to study.
- 3. Murfreesboro chapter of the IAAP:** <http://www.iaap-murfreesboro.org>
You do not have to be a member of IAAP to take the CPS exam. However, you will note in the application packet that there is a discount for IAAP members - \$210 vs. \$285. The annual dues are \$95, plus a one-time processing fee of \$15. For membership information, contact the IAAP Murfreesboro membership chair, Melinda Samuels, at ms1627@comcast.net. [note: IAAP members receive a 20% discount on exam study guides and, if you must retake one or more sections, a discount on the re-test fee).

How difficult is the CPS Exam?

From the IAAP website, you can look at the data from past exams (i.e. how many people took the exam, and how many passed all 3 tests and received the CPS rating) - <http://www.iaap-hq.org/prodev/certification/statistics.html>. The pass rate in 2006 and 2007 was ~53-55%. In 2008, the pass rate percentage went up to 64%. Although several members passed all three parts and certified on their first attempt, there are many individuals who have had to re-take one or more parts (and they said that they were more motivated and focused on studying for the retake).

How is the CPS exam scored?

Each of the three tests is graded on a scale which has a predetermined pass/fail cut-score. As an example, the cut-score on the exam I sat for was 450. Candidates scoring more than 450 on each section passed; less than 450 failed that part. It is possible to score over 1000 on each part – so if you have prepared, you can achieve that pass/fail score! Your Performance Report, mailed to you 45 days after taking the exam, will tell you the pass/fail cut-score and will also tell you your scores on each of the three parts. Each of the 3 sections is scored separately, and if you fail one but pass others, you only have to retake the one(s) failed – a little bit cheaper re: cost (\$85 re-take fee per part/\$60 for IAAP members).

Study/Review Guides

The Certification Review Guide, <http://www.iaap-hq.org/prodev/certification/examrevw.pdf>, should be used to direct any course of study for the CPS and CAP Exams. There are also review materials for the CPS exam available through Prentice-Hall and Metcalf Educational Services (20% discount for IAAP members).

The ROCE online prep courses and the Tennessee Technology Center, as well as most of the ASCE members who responded, use/d the **Prentice-Hall set of study guides (5th edition, 2005 – most current published)**, http://vig.pearsoned.com/store/home/1,1205,store-14800_id-5,00.html. There are 3 books, one for each test section, and the **retail price is \$95.80 per book**. Phillips/MTSU Bookstore did not have the study guides in stock; however, you can probably order copies (with a staff discount?) through them. Each of these books is 350-450 pages (i.e. waiting until the last weekend or two before the exam is not enough time to read/learn all 3 books!). They are extremely thorough in presenting concepts and theories. Each book has ~ 10 chapters, and there are quizzes after each topic within the chapter. There are about 25 questions at the end of every chapter, and a sample test at end of book – 75 questions.

[Beware – the CPS exam format was updated c. 2004; therefore, the previous editions of the Prentice-Hall study guide are obsolete. I searched Amazon and eBay, and found many outdated (pre-2004) editions. There were 5th edition copies available, but the used price was still \$78 – and they didn't always confirm the edition or publication date.]

The Metcalf review materials, <http://www.cpsreview.com/webdoc404.htm>, offer a variety of reasonably priced formats – audio CDs, computer data CD-ROMs (which includes digital textbook and mock exams), and flashcards. IAAP members receive a 20% discount; non-members can take advantage of an Internet Special/10% discount off \$200 or more purchase. There was not much feedback about the Metcalf materials, although they do seem to present the study materials in a more concise (“Cliff note”) manner.

Where to Find Study Guides on Campus

The Certification Review Guide provides a bibliography of suggested reading, and clearly reminds you that the questions on the exam do not come from the study guides, but from actual college textbooks (most recent editions). I did try to find the suggested books and found that Walker Library did not have a lot of the authors/titles. But there are certainly plenty of textbooks on Management, Human Resources, Time Management, etc. **That said, if you know the material from the study guides (Prentice Hall, at least), most ASCE members concurred that you will be prepared and can pass.**

Walker Library does have two sets of the 5th ed. (current) Prentice-Hall study guides (actually, there are 2 copies each of Office Systems and Technology and Management, and 3 copies of Office Administration) at the **Reserve Desk on the first floor**, next to Circulation. The study guides are available for 3-day checkout – so you can check them out (all or individually) on a Friday afternoon and then keep them until Monday/Tuesday (staff may get an extra day?). The call numbers for the study guides at Walker are:

651.8 R76o *Office systems and technology* (320 pp) / Diane Routhier Graf, Betty L. Schroeder
651.3 Sch7 *Office administration* (449 pp) / Betty L. Schroeder, Diane Routhier Graf
651.374 H19m *Management* (320 pp) / Varina L. Haney, Lynn Mazzola

The June Anderson Women’s Center (JAWC), located on the main/2nd floor of the JUB (same floor as TN Ballroom), also has a set (3 books) of the Prentice-Hall study guides. **You must be an ASCE member in order to check out a study guide from JAWC.** To allow access to other ASCE members, you may only check out one book at a time, and the return date is 2 weeks after check-out.

Other CPS Holders who purchased the study guides may be willing to loan them to a colleague prepping for the exam. ASCE is putting together a list of CPS holders at MTSU and the year individuals took the test – ask around and see if you can find someone willing to share their books (another value of networking with ASCE and IAAP).

Are there Test Prep Classes?

Regents Online Continuing Education, http://www.rodpc.org/roce/CPS_Information.htm, offers online classes for each of the 3 testing areas (note that the courses can be taken in any order). The classes cost \$200 each, plus the purchase of books. Even if you don’t register for this program, you can still click on each class name, and then syllabi – this gives you more info about the material you need to know for the exam, as well as bibliography info.

The **Tennessee Technology Center, Murfreesboro**, <http://www.ttcmurfreesboro.edu/business-systems-technology.htm>, occasionally offers a CPS prep course (~\$750) taught by Debbie Ball. There are currently no CPS prep courses offered, however, contact TTC-Murfreesboro for availability.

Start a Study Group! The ASCE can assist in identifying individuals who are preparing for an upcoming CPS exam and also help reserve a study room – why not network and form a study group? The group can be as formal or informal as members decide – perhaps the group just wants to schedule lunch-hour study times (individual study, but a commitment to meet as scheduled so that you DO read/study).

How Much Study Time Is Required?

Most individuals who studied on their own began their review by the registration deadline (i.e. February for the May exam or August for the December exam). An excellent course of study is to take the number of days available to study, divide into it the number of chapters in all three books, and then study a portion each day. Many folks got behind on their studying but said that they still passed the exam (i.e. there is a lot of material to cover!).

One member studied for 5 weeks – 7-10 hours on Saturdays and Sundays, plus read/studied during hour lunch break in the month leading up to the exam. Another member studied for 3 months. Others spent 3-6 months studying and/or enrolled in a prep course.

How/What to Study?

Most ASCE members who passed said that they studied by themselves; often, because they didn't know of anyone else taking the exam. Several said that they would check out the study guides from Walker Library. They read all of the books and answered the end-of-chapter questions. They would go back and review the areas in the book that they missed on the test. One member suggests taking the practice tests at the end of each of the three books **BEFORE** you begin reading/studying. This allows you to determine which book to start on first, based on materials that are already familiar versus areas that need to be learned. After you have completed a book, take the practice test again – this will allow you to track the effectiveness of your studies.

My biggest piece of advice is to concentrate your review/study on the **primary areas** emphasized in the outline of each test (pp. 4, 9, 13) in the review packet <http://www.iaap-hq.org/prodev/certification/examrevw.pdf>. For example, the office administration test covers two main areas - records management and communication. **BUT** - only 28% of the questions pertain to records/filing standards, whereas 72% of the questions are about communications. There were definitely a lot of questions re: verbal/non-verbal communication (theories, examples, etc), giving effective speeches/presentations, etc. For this reason, I recommend reading one or two books from the suggested bibliography.

Likewise, on the management exam, 48% is human resources-related and only 16% accounting. There are **THREE** chapters on cost-accounting in the study guide; yet, there were only 2-3 questions that actually required a calculator and extensive knowledge of accounting calculations. Now, there were still several accounting questions, but **more terminology and theories**, not actual number-crunching. Overall, though, the emphasis of the exam was much heavier on human resources and management theories. To summarize, don't get bogged down trying to learn complex accounting formulas and math if it is unfamiliar material (because only 16% of the exam's 175 questions will be accounting, and many will relate to definitions of terms)!

Note that there is a glossary at the end of each book – why not make flash cards (since many of the questions do ask about definitions)? Some people learn well if they write something. If someone decided to create flashcards from the glossary on their computer, and were willing to share the final document, this would make an excellent resource for ASCE to make available as a pdf document on the website.

What to Expect on Exam Day

It is suggested that you try to finish studying a couple of days (or even the weekend) before the test, get enough sleep the night before, eat breakfast, and have snacks throughout the day. The exam day is mentally exhausting – so try not to cram the night before. In addition to studying, a member suggests prayer – “I prayed that if God wanted me to pass, that He would help me. I passed all three the first time. This is not a scientific method, but it worked for me, and God helped me pass”.

The exam has 3 sections, each section has ~175 multiple choice questions, and you have 2 hours and 15 minutes for each section. You will receive an admission letter which will tell you the location of the exam (and tell you to bring a photo id). The exam schedule is:

- 8:00 a.m. Office Systems and Technology (followed by 15 minute break)
- 11:00 a.m. Office Administration (followed by 1 hour lunch break)
- 2:30 p.m. Management

What Happens After the Exam?

The exam is long and challenging - my observation on exam day was that many individuals walked out feeling overwhelmed. Some individuals went in feeling well-prepared, yet walked out unsure of whether or not they did well. Most people said that it took about a week after the exam to put the experience in perspective and begin to feel confident again that the studying had paid off and they would do well enough to pass. The exam results are mailed to you about 45 days after the test date – so the worst part after months of study is waiting another 5-6 weeks for the results! When you receive your passing letter, you will need to send a copy of the certification, along with a PEF, to Human Resources. The 9% pay raise awarded upon passing all 3 parts of the CPS exam is effective immediately, i.e. the next pay period after scores are received.

Ready, Set, Go For It!

Finally, registering to take the CPS exam is a major investment – especially in this economy! ASCE members are very fortunate to now have the opportunity to apply for a CPS scholarship; however, the current guidelines limit the availability to only two scholarships per year. With the opportunity to earn a 9% pay raise within 6 months (we haven't received cost-of-living raises since July 2007), I would encourage MTSU clerical employees to take advantage of this professional development and the financial reward. For me, personally, the financial commitment motivated me to study and prepare for the exam – failure was not an option!

All of the ASCE members who contributed to this document want to encourage their colleagues to take the CPS exam! You will feel a sense of accomplishment, you will enhance your administrative skills, and you will probably learn something new! Most CPS holders are more than happy to talk with you individually about how they studied, what they think is most important to focus on, and offer words of encouragement.

Did you find this document useful? One of the purposes of ASCE is to achieve and enhance professional and personal growth. If you are not an ASCE member, we hope that you will accept this as an invitation to join! <http://frank.mtsu.edu/~asce/index.html>