

4-1980

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Recommended Citation

Schwartz, Bill N. (1980) "Introducing Accounting Students To The Real World: Bringing Practitioners And Students Together," *Woman C.P.A.*: Vol. 42 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/wcpa/vol42/iss2/8>

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Introducing Accounting Students To The Real World

Bringing Practitioners And Students Together

By Bill N. Schwartz, CPA, PhD.

Accounting practitioners and educators spend many hours encouraging students to enter the accounting profession. Practitioners distribute brochures describing the profession's and their firm's many attractive features. They deliver speeches and engage in discussions with student organizations. They also participate in advisory councils to offer suggestions for curriculum development and revision. In these and many other ways, practitioners contribute a great deal to helping students understand the career opportunities in accounting.

Educators encourage students to enter the accounting profession by stimulating interest in the subject matter within the classroom setting. Many of these efforts are concentrated in the introductory courses. Instructors have used case studies, multi-media effects, game playing and simulations to generate enthusiasm and to expose students to real world problems. After several courses are completed, instructors have asked students to conduct audits of university activities and to role-play as auditors in management

games. Internships have been offered so that a select number of students can experience for a short period what accounting work is like. Educators also spend a great deal of time encouraging students in individual counseling sessions.

All of these approaches have been helpful but they have not answered the personal, individualized questions that concern many students. They want to know whether their personalities and temperaments will fit the accounting mold. They are also interested in learning more about what their work would be like on a day-to-day basis and about the opportunities in small as well as large organizations. They want to inquire about positions in private industry and not-for-profit areas in addition to public accounting. Students do not always have an accurate impression of the work environment in which accountants operate yet they rarely see that environment before they accept their first positions. Some students actually think accountants wear eye shades and work under a hot lamp!

Educators may not be equipped to answer these questions though the

answers may decide whether a student pursues an accounting career. Practitioners are in the best position to help. They can offer the kind of specific information that students need and arrest many of the uncertainties the students have felt. At the same time practitioners can describe their particular type of accounting work so that students have a keener perspective of the many facets in the accounting profession. A method is needed to bring practitioners and students together.

A Term Project

Recently a term project was developed that gives students an opportunity to speak with practitioners on an individual basis in the practitioner's work environment. The project gives students a better knowledge of the accounting profession at a stage when they are deciding on a major. It also gives practitioners an opportunity to explain what their work entails. In this manner students can understand fully the various types of activities in which accountants are engaged. The project removes some of the misconceptions students may have had, allows practitioners to "get their story across," and encourages students to pursue an accounting career in the practitioner's area of interest.

The project required students in a second semester intermediate accounting class taught by the author (at California State University, Northridge) to conduct personal interviews with three individuals in the accounting profession; one in public accounting, one in private industry, and one in non-profit accounting. The students were required to prepare a term paper analyzing the interviews and relating the information they obtained to their own personal needs. The project was assigned in the intermediate course because in many cases this is the point when students solidify or change their career path.

The students selected the three individuals to interview but were given a set of instructions on how to make the selections. They were also given a questionnaire for the interviews consisting of four parts: family background, education, the job itself, and a review of the past and future for the person being interviewed. There were a total of thirty-eight questions.¹ The students were allowed to

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add or delete questions, depending on the individuals they interviewed.

The interviews thus gave the students an opportunity to learn a great deal about three accountants and the jobs they perform. They also encouraged the students to contact other practitioners for additional information, which a number of students did. The students were able to obtain a great deal of information relating to their personal needs that they might not have been able to obtain by any other means. Since the interviews were conducted at the accountants' offices the students were able to see what work conditions really were like. Thus the interviews assisted them in deciding whether they wanted to pursue accounting as a career.

Analyzing The Term Project

Although it was anticipated that the interviews would encourage students to pursue an accounting career, there was no guarantee that they would react in that manner. Therefore, an experiment was conducted to determine what effects the interviews had on the students. First, an additional class of second semester intermediate accounting students taught by the author but who had not conducted the interviews was chosen as a control group for comparative purposes. Both classes were treated identically in all respects, except for the interview project. The two groups were compared in the following manner:

1. those who conducted the interviews (the experimental group) were compared with the control group in terms of a number of basic attributes to determine whether there were any significant differences between the two groups,

2. the experimental group was compared to the control group in terms of their subsequent behavior to determine if any significant differences existed between the two groups.

Each of these comparisons are discussed in turn.

Comparing the Groups in Terms of Basic Attributes

The two groups were compared on the basis of four basic attributes; 1) age, 2) gender, 3) prior grade point average, and 4) class standing. The comparisons appear in Table 1.

The two groups appear to be quite similar. The mean ages differ by less than two years, 22.9 for the experimental group, 24.7 for the control group. The breakdown between males and females is the same for both groups, 24 males and 6 females. The prior grade point averages are almost identical, 2.71 for the experimental group, 2.74 for the control group. The class standings are very similar, too. Most of the students in both groups are juniors. Statistical tests confirm that the groups are not significantly different² so that comparisons in terms of subsequent behavior were appropriate.

Effects of the Interviews

The semester after the interviews

were conducted, the students in both groups followed various paths. It was assumed that these paths, including their course selection as well as any other school-related activities, were randomly chosen. Consequently, to determine whether the interviews encouraged students to continue studying accounting and/or pursue an accounting career, their behavior was observed over the three semesters following the semester the interviews were conducted. Specifically, five variables were considered: 1) joining the student accounting association, 2) applying for the student internship program, 3) establishing a job file at the Placement Office, 4) changing major fields of study, 5) subsequent grades in accounting.

Observations of the first three variables are presented in Table 2. Students in the experimental group were more interested in the student accounting association than those in the control group. Of the thirty students in each group, 70 percent of the experimental group joined the association while only 40 percent joined from the control group. Almost all of those who joined did so immediately following the intermediate accounting course. The students in the experimental group appeared to be more interested in learning about the accounting profession than did those in the control group.

The students in the experimental group also were more interested in applying for the internship program than the students in the control group. Of the twenty-one students in the experimental group eligible for the internship 28.5 percent applied. Of the nineteen eligible in the control group only 10.5 percent applied. The students in the experimental group were also more interested in establishing files at the Placement Office. Of the twenty-six students in the experimental group, 81 percent established files compared with only 55 percent of the twenty-one students in the control group. Statistical tests confirmed the significance of the difference in proportions for joining the accounting association but did not for the internship due to the small number of individuals involved.³ The difference between the two groups in terms of job files at the Placement Office borders on significance.⁴

**TABLE 1
COMPARISON OF GROUPS
IN TERMS OF BASIC
ATTRIBUTES**

Attributes: Age, Gender, Prior Grade Point Average, and Class Standing

Basis of Attribute	Group Comparison	Group	
		Experimental	Control
Age	Means	22.9	24.7
Gender	Totals		
	Males	24	24
	Female	<u>6</u>	<u>6</u>
		30	30
Prior grade point average	Means	2.71	2.74
Class Standing	Year 1	0	0
	2	9	2
	3	17	22
	4	2	5
	Grad	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>
		30	30

**TABLE 2
EFFECTS OF THE
INTERVIEWS**

Variables: Student Accounting Association, Internship Program Placement Office

Variables	Basis of Comparison		Group	
	Experimental	Control		
Student Accounting Association	Total number possible	30	30	
	Percent joining	70.0%	40.0%	
Internship Program	Total number possible	21	19	
	Percent applying	28.5%	10.5%	
Placement Office	Total number possible	26	21	
	Percent establishing files	81.0%	55.0%	

The change in major fields of study provides an interesting contrast in the behavior of the two groups. In the experimental group twenty-two students were majoring in accounting when the project was conducted, eight were majoring in other fields had switched to accounting. The control group behaved quite differently. In that group twenty-eight were majoring in accounting when the term project was conducted, two were majoring in other fields. Three semesters later five students had changed majors, four of those away from accounting!

To examine grades the mean grade point averages in accounting were calculated for each of the four semesters that were observed. Table 3 presents the results.

**TABLE 3
EFFECTS OF INTERVIEWS
Variable: Grades in Accounting**

Semester Group	1	2	3	4
Experimental	2.85	2.99	3.03	2.71
Control	2.83	2.81	2.71	2.87
Difference	+0.02	+0.18	+0.32	-0.16

The experimental group outperformed the control group in each of the first three semesters. Thus, if students perform better in courses in which they are interested, the experimental group appears to have been more interested in accounting than the control group for those three semesters. It is possible that in the fourth semester the experimental group were anxious to graduate and enter the accounting world. As a result their grades suffered.

Conclusion

It appears the project accomplished its objective. It gave students an opportunity to speak with practitioners on a one-to-one basis and to obtain a great deal of valuable information that will help them to evaluate accounting as a career choice. The project also exposed them to the work environment in which an accountant operates. The project encouraged students to continue with accounting. The group that conducted the interviews (the experimental group) indicated greater interest in accounting than a control group in a number of ways. The experimental group joined a student accounting association, applied for an internship program, and established placement files in greater proportions than did the control group. Members of the experimental group who changed majors changed to accounting, those who changed in the control group changed away from accounting. Finally, the experimental group earned higher grades in accounting than the control group for three semesters after the interviews were conducted.

To confirm the benefits of the interviews a questionnaire was sent to all the accounting majors in the two groups shortly before the end of the fourth semester. The students were asked to indicate the importance of a number of factors that might have influenced their decision to pursue an accounting career. The factors were: aptitude tests, college accounting courses, college professors, friends, internships, the job market, parents, part-time work and the term project.

The two groups responded in a very similar fashion. Both groups listed the job market as the most important influence, college accounting courses second, college professors third, friends fifth and intern-

The project gave students an opportunity to speak with practitioners on a one-to-one basis

ships eighth. The groups interchanged parents and part-time work. The experimental group listed parents sixth and part-time work seventh, the control group vice versa.

The experimental group listed the term project fourth. This is significant particularly considering the questionnaire was distributed almost four semesters after the project was conducted. In addition the project was a discrete event while the students had continuous contact with the other three factors they listed as more important; the job market, college accounting courses and college professors.

The interview project appears to be a useful activity. However, the approach may require modification, particularly when it is conducted in a small community where fewer practitioners are available. Several suggestions might be offered. First, rather than interviews on a one-to-one basis, roundtable discussions in which three or four students can interview a practitioner can be arranged. Students still should receive a great deal of valuable information without seriously depleting the number of practitioners able to participate. Second, the number of practitioners each student interviews can be reduced. Possibly one in each of two areas of accounting would be sufficient. In addition, some method can be developed so that students can share information from each other's experiences. Third, practitioners can be encouraged to participate by shortening the questionnaire. This will minimize the amount of time a practitioner devotes and improves the possibility he or she will be willing to repeat the experience with other students. Fourth, do not require the interviews during the period when public accountants are very busy (i.e., January through April). Consider requiring the interviews either in the first or second intermediate accounting course so

that all accounting students have the opportunity to participate. The interview project has sufficient flexibility so that the appropriate adjustments will allow it to be conducted most anywhere.

Implications

The interviews offer an excellent opportunity for practitioners to expose students to the real world. Practitioners can be involved, and they will not have to leave their offices to do so. They can have the opportunity to interact with students on a personal basis and be able to help them a great deal. Practitioners also can explain to students what their particular area of accounting is all about and remove any misconceptions the students may have had. Thus practitioners can promote their areas of accounting and assist students in the process.

Educators will be benefited, too. The interviews can give students additional perspective about their studies and make their classroom experiences more meaningful to them. Students' interest and performance can improve as well. Also, educators need not relinquish class time in order for the students to gain these benefits. All in all, the interviews can be beneficial to the practitioner, the educator, the student and thus to the profession as a whole. Ω

NOTES

¹Those interested in obtaining a set of instructions and a list of the questions need only write directly to the author.

²A Z Value of 1.61 was determined for the attribute, age. This is not significant at the .05 level. For class standing the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test (Siegel, 1956) was used because the distribution was not normal. A K Value of 7.0 was obtained which was not significant at the .05 level. No statistical tests appeared necessary for the attributes gender and prior grade point average.

³A Z Value of 2.33 was determined for the student accounting association which was significant at the .05 level. The Z Value of 1.42 for the internship program was not significant at the .05 level.

⁴A Z Value of 1.95 was determined and is on the borderline of significance at the .05 level.

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