Accounting Graduates' Perceptions of the Internship's Role in Workplace Transition and Employability Development: A Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract

Although the accounting community has been collaborating for decades to address a lack of progress in closing the gap between accounting theory and practice, shortcomings in accounting education quality persist. Prior research has focused on the perceptions of students, faculty, and employers, but there is a scarcity of published work on recent accounting graduates' perceptions of their experiences with transitioning to industry. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate the cause of the expectation gap through an exploration of recent accounting graduates' perceptions of their workplace transition and employability development. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from a purposive sampling of 13 graduates who received an undergraduate accounting degree from a rural western Pennsylvania university. The research questions were designed to identify perceptions of their educational experiences, the potential impact of internship programs, and their experiences of transitioning to practice. The qualitative data analysis software NVivo 12 Plus was used to analyze the data. The results indicated that participants found value in their overall educational experiences, perceived their internship experiences as critical in their transition to professional practice, and acquired a variety of technical and non-technical skills by graduation. Future research suggestions include replication of this study at other U.S. post-secondary institutions, further exploration of students' levels of technical and non-technical skill, and the employment of quantitative methods to further examine graduates' perceptions. Finally, research is suggested to explore the impediments to developing and implementing job placement programs from the perspectives of employers and university administration. Stakeholders might use the results of such research to map accounting program curricula, accreditation standards, and concepts statements purposefully to the practical skills demanded by practitioners in a variety of organizational settings.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Institutions of tertiary education and research, in cooperation with major accountancy bodies and accrediting agencies, have developed accounting program goals and student assessment outcomes to plan instruction and curricula to improve the quality of accounting education and to develop the core competencies necessary for entry into the accounting profession (Engel, 2015; Eschenfelder, Bryan, & Lee, 2014; Lawson et al., 2014; Tan & Laswad, 2015). The American Accounting Association (AAA) and the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) created The Pathways Commission on Accounting Higher Education to focus on current and future challenges of both accounting education and accounting practice (Behn et al., 2012). The Institute of Management Accountants (IMA) and the AAA also formed a task force to develop a competency-based framework for accounting education in response to calls for reform in accounting education (Lawson et al., 2014). Fittingly, many academic institutions have turned to regional or national accrediting agencies to obtain specialized accounting accreditation. National accrediting agencies such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP), and the International Assembly for Collegiate Business Education (IACBE) have rigorous educational and quality assurance standards that are designed to ensure that institutions are providing top quality accounting education and meeting the emerging needs of the accounting profession (AccountingEdu.org, n.d). The allied efforts of these institutions have been critical to strengthening the relationship between tertiary education and professional practice, enhancing student employability through flexible pedagogies, and developing mechanisms for purposeful integration of a broad scope of accounting competencies.

Demands from professional accountancy bodies to overhaul accounting curriculums in response to concerns over alignment between university instruction and the accounting profession date back to the mid-1980s (Lawson et al., 2014; Madsen, 2015; Paisey & Paisey, 2010; Stivers & Onifade, 2014; Wilson, 2011). The distancing between accounting education and accounting practice was initially recognized by the AAA, which determined that the narrow objectives of the existing platform focused mainly on fundamental bookkeeping skills needed for entry-level accounting positions. The models that were being used to prepare students academically for accounting positions did not institute the long-term career aptitudes required of accounting professionals in diverse organizational settings, nor were such pedagogies focused on meeting the changing demands of the contemporary business environment. One widespread consequence of the deficiencies of earlier accounting curricula, noted at both national and international levels, was the divide between textbook accounting and real-world practice that still plagues the current generation of accountants (Brewer, Sorensen, & Stout, 2014; Lawson et al., 2014; Wilson, 2011).

Several aspects of the theory-practice phenomenon have been examined by educators, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, with most endorsing some theoretical approach for how students best learn and others offering strategies and recommendations for enriching accounting education experiences (Barth, 2015; Caskey & Corona, 2016; Johnson, 2014; Lawson et al., 2014; Pernsteiner, 2015; Stanley, 2013). These previous efforts to revitalize accounting education and fully understand the barriers to bridging the gap between academics and practice have bred valuable innovations and made noteworthy contributions to the profession's knowledge base. Nonetheless, there remains an overall scarcity of published work on student learning in accounting internships and workplace transition, particularly from the perspectives of

recent accounting graduates (Beck & Halim, 2008; Gracia, 2010; Paisey & Paisey, 2010; Stanley, 2013).

Researchers have noted an assortment of explanations for why there exists a divide between accounting academia and accounting practice. Johnson (2014) and Stivers and Onifade (2014) both reported findings that indicated that neither accounting students nor career accountants found value in their accounting faculty or their educational experiences. Stivers and Onifade (2014) revealed that students had mostly negative viewpoints of their learning experiences in an accounting principles course but mainly a positive viewpoint of the accounting profession. Basu (2012), Tucker and Lowe (2014), and Vladu (2015) all pointed to shortcomings of current accounting research efforts and the inaccessibility and overall complexity of academic journals as barriers contributing to a gap between theory and practice. They argued that accounting research should be aimed at improving accounting information content that is critical to accounting practice. Basu (2012) further blamed researchers who had spent their entire professional lives in an ivory tower, while Vladu (2015) concluded that practitioners rarely integrated accounting research into their professional work. Tucker and Lowe (2014) placed responsibility for bridging the gap on professional accounting bodies.

Several of the researchers blamed the widening gap on a lack of a standard, accounting outcome assessment exam (Beard, 2007; Eschenfelder et al., 2014; Lawson et al., 2014; Martinson & Cole, 2002). Lawson's et al. (2014) extensive review of the professional and academic literature identified the need for a new education framework that defined professional competencies in accounting, finance, economics, and information systems, promoted long-term career development, and better aligned with the current accounting environment. Beard (2007) and Martinson and Cole (2002) recommended a standardized exam for use in accreditation

assessment activities. Beard (2007) shared suggestions for internship program requirements, guidelines for employer supervision of internships, and a variety of examples and assessment and program evaluation forms. Martinson and Cole (2002) collaborated with the Institute of Certified Management Accountants (ICMA) to develop a content-specific accounting assessment exam, which they planned to base on the Certified Management Accountant (CMA) exam because they felt that the topics assessed on the exam were the same ones covered in most accounting curricula. Eschenfelder et al. (2014) explored the views of accounting and economics faculty on the Assurance of Learning Process (AOL) required as part of the AACSB accounting accreditation and found that faculty did not find the implementation of AOL to improve student learning or invoke curriculum changes. Additionally, they associated the lack of a required standardized test as part of the AOL process to student unpreparedness.

The predominant reason researchers cited for the expectation gap is the inability of academic programs to meet the opportunities and challenges of the accounting profession (Caskey & Corona, 2016; Gracia, 2010; Pernsteiner, 2015; Ratnatunga, 2012; Towers-Clark, 2015; Wilson, 2011). The researchers drew these conclusions mainly from student and faculty perceptions, except Caskey and Corona (2016) and Wilson (2011) whose articles were simply personal reflections of prior research on the subject. Most offered recommendations for increasing levels of accounting proficiency and professional competencies to both the accounting academic and practice communities. Several researchers made distinctions between soft and hard skills with each noting that soft skills were critical to workplace transition (Beck & Halim, 2008; Gracia, 2010; Pernsteiner, 2015; Towers-Clark (2015).

Barth (2015) was the only author who contributed the weakening link to a lack of research aimed at improving the content of accounting information and the reluctance of

standard-setters to consult accounting research. Barth speculated that accounting is necessary to create an environment that stimulates economic growth and argued that accounting research aimed at improving accounting information content is critical to accounting practice. The researcher offered numerous examples of how research enhanced financial accountability and supported the widening gap between research and practice with a list of potentially researchable questions.

Researchers, practitioners, educators, and policymakers have been endeavoring to properly align the learning curriculum and the practice of the accounting community for decades (Behn et al., 2012; Gracia, 2010; Johnson, 2014; Lawson et al., 2014; Pernsteiner, 2015; Ratnatunga, 2012; Stanley, 2013; Stivers & Onifade, 2014; Towers-Clark, 2015; Wilson, 2011). Institutions of higher education have made meaningful changes to their accounting curricula, and professional accountancy institutions have created helpful resources to empower accounting learners. Moreover, information gathered through the investigations of certain stakeholders' perceptions has provided important insights. Even so, one facet of the theoretical-practical divide that remains unclear is the impact of internships in accounting education. Particularly, there exists an opportunity to examine accounting theory as it correlates with practice from the viewpoint of newly hired accounting graduates.

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed by this study was the lack of progress in reconciling expectations of accounting industry practitioners with competencies proposed in university accounting curricula. The success of the collaboration between higher education institutions, accountancy bodies, and accrediting agencies has been greatly disputed since the mid-1980s (Barth, 2015; Eschenfelder et al., 2014; Gracia, 2010; Lawson et al., 2014; Stanley, 2013; Vladu, 2015).

Information presented in accounting task force and governing committee reports indicates shortcomings in accounting education quality (Behn et al., 2012; Bloom, 2013; Brewer et al., 2014; Lawson et al., 2014; Madsen, 2015). Madsen's study confirmed a 7% decline in the quality of accounting students over this forty-year period when compared to other non-accounting business students. The AICPA's 2017 *Trends Report* reported a nearly 20% decline in the hiring of accounting graduates by Certified Public Accounting (CPA) firms over the past six years, reflecting a need for specialized employment in assignment areas such as Big Data and information systems (AICPA, 2017; Sledgianowski, Gomaa, and Tan, 2017).

Scholars and practitioners have offered a myriad of recommendations and proposals to address the expectation gap, yet little progress has been made in merging accounting education and professional expectations. The most common reason offered in the literature is the inability of academic programs to meet the opportunities and challenges of the accounting profession in a dynamic global business environment (Behn et al., 2012; Ratnatunga, 2012; Sledgianowski et al., 2017; Towers-Clark, 2015; Wilson, 2011). Researchers have drawn these conclusions mainly from student, faculty, and employer perceptions, but there is a scarcity of published work on accounting graduates' perceptions of their internship experiences and their transition to industry (Beck & Halim, 2008; Gracia, 2010; Paisey & Paisey, 2010; Stanley, 2013). An examination of graduates' earliest experiences with a transition into accounting work, problems they encountered, and the possible role internships played might provide insight into the barriers contributing to the purported gap between accounting education and accounting practice. Business schools, accrediting agencies, and accountancy bodies might use the results of such research to map accounting program curricula, accreditation standards, and concepts statements

purposefully to the practical skills demanded by practitioners in a variety of organizational settings.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, case study design research was to investigate the fundamental cause of the expectation gap through an exploration of recent accounting graduates' retrospective perceptions of their workplace transition and employability development. Qualitative methods provide insight into participants' behavior, and perceptions of a situation are appropriate for studying processes; therefore, the use of qualitative methods is appropriate for evaluating research models rooted in experiential learning, sociocultural learning, or cognitive behavioral theories (Chenail, 2011; Krathwohl, 2009). Such theories have been used to support studies whereby researchers examined the perceptions of faculty, students, and practitioners on the transfer of learning to practice. A case study is appropriate because it is ideal for investigating contemporary, social phenomena and is restricted to a particular group, a set of events, and time period (Krathwohl, 2009; Yin, 2012; Yin, 2013). Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from a sample of 127 students who received an undergraduate accounting degree between 2013 and 2018 from a rural western Pennsylvania university and were subsequently employed in the accounting field. The University's School of Business Annual Reports and public information provided by the professional network LinkedIn were the primary and secondary sources providing the list of graduate names, contact information, and early employment information.

Theoretical Framework

The idea of student learning in accounting has evolved from psychological or cognitive theories and processing systems that focus on how accounting students think, remember, learn,

and perceive (Beard, 2007; Gracia, 2010; Johnson, 2014; Stanley, 2013; Tan & Laswad, 2015). The underlying theories most noted in the literature include sociocultural learning theory and experiential learning theory. Russian psychologist, Lev Semenovich Vygotsky, was the pioneer of sociocultural learning theory whereby students develop skills through social interaction with adults (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky maintained that a teacher-student reciprocal learning experience was critical to learning, a concept he penned, the *zone of proximal development*. David A. Kolb's theory of experiential learning deals with the process of learning through cognitive development (Kolb, 1984). Kolb's view that "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 38) forged the development of his cyclical learning style model and four learning styles, which has been widely referenced in business education research.

Beard (2007) and Gracia (2010) employed experiential learning theory to support the critical importance of practical experience through supervised work experience and internships. Johnson (2014) linked experiential learning to his research findings after participant responses revealed that students valued real-world experience and placed responsibility on faculty to facilitate the translation between theory and practice. Tan and Laswad (2015) identified learning styles of accounting students using Kolb's Learning Style Inventory (LSI), an experiential learning model widely used in business education research, to examine the impact of learning style on academic performance. Other researchers whose models implied experiential learning theory were Paisey and Paisey (2010) and Pernsteiner (2015).

Gracia (2010) classified students into two categories of learners and then determined whether students favored a cognitive learning transfer approach or a sociocultural approach to learning. Stanley (2013) claimed to be the only researcher to examine student learning in

accounting through the lens of a sociocultural learning perspective. The researcher concluded that university learning was exceptionally different from workplace learning and used his results to link the three sociocultural concepts to themes that emerged from his study.

A review of the literature revealed two alternative theories concerning the research-practice gap. First, Caskey and Corona (2016) noted a contrast between the field of economics and the field of accounting. They argued that economic theory and policy-setting go hand in hand but that there is little exchange between theory and empirical work in accounting. They reasoned that to generate a healthy interaction between research and practice, both academics and practitioners must understand that experimental work must be explained through basic economic theory. Second, Tucker and Lowe (2014) made use of the diffusions of innovations theory, which centers on how innovation is adopted, to identify barriers to the application of practice in research.

Most of the responsibility for bridging the gap between research and practice lies heavily on the quality of faculty and accounting academic programs or accounting professional bodies and practitioners (Eschenfelder et al., 2014; Lawson et al., 2014; Pernsteiner, 2015; Stanley, 2013; Vladu, 2015). The researchers who applied qualitative methods to obtain their data formulated questions that focused on various experiential or sociocultural elements of learning. In none of the articles examined did researchers formulate questions that focused on the functions of motivational theories such as the expectancy-value theory or self-determination theory. An additional search turned up one or two articles whereby researchers employed self-determination theory to analyze student motivation in accounting programs (Araújo, Miranda, & Souza, 2013; Geiger & Cooper, 1996). The sole purpose of these studies, however, was to determine what motivates students to excel academically and not to explore inferences between

accounting research and practice.

Nature of the Study

The researcher utilized a qualitative methodology to explore recent graduates' retrospective perceptions of their university, internship, and workplace transition experiences. Several researchers describe qualitative studies as exploratory, emergent, and evaluative, requiring an inductive approach when research is lacking in a particular area and suggest that the research questions evolve as the study unfolds (Chenail, 2011; Krathwohl, 2009; Rosaline, 2008, & Yin, 2012). Qualitative methods allow the researcher to explore the relationship between how and why and provide insight into participants' behaviors and perceptions of a situation. Such methods teach us how to understand a phenomenon predominantly through an exploration of the insider's view of the situation, as they perceive it. The phenomena, in this case, are the aspects of the theory-practice gap that have been scarcely examined. The use of qualitative methods seems ideal for gaining insight into recent accounting graduates' retrospective perceptions of their internship experiences and transition to industry.

The literature supports a qualitative case study design approach to accounting graduates' perceptions of their educational experiences, the potential impact of internship programs, and their experiences of transitioning from university to practice (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell, 2013; Krathwohl, 2009; Rosaline, 2008, Yin, 2012). Baxter and Jack (2008) and Creswell (2013) described several procedures for conducting case studies, including determining the unit of analysis (recent graduates), placing time and activity boundaries to restrict the case (year graduated, place of internship, and position obtained after graduation), and describing the context within which the case occurred (perceived gap between theory and practice). Several researchers who examined the value of internships and workplace transition employed qualitative research

methodologies, including Gracia (2010), Johnson (2014), Paisey and Paisey (2010), Pernsteiner (2015), Ratnatunga (2012), Stanley (2013), Stivers and Onifade (2014), Towers-Clark (2015), Tucker and Lowe (2014), and Vladu (2015).

As there appears to be a consensus that qualitative methods are painstakingly appropriate for studying processes, the use of such methods might provide insight into graduates' perceptions of undergraduate academics and workplace transition best practices and their relationship to workplace preparedness (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Chenail, 2011; Creswell, 2013; Krathwohl, 2009). Additionally, such methods might be used to understand graduates' perceptions of the relationship between educational preparedness and skill development. Both Giuliano et al. (2014) and Hun, Loy, and Hansaram (2013) described learning itself as a process, so employing qualitative procedures to address this research problem seemed ideal.

Research Questions

The following research questions were designed to identify recent accounting graduates' perceptions of their educational experiences, the potential impact of internship programs, and their experiences of transitioning from university to practice. Through an examination of the graduates' successes and challenges of their educational journeys, the researcher hoped to comprehend better the perceived deficiencies in accounting education. Additionally, the researcher hoped to understand the relationship between the graduate and the context of the internship better. These insights may contribute to the existing body of knowledge on bridging the theory-practice and research-practice gaps.

RQ1. How do the accounting graduates view their educational preparedness and workplace expectations of accounting professionals?

RQ2. How do early career practitioners retrospectively perceive the impact that their internship experiences had in their transition to professional practice?

RQ3. How do the skills acquired by accounting graduates at various stages of undergraduate academic and employability development match the skills required by the entry-level accounting positions?

Significance of the Study

A study focused on recent graduates' perceptions might bring relevance to the application of relating accounting theory to accounting practice. Unarguably, this documented divide has contributed to the attitude that what is being taught at universities and colleges has little impact on accounting practice, and consequently, countless fundamental financial accounting questions remain unresolved (Barth, 2015; Basu, 2012; Johnson, 2014; Ratnatunga, 2012). Some researchers have suggested a more purposeful integration of education and practice through consultations with academics and accounting professionals (Behn et al., 2012; Eschenfelder et al., 2014; Johnson, 2014; Martinson & Cole, 2002; Ratnatunga, 2012; Vladu, 2015). The recent accounting graduate might be in a prime position for fostering such relationships, having recently obtained an undergraduate education that provided them with the required business knowledge and foundational accounting skills required for an entry-level position, while concurrently within their recent employment further developing and more deeply integrating their broad business and accounting knowledge. The views of their personal experiences might contribute to the establishment of a more formal relationship between the academic and practitioner communities, thereby overcoming many of the most significant impediments that presumably inhibit the progress toward eliminating the gap.

Definitions of Key Terms

Accrediting agency. An accrediting agency is an agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education that grants accreditation to an institution of higher education. Accreditation indicates that an institution of higher education has met certain quality standards (Martinson & Cole, 2002).

American Accounting Association (AAA). The AAA is the world's largest association of accounting academics and supports accounting education, research, and practice (AAA, 2018).

American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA). The AICPA is the world's largest association of accounting professionals. The AICPA is responsible for standard-setting and developing the Uniform CPA Examination (AICPA, 2018).

Assurance of Learning (AOL) assessment. AOL is a process whereby AACSB standards are used to determine whether students are meeting the learning objectives of a particular program (Eschenfelder et al., 2014).

Concepts Statements. Concepts statements were created by the Financial Accounting Standards Board (FASB) and are a part of Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP). The statements set the objectives that dictate how business transactions are recognized and recorded in the financial statements (FASB, n.d.).

Expectation Gap. The expectation gap refers to the differences between accounting program learning outcomes and the presumed skills of accounting graduates by accounting practitioners (Low, Botes, Rue, & Allen, 2016).

Hard skills. Hard skills are teachable concepts and quantifiable skills that students mainly learn through classroom instruction (Low et al., 2016; Madsen, 2015; Pernsteiner, 2015).

Ivory Tower. In academia, the ivory tower represents a place that is isolated or withdrawn from life's realities (Ratnatunga, 2012).

Outcomes assessment. Outcomes assessment is the process of collecting information on a student, faculty member, course, or program to determine the success of the academic experience (Colon et al., 2015; Dragoo & Barrows, 2016; Martinson & Cole, 2002).

Pedagogy. A pedagogy is a teaching method or strategy designed to promote student learning (Trede & McEwen, 2015).

Soft skills. Soft skills, or people skills, include social and emotional intelligence, communication skills, and common sense (Low et al., 2016; Madsen, 2015; Pernsteiner, 2015).

Tertiary. Tertiary refers to any institution of higher education (Stanley, 2013).

Theory-Practice Phenomenon. The theory-practice phenomenon is the difference between what students learn at a university and what qualifies them for professional practice (Wilson, 2011).

Workplace transition. Workplace transition is the ability of a student to evolve from a student in the classroom to an employee in an office (Gracia, 2010; Paisey & Paisey, 2010; Stanley, 2013).

Summary

Educators, policymakers, and practitioners have been collaborating for decades to improve the quality of accounting education and to align core accounting competencies with professional expertise (Engel, 2015; Eschenfelder et al., 2014; Lawson et al., 2014; Tan & Laswad, 2015). Their efforts to reunite accounting education and professional practice have been widely criticized and pigeonholed as the theory-practice gap. Although researchers have examined the perceptions of students, faculty, practitioners, and policymakers in the hopes of

gaining insight into the separation of "knowing" from "doing", research examining graduates' perceptions is practically non-existent (Beck & Halim, 2008; Gracia, 2010; Paisey & Paisey, 2010; Stanley, 2013). The purpose of this qualitative research study was to investigate the views of recent accounting graduates from a rural liberal arts university in western Pennsylvania. Their opinions of the accounting program's employability success and their experiences of shifting from academics to industry provided additional insight into those barriers contributing to the affirmed gap between accounting theory and accounting practice.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, the researcher presents the theoretical foundation for the study and reviews the scholarly literature on the underlying causes of the widening gap between tertiary accounting education and professional accounting practice. Longstanding demands for accounting education reform and admonitory pleas from accounting professionals to bridge the expectation gap permanently have necessitated further exploration of this elusive phenomenon. While many researchers have analyzed the perceptions of students, faculty, and employers, there is an absence of published work on recent accounting graduates' perceptions of their internship experiences, learned proficiencies, and acclimatization to industry (Beck & Halim, 2008; Gracia, 2010; Paisey & Paisey, 2010; Stanley, 2013). Recent accounting graduates might be ideally situated to initiate partnerships between their professional firms and former institution.

A review of the literature guides the discussion and plays a critical role in understanding the current state of the expectation gap. This chapter opens with an introduction to, and a detailed discussion of, the theoretical framework that guides this research study. Experiential learning and cognitive development theories are presented to support an approach to learning in higher education that combines direct learning experiences with traditional post-secondary programs. A discussion on the past and present states of accounting education reform follows this foundational piece. Next, evidence of the gap between the academic and practice communities is established, followed by explanations of why a gap still exists despite years of ongoing accounting education reform. Aptly following is a discussion on the qualities that employers expect accounting graduates to possess. Then, the benefits and consequences of undergraduate internships and supervised work experiences in accounting are investigated to ascertain their role in the development of student competencies and in preparing students to

transition from the classroom to the office. Common recommendations to improve the alignment between accounting education and practice are recognized next. Finally, the summary section concludes the literature review.

References and Citations

In conducting the comprehensive search of the available literature, the researcher focused on recent articles about the accounting research-practice gap and the accounting theory-practice gap. Key word searches were performed primarily through Northcentral University's library databases and supplemented by searches of Google Scholar, the Saint Francis University Library databases, and resources made available through the Saint Francis University's interlibrary loan services. Articles were obtained from the following library databases: ABI Inform/Global, APA PsycNet, Ebsco, the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), JSTOR, ProQuest, Sage, and Science Direct. The researcher is a member of the IMA and receives a subscription to the professional journal, *Strategic Finance*. Several articles were obtained directly from this source.

A tentative outline of the literature review was created and key word searches conducted according to these categories. For example, the theoretical framework for this study is experiential learning, so key words searched included experiential learning in accounting, situated learning, sociocultural theory, and Kolb's Learning Style Inventory. Key words searched to find articles on accounting education reform and curricula included the accounting theory-practice gap, the accounting research-practice gap, expectation gap, accounting education reform, accounting education assessment, accounting accreditation, the Pathways Commission, assurance of learning (AOL), accounting outcomes assessment, accounting education framework, and introductory accounting courses. The topic of professionalism in graduates was searched using the key terms accounting competencies, accounting students' skills, accounting

graduate, long-term career requirements, and employer preferences. Finally, the following words were searched to find articles relative to internships and training: accounting internships, supervised work experience in accounting, workplace transition, employability, accounting graduates' skills, professional accounting education, technical skills in accounting graduates, non-technical skills in accounting graduates, accounting student perceptions, and accounting faculty perceptions. The researcher used the Boolean operator mainly when searching for a particular author and topic together. The 'Keywords' sections of all the articles reviewed were examined and used to locate additional references related to the study.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research is grounded in learning theories used to explain methods and ideologies that foster learning and development primarily in higher education communities. It draws principally on David Kolb's experiential learning theory, which is anchored firmly in the earlier works of Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget and Vygtosky's sociocultural theory (Kolb, 1984). These theories have provided solid justification in many research studies for how learning best occurs in accountancy. Experiential learning theories have been used to identify learning styles of accounting students, explain student performance and mastery in the accounting discipline, and orient students to their professional mentalities so that they can adapt to their work environments.

Tan and Laswad (2015) investigated learning style distributions and the correlation to a student's academic performance in an introductory accounting course using Kolb's Learning Style Inventory (LSI). Several other researchers employed the Visual-Aural-Read/Write-Kinesthetic (VARK) in their studies to identify student learning styles (Engel, 2015; Hun et al., 2013; Leung, McGregor, Sabiston, & Vriliotis, 2014). The explicit objective of Hun et al.

(2013) was to quantify learners' characteristics about the way they learn. Engel (2015) aimed to identify the predominant learning style of students in an introductory accounting course and invited researchers to investigate the impact of such knowledge on the quality of introductory accounting courses.

Background

The Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 was a catalyst for several reformatory endeavors including the first major study of the U.S. auditing profession by the U.S. Treasury Department's Advisory Committee on the Auditing Profession. Its 2008 *Final Report* included not only recommendations for enhancing the auditing profession but also recommendations for enhancing the profession's broader roles of creating economic value and cultivating societal well-being (U.S. Department of the Treasury Advisory Committee on the Auditing Profession, 2008). In this report, the U.S. Treasury Department challenged the AICPA and the AAA to explore the current and future states of the accounting profession and blaze a trail on accounting education reform. The result of this 18-month joint venture by the AICPA and the AAA was the Pathways Commission Report, which was designed to foster collaboration between accounting scholars and accounting professionals for the sole purpose of enriching accounting higher education.

The Committee's number one recommendation was "Build a learned profession for the future by purposeful integration of accounting research, education, and practice for students, accounting practitioners, and educators." (U.S. Department of the Treasury Advisory Committee on the Auditing Profession, 2008, p.11). This recommendation was intended to address the gap among accounting research, education, and practice. Action items included the integration of professionally qualified faculty into the classroom, an ambitious focus on academic research

related to practice issues and integration of that research into accounting programs and courses, and the creation of networks between educators and practitioners.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory

The Commission's acknowledgment of critical linkages between research and practice, practice and education, and education and research is suitably akin to the tenets of experiential learning theory. According to Kolb (1984), experiential learning is a process that links education, work, and personal development. Kolb defines learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience," (p. 38). A university education provides the formal competence-based academic training. A formal workplace creates the learning environment where the students can learn to cope with the shift from classroom education to competent professional service. Personal or intellectual development is then nurtured by meaningful work and career development opportunities that build human capital, promote employability, and cultivate societal well-being. This accumulated experience provides competencies beyond those of timeworn customary classroom routines, teacher-centered lectures, and a focus on rote learning and memorization of concepts.

Foundations of Experiential Learning. The traditions of Kolb's experiential learning theory are founded in the philosophies of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and Jean Piaget (Kolb, 1984). Dewey's educational model of learning is perhaps the most progressive and the most influential. His model emphasizes feedback as the key construct of purposeful learning; therefore, internships and field assignments create the perfect environment where observation, reflection, and judgment combine for a more purposeful and practical learning arena. Lewin's allegiance to the integration of theory and practice fostered an experiential learning model that focuses on data collection, analysis, and feedback to validate abstract concepts. He developed a

four-stage learning cycle where current experiences serve as the basis for observation and reflection and are later conformed into hypotheses that serve to create new experiences. Piaget's Model of Learning and Cognitive Development is based on four major stages of cognitive growth from infancy through age 15 which shape the basic learning processes in adults. His model is centered on the theory that people acquire knowledge through progressive stages of development and maturation through interaction with their environment.

Another key contributor to the foundations of experiential learning is Russian psychologist, Lev Semenovich Vygotsky. Strongly influenced by Kurt Lewin, Vygotsky was the pioneer of sociocultural learning theory, and his work focused on processes that progressively build skills and knowledge in students through social interaction with adults (Kolb, 1984; Vygotsky, 1978). His concept of *Zone of Proximal Development* refers to the physical learning environment where the student makes the critical transition from novice to expert through mentoring by more experienced members of society. He maintained that mastery of skills and higher mental function are the output of the social interactions and cultural experiences of a child.

Learning Style Models. A variety of learning style models and theories have been developed to conceptualize the psychological behaviors of adult learners and provide a framework to maximize learning experience based on different student learning styles (Akella, 2010; Engel, 2015; Hun et al., 2013; Leung et al., 2014; Tan & Laswad, 2015; Tsingos, Bosnic-Anticevich, & Smith, 2015). As previously noted, the conceptual framework of this proposed study is based on David Kolb's experiential learning theory which he defined as "a holistic, integrative perspective on learning that combines experience, cognition, and behavior" (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). Experiential learning is a circular and continuous process by which knowledge is

generated through the transformation of new experiences rather than just from received standardized instruction (Akella, 2010; Bergsteiner, Avery, & Neumann, 2010; Mainemelis, Boyatzis, & Kolb, 2002; Tan & Laswad, 2015; Tsingos et al., 2015). According to Tsingos et al. (2015), the experiential learning process described by Kolb is divided into three categories of human growth and development: acquisition is the stage from birth to adolescence where individuals begin to develop basic approaches to learning; specialization occurs during the formal education years, and dominant learning styles begin to surface; integration occurs late in the individual's career after worldly experiences transform and influence the non-dominant learning styles.

It is the specialization period that was particularly important to Kolb (Tsingos et al., 2015). It is at this stage where Kolb's model emphasizes experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting as learners cycle through four major stages: concrete experience (CE), reflective observation (RO), abstract conceptualization (AC), and active experimentation (AE). He argued that when the learner integrates the two opposing elements of grasping experience (concrete experience and abstract conceptualization) and the two opposing elements of transforming experience (reflective observation and active experimentation), the learner achieves a higher level of development and specialized learning in a holistic, sophisticated manner.

The Four Stages of Experiential Learning. Concrete Experience (CE) is the beginning stage where active learning and student experiences occur (Akella, 2010; Bergsteiner et al., 2010; Mainemelis et al., 2002; Tan & Laswad, 2015). Learners adapt to and engage with their environments as opposed to following some systematic approach to learning. In the next stage, Reflective Observation (RO), the student learner reflects on these experiences and critically examines how and why they occurred. In the Abstract Conceptualization (AC) stage, the learner

reflects on the experiences and observations to develop theories and solutions to problem sets that are tested in the Active Experimentation (AE) stage.

Learning Style Inventory (LSI). Kolb illustrates his experiential learning theory in a model consisting of four learning style groups: Divergers, Assimilators, Convergers, and Accommodators (Akella, 2010; Bergsteiner et al., 2010; Mainemelis et al., 2002; Tan & Laswad, 2015). Kolb posits that no two learners experience the four stages of the cycle equally and that individual learning styles result from combinations of adjacent elements in the experiential learning cycle. Kolb describes various combinations of those elements that make up the learning style groups.

Divergers. As the title suggests, Divergers prefer to deviate from the norm and prefer to reflect on their experiences rather than take action (Akella, 2010; Bergsteiner et al., 2010; Mainemelis et al., 2002; Tan & Laswad, 2015). Divergers fall between the dualities of Concrete Experience (CE) and Reflective Observation (RO). They prefer learning in groups, so they frequently engage in brainstorming activities to generate new ideas. Divergers tend to be culturally diverse and prefer to receive feedback, which they usually memorialize in a private journal. Divergers are sensitive and are best suited for careers in the arts or human resource management.

Assimilators. Assimilators sit between the dualities of Reflective Observation (RO) and Abstract Conceptualization (AC). Assimilators are not interested in socializing and favor abstract concepts over human beings (Akella, 2010; Bergsteiner et al., 2010; Mainemelis et al., 2002; Tan & Laswad, 2015). They are concise, organized, and logical, and therefore, prefer detailed notes and instruction. Assimilators are more concerned with creating an action plan

than they are in implementing one. Learners with this style prefer reading assignments, lectures, and exploring analytical models and are best suited for careers in math and science.

Convergers. Convergers learn through practical application and are good at hypothetical deductive reasoning to solve problems (Akella, 2010; Bergsteiner et al., 2010; Mainemelis et al., 2002; Tan & Laswad, 2015). Convergers lie between the dualities of Abstract Conceptualization (AC) and Active Experimentation (AE). They quickly adapt to their environment and like to experiment with new ideas. Convergers might be most satisfied with careers in accounting or engineering.

Accommodators. Accommodators tend to be risk-takers and rely on intuition rather than logic (Akella, 2010; Bergsteiner et al., 2010; Mainemelis et al., 2002; Tan & Laswad, 2015). These *'hands-on'* learners are skilled in the dualities of Active Experimentation (AE) and Concrete Experience (CE). They tend to rely on information and opinions from other people and enjoy working in groups. Accommodators lack routine or structure but can follow through with plans and complete tasks.

Criticisms of LSI. Although business education research has widely adopted Kolb's learning style instrument, the psychometric properties of the LSI have been highly debated and criticized (Akella, 2010; Bergsteiner et al., 2010; Engel, 2015; Mainemelis et al., 2002; Tan & Laswad, 2015). Akella (2010) and Engel (2015) observed that the experiential learning theory model is not sensitive to gender, culture, age, or social status. Akella (2010) further remarked that although the model helps to identify how a student best learns, it does not address how individual differences and characteristics influence student perceptions of the link between learning assessment and academic performance. Additionally, these researchers noted that little research had been conducted on how an instructor has used the experiential learning model to

adapt, improve, or modify teaching styles and course content. Mainemelis et al. (2002) acknowledged concerns over the instrument's use of forced-choice methods and forced-choice measurement but later claimed redemption through several revisions and improvements over a 15-year period.

Unlike other criticisms revealed in the extant literature, Bergsteiner et al. (2010) examined and critiqued Kolb's learning cycle graphical model and proposed guidelines to overcome its weaknesses. Their findings revealed a multitude of issues including reliability and validity of the LSI, flawed theoretical foundations, graphic syntax errors within the model, confusion over definitions of the elements within the model, and difficulties in categorizing activities associated with the learning modes. Tan and Laswad (2015) highlighted challenges regarding the validity of earlier versions of Kolb's LSI but claimed the instrument was rated strong for reliability and fair for validity in a review of over four decades of learning styles inventories conducted by Hickcox (2006). They concluded that Hickcox's findings supported the use of Kolb's LSI as a framework for pedagogical practices.

Experiential Learning in Higher Education.

According to Kolb (1984), an academic institution is by nature at the heart of experiential learning theory because it fosters the learning environment that provides students with access to social knowledge. Consequently, institutions of higher education are responsible for making certain that individual learners progress through all three stages of experiential learning. In stage one students acquire the tools necessary for learning basic skills. Although stage one mainly occurs in primary and secondary education, Kolb blamed an abdication of responsibility on the part of the public school system for the transfer of this burden to tertiary education. Stage two, specialization, is where the learner selects a particular field of study where he can combine his

knowledge, skills, and talents to meet the needs of his social circles. The final and most critical stage, integration, is where the learner begins his assimilation into modern society. According to Kolb, this final stage that has suffered greatly at the hands of specialization.

Kolb (1984) believed that the secularization of the classical Harvard education in the mid-1800s inspired the trend toward specialization and vocationalism in higher education, which emphasizes a "unitary linear trend of growth and development" (p. 241). Kolb drew this conclusion partly from his personal experience as an academic advisor when dealing with students who had come to realize that the careers (majors) they chose as freshman were not quite what they imagined them to be. He speculated that these vacillations between majors represented mismatches between personal learning styles and the demand of the discipline and not the learners' changing interests. Later, Kolb explored the consequences of specialized development and examined the process of accentuation and its impact on a specialized approach to learning.

Kolb (1984) used the LSI to examine specialization through accentuation and to explain relationships between students' learning styles, their academic performance and social adaptation as the university level, and their ability to adjust to the profession's norms. Convicted by the results of his studies, Kolb argued that a professional education should focus less on intensive specialized training and more on a comprehensive development of competencies required for lifelong learning. He warned the higher education community of the implications of early specialization and challenged college professors to become experiential educators (Kolb, 2015). His recommendations included the creation of learning spaces beyond the traditional classroom, such as apprenticeships and internships, the inclusion of pedagogies that address all four learning

modes, and the implementation of assessments and outcomes that measure learning skills in addition to content knowledge.

A Brief History of Accounting Education Reform

The movement to reform accounting education began long before the passing of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, and The Pathways Commission was not the first collaboration of accounting professionals whose aim was to acknowledge and explore the strong links among accounting research, practice, and education. A 1966 publication titled, "Horizons for a Profession: The Common Body of Knowledge for CPAs," (Roy & MacNeill, 1966) was the result of a three-year study conducted by then Dean of Engineering Science at the Johns Hopkins University, Robert Roy, and former Accounting Department Chairman in the School of Business Administration of Fordham University, James MacNeill, to address the imminent changes of the profession and serve as a guide to new CPAs. Almost two decades before David Kolb expressed concerns over the narrowing approach to classroom learning, Roy and MacNeill warned of prescriptive syllabi, a lack of depth in the current training model, and an overall need for improvement of professional competencies.

In addressing professional preparation, Roy and MacNeill (1966) pinpointed a generous list of classroom inefficiencies, but the most significant element that was lacking was what they referred to as the "essential ingredient of reality" (p. 40). In other words, the classroom experience lacked the reality of professional practice. Perhaps just as essential as this admission was their charge that the number of faculty and students engaging in research, aside from doctoral candidates, was nearly static, and they went as far as to suggest that research projects be sponsored and paid for by organizations that wish to have specific accounting problems investigated. Ultimately, the researchers' goal was to provide recommendations for new CPAs

based on the quantitative data collected and the opinions of those interviewed for the study. The researchers concluded that the "common body of knowledge" was much broader than their formal academic training and included such categories as technology, economics, statistics, the humanities, and law.

The Bedford Report. The Bedford Report, as it is commonly referred, was the work of a diverse group of professionals appointed by the AAA in 1984 to investigate the content, scope, and structure of accounting education (American Accounting Association, 1986). The AAA's concern was that accounting education was not evolving as quickly as the demands of the profession itself. Additionally, accountants were now expected to provide a more complex and diverse set of services than the traditional accounting functions they were originally trained to perform. The committee was responsible for identifying the evolving characteristics of the growing profession and subsequently providing recommendations to higher education institutions to assist them in realigning their accounting programs.

The report acknowledged the growing gap between the course content of a formal university accounting education and the expanding scope of competencies of the accounting professional (American Accounting Association, 1986). Additionally, the committee noted a correlation between this gap and the accounting student's lack of research skills. The committee's top recommendation for college and university faculty included updating course content, improving teaching and technology methods, and developing students' soft skills. Like Roy and MacNeill (1966), the Bedford Report (American Accounting Association, 1986) stressed that the content of an accounting education should include knowledge of the humanities, arts, and sciences if future accountants are to possess the experience and skills necessary to meet the changing needs of the profession and the people it serves. Finally, the committee provided a

conceptual framework for future accounting education as well as a plan for implementation of the recommended changes.

The Accounting Education Exchange Commission. In August of 1989, the AAA collaborated with the eight largest CPA firms, all of which contributed millions of dollars to fund the Commission, to form an 18-member group known as the Accounting Education Change Commission (AECC) (Sundem, 1999; Williams, 1993). The appointment of the AECC was considered the catalyst for effective change because the multiple models for revision of accounting education that already existed led only to limited actions and none had widespread impact. Graduates were still not prepared for the requisites of the workplace. The Commission's purpose was to accelerate change in accounting education by 1) taking the lead in changing accounting education so that it would be responsive to meeting the needs of graduates and by 2) providing a more successful curriculum design for colleges and universities.

The AECC identified the key features of its newly designed accounting curriculum as broad-based, integrated, and reflective of real-world problems (Sundem, 1999; Williams, 1993). The commission worked to dismiss the idea that accounting problems only have one right answer when in fact many problems have more than one acceptable solution. This new model centered on active learning, including discussions, presentations, and simulations rather than lectures and rote memorization of processes and pronouncements. Additionally, this new curriculum was designed to provide opportunities to develop students' communication and interpersonal skills. Lastly, the AECC's new education model de-emphasized the concept of 'teaching to the test,' (the CPA exam) because graduates were entering a variety of career paths. The AECC awarded grants to fund proposals from schools that implemented the Commission's new curriculum and met its objectives.

The Albrecht and Sack Project. This project was a bold collaboration between the IMA, the AICPA, the AAA, and what was, at the time, the Big Five public accounting firms to, at last, fix a broken system (Albrecht & Sack, 2000). The authors' monograph contained enough gloom and doom to make anyone who read the book believe that accounting education was dying a slow and imminent death. The authors lamented about declining enrollments, overall drops in the quality of accounting students, antiquated educational models, and claims of regret from educators and practitioners who would not major in accounting if they had to do it all over again. Unfortunately, their claims were not baseless.

A technology-driven business environment combined with globalization was creating new products and services, and in turn, increasing the attractiveness of other majors along with their salaries (Albrecht & Sack, 2000). The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) reported that salaries paid to accounting and finance undergraduates increased 31% and 28%, respectively, from 1990 to 1999 whereas the salaries of consultants and information system/computer science specialists increased 42% and 48%, respectively, over the same period. Correspondingly, an AICPA study revealed that the number of bachelor's and master's accounting degrees declined by 20% between the 1995-96 and 1998-99 academic years, and the number of students enrolled in accounting programs decreased by 23% over that same period. Most alarming to the researchers was the discovery that 100% of educators and 79% of practitioners would not earn a degree in accounting if they started their education over.

Following the dismal study results and harsh criticisms of general accounting education came warnings of the consequences of ignoring the evidence in hand (Albrecht and Sack, 2000). The authors proclaimed that the profession had undergone the necessary transformation, but accounting education had yet to reinvent itself. The educators, practitioners, and governing

bodies concluded their study with challenging solutions that focused on broadened curricula, integrated programs, and investment in faculty development.

NYSSCPA White Paper. In 2008, The New York State Society of Certified Public Accountants (NYSSCPA) Quality Enhancement Policy Committee (QEPC) presented its official position in a white paper on the 150-credit hour requirement to sit for the Uniform CPA Examination (Fierstein, 2008). The committee proposed what they referred to as pre-certification educational goals that identified what accounting graduates with 150 credit-hours should know and what they should be able to do. In examining the impact of this change, the committee highlighted several momentous historical events, which helped pave the way for the 150-hour requirement by widening the gap between academics and practice. Of the attributes that the committee identified as most essential for success as a CPA, strong research skills were most noteworthy. The committee also suggested the use of comprehensive business case studies in the classroom, practical internship experience for students, and the hiring of faculty with considerable work experience in lieu of a doctoral degree to enhance the student's whole academic experience.

The Pathways Commission Report. The most well regarded of all restructuring endeavors was the Pathways Commission's report, "Charting a National Strategy for the Next Generation of Accountants." Whereas the other endeavors stimulated significant discussion and debate but little action, the "Final Report" was purposed as the mechanism for achieving real reform in accounting education (Behn et al., 2012; Bloom, 2013; U.S. Department of the Treasury Advisory Committee on the Auditing Profession, 2008). Despite the parallels with previous studies, this report mainly focused on overcoming the impediments of time and money, which limited earlier efforts. The commission blamed a bureaucratic reward system for delaying

the changes and was confident that the actions recommended to address the impediments could realistically be implemented.

Other accounting education reformation endeavors, the premises of which echoed the sentiments of those aforementioned, included the 1989 Big Eight White Paper titled, "Perspectives on Education: Capabilities for Success in the Accounting Profession" and the AAA Executive Committee's establishment of the Accounting Education Change Commission (Bloom, 2013; Mueller & Simmons, 1989). The overall objective of these and other task forces was fundamentally the same: foster demonstrable changes in education and industry that focus on developing skill sets with the depth and breadth necessary to meet the changing needs of society. Although each organization's list of recommendations for achieving this goal varied to some extent, the significance of the interdependent relationships among education, research, and practice was prevalent in each.

The Current State of the Accounting Academy

Though a small number of experts argue that the news is not all bad, there are plenty of others who continue to express growing concerns that the skills gap has yet to be closed (APQC, 2015; Brewer et al., 2014; Mastracchio, 2017; Madsen, 2015; Martin & Alleyne, 2017; Pryor & Cipriano, 2017; Walker, 2017). Those who argue that some of the noted concerns are merely common myths and that the state of accounting education is strong make those claims based on increasing pass rates on the CPA exam by candidates from AACSB-accredited accounting programs. This datum, however, does not necessarily translate to a higher percentage of new CPAs. Mastracchio (2017) in particular reasoned that the willingness of accounting graduates and Big Four accounting firms to make large monetary donations to universities demonstrates accounting program success. Nevertheless, the use of such lone criterion as evidence of bridging

the gap is contrary to the researcher's conclusions, which suggest that a successful accounting program is one that advances the profession by producing graduates who possess the growing assortment of competencies needed to serve our progressive society.

Pathways Update. A summary of recent activities by the Pathways Commission on Accounting Higher Education can be found on the AICPA's website. The update links are aligned to the Final Report's recommendations and divided into six categories: 1) Our Profession, 2) Future Faculty, 3) Research and Teaching, 4) Our Curricula, 5) Our Students, and 6) Our Data. The most recent updates were posted in June of 2016. One update was a review of the Accounting Doctoral Scholars (ADS) Program, and the other was a review of the Advanced Placement (AP) Course Initiative (AICPA, n.d.). Both initiatives were designed to meet the objectives of Recommendation 5: Improve the ability to attract high-potential, diverse entrants into the profession.

The ADS Program was designed to address the shortage of doctorally qualified accounting faculty by increasing the pool of academically qualified CPAs in the college classroom (AICPA, n.d.). The program was launched in 2008, and as of 2016, 58 participants earned their PhDs and secured faculty positions. At the time of the update, the committee was planning to launch phase two of the program and hold an orientation conference. According to the annual review, the total number of program scholars who had received their PhD or were nearing program completion in 2017 was 108. Even though the foundation's leaders boast strong support of the program by the AICPA, many large accounting firms, and some 48 universities, no measurement guidelines of this program's success have been established.

The goal of the AP Course Initiative was to design a high school accounting course, which was eligible for AP credit (AICPA, n.d.). The AICPA collaborated with CPA Societies

and State Departments of Education to create an advanced accounting curriculum called AICPA Accounting Program for Building the Profession (APBP). The Pathways Committee extended this program to the College Board in the spring of 2015. According to the update, the College Board notified the AICPA in late 2015 that it would not be adding any new AP courses until certain organizational issues could be resolved. The College Board estimated that those issues could take years to resolve. Despite the College Board's rejection of this program, the committee decided to move forward with the initiative because it was well established in several states. Although several state CPA societies continue to provide educator training, the program has yet to gain national recognition.

Evidence of an On-Going Skills Gap. In 2014, members from the IMA and the Management Accounting Section (MAS) of the AAA formed a task force to address the competency crisis in accounting education (Lawson et al., 2014). An extensive review of both professional and academic literature identified the need for a new education model that defined required professional competencies, promoted long-term career development, and better aligned with the current accounting environment rather than another program designed to focus on the skills necessary for entry-level public accounting. The review led to four recommendations that the task force integrated into their proposed educational framework. The focus of the framework was the development of core competencies in accounting, finance, economics, and information systems.

The IMA continued its quest to close the skills gap in late 2014 when it, along with the American Productivity and Quality Center (APQC), surveyed 173 human resource-recruiting professionals to determine the current state of entry-level management accounting and finance professionals (APQC, 2015). They reported that 90% of the organizations surveyed faced

challenges in hiring qualified entry-level accounting and finance professionals. Suggesting that the problem was rooted in education, they noted deficiencies in both technical and non-technical competencies. Technical skills that were most inadequate included planning, budgeting and forecasting, cost management, and financial reporting. The top non-technical competency gaps included leadership, strategic thinking and execution, and change management. Most participants also agreed that the top consequences of hiring challenges included an increased time in filling vacant positions and increased recruiting costs. The IMA and APQC found large gaps in all 25 technical and non-technical competencies evaluated. Perhaps the most concerning statistic was that 37% of the survey participants were fairly concerned that the shortage of talent would persist in their own organizations for at least five to ten years.

The outcomes of several other studies parallel the IMA and APQC claims that entry-level accountants still do not possess the skills employers want and that traditional accounting curriculum has not kept pace with the demands of the profession (Brewer et al., 2014; Colon, Badua, & Torres, 2015; Martin & Alleyne, 2017; Thomson, 2017). Brewer et al. (2014) and Thomson (2017) argued that accounting curricula, which are narrowly focused on audit, tax, and compliance, are responsible for the competency crisis and encouraged higher education institutions to adopt the IMA/MAS Task Force's Integrated Framework. This framework maps accounting curriculum to long-term career competencies including foundational competencies such as communication, problem-solving, and technology, as well as broad sets of accounting and management competencies. According to Thomson (2017), IMA president and CEO, new accountants spend only three years in public accounting and then move into the private sector where they must be able to engage in a cross-functional approach to managing all facets of the enterprise. Such skill sets include not only budgeting, planning, and forecasting, but also

planning and executing strategy, collaborative decision-making, and liaising with investors, executives, and other staff. The researchers agreed that universities must collaborate with businesses to blend a well-rounded curriculum with meaningful job training.

In recent studies conducted by Fogarty and Black (2014) and Madsen (2015), the researchers quantified some of the opinions held by others that accounting education remains far-removed from accounting practice. In Fogarty & Black's study, the researchers used the 1980 to 2012 annual editions of Hasselback's *Accounting Faculty Directory* to establish that the number of new faculty who held professional certifications was at a 30-year all-time low and would continue to decline rapidly. They reported that although the total number of accounting faculty increased by 2.3% from 1995 to 2011, the number of faculty who held a professional certification declined by 13.5% over that same period. This decline of credentials occurred more often in institutions that offered a doctoral degree than in non-doctoral program institutions, with more prestigious institutions leading the trend. The researchers attributed this problem to the publishing requirements of faculty at AACSB-accredited institutions. These same institutions use CPA pass rates as a measure of program success yet do not emphasize the practice credentials of their own faculty. Such evidence has confirmed for many that the requirements for earning a PhD in accounting have only widened the gap (Pryor & Cipriano, 2017; Walker, 2017).

Madsen (2015) measured the quality of accounting education from the 1970s to the 2000s using comparative data over the same period to substantiate the decades' old argument that the quality of accounting degree programs has deteriorated. The researcher indicated that although the academic ability of accounting students had remained relatively the same over the forty years examined, these students had weaker soft skills when compared to other non-accounting business students. The evidence suggested a decrease in the quality of accounting students of

approximately two to seven percent when compared to students selecting other business majors. Madsen contended that other business programs were doing a better job of attracting high-quality students to the detriment of accounting programs. The launch of more attractive business degree programs whose salaries increased at higher rates compared to those of college-educated accountants was also a contributing factor. Madsen's study complements earlier studies, particularly the Bedford Report and the Albrecht and Sack project.

Why Still a Gap?

It has been a little more than half of a century since the first calls to radically change the milieu of accounting education began, yet many accounting programs are still maintaining the status quo (Lawson et al., 2014; Pincus, Stout, Sorensen, Stocks, & Lawson, 2017). The conventional model for postsecondary education, in general, has become increasingly challenged due to unfavorable demographics, financial stress, and technology forces, but researchers suggest that these issues have greater implications for accounting academia. Several scholars have suggested that the explicit stumbling blocks to changing an infrastructure that has been in place for many years include university administration (Chen, 2016; Bisoux, 2016; Serocki, 2017; Walker, 2017), business and professional development (Chen, 2016; Fogarty & Black, 2014; Pincus et al., 2017; Serocki, 2017; Walker, 2017; Wilkerson, 2010), the role of research (Chen, 2016, Pryor & Cipriano, 2017; Walker, 2017), and teaching challenges (Chen, 2016; Pincus et al., 2017; Thomsen, 2017).

University Administration. University management practices and the AACSB accreditation process have created obstacles that, in the opinion of some, have weakened the state of accounting education, not improved it (Chen, 2016; Bisoux, 2016; Serocki, 2017; Walker 2017). Minerva Schools' CEO, Ben Nelson, called tenure a "cancer in higher education"

(Bisoux, 2016, p.24). Walker (2017) also harshly criticized the current tenure system stating that it was "designed to protect individuals professing unpopular points of view from being denied continued employment," (p.27), and "there is almost a complete lack of accountability for any aspect or outcome of university operations" (p. 27). Tenure accommodates only faculty and does not necessarily draw a parallel to effective teaching. A professor can be awarded tenure despite a poor teaching record. In contrary to this condemnation of tenure, Mastracchio (2017) inferred that the best educators are tenured faculty because "research and teaching go hand in hand" (p.35).

According to Chen (2016) and Walker (2017), accreditation only ensures that a certain percentage of faculty have earned a PhD, not that faculty have practical experience or formal training in education. Additionally, they argued that accreditation encourages research endeavors but not curriculum changes. In a recent survey of registrants who attended the 2017 Accounting Program Leadership Group (APLG) of the AAA, only 18% of schools planned to offer new accounting degree programs and 25% planned to revise existing accounting programs (Pincus et al., 2017). These changes, however, were little more than updates to the traditional accounting program rather than the structural changes that applied a new curriculum based on the highly recommended competency-based framework.

Although national accrediting agencies like the AACSB have quality assurance standards that portray themselves as measurements of student learning outcomes, there is no standardized exam to determine whether or not a student is prepared for an entry-level accounting position (Barilla, Jackson, & Mooney, 2008; Beard, 2007; Eschenfelder et al., 2014; Martinson & Cole, 2002; Walker, 2017). Beard (2007) and Martinson and Cole (2002) recommended a standardized exam for use in accreditation assessment activities. Beard (2007) shared

suggestions for internship program requirements, guidelines for employer supervision of internships, and a variety of examples and assessment and program evaluation forms. Martinson and Cole (2002) collaborated with the ICMA to develop a content-specific accounting assessment exam, which they planned to base on the Certified Management Accountant (CMA) exam because they felt that the topics assessed on the exam were the same ones covered in most accounting curricula. Eschenfelder et al. (2014) explored the views of accounting and economics faculty on the AOL process that was required as part of the AACSB accounting accreditation and found that faculty did not find the implementation of AOL to improve student learning or invoke curriculum changes. Additionally, they associated student unpreparedness with the lack of a required standardized test as part of the AOL process.

Business and Professional Development. Since the outdated curriculums of accounting degree programs have not kept pace with the evolving role of the accountant, the expertise of accounting faculty might be the key to producing a more diverse graduate and cultivating alliances with business leaders and organizations (Chen, 2016; Fogarty & Black, 2014; Pincus et al., 2017; Serocki, 2017; Walker, 2017; Wells, 2018; Wilkerson, 2010). Accreditation standards, however, have minimized the significance of professional experience and practice credentials of faculty to the point where an academic credential, such as the PhD, is a stand-alone criterion for securing a tenure-track faculty position. Accounting PhD students learn how to conduct research but usually know very little about the practice of accounting or how to teach it. Hasan (2016) argued that research excellence and teaching excellence are mutually exclusive and warned that faculty are focusing too heavily on research to the detriment of teaching. Walker (2017) suggested that the PhD's heavy focus on research prevents faculty from staying current on accounting practice.

Faculty have a responsibility to stay relevant by keeping up-to-date on higher education changes while simultaneously remaining current in their research and specialization areas (Fogarty & Black, 2014; Pincus et al., 2017). According to Wilkerson (2010), accounting educators are the sustainers of the profession because they possess specialized knowledge and essential practice skills necessary for a deeper understanding of the profession's purpose. Professional certifications enhance these characteristics and provide access to professional connections such as networking and continuing education opportunities (Fogarty & Black, 2014; Thomson, 2017). Unfortunately, academic credentials are consistently emphasized over practice credentials, so faculty are often not required to obtain a professional certification such as the CPA or CMA designations (Fogarty & Black, 2014; Serocki, 2017; Wilkerson, 2010). Fogarty and Black (2014) noted that the percentage of new faculty with the CPA designation is at a 30-year low with no signs of increasing.

The Role of Research. In 2008, AACSB International ordered the Impact of Research Task Force to study the distinct nature and function of business school scholarship and extend guidelines to second and third tier business schools on how they could increase the importance and prominence of academic research (AACSB International, 2008, Reprinted 2012). The report was divisive for many reasons, particularly for the assertions that research conducted at these institutions was reflected in practice and that effective teaching was concurrent with excellent research. Both of these claims are heavily disputed in the literature, and most argue that nothing has changed in over 50 years: research carried out in business schools is mostly unread (Hasan, 2016; Rebele & St. Pierre, 2015; Walker, 2017).

Rebele and St. Pierre (2015) analyzed articles published between 1998 and 2015 and found that the number of empirical articles declined by approximately 53% during this time

whereas the number of non-empirical articles rose by about 26%. Signs of this stagnation included research too narrowly focused, research that employed the same irrelevant research methods, and research that merely recapped prior studies in a different context. Researchers mainly focused on the topics of curriculum and instruction (40%) and faculty-related issues (14%). Even after AACSB International added assurance of learning as an accreditation requirement, less than three percent of articles have been published on this topic. Barth (2015) and Ratzinger-Sakel and Gray (2015) also quantified the gap between research and practice and identified numerous topics in the practice community that are underrepresented or remain unresearched altogether.

Although the conclusions drawn by researchers in numerous studies support the general opinion that the gap between accounting research and practice continues to widen, researchers offer an assortment of possible explanations for the chasm. The core of the issue might be the debate over whether or not modern accounting is an applied discipline (Walker, 2017; Zimmerman, Fogarty, & Jonas, 2017). To fit the academic mold, institutions developed research practices that resembled the physical and social sciences, which are based largely on testing theories, and therefore, not relevant to professional practice. Other likely reasons for the research-practice void included a lack of incentives (Ratzinger-Sakel & Gray, 2015; Ratnatunga, 2012; Rebele & St. Pierre, 2015; Zimmerman et al., 2017), an unwillingness from practitioners to share data (Ratnatunga, 2012; Ratzinger-Sakel & Gray, 2015; Vladu, 2015), timing differences (Ratzinger-Sakel & Gray, 2015; Walker, 2017), a detachment from the accounting profession (Barth, 2015; Rebele & St. Pierre, 2015; Walker, 2017), the inaccessibility and complex nature of most academic journals (Basu, 2012; Pryor & Cipriano, 2017; Vladu, 2015),

and underutilization of accounting research (Basu, 2012; Tucker & Lowe, 2014; Ratnatunga, 2012; Vladu, 2015).

Lack of Incentives. The growing divergence between the research and practice sides of accounting is, in part, due to the lower status of pedagogical and qualitative research at top-tier universities (Ratzinger-Sakel & Gray, 2015; Rebele & St. Pierre, 2015). Such research is not likely to be published in top-tier accounting journals because the articles do not meet the journal's editorial standards. Although AACSB-accreditation requirements for promotion and tenure should be motivation enough for faculty to focus on conducting empirical research, some argue that faculty should receive monetary rewards if their articles are accepted for publication in such journals (Ratnatunga, 2012; Rebele & St. Pierre, 2017). Likewise, those publishing in practitioner-oriented journals should be given the same recognition as those publishing in top accounting journals (Walker, 2017).

Unwillingness of Practitioners to Share Data. Another example of how accounting research has idled is the reluctance of practitioners to provide information that would support meaningful research efforts (Ratzinger-Sakel & Gray, 2015; Vladu, 2015). Some topics might be off limits due to the sensitive nature of the practitioners' internal data and the fear of litigation. However, for accounting research to gain relevancy by solving real accounting problems, accounting academic programs must develop more opportunities for students to engage with accounting professionals (Ratnatunga, 2012). Such joint undertakings can substantially enhance communication between the two communities, potentially uncovering practical research topics.

Timing Differences. The process of scholarly publishing is routinely a long road, so one additional issue contributing to the research-practice gap is the research time lag (Ratzinger-

Sakel & Gray, 2015; Walker, 2017). Organizations must solve problems immediately and cannot wait for years while researchers contemplate potential solutions. Because practitioners are often working with deadlines, they usually need immediate answers, whereas the research process might span several years. Likewise, it might take months, or even years, before current practice is reflected in the most recent editions of accounting textbooks. Ratzinger-Sakel and Gray (2015) also noted that research results are intended to be generalizable, but problems faced by practitioners today are unique across clients.

Detachment from the Profession. Whereas other business specialties, such as finance, have had a direct and substantial impact on practice, accounting research has become increasingly detached from the accounting profession (Barth, 2015; Rebele & St. Pierre, 2015; Walker, 2017). The accounting research that is most valued by the AACSB, doctoral students, and professors ignores fundamental issues relevant to practice. Walker (2017) declared that no one in the practice community reads articles published in peer-reviewed academic journals, because results rarely have practical applications. Barth (2015) argued that accounting is necessary to create an environment that stimulates economic growth and maintained that accounting research aimed at improving accounting information content is critical to accounting practice. Barth (2015) and Rebele and St. Pierre (2015) supported these views with evidence of topics and questions that remain open to research for which answers could improve the state of financial accounting and reporting.

Inaccessibility and Complexity. Other impediments contributing to the purported gap between accounting research and accounting practice are the inaccessibility of accounting research results and the complex nature of most academic journals (Basu, 2012; Pryor & Cipriano, 2017; Tucker & Lowe, 2014; Vladu, 2015). Even though students have access to

academic journals through library services, they rarely access them to support graded assignments (Vladu, 2015). Practitioners have access to professional journals through professional membership organizations, but few have (or want) access to academic journals. Under the current model, whereby article length is often an indication of rigor, articles are too analytical, too long, and too formal. An overuse of statistical analyses contributes to the bloat, and consequently, leaves little room for researchers to employ approaches that inspire real-world accounting practices. Pryor and Cipriano (2017) alleged that peer-reviewed accounting research has three weaknesses: 1) topics trend toward the preferences of an academic audience instead of the practice community, 2) articles are merely the chronicles of professors talking to other professors, and 3) the writing style of articles is mostly academic, not business. If research is to be pioneering and pertinent, articles written for accounting journals must be more precise, use simpler language, and focus on topics that are relevant to the marketplace.

Underutilization of Accounting Research. The practice community has identified inaccessibility and complexity of accounting research results as two of the most significant obstacles contributing to the underutilization of accounting research (Basu, 2012; Tucker & Lowe, 2014; Vladu, 2015). Ratnatunga (2012) and Vladu (2015) conducted studies to validate the claim that even with the availability of decades' worth of accounting research there remains a lack of demand for these research findings outside of the university context. Ratnatunga (2012) found from a survey of Big Four and middle tier accounting firms that over 70% of respondents had never heard of the top five academic journals and 90% would not consider reading them. In addition, 100% of participants who held memberships in professional organizations such as the IMA had heard of their respective association's journal, but only 70% agreed that they actually read it. Tucker and Lowe (2014) and Vladu (2015) maintained that the research crisis was an

international problem. Vladu's study of Romanian accounting experts revealed that only seven percent of survey respondents said that they consulted accounting research as part of their routine activities when seeking solutions to their problems. These researchers also contributed a lack of financial resources and time to conduct a literature review to the under-implementation problem.

Teaching Challenges. It is difficult to refute that the accounting profession is remarkably different for today's seasoned professional who donned a cap and gown decades ago. Conversely, what is questionable is how much of what is taught in the classroom or how it is taught has kept pace with the profession's revolution. Johnson (2014) and Stivers and Onifade (2014) both reported findings that indicated that neither accounting students nor career accountants found value in their accounting faculty or their educational experiences. The onset of the 2007 Recession and the end of a prosperous era caused the U.S. Higher Education system to reconsider its timeworn, 150-year-old financial model (Pincus et al., 2017). More recent concerns about college affordability, limited resources, and paralyzing long-term debt have created some obstacles in implementing essential accounting education reform (Chen, 2016; Pincus et al., 2017). These financial strains have a trickle-down effect and create teaching challenges in the classroom. Although not an exhaustive list, the main issues that emerged relate to accounting program curricula (Chen, 2016; Lawson et al., 2014), the first-year accounting course (Abbott & Palatnik, 2018; Spiceland, Spiceland, & Schaeffer III, 2015; Wells, 2018), accounting textbooks (Hammond, Danko, & Braswell, 2015; Wells, 2018,) technology integration (Chen, 2016; Hood, 2015; Lawson et al., 2014), and faculty training (Chen, 2016; Fogarty & Black, 2014).

Narrowly Focused Curriculum. There is a widespread consensus among accounting professionals today that the proficiencies required by accounting students seeking entry-level

positions, particularly in auditing, tax, and compliance, lack diversity (Chen, 2016; Lawson et al., 2014; Thomson, 2017). Brewer et al., (2014) and Thomson (2017) declared that accountants are not primed for their careers because they lack adequate technical and non-technical skill sets necessary to perform a wide range of functions. Recent studies reveal that the competency dilemma is trending downward rather than upward because many higher educational institutions have yet to adopt the IMA and AAA MAS Task Force's integrated competency-based framework for accounting education (Brewer et al., 2014; Pincus et al., 2017; Thomson, 2017). Chen (2016) and Dragoo and Barrows (2016) concurred that institutions are not transitioning to competency-based programs due to cost, opposition to change, and the perceived scope and complexity of implementation. Others blame delays in shifting from the traditional accounting program model to a more blended and broad-based model on the AICPA's 150-credit-hour accounting program requirement and the changes it forced in accounting curriculums (Chen, 2016; Lawson et al., 2014), In contrast, Barilla et al. (2008) and Mastracchio (2017) concluded that the 150-credit-hour accounting major from an AACSB-accredited institution has better pass rates on the exam than a graduate from a non-AACSB-accredited institution, is highly sought after by big CPA firms, and is better prepared to meet the needs of society.

The Foundational Course. Madsen's argument (2015) that accounting programs are no longer attracting the best and brightest students has been corroborated by more recent studies that attribute the problem to encounters in the first-year accounting course (Abbott & Palatnik, 2018; Spiceland et al., 2015; Wells, 2018). Even the AECC (1990) and the Pathways Commission (2012) cited concerns regarding the introductory accounting course and called for a complete pedagogical overhaul of the course. Albrecht and Sack (2000) recommended that colleges and universities expand the introductory accounting course to reflect an inter-disciplinary approach.

These sentiments were recently endorsed by others who not only had concerns about the foundational accounting course but also general concerns about accounting program enrollments, falling retention rates, and student performance (Engel, 2015; Abbott & Palatnik, 2018; Spiceland et al., 2015; Stivers & Onifade, 2014; Tan & Laswad, 2015).

Abbott and Palatnik (2018) and Stivers and Onifade (2014) examined students' perceptions of an introductory accounting course and the accounting profession and found that preconceived, negative, and inaccurate opinions were widespread. Additionally, these students found the introductory accounting courses to be too rigorous with no real-world applicability and little connection to other business courses. Spiceland et al. (2015) conducted an analysis of an introductory accounting course before and after the implementation of a comprehensive overall course redesign that focused on core competencies, frequent review of procedures, and technological supplementations. Empirical evidence revealed that students' grades improved in the introductory course by 47%, withdrawals fell by 67%, and enrollment in intermediate accounting courses improved by 50% following the course restructure. Students' comments collected after the redesign indicated that they felt more optimistic about the curriculum, particularly with the integration of modern learning technologies.

Engel (2015) and Tan and Laswad (2015) also had concerns regarding the academic achievement of students enrolled in introductory accounting courses and used learning style instruments to determine the predictability of learning style on student performance in a first-year financial accounting course. They agreed that other researchers have examined student learning styles as a possible explanatory variable of undergraduate student academic performance in a variety of disciplines, but few have examined how student learning styles impact student performance in introductory accounting courses. According to Engel (2015), an

introductory financial accounting course is considered a gatekeeper course, the importance for which cannot be overstated. As a program requirement and prerequisite for future accounting courses, negative perceptions or unpleasant experiences with this course could affect the student's degree program and future employment opportunities. Engel (2015) and Tan and Laswad (2015) argued that improving the quality of the first-year introductory accounting course and students' experiences in that first-year course could impact their decision to major in accounting. Because students' academic achievements are measured predominantly through performance assessment, these researchers were interested in knowing whether learning style affected student performance in different types of assessments in a first-year accounting course. Although Engel (2015) administered the VARK (Visual, Aural, Read/Write, Kinesthetic) questionnaire and Tan and Laswad (2015) administered Kolb's LSI, both studies validated that the recognition of students' learning styles was critical to their success in an introductory accounting course.

Introductory Financial Accounting Textbooks. Textbooks have been, and remain, a standard, central teaching instrument of most courses in the accounting curricula. The authors of the Bedford Report (American Accounting Association, 1986) acknowledged the role of the textbook as "a key aid to instruction" (p.177) but went on to warn that "if the teaching process centers on repeating textbook material in the classroom…then the learning process risks becoming uninspiring to capable future accountants (p. 177). In more recent studies, researchers reported that deficiencies in introductory accounting textbooks and publishers' supplementary materials continue to contribute to the disparity between accounting education and accounting practice, despite the Bedford Committee's forewarning (Ferguson, Collison, Power, & Stevenson, 2010; Hammond et al., 2015; Wells, 2018). Ferguson et al. (2010) sought the

opinions of British educators on the recommendations and uses of accounting textbooks in an introductory financial accounting course while Wells (2018) exhaustively analyzed five textbooks that were authorized adaptations of American textbooks used in introductory accounting courses in eight New Zealand universities. Hammond et al. (2015) also aimed to gauge accounting faculty perceptions of accounting textbooks, including ones used in an introductory course, but the context from which this study emerged differed from the Ferguson et al. (2010) and Wells (2018) studies. Hammond et al. (2015) were concerned with the rising costs of education and student loan debt. In examining the cost of textbooks, the researchers were trying to determine whether there was a relationship between the frequency of revised textbook editions and improved quality of the new editions. Specifically, they wanted to know if the new editions had been updated to reflect changes in the profession.

The respondents in the Ferguson et al. (2010) and Wells (2018) studies communicated similar views regarding the relevance and effectiveness of textbooks adopted in foundational accounting courses. Overall, the introductory accounting textbooks examined failed to reflect the complexity and extensiveness of contemporary accounting practice accurately, the implications of which are likely to continue to contribute to the widening gap between academia and practice. More specifically, accounting instructors felt that the textbooks were too procedural and that the preparation of financial statements was exaggerated, thus contributing in part to the narrow and inaccurate perceptions that students already have of accounting. In contrast to other studies that emphasized highly sought after soft skills of accounting professionals, these studies revealed a consensus among faculty that the textbooks considered placed too much emphasis on non-technical skills and failed to acknowledge the role of technology in producing accounting information. The educators also perceived that the texts

were partial to the needs of shareholders (Ferguson et al., 2010) and failed to present the diverse social context of accounting (Ferguson et al., 2010; Wells, 2018). Hammond et al. (2015) concluded that none of the recent editions had undergone any ground-breaking transformations. All researchers agreed that the use of supplemental materials such as academic and professional journal articles and online updates from professional organizations would encourage critical thinking and increase the students' awareness of current issues in accounting.

Technology Training and Integration. The push to recognize not only the imminent adverse effects on the growing skills gap from technology influences but also the importance of the integration of technology into accounting and business programs came in 2013 from the AACSB with its revision to Standard A7 (AACSB, 2013). The Standard, which is part of a section on accounting learning and teaching, was amended to include a statement advising that accounting degree programs include specific goals in their accounting curricula pertaining to the development of certain technology skills such as data analysis and data mining. Other researchers soon followed up this endorsement with their own recommendations (Brewer et al., 2014; Lawson et al., 2014; Sledgianowski et al., 2017). First, Lawson et al. (2014) proposed a technological foundational competency that included proficiencies in spreadsheet and other software applications, the structure and significance of accounting information systems, Big Data and data analytics, information technology security, and computer hardware components. Successively, Brewer et al. (2014) made recommendations on how accounting educators could apply Lawson et al.'s (2014) framework to help close the competencies gap. Sledgianowski et al. (2017) recommended that Big Data and information systems technologies be integrated into accounting coursework to equip students with the technological competencies required of a data-targeted environment.

Despite the efforts of these previous undertakings, technological intelligence and automation continue to disrupt the profession and fuel the skills gap in accounting and finance (Chen, 2016; Hood, 2015; Pincus et al., 2017). Hood (2015) asked some of the most influential representatives of the profession what they thought were the industry's biggest bottlenecks, and technology was one of the top three issues identified. The researcher referred to the matter of technology as "The Nightmare of Change," (p. 44) stating that although change is expected (new standards, regulations, etc.), technology eradicated many time-honored practices at unprecedented rates. Small and mid-size accounting firms struggle to keep pace with the rate of technology change in the small-business marketplace, and there is a greater expectation from CPAs at all levels to possess an extensive set of competencies (Pincus et al., 2017; Thomson, 2017). Consequently, some firms are taking specific business processes and services overseas where costs are lower than in the U.S. On the education side, challenges of the current financial model are preventing institutions from making the financial investment necessary to ensure that faculty and students have access to technology (Chen, 2016; Pincus et al., 2017). With technology changing at such a rapid pace, the absence of technology in the accounting curriculum will continue to affect the profession profoundly.

Formal Training of Faculty. Critical thinking, research methods, and accounting theory dominate traditional accounting PhD programs, so rarely do they contain a component of formal coursework relating to teaching methods, instructional design, or assessment practices, even though more than half of an academic's job is teaching related (Chen, 2016; Walker, 2017). After a graduate is placed at a leading research university, quite often the only concern is that the faculty member publishes in top-tier accounting journals. There are no systems in place to require accounting faculty to be up-to-date on current accounting practice. Faculty are

considered current in their field so long as they publish or use the latest edition of a textbook. Wilkerson (2010) proposed an education model that mirrored those of medicine or law and included the scholarship of practice, professional identity development, and apprenticeship requirements.

The requirement of a professional certification, such as the CPA or CMA designation, is another overlooked faculty attribute that takes a backseat to more academic credentials such as the PhD or DBA (Fogarty & Black, 2014; Serocki, 2017; Thomson, 2017). Although there is much inconsistency about the role of professional certification, meeting the demand for new skills and closing the skills gap require that faculty actively seek certification to demonstrate that they meet the standards of their profession. CPA licensure has highly influenced the paradigms of most accounting curriculums because it symbolizes the profession's highest standard of competence, yet accounting faculty have not placed as much value on earning their own credentials (Boyle, Carpenter, & Hermanson, 2015; Fogarty & Black, 2014). Johnson (2014) found a correlation between a faculty member's practical work experience and a student's perceived degree of success. Overall, students felt they learned more from professionally qualified faculty members than those faculty members with purely academic credentials.

The AACSB and its member schools have placed more prominence on doctoral degrees than practice credentials, quality teaching, or post-graduation student career success (Fogarty & Black, 2014; Thomson, 2017; Walker, 2017). The new AACSB standards expanded the categories for specifying faculty status from two (Professionally Qualified and Academically Qualified) to four (Scholarly Academics, Practice Academics, Scholarly Practitioners, and Applied Practice); however, 40% of AACSB member institution's faculty resources must be considered scholarly academics (SA), which still requires a doctoral degree and substantive

scholarly activity (AACSB, 2013; Plumlee & Reckers, 2014). The expanded categories allow for a variety of combinations of education, professional certification, and experience. Nonetheless, if accounting programs continue to conform to traditional academic conventions, the marks of industry expertise will remain second-rate.

Employer Expectations

Employers seek a variety of professional attributes and qualifications in their newly hired accounting graduates. Every other year, the Private Companies Practice Section (PCPS) of the AICPA administers the CPA Firm Top Issues Survey to identify the main challenges facing more than 6,700 accounting firms nationwide and to deliver targeted solutions that equip practitioners with the tools and resources necessary to overcome their challenges (American Institute of Certified Public Accountants, 2009). Although issues vary by firm size, locating and retaining qualified staff consistently reappears on the bi-annual survey as a prime concern for several categories of practitioners. According to Clark, Downen, and Bain (2016), practitioners identified technical knowledge, work experience, and professionalism as the three top credentials sought-after in accounting graduates in the 2009 survey. Although the predominant focus of their study was to conceptualize the elements of professionalism, the researchers explained that work experience was "both general and discipline-specific (internships)" (p. 157), validated by graduates' resumes and through the verification of references.

In similar studies, researchers found that in addition to fundamental technical accounting proficiencies, non-technical, or soft skills, such as communication skills, interpersonal skills, and networking skills, were essential to the employer's perceived level of student preparedness (Low et al., 2016; Pernsteiner, 2015; Towers-Clark, 2015). The researchers acknowledged other desirable competencies lacking in recent accounting graduates such as teamwork, problem-

solving skills, and self-management. Similarly, the IMA and APQC identified large competency gaps in 25 technical and non-technical competency areas in entry-level talent including the areas of leadership, planning, budgeting, and forecasting, and strategic thinking and execution (APQC, 2015). Overall, the studies presented similar findings: accounting graduates are ill-prepared for the workplace and lack both technical and non-technical skills.

The skills gap has been intensified not as much by a lack of rudimentary technical proficiencies but more by the deficiency of generic aptitudes such as teamwork and communication (Low et al., 2016; Pernsteiner, 2015; Towers-Clark, 2015). Employers presume that new graduates only have a basic understanding of accounting principles and concepts, so they expect to have to teach them how to do the advanced accounting work. Firms are more interested in the accounting graduates' personalities and ability to embrace the organizational culture of the firm, assume leadership roles, and facilitate interactions with clients. Equally important to employers are the graduates' oral and written communication skills, listening skills, and problem-solving skills. Such aptitudes might best be developed through work and life experiences rather than through classroom instruction.

The Value of the Internship

If employers perceive that their perfect candidates possess an array of both technical and non-technical competencies, then internship initiatives are imperative to both academic institutions and accounting firms. Researchers who examined employer expectations and student preparedness for the workplace as a consequence of the theory-practice gap recommended that accounting programs include internship initiatives to provide students with real-world practice (Low et al., 2016; Martin & Alleyne, 2017; McKnight & Watson, 2017). Martin and Alleyne (2017) suggested that overcoming the skills gap in hiring and recruiting entry-level accountants

was “all about the internship,” (p. 45). Internships, in particular, might provide the opportunity for students to develop both the technical and non-technical skills that seem to be deficient in graduates (Low et al., 2016; McKnight & Watson, 2017; Paisey & Paisey, 2010; Pernsteiner, 2015). Kolb (1984) appeared to have foreknowledge when he stated that the development of the broad skills that foster employability is a collective process of formal academic training, supervised workplace experience, and the constant pursuit of self-improvement. Even the AICPA identifies fieldwork through internships as a teaching strategy that addresses multiple elements of its Core Competency Framework (AICPA, n.d.).

An accounting internship might be the perfect complement to traditional lecture and problem-based learning and could give students a distinctive edge when they graduate (AICPA, n.d; Johnson, 2014; McKnight & Watson, 2017). Students make professional contacts that not only provide them with industry know-how and career opportunities but also aid in improving communication between the university and businesses. Internships can create the stage for multifaceted learning, thus improving the effectiveness of the knowledge process (Capka & Foltin, 2017; McKnight & Watson, 2017). Companies benefit because they would have had many opportunities to assess the interns’ cultural fit and can make claims on the best and the brightest students. A successful internship program might also improve the institution’s reputation, generate support from key constituents, and foster executive in residence (EIR) programs.

Internship Experiences. A handful of research contributes to the sparse body of literature on the effectiveness of work placements and internships with most focusing on students’ views of their collaborations with the professional world. Many of these studies have been conducted at non-U.S. post-secondary institutions in countries such as Australia (Stanley,

2013; Trede & McEwen, 2015), the United Kingdom (Gracia, 2010; Paisey & Paisey, 2010; Towers-Clark, 2015), Asia (Beck & Halim, 2008), and Romania (Albu, Calu, & Guse, 2016; Pacurari & Nechita, 2013). In the U.S., a number of earlier studies focused on knowledge acquisition and investigated the impact of internships on academic performance (English & Koeppen, 1993; Knechel & Snowball, 1987; Maletta, Anderson, & Angelini, 1999). More recent studies conducted in the U.S. focused on the importance of an apprenticeship as an experiential learning experience necessary for the development of certain skills (Beard, 2007; Crisostomo, 2015; Pernsteiner, 2015).

In many cases, researchers were motivated to study internship experiences because of a lack of research on the benefits and consequences of work placement as part of an accounting curriculum. Beard (2007) was inspired by a lack of scholarly and peer-reviewed articles on the topic of using internships as part of a comprehensive assessment program. Gracia (2010) and Paisey and Paisey (2010) were inspired by the trend of supervised work programs in other undergraduate degree programs such as teaching and medicine and claimed that little research had been conducted on work placement in accounting programs. They aimed to investigate students' perceptions of the internship as a mechanism for the development of the skills necessary to obtain employment after graduation and to assess the transferability of those skills. Crisostomo (2015), Pernsteiner (2015), and Towers-Clark (2015) examined students' opinions to identify the specific types of hard and soft skills that students perceived to have obtained from participation in an internship program. Crisostomo (2015) examined students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the internship course activities including discussion forums, reflection journals, employer evaluations, and written reports and the specific soft skills that were obtained as a result. Pernsteiner (2015) specifically explored the effects of soft skills on the students' level of

accounting proficiency. Towers-Clark (2015) was motivated by criticism of student preparedness, so the researcher considered students' opinions on whether their academic program aided them in developing the technical and non-technical competencies required for accounting practice.

Other researchers investigated the extent to which internships prepared students to transition from the role of a student to that of an employee (Albu et al., 2016; Pacurari & Nechita, 2013; Trede & McEwen, 2015). Albu et al. (2016) surveyed students engaged in internship opportunities along with host organization representatives to analyze how well students developed general competencies and moral standards and to determine the extent to which they acclimated to their professional environments. Driven by warnings from the Albrecht and Sack (2000) report and national appeals to revamp accounting education, Pacurari and Nechita (2013) examined the role of internships in students' job search and interviewing processes. Likewise, Trede and McEwen (2015) were interested in the socio-cultural benefits and academic purposes of workplace experiences, but they also examined the role of first-year internships as a recruiting and retention strategy.

Beck and Halim (2008) and Stanley (2013) were most interested in how students learned in supervised accounting work placement and internship programs. Kolb's model of experiential learning guided the objective of the Beck and Halim (2008) study to relate theory to practice. The researchers also evaluated whether or not the internship experience had prepared students for their first job, positively influenced their career decisions, and helped them to transition to professional life. Stanley (2013) explored the application of situated learning in accounting, a concept that evolved from sociocultural learning theories. The researcher examined the perceptions and experiences of third-year accounting students who participated in a workplace

learning experience program and concluded that university learning was exceptionally different from workplace learning and used his results to link three sociocultural concepts to the nine emerging themes. Stanley concluded that his one-of-a-kind research provided empirical evidence of the significance of a work-based learning requirement in an accounting program.

Recommendations for Bridging the Gap

Numerous resolutions to bridging not only the skills gap but also the gaps between research and practice and education and research have been offered by professional accounting bodies, academic institutions, and accounting professionals. Broad-based competency-integrated curriculums can deliver the expanded set of competencies demanded by those in the profession (Brewer et al., 2014; Lawson et al., 2014; Sledgianowski et al., 2017). Formal outcome assessments such as AOL, competency-based education (CBE) degree programs, national testing programs, and even CPA exam pass rates can measure student achievement while simultaneously improving teaching and learning (Colon et al., 2015; Dragoo & Barrows, 2016; Martinson & Cole, 2002; Barilla et al., 2008; Mastracchio, 2017). Prescribed workplace learning might assist students in developing professional competencies, practical experience, and transitioning from university to practice (Albu et al., 2016; Beck & Halim, 2008; Stanley, 2013). Joint research efforts between accounting practitioners and accounting faculty can promote the relevancy and role of research in the practice of accounting while potentially providing solutions for unresolved practice issues (Barth, 2015; Pryor & Cipriano, 2017; Ratnatunga, 2012; Vladu, 2015). Collectively, these recommendations might provide a roadmap that promotes strategic alliances between accounting educators and the business world to assess their environments and their capacities for educating accounting students.

Although the literature unfailingly supported evidence of gaps between education and

research, research and practice, and practice and education, there were disparities and ambiguities among conclusions. For example, Stivers and Onifade (2014) and Johnson (2014) reported that students had mostly negative viewpoints of their learning experiences in accounting but viewed a career in accounting as prestigious. Stivers and Onifade (2014) addressed this contradiction by simply concluding that faculty were not delivering in the introductory accounting courses. Similarly, Johnson (2014) suggested that graduates were dissatisfied because of the faculty's inability to integrate relevant practice experiences into classroom assignments.

Low et al. (2016) and Mastracchio (2017) were in the minority with their views on the expectation gap. Lowe et al. (2016) concluded that the gap was not as pervasive as previously reported because employers generally had low expectations with regard to the skills and competencies of graduates. Mastracchio (2017) intended to dismiss the "common myths" (p.32) about the state of accounting education. The researcher cited strong demands for top accounting students, high pass rates on the CPA exam by first-time candidates from AACSB-accredited schools, and generous donations to universities by large accounting firms as evidence that academic institutions were adequately preparing students for the workforce.

A handful of the research contributed to the small body of literature on the effectiveness of work placements and internships. Although most findings were consistent with prior studies by Knechel & Snowball (1987), and Maletta et al. (1999), there were some disparities. Contrary to the conclusions drawn by Knechel and Snowball (1987), English and Koeppen (1993) determined that the benefits of an accounting internship were not limited to a single area such as auditing. Gracia (2010), Paisey and Paisey (2010), and Stanley (2013) described the vocational nature of work placement as contradictory to the philosophies of higher education even though

all argued that the experience was critical to student employability development and transition to practice, and therefore, a necessary element within an accounting curriculum. Several researchers disagreed on the ideal duration of the internship program. Gracia (2010) and Paisey and Paisey (2010) reasoned that for programs to be effective, they had to be extensive. Trede and McEwen (2015) recommended that work placement initiatives begin in the student's first year of enrollment in an accounting program and continue throughout their academic careers. On the other hand, Stanley (2013) drew similar conclusions to the others from just a two-and-a-half-week program.

Despite the pressure on universities to adopt some formal competency-based or outcomes assessment program, the idea of a standardized exam to assess students' knowledge, skills, and abilities remains off the table. Consequently, there were no follow-ups by the researchers who made recommendations or developed competency-based frameworks and assessment tools (Beard, 2007; Eschenfelder et al., 2014; Lawson et al., 2014; Martinson & Cole; 2002). Even though Martin and Cole (2002) worked with the ICMA to develop a formal assessment plan that included a content-specific exam, there is no additional evidence to support that their idea materialized. Contrariwise, Eschenfelder et al. (2014) reported that an alarming number of faculty did not believe that AOL improved student learning, which is contrary to the AACSB's opinion of AOL's success.

Finally, several researchers claimed that fundamental accounting practice issues remain unsolved and demands for accounting research by the accounting community continue to decline (Chen, 2016; Ratnatunga, 2012; Walker, 2017). They encouraged universities to abandon the practice of only hiring PhDs to fill faculty positions and professed that those with significant practical experience best serve in senior academic positions. Their positions, however, are

incompatible with studies that allege a threat to scholarships because of a shortage of doctorally qualified accounting faculty (Boyle et al., 2015; Braun & Mauldin, 2012; Plumlee, Kachelmeier, Madeo, Pratt, & Krull, 2006; Plumlee & Reckers, 2014).

Summary

The amount of progress that has been made in bridging the gaps among research, practice, and education seems unclear as the contemporary literature is still calling for broad reform of accounting programs (APQC, 2015; Chen, 2016; Curtis, 2017; Walker, 2017). Although a few researchers insisted that the competency crisis has been exaggerated (Low et al., 2016; Mastracchio, 2017), others contend that threats to the profession persist (Dragoo & Barrows, 2016; Curtis, 2017; Lawson et al., 2014). Both the blame for the crisis and the responsibility to resolve it has been placed on educational institutions (Albrecht & Sack, 2000; Walker, 2017), the profession (Albu et al., 2016; Martin & Alleyne, 2017), and educators (Abbott & Palatnik, 2018; Wilkerson, 2010; Wilson, 2011). Although significant changes resulting from the efforts of those most affected have influenced the theoretical-practical divide, a universal solution remains elusive. Even so, practitioners, educators, and policymakers should realize that bridging the gap between tertiary education and the business world is an iterative process, and success depends on purposive partnerships among all stakeholders.

The review of the literature first provided the theoretical tenets that established the underpinnings of the study. The history of accounting education reform and reform's current status were then reviewed. Next, clear evidence of the proficiency gap and reasons why it looms were highlighted. Then, the researcher summarized the attributes and abilities that employers sought most in accounting graduates. To conclude the literature review, the researcher presented the works of scholars who explored the perceptions of the accounting internship experience.

This literature revealed that the one aspect of the skills gap that remains unclear is the impact of internships in closing the gaps among education, research, and practice. Particularly, there exists an opportunity to examine accounting theory and research as it correlates with practice from the viewpoint of newly hired accounting graduates. Authentic learning experiences such as those offered by internships provide the ideal platform for the pursuit of improved alignment among theory, research, and practice. Therefore, the objective of this qualitative study is to explore recent accounting graduates' perceptions of the quality of their education, the value of their internship experiences, and their transition from academic life to that of a professional accountant.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The problem addressed in this study was the lack of progress in reconciling expectations of accounting industry practitioners with competencies proposed in university accounting curricula. The success of the collaboration between higher education institutions, accountancy bodies, and accrediting agencies has been greatly disputed since the mid-1980s (Barth, 2015; Caskey & Corona, 2016; Eschenfelder et al., 2014; Gracia, 2010; Lawson et al., 2014; Pernsteiner, 2015; Stanley, 2013; Vladu, 2015). Information presented in accounting task force and governing committee reports indicates shortcomings in accounting education quality (Albrecht & Sack; 2000; Behn et al., 2012; Bloom, 2013; Brewer et al., 2014; Lawson et al., 2014; Madsen, 2015). Madsen's study confirmed a seven percent decline in the quality of accounting students over this forty-year period when compared to other non-accounting business students. The AICPA's 2017 *Trends Report* reported a nearly 20% decline in the hiring of accounting graduates by CPA firms over the past six years, reflecting a need for specialized employment in assignment areas such as Big Data and information systems (Sledgianowski et al., 2017; AICPA, 2017).

Scholars and practitioners have offered a myriad of recommendations and proposals to address the expectation gap, yet little progress has been made in merging accounting education and professional expectations. The most common reason offered in the literature is the inability of academic programs to meet the opportunities and challenges of the accounting profession in a dynamic global business environment (Caskey & Corona, 2016; Gracia, 2010; Pernsteiner, 2015; Ratnatunga, 2012; Sledgianowski et al., 2017; Stanley, 2013; Towers-Clark, 2015). Researchers have drawn these conclusions mainly from students, faculty, and employer perceptions, but there is a scarcity of published work on accounting graduates' perceptions of their internship

experiences and their transition to industry (Beck & Halim, 2008; Gracia, 2010; Paisey & Paisey, 2010; Stanley, 2013). An examination of graduates' earliest experiences with a transition into accounting work, problems they encountered, and the possible role internships played might provide insight into the barriers contributing to the purported gap between accounting education and accounting practice. Business schools, accrediting agencies, and accountancy bodies might use the results of such research to map accounting program curricula, accreditation standards, and concepts statements purposefully to the practical skills demanded by practitioners in a variety of organizational settings.

The purpose of this qualitative case study design research was to investigate the fundamental cause of the expectation gap through an exploration of recent accounting graduates' retrospective perceptions of their workplace transition and employability development. Qualitative methods provide insight into participants' behavior and perceptions of a situation and are appropriate for studying processes; therefore, the use of qualitative methods is appropriate for evaluating research models rooted in experiential learning, sociocultural learning, or cognitive behavioral theories (Chenail, 2011; Krathwohl, 2009). Such theories have been used to support studies whereby researchers examined the perceptions of faculty, students, and practitioners on the transfer of learning to practice. A case study was appropriate because it is ideal for investigating contemporary social phenomena and is restricted to a particular group, a set of events, and time period (Krathwohl, 2009; Yin, 2016). Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from students who received an undergraduate accounting degree between 2013 and 2018 from a rural western Pennsylvania university, participated in an internship program, and were subsequently employed in the accounting field. Data supplied by the University's

Advancement Office and the School of Business Annual Reports provided the list of graduate names, contact information, internship information, and early employment information.

The following research questions were designed to identify recent accounting graduates' perceptions of their educational experiences, the potential impact of internship programs, and their experiences of transitioning from university to practice. Through an examination of the graduates' successes and challenges of their educational journeys, the researcher hoped to better comprehend the perceived deficiencies in accounting education. Additionally, the researcher hoped to better understand the relationship between the graduate and the context of the internship. These insights might contribute to the existing body of knowledge on bridging the theory-practice and research-practice gaps.

RQ1. How do the accounting graduates view their educational preparedness and workplace expectations of accounting professionals?

RQ2. How do early career practitioners retrospectively perceive the impact that their internship experiences had in their transition to professional practice?

RQ3. How do the skills acquired by accounting graduates at various stages of undergraduate academic and employability development match the skills required for entry-level accounting positions?

These research questions were developed after careful review of the extant literature on the accounting competency crisis and a comprehensive examination of published work on accounting education reform and the role internships play in the graduate's transition to active practice. In the remainder of this chapter, the researcher explains in detail the research methodology and design that was adopted, the size and characteristics of the population, and the appropriate sample size and the guidelines used to determine such. Additionally, a description of

the instrumentation follows along with the identification of strategies that were used to code and analyze the data. Finally, the study's assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and ethical assurances are described.

Research Methodology and Design

The researcher utilized a qualitative methodology to explore recent graduates' retrospective perceptions of their university, internship, and workplace transition experiences. Several researchers describe qualitative studies as exploratory, emergent, and evaluative, requiring an inductive approach when research is lacking in a particular area and suggest that the research questions evolve as the study unfolds (Chenail, 2011; Krathwohl, 2009; Rosaline, 2008, & Yin, 2016). Qualitative methods allow the researcher to explore the issues of how and why and provide insight into participants' behavior and perceptions of a situation. Such methods teach us how to understand a phenomenon predominantly through exploration of the insider's view of the situation, as they perceive it. The phenomena, in this case, are the aspects of the theory-practice gap that have been scarcely examined. The use of qualitative methods seemed ideal for gaining insight into recent accounting graduates' retrospective perceptions of their internship experiences and transition to industry.

The focus of attention in this study involved answering 'how' questions regarding graduates' perceptions of their experiences. Therefore, the case study approach was used to capture the essence of this phenomenon. Case studies are described in the literature as the comprehensive evaluation of an individual, event, organization, or setting, and take root in the medical and legal profession and are often used in business and policy analysis (Cozby & Bates, 2015; Creswell, 2013; Trochim, Donnelly, & Arora, 2016, Yin, 2016). The literature supports a qualitative case study design approach to accounting graduates' perceptions of their educational

experiences, the potential impact of internship programs, and their experiences of transitioning from university to practice. The researchers described procedures for conducting case studies, including determining the unit of analysis (recent graduates), placing time and activity boundaries to restrict the case (year graduated, place of internship, and position obtained after graduation), and describing the context within which the case occurred (perceived gap between theory and practice). Since case studies are frequently limited by time and location, there is no single way to develop the case and accompanying research questions (Yin, 2016). Observations and fieldwork were not appropriate data-collecting methods, so the researcher employed the conversational mode of interviewing. The allure of this approach was the pursuit of transparency and the uniqueness of the real-world view of the accounting student turned practitioner who might offer additional insights into the theory-practice gap in plain terms.

In this study, graduates from a private, rural, liberal arts university in the northeastern United States were interviewed using open-ended questions that explored their perceptions of their internship experiences, employability development, and workplace transition rather than a closed-ended question approach where all questions would have had the same set of defined and limited responses (Yin, 2016). Data sources used for triangulation consisted of data collected from participant interviews, graduate data maintained by certain University departments, and the professional network LinkedIn.

Data were obtained from the University's Advancement Office, which is responsible for development and fundraising and manages ongoing relationships with a number of key support groups including alumni, the media, and other key constituents of the University. The researcher was granted access to employment and graduate school annual reports made available through a shared drive on the University's network. These annual reports provided employment and

graduate status, including full-time and part-time employment as well as a record of which students were working and attending graduate schools and those only attending graduate school. The report also listed the graduate school, location, and intended degree or major of the student. Additionally, the report provided detailed employment information including the employers' names, job titles, location of employment, and average starting salaries.

The researcher's primary source of graduates' contact information was the records provided by the Advancement Office at Saint Francis University. Additionally, the School of Business is required to maintain annual employment and graduate school information. These records contained the graduates' employer and location information. These two sources provided the information necessary to contact and recruit study objects. As a secondary source, the researcher used the social network, LinkedIn. The researcher makes and maintains professional connections with graduates from the University's business programs using LinkedIn. LinkedIn was used to verify the accuracy of information contained in the University's annual report and to obtain email addresses that were missing from the University's records. In some cases, the LinkedIn profile provided more current information than the annual reports because the graduate's situation had changed since graduation, and the University was not notified. Other profile information that was considered by the researcher included education, skills profile, work samples or projects, and the member's other professional connections.

Several researchers who examined the value of internships and workplace transition employed qualitative research methodologies, including Gracia (2010), Johnson (2014), Paisey and Paisey (2010), Pernsteiner (2015), Ratnatunga (2012), Stanley (2013), Stivers and Onifade (2014), Towers-Clark (2015), Tucker and Lowe (2014), and Vladu (2015). Gracia (2010) and Stanley (2013) used semi-structured interviews to collect data from students and graduates

concerning their expectations of workplace experience, and each cited researchers who advocated for a phenomenological research approach to explore perceptions and to facilitate self-examination or introspection with regard to personal experiences. Gracia's (2010) approach evolved from techniques of grounded theory, which eventually led to the discovery of patterns within the data. Similarly, Johnson (2014), Paisey and Paisey (2010), Pernsteiner (2015), Ratnatunga (2012), Stanley (2013), Stivers and Onifade (2014), Towers-Clark (2015), Tucker and Lowe (2014), and Vladu (2015) conducted content and thematic analyses to recognize themes or categories with which to interpret their data.

Researchers who examined the experiences, views, and perceived outcomes of students, faculty, and practitioners described the use of qualitative research methods, mainly case studies, with semi-structured interviews or questionnaires as their main source of data collection (Eschenfelder, et al., 2014; Gracia, 2010; Johnson, 2014; Paisey & Paisey, 2010; Pernsteiner, 2015; Stanley, 2013; Stivers & Onifade, 2014; Vladu, 2015). Eschenfelder et al. (2014) used survey methods to examine the views of accounting and economics faculty on their roles in the assurance of learning process (AOL), while Johnson (2014) used survey methods to purposively sample accounting faculty and other mid-career accounting professionals to explore their perceptions of the impact of their college faculty on their professional careers. Gracia (2010), Paisey & Paisey (2010), Pernsteiner (2015), and Stanley (2013) all used survey methods to collect data from undergraduate accounting students in several large universities across the globe to examine their expectations and perceptions of supervised work experience (internships) on their employability development and transition to accounting practice.

Population and Sample

Since the main goal of the research was to contribute to the short list of causes of the theory-practice gap by examining graduates' perceptions of their internship experiences and employment experiences, the intended population of this qualitative case study was students who received a four-year undergraduate accounting degree between 2013 and 2018 from a private, western Pennsylvania university, completed an accounting internship during the program, and were subsequently employed in the accounting field. The University's campus is situated in a rural area approximately two hours east of the nearest metropolitan area. The University's annual enrollment is approximately 2,700 undergraduate and graduate students, and it offers a variety of programs in business, education, health-care, humanities, and science.

The total number of students who graduated with a degree in accounting between 2013 and 2018 for whom contact information was available was 127. Participants were further divided into cohorts representing groups by academic year (AY) to identify potential differences in attitudes and opinions between the graduating classes and also to provide a means for obtaining data relating to the length of time students have been employed (Stanley, 2013). A purposive sampling of participants was obtained to explore the perceptions of recently employed accounting graduates who participated in an internship during their undergraduate studies. Since participation in an internship program is not a graduation requirement at the intended university, the appropriate sample size from each AY was determined based on the number of students from each graduating class that participated in an accounting internship during their program. The total number of students who participated in an accounting internship was approximately 45. Baker, Edwards, and Doidge (2012) recommended a sample size of 30 when interviewing recent graduates or graduate students, while the participants in Stanley's (2013) study totaled 43.

Gracia (2010) collected data from a sampling of 30 accounting majors from one institution, while Vladu (2015) interviewed 14 accounting practitioners employed in various industries. Saturation was obtained when the researcher was able to identify repetitive themes, which ensured that ample quality data had been collected (Yin, 2016).

The researcher communicated with the participants via email correspondences regarding their willingness to participate in the study. Accessibility of these alumni was not a concern to the researcher since the University graduate database was current, and the researcher had helped facilitate an alumni mentorship program of which many of the intended study participants partake. Additionally, the researcher was the faculty member for many of the participants during their academic programs. Prior to the start of the study, participants were asked to sign an informed consent form (Cozby & Bates, 2015; Hicks, 2018; Krathwohl, 2009; Trochim et al., 2016).

Materials/Instrumentation

The researcher served as the primary instrument for the study, and qualitative interviews that followed a conversational mode served as the main source of data collection (Yin, 2016). The use of a semi-structured approach provided the participants with an opportunity to determine the direction and depth of conversation and topics covered. Since the participant was no longer a student, and the researcher had established a rapport with the majority of the intended participants, the participants had less inhibition and were more willing to contribute to the dialogue. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, via Apple, Inc.'s proprietary videotelephony product, FaceTime, and in one case, via email. Open-ended questions focused on obtaining data relevant to the research questions regarding the graduates' perceptions of employability development and workplace transition. The researcher developed the open-ended interview

questions using the three research questions as a framework. The researcher consulted her colleagues in the Shield's School of Business at Saint Francis University and asked them to review the open-ended questions and provide feedback. The researcher provided the participants with an interview protocol guide that was prepared by the researcher and described in detail the open-ended interview process (Yin, 2016). Once the interviews had been conducted, the researcher emailed each participant a copy of the transcribed interview to confirm the accuracy of the interview transcripts.

Study Procedures

Data were collected from several sources. The University's School of Business Annual Reports provided the list of graduate names, contact information, and early employment information. Student data were also obtained from the University's Advancement Office. Since the University requires all students to maintain a profile on the professional network LinkedIn, the researcher used the site to locate and contact graduates. To obtain graduates' opinions, semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face (contingent upon time or travel constraints), via FaceTime, or as in one case, via email. Observation was not feasible nor practical in this case, and survey methods were avoided since intended participants often fail to respond to such emails. Since the graduate was being addressed as a professional and not a student, the researcher thought that he or she might have less inhibition and be willing to contribute more freely in response to the researcher's questions. (Krathwohl, 2009). Furthermore, body language and human interactions were of particular importance because the researcher believed that they would improve the quality of contact.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected at the researcher's office located on the campus of a small liberal arts university in western Pennsylvania and at the researcher's home office located in a personal residence. Both sites were agreed upon by the participant and the researcher. When a physical meeting was not convenient, the researcher and the participant agreed to use Apple, Inc.'s proprietary videotelephony product, FaceTime, to conduct the interview. If the participant was not willing to participate in the interview using video teleconference, then the researcher considered conducting a telephone interview or accepting the participant's responses via email. The researcher scheduled appointment slots with a duration of 60 minutes. During this phase of the study, the researcher was mindful of the participants' work schedules and availability. If a 60-minute appointment slot was not convenient for the participant, the researcher considered shorter appointment slots accommodated by an email or Internet questionnaire. If the researcher was unable to cover all of the intended questions in a single 60-minute session, the researcher gave the participant the option of participating in an additional 15-30 minute face-to-face or phone session. If neither of these options was convenient for the participant, the researcher considered asking the remaining questions through email. If the interviewer had follow-up questions after the analysis of the initial set of interview results, participants were given the option to answer these questions via a telephone interview or through email. The researcher also provided the interviewee with an interview guide in advance of the scheduled interview to reduce the likelihood of time constraint issues (Yin, 2016).

All interviews were digitally recorded using a Sony Mono Digital Voice Recorder with a built-in USB. The researcher obtained both written and verbal consents from the participants to use a recording device. The researcher also took notes during the interview and paid particular

attention to gestures and body language and documented general themes and other relevant information garnered from the interview (Creswell, 2013). While notetaking, the researcher made a conscious effort to refrain from paraphrasing but rather focused on capturing the interviewees' responses verbatim (Yin, 2016).

After selecting the specific behaviors to examine further, the researcher began a process that facilitated measurement and interpretation of the data (Cozby & Bates, 2015; Creswell, 2013; Krathwohl, 2009). In this study, themes and categories centered on graduates' perceptions of their educational experiences, their internship experiences, and their experiences of transitioning from university to practice. Sizeable piles of data accumulated quickly, so the investigator established a system whereby data were further processed, organized, and eventually coded. Following an inductive strategy for analyzing the data, the researcher investigated the interview recordings in precise detail and transcribed the interviews line by line (Krathwohl, 2009; Yin, 2016). The researcher used the qualitative data analysis software package, NVivo 12, to compile, code, summarize, and analyze the data for themes, categories, or ideas. The use of NVivo 12 made retrieving text more feasible and facilitated a more comprehensive analysis of the data. The results of the data analysis were scrutinized until all research questions were answered and provided detailed explanations of graduates' perceptions of their internship experiences and transition to the accounting industry. The researcher reviewed the themes and trends that emerged from the archival data and triangulated the results with the interview data to reach final conclusions.

Qualitative research comes in many forms, so there needs to be a way of assessing the validity and reliability of the findings (Creswell, 2013; Trochim et al., 2016: Yin, 2016). The literature supports the use of multiple strategies to ensure the accuracy of the analysis and the

credibility of the researcher and his methods. Triangulation might be achieved through an intersection of different data sources, in-depth descriptions of the research setting, long-term observations, peer debriefing, and external auditing, all which will serve to enhance the overall validity of the data. The most important source of data in this study was the initial interviews conducted by the researcher with the study participants. The validity of this study and its findings were enhanced by the collection and examination of converging evidence obtained from the advancement office and LinkedIn.

Assumptions

The researcher assumed that the participants in this qualitative study provided candid and truthful answers to the open-ended interview questions. The participants selected for this study were accounting graduates who met the minimum requirements for graduation from a regionally accredited, outcomes-based institution, and therefore, were assumed to be intelligent adults capable of making autonomous decisions. Given these inclusion criteria, the researcher assumed that since all participants earned the same undergraduate degree, all would have taken the same major courses in the program of study, and subsequently had shared experiences and common views. The researcher believed that because the graduates maintain contact with the University, they had a sincere interest in the research project.

Limitations

The conversational nature of case studies and open-ended interviewing approaches makes them difficult to conduct and can jeopardize the quality and analysis of the data (Yin, 2016). First, qualitative interviews require both mental and physical stamina because they tend to take longer to conduct than structured interviews. For this reason, the researcher scheduled no more than three interviews in a single day to avoid feeling mentally exhausted and risk compromising

the quality of the interview. Second, the researcher consciously decided to speak less than the participant did. After the researcher's initial query, the researcher did not lead the participant or put words in the participant's mouth. Third, the researcher remained neutral on the topic and refrained from interjecting personal opinions or biases. Lastly, the researcher established and maintained rapport with the participants throughout the interview.

The researcher was aware that issues concerning time constraints might arise during the interviewing process. Although an interview guide containing the researcher's prompts was provided in advance of the scheduled interview, the researcher was aware that other situations could have arisen during the interview, which may have caused interruptions or early termination of the conversation. The researcher remained flexible with time slots and worked to accommodate the participants' schedules. Smaller time slots were considered, and on one occasion, the researcher supplemented the interview with email correspondence to complete the process. The researcher was aware that variation in data collection methods could result in differential impacts for different participants.

The inexperience of the researcher could have presented limitations including negligence in applying the research's design and improperly analyzing the data (Yin, 2016). In addition to conducting effective qualitative interviews, the researcher also took care to employ effective data collection procedures. The researcher developed a process for collecting data from the participants in accordance with leading researchers of case study designs. The process included notetaking, video recordings, and regular review and refinement of all data collected. In addition, the researcher relied on data triangulation to improve the quality of the data and results. The QDA software, NVivo 12, was used to compile, code, and disassemble the data. To mitigate

the risks associated with the use of computer software in qualitative data analysis, the researcher utilized the software's online tutorials and customer success center.

When presenting the results of the qualitative study, other potential limitations associated with a case study design are researcher subjectivity and external validity (Yin, 2016). To mitigate the issue of researcher bias when presenting the study's results, all themes and outcomes identified through the data analysis are presented, not only those desired by the researcher. Additionally, the researcher avoided giving special attention to or dwelling solely on one participant's views or statements. The researcher strived for an equitable presentation of all findings. To ensure that the study's findings are credible, the researcher relied on the triangulation methods described in the *Research Methodology and Design* section of Chapter 3. Finally, the researcher established a chain of evidence that provided an audit trail so that other researchers could replicate the study in other academic settings where the researcher desires to examine perceptions of students, faculty, or industry representatives (Yin, 2014).

Although the limitations of the study created challenges, the researcher has over 24 years of industry experience and specialized instruction in higher education and holds a professional certification in accounting. While this experience contributed to the skill set necessary to execute the project, the researcher proceeded cautiously because of inexperience with fundamental research protocols. The researcher conducted the research with integrity and sensitivity and sought assistance from the Chair, the dissertation committee, the institution, and other resources deemed appropriate to ensure the quality of the research findings.

Delimitations

Even though the divides between accounting theory, accounting education, and accounting practice were recognized decades ago, today's industry leaders agree that accounting

education is still in crisis. If accounting educators are ever going to respond productively to changes in the accounting profession, they need to be able to determine which competencies are critical to the next generation of accountants and how best to integrate them into their curricula. The recent accounting graduate might be the missing link. Hence, the intended population of this qualitative case study was students who received a four-year undergraduate accounting degree between 2013 and 2018 from a private, western Pennsylvania university, completed an accounting internship during the program, and were subsequently employed in the accounting field. A purposive sampling of participants was obtained to examine the perceptions of recently employed accounting graduates who participated in an internship during their undergraduate studies. Hereafter, the findings of which might not be generalizable to other subjects, setting, or future time periods.

Ethical Assurances

The passing of the National Research Act in 1974 led to the creation of The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (Cozby & Bates, 2015; Trochim et al., 2016). This committee was charged with developing guidelines for human research subjects and produced the report known as the Belmont Report. The universal standards underlying the conduct of biomedical and behavioral research described in the report include respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Respect for persons, or autonomy, is commonly referred to as informed consent and means that research contributors must be able to make informed decisions and give their consent to participate. Beneficence refers to the intent of the researcher to consider the well-being of the research participant. The researcher attempted to maximize the benefits and minimize the risks of participation. Justice refers to fairness and equity in the recruiting and selection of subjects for the research process.

The primary ethical concern in this study was informed consent. The researcher took extreme care in presenting the graduates with sufficient information about the project so that they could make an informed decision about their participation. The research proposal contained a policy that informed prospective participants about the nature and purpose of the research, the procedures and treatments planned, the risks and benefits, alternative treatments, availability of compensation, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and contact information for inquiries (Cozby & Bates, 2015; Hicks, 2018; Krathwohl, 2009; Trochim et al., 2016). The form also contained information regarding unforeseeable risks, the cost associated with the study, and the anticipated number of participants. The consent form was written at a sixth-to-eighth-grade reading level and in the second person to make certain that the language was understandable.

To determine the graduates' eligibility for the study, the researcher identified which graduates participated in an accounting internship during their undergraduate studies at the University, were subsequently employed in the accounting profession, and were not currently enrolled in any of the University's graduate programs. Although this required the graduate to answer simple yes or no questions, the researcher made certain that the graduates were aware that participation in the initial survey questions was voluntary. Beyond these initial questions, the researcher provided an outline to the participants that summarized the purpose and procedures of the research project so that the participants could make an informed decision regarding their participation. Additionally, the researcher took the appropriate steps to ensure confidentiality and protect the privacy of the participants.

Despite the difficulties associated with securing personal and private information in the modern world, the researcher took great care in protecting the privacy and anonymity of research participants (Cozby & Bates, 2015; Hicks, 2018; Krathwohl, 2009; Trochim et al., 2016). The

researcher implemented the appropriate confidentiality procedures to protect access to personal data and ensure the anonymity of individuals. Confidentiality of individual responses was assured along with measures taken to not link data with specific participants (Hicks, 2014). Report identifiers were removed after all necessary data had been collected and interviews were identified by participant number (P1, P2, etc.) only. The researchers debriefed participants once the study was completed and gave them the opportunity to have their data and survey responses excluded if they felt deceived or harmed in any way.

In addition to the concerns highlighted, Krathwohl (2009) cautions researchers regarding ethical issues arising in the field and requiring immediate action. Illegal acts were not a concern in this particular study. However, such a study could have revealed isolated incidents of violations of University academic policies, in which case the researcher would have had a moral obligation to take administrative action as outlined in the University's Handbook. This could have damaged relationships between the researcher and the graduate or the graduate and the University and potentially result in an unfavorable mark on a student's transcript or even dismissal from the University. The researcher informed participants of the implications of such discoveries before the study.

Since the purpose of this study was to investigate the fundamental cause of the expectation gap through an exploration of recent accounting graduates' retrospective perceptions of their workplace transition and employability development, the recruiting of subjects for this research project was limited to students who earned an undergraduate degree in accounting, had a workplace experience during their undergraduate studies, and were subsequently employed in the accounting profession. The researcher acknowledged that the benefits of the study might seem marginal to the participants at the beginning. However, the researcher was hopeful that

participants would come to a realization that their contributions would enhance the scarcity of published work on the issue and that outcomes could significantly impact their current or future roles as practitioners or professors. Moreover, the researcher hoped that the participants would gain personal satisfaction from simply contributing to the study.

The Belmont Report was the benchmark for Northcentral University's policies on research and the protection of human subjects. Because this study involved human subjects, the researcher obtained approval from Northcentral University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) before the study's onset and collection of any data. The researcher also renewed her CITI certification before completing the NCU IRB application.

Summary

This chapter focused on the qualitative research methodology and data collection procedures planned for this study. The researcher of the study further examined the shortcomings of the current accounting education model through an inquiry of students who graduated with a bachelor's degree in accounting from a rural liberal arts university in western Pennsylvania between 2013 and 2018, had supervised work experience before earning their degree, and were subsequently employed in the accounting profession. The former students' opinions of their accounting program's employability success and their experiences of transitioning from the classroom to the office provided additional insight into those barriers contributing to the competency crisis.

The research questions emerged after a thorough review of the existing literature on the threats to accounting education. Data were obtained mainly through interviews with the accounting graduates, resources provided by the University's Advancement Office, LinkedIn, and internship course activity artifacts. Open-ended questioning was the interviewing mode used

to capture the graduates' views of their own experiences. Threats to the study's credibility were addressed through data triangulation opportunities. The data were examined for themes, categories, or ideas and coded quantitatively so that they could later be retrieved for comparison or analysis. The study, as it relates to human subjects, was guided and documented according to NCU's IRB process.

The next chapter presents the overall findings of the study and an analysis of the data collected. The demographic information that was collected from the study participants is presented in a table. A detailed description of the steps taken to analyze the data together with the themes, categories, or patterns that emerged is provided. Finally, an interpretation of the findings of this qualitative research study is presented.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this qualitative case study design research was to investigate the fundamental cause of the expectation gap through an exploration of recent accounting graduates' retrospective perceptions of their workplace transition and employability development. To explore recent graduates' opinions of the accounting program's employability success and their experiences of shifting from academics to industry, semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from 13 recent graduates. These participants received an undergraduate accounting degree between 2014 and 2018 from a rural western Pennsylvania university, participated in an internship during their academic program, and were subsequently employed in the accounting field after graduation. Data were supplied by the University's Advancement Office and the School of Business annual reports and consisted of the list of graduate names, contact information, internship information, and early employment information.

The following central research questions were designed to identify recent accounting graduates' perceptions of their educational experiences, the potential impact of internship programs, and their experiences of transitioning from university to practice. Through an examination of the graduates' successes and challenges of their educational journeys, the researcher hoped to comprehend the perceived deficiencies in accounting education better and further understand the relationship between the graduate and the context of the internship. Consistent with the study's purpose, the researcher hoped to gain insights that might contribute to the existing body of knowledge on bridging the theory-practice gap.

RQ1. How do the accounting graduates view their educational preparedness and workplace expectations of accounting professionals?

RQ2. How do early career practitioners retrospectively perceive the impact that their internship experiences had in their transition to professional practice?

RQ3. How do the skills acquired by accounting graduates at various stages of undergraduate academic and employability development match the skills required for entry-level accounting positions?

In this chapter, the researcher presents the results of the study, provides an evaluation of the findings, and then finally, concludes with a summary of the chapter. The results section identifies the major themes that were revealed through an analysis of the data collected using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo 12 Plus for Windows. These results are organized around the three research questions, which were mapped directly to the survey questions the researcher used to conduct the interviews. The evaluation section includes a discussion of the results of the analyses as they relate to the research questions and literature review.

Trustworthiness of the Data

The researcher took several steps to ensure the trustworthiness, credibility, and dependability of the final study data set. The eligibility criteria for this study were intentional and, therefore, enhanced the dependability of the data. Additionally, the researcher used the same rigorous techniques when conducting each interview. Using an activity checklist as a strict guideline, the researcher followed the same procedures during each interview and took detailed notes describing various verbal and nonverbal impressions of all participants. Twelve of the 13 interviews were conducted face-to-face and recorded using a Sony Mono Digital Voice Recorder with a built-in USB. The final interview was conducted via email, so the researcher was unable to apply the activity checklist in this case. The last participant was unable to participate in a face-to-face or phone interview due to work restrictions, so the participant typed his responses

directly in the survey document and emailed the completed survey to the researcher. The researcher made certain that this participant had her contact information in the event questions arose during the completion of the survey.

The researcher manually transcribed the other 12 recorded interviews into Word documents using Microsoft Word 2016. This very laborious process allowed the researcher to check and recheck participants' responses, make comparisons to the notes taken during the interviews, and identify initial themes and patterns in the data. The researcher then sent copies of the transcribed interviews to each research participant. The participants were asked to review their transcripts for accuracy and were encouraged to contact the researcher with any edits or concerns regarding the accuracy of their answers. The researcher carefully reviewed the type-written responses of the last participant and communicated with the participant via email to ensure the clarity and accuracy of all responses.

The researcher addressed the transferability criteria by seeking volunteer participants who are part of a vast community of accounting professionals and for whom profiles were easily available on LinkedIn. Although this research was conducted at a single site, the study could easily be adapted by researchers at other universities with accounting degree programs. The literature review provided evidence of similar studies conducting in similar settings throughout the country.

Results

A purposive sampling of participants was obtained from the University's Advancement Office to examine the perceptions of recently employed accounting graduates who participated in an internship during their undergraduate studies. This list provided the names, class years, campus emails (if active), personals email (if available), and the undergraduate degree(s) earned

by the graduates. The researcher used LinkedIn to obtain any email addresses missing from this list. The researcher also used LinkedIn to confirm the personal email addresses of the students on the list. Additionally, upon IRB approval, the School of Business Internship Coordinator provided the researcher with a list of students who completed internships between 2013 and 2018. This list identified the students' names, the companies for which the students completed internships, the dates of the internships, the types of internships (Accounting, Marketing, Finance, etc.), and the credits earned upon completion of the internships. The researcher examined this list to identify those students who had completed accounting internships.

Upon close examination of the internship information, the researcher found that of the 127 students who graduated between 2013 and 2018, only 45 (35%) of them had completed an accounting internship. This estimate was lower than the original estimate of 65-75 graduates who had completed an accounting internship, which resulted in a study sample size lower than the original estimate of 30-40. The researcher speculates that when this information was requested, the estimate included students who had also completed a finance internship since many students double major in Accounting and Finance. Nonetheless, the recruitment email was sent to all 127 graduates on record, since the possibility existed that some of the information provided by the reports could have been inaccurate or outdated. A total of 38 (30%) graduates responded to the email and completed the survey. However, assuming that only 45 of the 127 graduates completed an accounting internship, the response rate was quite high (84%). Of the 38 graduates who completed the survey, 19 (50%) graduates were determined to be eligible to participate in the study. The researcher invited all 19 graduates to participate, and of those 19, 13 (68%) graduates agreed to participate in the study.

All volunteer participants in the study earned an undergraduate accounting degree between 2014 and 2018, completed an accounting internship during the program, were subsequently employed in the accounting field upon graduation, and were not enrolled in the University's MBA program. No respondents from the 2013 class were eligible to participate in the study, but there is at least one participant for each of the other five graduating classes. The numbering scheme P1, P2, etc., was used in place of participants' names on transcribed documents and limited demographic information was collected to protect their identities. Table 1 below shows the demographic profiles of the thirteen participants.

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Participants

	Participant Count	Percentage
Gender		
M	5	38.46
F	8	61.54
Age		
21	1	7.69
22	2	15.38
23	4	30.77
24	3	23.08
25	2	15.38
26	1	7.69
Race		
African American	1	7.69
Caucasian	12	92.31
Graduation Year		
2014	1	7.69
2015	3	23.08
2016	1	7.69
2017	1	7.69
2018	7	53.85
Highest Level of Education		
Bachelor's Degree	12	92.31
Master's Degree	1	7.69
Professional Certification		
Yes	1	7.69
No	12	92.31
Sector		
Public	5	38.46
Private	8	61.54

The transcribed interview data files were uploaded to NVivo 12 Plus for Windows for coding and analysis. The researcher created nodes for each of the 28 survey questions and coded each interview response to the appropriate node. Coding stripes were then used to display how the content within each node, or survey question, had been coded. The researcher also employed the auto code feature to identify themes, patterns, and sentiments within each node. NVivo's case classification function was also used to manage the demographic data of the 13 participants.

Coding queries were then used to gather content centered on the demographic information of these participants and make comparisons based on attributes such as gender and academic year.

RQ1. How do the accounting graduates view their educational preparedness and workplace expectations of accounting professional? An analysis of the data revealed several themes regarding graduates' opinions of their educational preparedness and opinions of accounting professionals. The themes are summarized in Table 2 and discussed below:

Table 2

Themes from Perceptions of Educational Preparedness and Accounting Professionals

Research Question	Themes
RQ1. How do the accounting graduates view their educational preparedness and workplace expectations of accounting professional?	• Accounting is boring • Accountants only do taxes • Old bald men with pocket protectors • Introductory courses most important/foundational • Advanced courses critical for exposing students to possible career paths • Excel, Taxes, CPA Review Course most important elective courses • Most valuable course materials for preparing students for entry-level accounting position: educational software, case studies; least valuable materials: textbooks • Classroom activities that best supported and prepared students: group work, case studies, real-world problems/projects • Post-educational view of accounting: broadened, not boring, many career paths, significant for all business disciplines

Pre-education view of accounting and accountants. Ten of the thirteen participants had moderately negative or neutral opinions of accounting and accountants before taking their

first accounting course. Most described accounting in general as bleak or boring and accountants as glorified bookkeepers, "number-crunchers," or as someone who only prepared taxes. Participant #12 stated, "the extent of what I knew an accountant to be was probably someone I saw in the movies, maybe with a pocket protector, kind of that comedic, stereotypical type of person." Four participants, who had mainly neutral views of the profession, had taken an accounting course in high school and claimed that a prior interest in math motivated them to pursue the major. Another four, all with moderately negative views of accounting, had begun their program in a different major and after a semester or two, switched to accounting.

The relevance of accounting courses. The participants' learning experiences in the introductory accounting courses were perceived as positive by all but one participant. Most sang the praises of the introductory courses and the faculty who taught them and described the courses as "interesting," "enjoyable," "fundamentally important," and "critical for success in an internship." Participant #3 said,

> I think those courses were very important in that they taught you the basics of accounting, vocabulary, and debits and credits. Even today, if I am looking at something and I am confused about, you know, is this supposed to be a debit or a credit…so you just go back to the basics.

Another participant credited their success in upper-level accounting courses to the knowledge gained in the introductory courses. Several others noted that what they learned in financial accounting was fundamental to tasks they perform in their current jobs such as preparing financial statements, reconciling bank accounts, and completing projects in Excel. The most reflective comment came from participant #10, who said,

> Those experiences in the introductory accounting courses were really important, not just for accounting majors but for everyone in their lifetime. In any business major you go into, it's very important to know how to look at financial statements, even like balancing your own portfolio, paying your bills, and everything like that.

The participant who had a more neutral opinion of the introductory courses had exposure to accounting in high school and stated that no new concepts were introduced until the participant's junior year. Additionally, this participant had been enrolled in a pilot Advanced Placement (AP) accounting course in high school and stated that the material covered in the course was quite advanced.

Similarly, most of the participants (10 of the 13) felt that their experiences in the advanced accounting courses such as auditing, taxes, and advanced accounting were moderately positive. They credited these courses with exposing them to different career tracks and piquing their interest in a particular field of accounting, as well as closing the gap on the holistic process of the accounting cycle. More than half noted the significance of the first tax accounting course, which is a major course requirement, to their internship experience, with several stating that their internships employers were surprised by their knowledge and ability to prepare basic tax documents. Participant #10 noted, "When I got there (the internship) they kind of let me go on my own because I already knew the basics." Likewise, participant #12 said,

> My first job out of college was in tax. Interestingly enough, I did fiduciary taxes first out of college, so that wasn't the type of tax we covered in college. So in terms of importance, the base knowledge was really important because if you don't understand the basic concepts, applying it in the real world isn't going to go very well.

Although the negative perceptions of the advanced courses were shared only by few, some common themes emerged among them. First, two of the participants had moderately negative views of the auditing course, while the third participant had a very negative view of the auditing course. Those with moderately negative views graduated most recently and cited bad experiences with the faculty member, who at the time was an adjunct faculty member. Participant #5 stated,

> I mean from my audit class it was basically we were read off our power points and then had open book tests. So you really didn't have to try to learn anything. So especially for taking the CPA, I struggled with that a lot because I didn't quite understand the concept.

The participant with the very negative opinion of the auditing course had taken the course after completing an initial internship and while participating in a second internship. The participant did not fault the instructor, but simply stated, "it's hard to teach auditing in the classroom." This participant was the only graduate who had earned a professional designation at the time of data collection.

Most of the graduates had moderately positive experiences in one of six elective accounting courses specifically noted: 1) Taxes II, 2) Accounting Information Systems, 3) Excel for Accounting, 4) Advanced Excel, 5) CPA Review, and 6) Fraud. Students from the earlier graduating classes (2014 and 2015) commented on how much they enjoyed the fraud course, but this course was not offered to students from the graduating classes of 2016, 2017, and 2018 because of faculty constraints. All 13 participants mentioned one of the Excel courses as being vital to their educational and internship experiences and indispensable to their current jobs. Both Participants #7 and #11 indicated that they spend the majority of their time in their current positions using Excel. Participant #10 declared,

> I'm using a lot of Excel, and that goes along with the Stat class. In the Stat class, we used a lot of Pivot Tables and VLookups, and I'm definitely using those a bunch now so I'm thankful for that class because without that class I would've been way behind making Pivot Tables and using VLookups. A lot of kids that I'm working with now that started with me they didn't even know how to make any of that, so I felt like I had the upper hand.

The CPA review course received mixed reviews from participants ranging from very negative to very positive. Participant #5 referred to the course as "awful" and added "we were trying to cram everything in and it was super overwhelming" while participant #8 asserted, "that class actually deterred me from going for my CPA." The more positive reviews described how influential the course was in persuading the participants to pursue the professional designation. Participant #10 explained, "I would say the CPA review class. I took it, and it made me know that I wanted to pursue my CPA a little more." Participant #5 seemed conflicted by the experience in the course, first calling it "awful" but then later stating,

> I mean the exposure to seeing how the CPA worked online was good, and I liked that you could get the book for cheap now and still access that material now. I liked the teacher, but she had a disconnect from accounting for many years. She was learning with us, which was kind of hard. Yeah, I think it just needed to be like an independent study for a four-credit class just so you have more or a lab because then like you could do simulations for the labs.

Overall, none of the participants who recounted their experiences in the CPA course have earned the professional designation, although two have expressed a desire to pursue it in the future.

None of the comments were made by the lone participant who had already earned the designation.

The findings in this study regarding the participants' earliest views of accounting and accounting courses are in stark contrast to the findings of Johnson (2014) and Stivers and Onifade (2014), which indicated that neither accounting students nor career accountants found value in their accounting faculty or their educational experiences. Stivers and Onifade (2014) revealed that students had mostly negative viewpoints of their learning experiences in an accounting principles course but mainly a positive viewpoint of the accounting profession. Abbott and Palatnik (2018) and Stivers and Onifade (2014) examined students' perceptions of an introductory accounting course and the accounting profession and found that preconceived, negative, and inaccurate opinions were widespread. Additionally, these students found the introductory accounting courses to be too rigorous with no real-world applicability and little connection to other business courses. Similar sentiments regarding the introductory course were not detected in the responses of the 13 participants, and the majority of them had negative to neutral feelings about the accounting profession before taking their first accounting course.

The relevance of classroom resources and activities. Nine of the participants shared in like terms that the textbooks were the least important of all classroom resources and "not all that helpful." Participant #9 explained that "you can read a textbook but until you do something hands on you can't really learn it." Several participants commented that textbooks were only secondary to Google for clarifying confusion, with participant #11 adding "it's very hard to read an accounting textbook." These responses support the warnings of the Bedford Report (American Accounting Association, 1986) that accounting textbooks were becoming uninspiring and the views of Hammond (2015) and Wells (2018) who concluded that contemporary

accounting textbooks only contribute to widening the expectation gap. Of the three participants who shared positive attitudes about the use of textbooks, two of them rated textbooks as very important with participant #13 going as far as saying, "I believe the use of textbooks is underrated as they are an invaluable resource to use."

Nine of the thirteen participants agreed that the resources that supported classroom learning best were digital education platforms such as Canvas and Connect and software programs such as QuickBooks and Microsoft Excel. Participant #7 said, "the thing that I did like about Connect was that while doing practice problems you could get an immediate response to let you know if you were doing it right. And I think it even told you specifically what you did wrong." Other thoughts confirmed the relevance of early exposure to QuickBooks due to its popularity and the lifeline Canvas provided between the student and the faculty member outside of the classroom.

The participants' sentiments regarding textbooks and technology support the research findings conveyed in the Bedford Report (AAA, 1986) as well as more recent studies conducted by Chen (2016) and Wells (2018). These researchers questioned the relevance and effectiveness of textbooks adopted in foundational accounting courses because their findings demonstrated that these textbooks failed to reflect the complexity and extensiveness of contemporary accounting practice accurately. Moreover, the textbooks considered placed too much emphasis on non-technical skills and failed to acknowledge the role of technology in producing accounting information. In a study conducted by Hood (2015), the researcher cited technology as one of the industry's top three biggest bottlenecks. Chen (2016) and Pincus et al. (2017) claimed that challenges of the current financial model were preventing institutions from making the financial investments necessary to ensure that faculty and students have access to technology and that the

absence of technology in the accounting curriculum would continue to affect the profession profoundly.

All participants emphasized a combination of case studies, group work, and real-world problems as those classroom activities that best supported classroom learning and prepared them for their entry-level accounting positions. Participant #13 enthusiastically declared,

> I truly believe group case study work was my favorite activity. This enabled me to bounce different ideas off people to gain a better perspective of the issues at hand. Additionally, I believe this built critical thinking skills, which I cannot stress how important those are in any work environment.

Participant #2 stated, "I think things like group work or case studies that kind of like replicate what you're going to actually do…you can't really learn until you like have hands-on experience". Another activity that received commendation from four of the female participants was guest lecturers. Participant #11 said, "the guest lectures were helpful in giving an understanding and realizing what opportunities are out there." Only one participant mentioned research and that individual stated it was the classroom activity of highest importance, followed by real-world examples. No other participant listed research as an important classroom activity. This underutilization and absence of research in the classroom support the general opinion that the gap between accounting research and practice continues to widen (Fogarty & Jonas, 2017; Walker, 2017).

Post-education view of accounting. The resounding response of all participants with regard to the changes in their views of accountants and accounting post-academic experience was an overall broadened view of the profession and the realization of the relevance of accounting to business at large. Participant #6 effectively summarized these sentiments when

stating, “I know that it's more than numbers, more than taxes. It broadened my view of what you could do with accounting. It gave me more of appreciation, you can go so far, you can do anything, anywhere, any industry.” Participant #7 recognized, “Accountants are a Hodge podge of different people from different backgrounds, not as nerdy as originally expected. I thought a lot of accountants are introverted like myself. … it opened my eyes to realize that it’s not just that stereotype.”

The only additional comments made were by several who said that their experiences confirmed a decision to pursue or not pursue the CPA certification, crediting the decision to the realization that the field of accounting offers many diverse opportunities. Participant #9 said, “I realized it’s not just like what I always thought about the CPA. You hear accounting and everybody always asks me are you going to go for your CPA. No, I’m not going to do that now.” Participant #10 concluded, “In four years I could finish with 150 credits and get my CPA and not have to come back for my master's because now I feel personally that a certification could be more beneficial than a master's.” Overall, participants’ views had evolved from somewhat negative or neutral to entirely positive compared to their pre-education attitudes of accountants and the accounting profession.

RQ2. How do early career practitioners retrospectively perceive the impact that their internship experiences had in their transition to professional practice? An analysis of the data revealed several themes regarding graduates’ perceptions of their workplace opportunities and transition to work. The themes are summarized in Table 3 and described below.

Table 3

Themes from Perceptions of Internship Experiences and Transition to Work

Research Question	Themes
RQ2. How do early career practitioners retrospectively perceive the impact that their internship experiences had in their transition to professional practice?	• Evolving perceptions of the profession • Exposure to a variety of career options • Improved ability to relate classroom theory to work environment • Validation of concepts taught in the classroom • Hybrid learning and training environments • Immaterial in decision to pursue professional certification • Exposure to the latest technology • Networking opportunities • Improved chances of a permanent position

Post-internship perceptions of accounting and accountants. Two distinct themes emerged when participants were asked to explain how their perceptions of accounting and accountants changed after their internship experiences. First, the participants' perceptions of the professional stereotypes and their generalizations surrounding the occupation changed from mostly negative to mostly positive. While they found accountants to be unsurprisingly professional, most were shocked to discover that they were not "straight-laced," "boring," or at all introverted, but were in fact, quite sociable, good communicators, and a pleasure to be around. Several participants commented on workplace chatter, casual days, and happy hours. Participant #9 stated, "It was more relaxed, so we could wear jeans you didn't have to wear suit and tie to work every day," while participant #5 declared, "Everyone loved a good happy hour!"

The second theme that surfaced debunked the misconception that accountants are the same as auditors or tax accountants. Students were exposed not only to public accounting career paths but also had exposure to the banking industry, governmental accounting, retail accounting,

and pension accounting. Some had more of a general epiphany that accounting was more than just audit or tax. Participant #9 said, "But in my internship, it was 12 weeks and every one or two weeks, I rotated it in at different departments within accounting". Participant #7 stated, "I think it made me realize that there's a lot more accounting jobs than what I expected or thought before going to school. Because I am in unclaimed property and that's something that we never really learned about in school."

Validation of classroom learning. Many participants described experiencing a pivotal moment when they made the connection between the concepts taught in the classroom and the various duties performed in the internships. Specifically, foundational principles such the rules of debits and credits, normal account balances, and financial statement classifications seemed to make more sense during and after the internship. Participant #2 stated it best saying,

> Yeah, I feel like there is this distance between what I was learning in the classroom and it was like hitting this wall because I couldn't connect it to anything and once I started doing it kind of like all came together. And then I was like oh my god I remember that now that makes sense.

Alternatively, a handful of participants claimed that particularly with auditing, they had a difficult time making the connection. Participant #5 referred to auditing as "just another world." Participant #13 disagreed with this overall perception of auditing stating,

> My internship validated the concepts I was taught in class by giving real-world examples and situations that I was taught. For example, I learned the different types of assertions in my auditing class. During my internship, I learned what procedures were covering the different types of assertions. It was interesting to see accounting principles actually being applied from textbook to real world.

Orientation process and training environment. All but one participant (92.3%) partook in an orientation or onboarding process at the start of their internships. Eight of the thirteen participants (61.5%) identified the process as lasting three days, while two others stated that they had one day of onboarding. Only two participants described the process as lasting one week or longer. For most, the orientations and onboarding processes were a mix of face-to-face meetings and online training. Regardless of the length of the onboarding process, 11 of the 13 participants (84.6%) described the training and learning environment as very structured. Participant # 3 stated, "you were definitely pretty much told exactly what to do." Two others claimed that their training was very unstructured with participant #2 confirming that "I definitely had to figure things out on my own." Although the majority of participants claimed their learning environments were very structured at the beginning, about half noted that they became more unstructured as time went on. Participant #7 stated, "But as time went on I was assigned to audits myself and I kind of knew/learned what the next steps are. They don't have to tell you everything."

Twelve of the thirteen participants (92.3%) agreed that the internship provided them with hands-on training related to the service line in which they were employed. From general accounting functions to more specific service lines such as audit or tax, most participants shadowed other employees before setting out to complete tasks independently. Two participants claimed to lack support and felt unprepared to perform the duties of the permanent position that was being offered at the end of the internship. Correspondingly, 11 of the 13 participants (84.6%) felt that their firms provided adequate training that allowed them to perform the duties assigned to them during their internships. The two participants that felt inadequately trained both stated that they were only allowed to observe others perform the work, and were not

permitted to perform tasks on their own. Participant #6 alleged, "They just had us observe it," and participant #9 affirmed, "It was kind of boring. Honestly, I would just sit there and watch".

Other internship outcomes. Only four participants credited their internship experiences with their decisions to pursue a professional certification such as the Certified Public Accounting (CPA) exam or the Certified Management Accounting (CMA) exam. Three of these four participants cited a previous desire to earn a professional certification and claimed that their internship experiences only solidified their decisions. The fourth participant decided to pursue the CPA designation after learning that her firm required certification for promotion to a management position. Three participants said that they decided not to pursue a professional certification because of their internship experiences. Participant #10 stated, "At the internship, they didn't really encourage doing it. Participant #12 added, "when I went back to this company they said you don't need one here we don't require it, it's not highly encouraged." Only one participant cited time and financial constraints as barriers to pursuing a certification.

Despite claims by several researchers (Chen, 2016; Hood, 2015; Pincus et al., 2017) that small and mid-size accounting firms struggle to keep pace with the rate of technology change, only one participant felt that they were not exposed to the latest technologies used in an accounting office. Twelve of the participants (92.3%) agreed that the internship experience exposed them to the latest technologies used in an accounting office. While several of the participants cited experience using Excel and QuickBooks, ten of them noted the utilization of firm-specific software, with no two participants identifying the same program across firms. Those programs mentioned included Great Plains, Munis, e-Audit, SAP, Oracle, and CaseWare.

When asked about networking events, slightly more than three-fourths of the participants (76.9%) strongly agreed that their internships provided them with opportunities for developing

professional contacts. Some participants described formal events, such as charity and team-building events, meant to connect young professionals, while others described less formal gatherings such as happy hours and bowling nights. Participant #2 remarked, "They asked the interns to go to different events together with senior managers and there was like one where we had to go make pottery." Participant #11 fondly remembered, "And then there was a United Way charity event where we volunteered with other people." One intern was required to create a LinkedIn profile and make at least 100 connections before the conclusion of the program.

Participants unanimously responded yes when asked if they obtained adequate job experience by the end of their internships. Only one participant claimed that the internship did not improve their chances of obtaining a permanent position, nor did the internship provide a full-time permanent employment opportunity. Therefore, twelve of the thirteen participants (92.3%) received a permanent employment offer at the conclusion of the workplace experience. Participant #11 affirmed, "Absolutely. So I got my KPMG internship because I had the Baker-Tilly internship. And then I got hired full time from my KPMG internship." Five of the participants revealed that they turned down full-time offers from the firms at which they interned because they, "wanted to see what else was out there." The single participant who believed that the internship did not improve his chances of obtaining a full-time position, and nor was he offered one, stated that no positions were available at that firm when he completed his internship.

RQ3. How do the skills acquired by accounting graduates at various stages of undergraduate academic and employability development match the skills required for entry-level accounting positions? An analysis of the data revealed several themes regarding graduates' perceptions of the skills they acquired as students and interns. These themes are summarized in Table 4 and discussed below.

Table 4

Themes from Perceptions of Skills Acquired at Various Stages of Employability Development

Research Question	Themes
RQ3. How do the skills acquired by accounting graduates at various stages of undergraduate academic and employability development match the skills required for entry-level accounting positions?	• Improved Excel skills • Real-world experience • Increased knowledge in specialized fields • Development of general soft skills

Improved Excel skills. More than half of the participants professed a greater proficiency in Excel by the conclusion of their internship programs. Specifically, participants stressed the importance of their ability to convert and manipulate client data into an Excel spreadsheet. Participant #12 stated, "The one that I can think of right off the top of my head is my Excel skills flourished. Honestly right now, it's all I use." Participant #13 declared, "I can't begin to describe how important it is to be as proficient in Excel as possible. Clients provide numerous types of spreadsheets, schedules and reports that may need to be manipulated for your needs." Participant #7 simply stated, "Definitely using Excel improved because of the internship."

Most participants felt that they had the upper hand compared to other interns and credited elective Excel courses for this knowledge. The participants' reactions to the technological skills acquired in the classroom and during their internships endorsed the recommendations of Brewer et al., (2014), Lawson et al., (2014), and Sledgianowski et al. (2017) who recognized the importance of technology in closing the skills gap. Both Lawson et al. (2014) and Sledgianowski et al. (2017) urged the integration of spreadsheet and other software applications. Participant #13 confirmed the importance of integration of technology into accounting and business programs when he recommended, "Learn the most with as many applications possible i.e., Excel, Word, Access, etc. I can't stress it enough."

Real-world experience. Every participant described gaining hands-on, real-life experience through their internship opportunities; however, the degree and depth to which participants described their real-world experiences varied considerably. A few participants generalized the idea by referring to the internship itself as the "real-world' experience. For example, participant #10, simply stated, "I would say that the new skills would just be the real-world experience." In addition to repeated references to the use and importance of Excel, several participants acknowledged gaining proficiency in task-specific skills such as testing controls in an audit procedure, managing accounts receivable, and learning how to use the firm's auditing and accounting software.

Increased knowledge in specialized fields. In only two specialized fields, auditing and financial accounting and reporting, did more than half of the participants claim to have increased knowledge as a result of their internship experiences. Participant #13 stated, "My internship was in auditing and it tremendously increased my knowledge in this field. Auditing in real life is greatly different from what you learn in the classroom." Participant #3 stated, "I guess I say just like looking at how many different accounts can go into one account on the financial statements, especially the working trial balance. You know it's just amazing how they can have a bunch of different accounts just for cash." Only two participants claimed to have improved knowledge in a single area, and only one participant identified as having improved knowledge in all specialized fields. The participant who claimed improved knowledge in all fields completed three internships in four years. Other categories in which participants claimed to have increased competence included budgeting, internal controls, unclaimed property, retail accounting, payroll accounting, loan originations, accounts receivable, and accounts payable.

Figure 1. Number of Participants whose knowledge was improved in certain specialized fields as a result of the internship experience.

Development of common soft skills. Participants were asked to consider a list of nine of the most sought-after personal attributes of employees and respond yes or no when asked if the internship played a role in improving or developing these soft skills. Each specific soft skill drew at least ten yes responses (76.9%). Participant #2 stated, "I acquired like of a lot of the soft skills because that's something you can't really teach somebody (in school)." Interpersonal skills received a yes response from all thirteen participants. Participant #1 suggested, "Just talking with people, working with people learning how to learn how to call somebody and say you know you need to pay. I mean everyone knows how hard it is to call people and ask for money."

As well as relationships with clients, participants also mentioned their ability to get along with managers, partners, and other interns. Participant #1 shared "So with the interns, there were ones younger than me, but there were actually two interns - one was married and like in her 30s and the other like in her 40s, and I wasn't used to working so closely with someone so much older than I was." Another self-proclaimed introvert revealed, "The internship was like my first time actually having to work with people and explaining what I was working on and talking about any problems." Participant #5 admitted "Honestly, it was easy for me to talk to everybody. It was kind of like learning a boundary. So when to be talking and when not to

because we needed to get stuff done. Because I know for me like I still struggle with it I love to talk all the time."

Communication and adaptability skills were each developed in all but one participant. Participants recognized improved verbal and written communication skills achieved through meetings with clients, managers, and senior associates. Participant #7 described how she learned to write business correspondences such as emails and memos, "They used a lot of blank requests that were templated, so I didn't have to generate my own. It was helpful to have examples of what things look like but it wasn't necessarily things from scratch." Participant #5 described scenarios of presenting information to clients and explained, "You are put into a lot of situations where you might be in a meeting with the client and it's going to be like their whole accounting board and you might be expected to tell them why we're meeting with them and discuss it."

Participants characterized the notion of adaptability as being able to adjust to different personality types and changing workplace conditions. Examples included rotations to different departments, locations, or teams, and changes in workplace policies or procedures. Participant #13 said, "I learned to adapt my skills as there are no two identical clients. Each one brings a unique experience and with that I needed to adapt in order to complete the audit." Participant #6 indicated, "I went to three different branches so they moved me over just to learn that different clientele and get different experience with it so I had to adapt to each location."

Eleven participants declared improvement in the areas of time management, work ethic, creativity, and teamwork. Several participants paired together time management and work ethic calling them "the time and effort required to get the job done," while other participants viewed them more autonomously and saw time management merely as the ability to meet strict deadlines and work ethic as the desire to work hard. Participant #13 said, "I learned so much time

management with this internship as I had numerous tasks that needed to be done on a tight deadline" and later added, "Like anything in life, you need to work hard to succeed and that is no different with public accounting and my internship." The two individuals who claimed that their work ethic did not improve because of their experiential opportunity, resolved that a person is either born a hard worker or is not born a hard worker.

Participants likened creativity to efficiency in that almost every participant who gave an example of their creativity in the workplace described a way by which they improved a process or reduced the duration of a given task. Five participants created efficiencies using pivot tables and the Vlookup function in Excel, while a sixth participant used Excel to replace a dated timecard (payroll) method. Although most participants agreed that they were required to collaborate with at least one other person during their internship experience, this soft skill generated the least comments from participants. Teamwork was viewed by the participants as an expectation of the position and an outcome of the training process.

Critical thinking and problem-solving skills received the fewest yes votes from participants, although in both cases 10 of the 13 respondents agreed that the internship aided in developing these skills. Several participants described situations where they were required to "think on their feet" or "think for themselves." Participant #12 described a situation whereby she had to identify and correct an error in the setup of a new payroll system. She explained,

> They accidentally mishandled how they set up another state. It was overpaying employees so instead of time and a half time it was paying double time. It took about a month of recalculating 30 to 40 employees time sheets to figure out how much we had overpaid them.

Two of the participants who denied obtaining these skills were the same ones who asserted that they did not receive adequate training during their internships and were basically only permitted to observe others perform tasks.

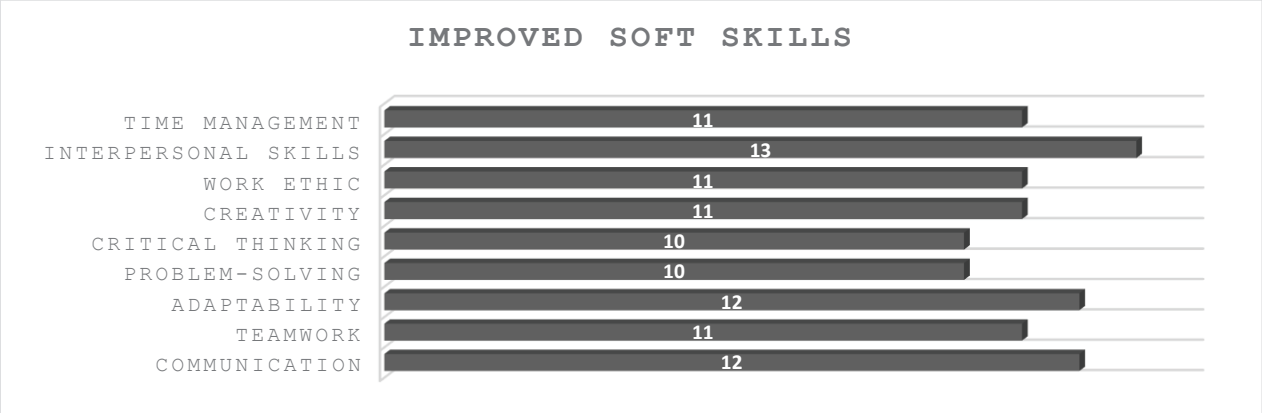

Figure 2. Number of participants who claimed improved or newly developed soft skills by the conclusion of the internship experience.

Researchers have acknowledged that non-technical, or soft skills, are essential to an employer's perceived level of student preparedness and are predominantly validated by graduates' resumes (Clark, Downen, & Bain, 2016; Low et al., 2016). In addition to technical knowledge and work experience, practitioners are seeking graduates with soft skills such as teamwork, oral and written communication skills, and problem-solving skills, which are best developed through work and life experiences rather than through classroom instruction. Given the depth of the participants' responses with regards to these general aptitudes, participants perceived the internship as a mechanism for the development of the skills that employers are seeking. These findings are consistent with studies conducted by Crisostomo (2015), Pernsteiner (2015), and Towers-Clark (2015), who examined students' opinions to identify the soft and hard skills they perceived to have obtained from their internship experiences.

Final thoughts. When participants were given the opportunity to offer insights or opinions at the end of the interview, several themes emerged from their responses. The first

theme was a shared opinion that all accounting students should participate in more than one internships during the course of their academic journeys, even if the internship is not specific to accounting. Trede and McEwen (2015) recommended that work placement initiative begin in the students' freshman year and continue throughout their academic careers. Participant #5 seemingly agreed, "A sophomore (from another school) told me that they interned their whole college career at an accounting firm and then went to the leadership conferences and then the Big Four internship and then eventually working at one of the Big Four." On the other hand, Stanley (2013) argued that students benefited from just a two-and-a-half-week internship program.

Second, academic institutions should do a better job of educating students on their accounting career options. Participants felt particularly uninformed about governmental accounting and the precepts of the CPA exam. Lastly, several students recommended taking an introductory finance course if the degree program does not require it. These participants felt that the knowledge gained in this course was critical to understanding financial statements. This sentiment is consistent with the conclusions drawn by Lawson et al. (2014) with regards to the need for a new education framework requiring professional competencies in not only accounting but finance, economics and information systems as well.

Evaluation of the Findings

The literature largely supports the importance of the internship as a practical learning experience necessary for knowledge acquisition and the development of non-technical skills, which are critical to workplace transition (English & Koeppen, 1993; Pernsteiner, 2015). The literature, however, is less clear on the impact of the internship as a component of accounting curricula and whether or not it is the decisive link in merging accounting education and the expectations of practitioners. Researchers who have conducted studies examining the ability of

supervised work programs to bridge the gap between academic programs and professional expectations have drawn their conclusions mainly from students, faculty, and employers (Crisostomo, 2015; Paisey & Paisey, 2010; Pernsteiner, 2015). While the findings of this study mostly support the extant literature on the benefits of the internship in undergraduate accounting degree programs, there were some inconsistencies with how the participants in this study view the profession and their overall educational experiences.

Perceptions of educational preparedness and accounting professionals. In studies conducted by Johnson (2014) and Stivers and Onifade (2014), the researchers concluded that neither accounting students nor career accountants found value in their accounting faculty or their educational experiences. Abbott and Palatnik (2018) reported that students had negative opinions of the introductory accounting course and the accounting profession. Participants in this study shared similar sentiments before taking their first accounting course; however, after the participants in this study graduated, their views of the first accounting course and the accounting profession change dramatically.

Participants in this study described the first accounting course as critical, enjoyable, and fundamentally important, while the participants in the Abbott and Palatnik (2018) and Stivers and Onifade 2014) studies found the introductory accounting course too rigorous and lacking real-world applicability. Moreover, several participants in this study changed their majors to accounting after finding success and enjoyment in an introductory financial accounting course. This outcome supports the research of Engel (2015) and Tan and Laswad (2015) who reasoned that a student's experience in a first-year accounting course could impact not only his decision to major in accounting but also his future employment opportunities. Furthermore, participants in

this study claimed that what they learned in financial accounting was fundamental to tasks they perform in their current jobs.

Overall, students found relevance in their first accounting course and classroom activities such as case studies and real-world problems. The reviews were mixed, however, when asked about their upper-level and elective accounting courses. The most impactful upper level courses were tax and auditing, and participants undeniably found merit in the Excel courses. Generally, respondents were not impressed with the CPA Review course and participants from 2016, 2017, and 2018 graduating classes were disappointed that the fraud accounting elective course was not offered. These negative sentiments endorse prior research findings that suggested that accounting curriculums are too narrowly focused and lack diversity (Chen, 2016; Thomson, 2017).

Themes from perceptions of internship experiences and transition to work.

Participants agreed that their internship experiences positively impacted their perceptions of the accounting profession, broadened their views on career options, validated the concepts that were being taught in the classroom, and provided adequate experience that led to gainful employment. These perceptions strongly support the traditions of Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory as well as the outcomes of studies conducted by Martin and Alleyne (2017) and McKnight and Watson (2017). Kolb declared that the mutual efforts of formal academic training and supervised workplace experience fostered the development of broad skills that employers seek in graduates. Martin and Alleyne (2017) and McKnight and Watson (2017) asserted that the internship was the key to overcoming the skills gap of entry-level accountants and gave students a distinctive edge when they graduated. All participants in this study, testified that their internships provided them with adequate job experience, regardless of the specific service line in which they were

employed. All but one participant reported that their internship programs result in an offer of full-time employment. These results are consistent with conclusions drawn by English and Koeppen (1993) who determined that the benefits of an accounting internship were not limited to a single area.

Themes from perceptions of skills acquired. Participants credited their formal academic and internship training with fostering the development of the professional competencies and practical work experience required to obtain an entry-level accounting position. They acknowledged gaining proficiency in Excel and other computer applications as well as in specialized fields of accounting such as auditing, tax, and financial statement analysis. These findings are supported in contemporary literature, which reveals that employers seek graduates with technical knowledge, work experience, and professionalism (Clark, Downen, & Bain, 2016). Pernsteiner (2015) and Towers-Clark (2015) also determined that interpersonal skills, networking skills, and communication skills were essential to an employer's perceived level of preparedness.

When it came to soft skills, the findings were consistent with some studies and contrary to others. First, the graduates reported that the development of certain personal attributes was the direct result of internship activities rather than through formal classroom instruction. These finding were consistent with Crisostomo (2015) and Pernsteiner (2015) who suggested that the internship is the ideal platform for the development of soft skills. Second, the participants' responses to the questions regarding the development of soft skills were overwhelmingly positive in terms of the depth and breadth of the skills acquired. These findings were not directly supported in the literature. Low et al. (2016) and Pernsteiner (2016) reported that deficiencies in common aptitudes such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills, continue to

intensify the knowledge gap in new graduates. Also, a report by the IMA and APQC presented concurring findings that suggest accounting graduates continue to lack non-technical skills (APQC, 2015).

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative case study design research was to investigate the fundamental cause of the theory-practice gap through an exploration of recent accounting graduates' retrospective perceptions of their workplace transition and employability development. To explore recent graduates' opinions of the accounting program's employability success and their experiences of shifting from academics to industry, semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from 13 recent graduates. These participants received an undergraduate accounting degree between 2014 and 2018 from a rural western Pennsylvania university, participated in an internship during their academic program, and were subsequently employed in the accounting field after graduation. The qualitative data analysis software NVivo 12 Plus for Windows was used to reveal common themes and patterns of the perceptions of the recent accounting graduate and their academic and internship experiences. The outputs resulting from the thematic analyses were sufficient to answer the three main research questions aimed at exploring the role of the internship in bridging the gap between academics and practice.

The analysis of the participants' views of their educational experiences and work-place expectations revealed attitudes that evolved from somewhat negative to predominantly positive over the course of their four-year college experiences. Nine themes emerged from the data answering the question of how do graduates view their preparedness and the accounting profession. Nearly all students found value in their introductory accounting courses and at least one advanced accounting course and one elective accounting course. Graduates found

educational software, and case studies to be the most valuable course materials in preparing them for entry-level positions and found textbooks to be the least valuable course material. They rated group work, case studies and real-world problems as the classroom activities that best supported and prepared them for work. In general, the participants' post-educational views of accountants and the accounting profession were reformed as a result of their experiences.

Seven themes emerged from the second research question concerning graduates' perceptions of the impact that their internship experiences had in their transition to professional practice. Foremost, participants no longer viewed accountants in the common societal stereotype, and they realized that audit and tax were not the only areas of accounting in which they could work. Additionally, several participants recalled the moment in which the internship experience closed the gap between what they had learned in the classroom and the duties they were performing in their jobs. The study also revealed that graduates enjoyed the variety of networking opportunities provided through the internship, felt suitably trained to perform their duties, and no longer pressured to pursue a professional certification. Lastly, the graduates believed that skills they obtained through the internship experience provided the job experience essential for securing an entry-level accounting position.

The results relating to the third and final research question concerning participants' perceptions of the technical and non-technical skills acquired at various stages of development demonstrated that graduates had greater competencies in both areas at the conclusion of their academic programs. The participants claimed increased professional competencies in accounting, finance, and information systems as a direct result of their supervised work programs. Moreover, the study revealed that participants' viewed the internship as the ideal platform whereby they developed personal attributes such as interpersonal, problem-solving, and

communication skills. Overall, participants found that their academic programs and real-world experiences aided their transition into accounting work and removed some of the perceived barriers contributed to the gap between accounting education and accounting practice. A detailed discussion of the implementations, recommendations for practice and future research, and conclusions are discussed in Chapter Five.

Chapter 5: Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions

Despite collaborative efforts by institutions of higher education, accountancy bodies, and accrediting agencies to finally explain the theory-practice phenomenon, insufficient progress has been made in reconciling the expectations of accounting practitioners with competencies proposed in university accounting curricula (Lawson et al., 2014; Madsen, 2015; Sledgianowski et al., 2017). This divide has been blamed on the inability of contemporary academic programs to meet the challenges of today's globally minded accounting professional. These conclusions have been drawn mainly from students, faculty, and employer perceptions, but there is a scarcity of published work on recent accounting graduates' perceptions of their internship experiences and their transition to industry (Gracia, 2010; Paisey & Paisey, 2010; Stanley, 2013).

The purpose of this qualitative case study design research was to investigate the fundamental causes of the theory-practice gap through an investigation of recent accounting graduates' retrospective perceptions of their workplace transition and employability development. The results of this study provide additional insights for educators, practitioners, and policymakers into the barriers contributing to the expectation gap. In addition, the results may be useful to business schools, accrediting agencies, and accountancy bodies for mapping accounting program curricula, setting accreditation standards, and developing concepts statements aligned with the practical skills demanded by practitioners in a variety of organizational settings. Students who recently received a four-year undergraduate accounting degree from a private, western Pennsylvania university, participated in an accounting internship, and were subsequently employed in the accounting field were used to explore perceptions of workplace transition and employability development.

The 13 study participants received an undergraduate accounting degree between 2014 and 2018 from a rural western Pennsylvania university, participated in an internship during their academic program, and were subsequently employed in the accounting field after graduation. The purposive sampling size, timeframe, and location of the study limit the generalization to other subjects, setting, or future time periods. Data were collected primarily from transcripts of semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with graduates. The researcher developed open-ended interview questions and used an activity checklist to ensure the same rigorous techniques were used when conducting each interview. Data were coded using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo 12 Plus for Windows, the findings of which were aggregated across the case nodes (Yin, 2014). Participants were provided with a copy of their transcribed interviews and asked to review them for accuracy. Participants were also encouraged to contact the researcher with any edits or concerns regarding the accuracy of the transcripts.

There were several limitations associated with this case study. First, the conversational nature of case studies and open-ended interviewing approaches makes them difficult to conduct and can jeopardize the quality and analysis of the data. Such limitations may include researcher subjectivity, response bias, and inaccuracies due to poor recall. Open-ended questions can also take a long time to complete, and participants' answers may differ in scope, length, and depth. To mitigate this limitation, the researcher scheduled no more than three interviews in a single day (Yin, 2016). Additionally, the researcher spoke less than the participant did and after the initial query, did not lead the participant or put words in the participant's mouth. The researcher also remained neutral on the topic and refrained from interjecting personal opinions or biases, yet she established and maintained rapport with the participants throughout the interview.

Another limitation included time constraints associated with the interviewing process. Although an interview guide containing the researcher's prompts was provided in advance of the scheduled interview, the researcher remained flexible with time slots and worked to accommodate the participants' schedules. Smaller time slots were considered, and on one occasion, the researcher supplemented the interview with email correspondence to complete the process. The researcher was aware that variation in data collection methods could result in differential impacts for different participants.

To avoid negligence in applying the research's design and improperly analyzing the data, the researcher took care to employ effective data collection procedures (Yin, 2016). The researcher developed a process for collecting data that included notetaking, video recordings, and regular review and refinement of all data collected. In addition, the researcher relied on data triangulation to improve the quality of the data and results. The QDA software, NVivo 12, was used to compile, code, and disassemble the data. To mitigate the risks associated with the use of computer software in qualitative data analysis, the researcher utilized the software's online tutorials and customer success center.

When presenting the results of the qualitative study, other potential limitations associated with a case study design are researcher subjectivity and external validity (Yin, 2016). To mitigate the issue of researcher bias in the presentation of the study results, all themes and outcomes identified through the data analysis were presented, not only those desired by the researcher. The researcher did not give special attention to one participant's views or statements. Additionally, the researcher established a chain of evidence that provided an audit trail so that other researchers could replicate the study in other academic settings where the researcher desires to examine perceptions of students, faculty, or industry representatives (Yin, 2014).

Finally, the researcher conducted the research with integrity and sensitivity and sought assistance from the Chair, the dissertation committee, the institution, and other resources deemed appropriate to ensure the quality of the research findings.

Because this study involved human subjects, the researcher obtained approval from Northcentral University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) before the study's onset and collection of any data. The researcher also renewed her CITI certification before completing the NCU IRB application. The researcher obtained both written and verbal consents from the participants and informed each subject that their participation was voluntary and they could choose to answer all, some, or none of the questions. To address confidentiality, the participants were de-identified upon completion of the study and subsequently referred to as P1 (Participant #1), P2, etc. All paper files were retained in a locked filing cabinet, and all electronic data were stored on an external flash drive. In the remaining sections of this chapter, the researcher presents the study's implications, recommendations for practice and future research, and conclusions.

Implications

The purpose of this qualitative case study design research was to investigate the fundamental causes of the theory-practice gap through an investigation of recent accounting graduates' reflective perceptions of their workplace transition and employability development. Specifically, the research questions were designed to identify graduates' perceptions of their educational experiences, the potential impact of internship programs, and their experiences of transitioning from academia to practice. In this section, the researcher discusses the results and conclusions of each of the three research questions and the extent to which they address the study problem and purpose and contribute to the existing literature. Additionally, the researcher

describes the extent to which the results are consistent with existing research and theory and provides potential explanations for unexpected or divergent results.

The first research question was "How do the accounting graduates view their educational preparedness and workplace expectations of accounting professionals?" This research question was developed to identify the graduates' pre- and post-education stereotypes of accounting and accountants and determine whether their whole educational experiences altered these views. Nearly all participants perceived their learning experiences in introductory accounting courses, advanced accounting courses, and elective accounting courses as positive and had changed views of accounting professionals and a broadened perspective of the significance of accounting to business in general. The participants' experiences in their accounting courses and internships were instrumental in the transformation of these pre- and post-education views.

In part, these findings were contradictory to the outcomes of the Stivers and Onifade (2014) study, which revealed that students had negative opinions of introductory accounting courses and found them to be too rigorous and detached from modern accounting practice. The findings of Johnson (2014) indicated that both accounting students and career accountants (accountants with five or more years of experience) did not find value in their faculty or their educational experiences. These researchers concluded that faculty were not delivering in the introductory courses. Contrariwise, the participants in this study found value in both their courses and their faculty members. Although at odds with the existing research, these results are encouraging since narrowly focused curricula, the first-year accounting course, and formal training of faculty top the list of current teaching challenges (Chen, 2016; Wells, 2018). Moreover, these outcomes support the precepts of sociocultural learning theory and experiential learning.

The second research question was "How do early career practitioners retrospectively perceive the impact that their internship experiences had in their transition to professional practice?" This question closely aligns with the study's purpose of investigating the core cause of the expectation gap by exploring recent graduates' perceptions of their ability to gain and maintain employment. All participants in the study acknowledged several outcomes of the internship experience as impacting their odds of securing a permanent position after graduation. First, the typical stereotypes were further discredited, and participants were exposed to a variety of accounting career options. Second, most participants perceived the internship as the link to validating the concepts taught in the classroom and closing the gap between classroom theory and accounting practice. Lastly, participants credited much of their skill development to their internships' training environments, which consisted of exposure to what participants perceived to be the latest accounting technologies.

These findings are consistent with the recent research of Crisostomo (2015) and Pernsteiner (2015), whose studies focused on the importance of an accounting apprenticeship necessary for the development of certain hard and soft skills. Gracia (2010) and Paisey and Paisey (2010) investigated the transferability of skills obtained through a supervised work program by examining students' perceptions. The results of these studies suggested that the fulfillment of academic requirements combined with work experiences created the standard skill set expected by employers and helped students enhance their knowledge in a variety of subject areas. These outcomes also fit the traditions of Kolb's experiential learning theory, particularly the stage he called integration, which he described as the platform (the apprenticeship) through which the learner begins to assimilate into modern society (Kolb, 1984).

One particular finding inferred from the second research question revealed that participants did not perceive the internship as instrumental or influential in their decision to pursue a professional designation. Only one participant decided to pursue the CPA designation because of the internship experience. Several participants even suggested that the company for which they completed an internship neither required nor encouraged certification. These attitudes about certification confirm the concerns of researchers who claim that a professional designation has taken a backseat to academic credentials such as the PhD or DBA, thus only further widening the skills gap (Fogarty & Black, 2014; Serocki, 2017; Thomson, 2017). Fogarty and Black (2014) revealed that the percentage of new faculty with a CPA designation is a 30-year low with no signs of increasing.

The final research question was "How do the skills acquired by accounting graduates at various stages of undergraduate academic and employability development match the skills required for entry-level accounting positions?" This question also closely aligns with the study's purpose of investigating the core cause of the skills gap by examining participants' opinions to identify the specific technical and non-technical skills they perceived to have obtained by the time they graduated. All thirteen participants believed that the Excel courses (required or elective) taken as part of the undergraduate program enhanced their performance during their internship, and more than half of all participants proclaimed a greater proficiency in Microsoft Excel upon completion of the internship. These findings are not necessarily reflective of the concerns conveyed by Chen (2016) and Pincus et al. (2107), who alleged that small and mid-sized accounting firms were struggling to keep pace with the rate of technology change. The results of this study demonstrate that both the higher education institution and the internship sponsors understood the importance of technology in closing the skill gap, stances of which are

heavily supported by the research of Lawson et al. (2014) and Sledgianowski et al. (2017). These researchers recognized a growing technologies skills gap and urged administrators and faculty to develop technological competencies as part of their accounting degree programs.

In addition to improved Excel skills, the participants in the study perceived to have an increased knowledge in an assortment of one or more specialized accounting fields, such as audit, tax, and financial accounting and reporting. Participants also overwhelmingly agreed that the duties and responsibilities to which they were assigned during their internships played a key role in the development of nine commons soft skills. Despite a paucity of research on the effectiveness of internships in U.S. accounting programs, these outcomes are mostly consistent with the existing literature. Crisostomo (2015) and Pernsteiner (2015) reported that the accounting students in their studies claimed to have increased knowledge in auditing, management accounting, government accounting, and financial accounting and reporting. However, these researchers reported conflicting results with regards to soft skills. Crisostomo's (2015) students perceived to have improved critical thinking and general socials skills, while Pernsteiner (2015) found that the soft skills employers seek were not largely developed in the accounting majors surveyed. The discrepancies in these results may be attributed to differences in culture, duration of the workplace experience, or the academic level of the student. Regardless of the perceived levels of technical and non-technical competencies acquired, the literature conclusively provides evidence of the significance of a work-based learning environment (Capka & Foltin, 2017; Low et al., 2016; McKnight & Watson, 2017).

Recommendations for Practice

The skills gap has plagued the accounting industry for over four decades, and it remains the opinion of industry leaders that this divide will continue to beset the current generation of

accountants (Brewer et al., 2014; Stout, 2014; Lawson et al., 2014). However, within those same four decades, signs of a maturing relationship between the worlds of academia and professional practice have emerged. Since bridging this gap has proven to be an iterative process involving many stakeholders, the researcher aimed to examine one aspect of the phenomena that remain uncharted. There is little published work on the role that the accounting internship plays in student learning and employability development. In this study, the researcher investigated the impact of the accounting internship as a mechanism for closing the skills gap through an exploration of recent accounting graduates' perceptions of their work preparedness. The recommendations for practice that follow are centered on the outcomes of the study, which not only reaffirmed the existing literature on the benefits of an internship but also provided additional insights into the effectiveness of the internship model.

Researchers have been acknowledging the value of the internship experience for years, but many academic programs and accrediting bodies have yet to commit to requiring them as part of program or accreditation requirements (AICPA, n.d.; Kolb, 1984; Knechel & Snowball, 1987; Low et al., 2016). Accrediting bodies and academic institutions should first and foremost consider mandating that students complete an internship as part of their undergraduate accounting degree programs. The findings of this study indicated that the internship not only complemented their academic proficiencies but also gave them a distinctive edge when they graduated. The internship created the stage for multifaceted learning, allowed students to make professional contacts, and provided them with industry know-how that they would not have otherwise obtained.

Although the literature revealed opposing views on the ideal duration of the internship program, the findings from this study indicated that the majority of participants participated in

more than one internship program and perceived to have received additional benefits from doing so. Trede and McEwen (2015) recommended that work placement initiatives begin in the first year of enrollment and continue throughout the four-year program. Accordingly, higher education institutions should consider developing internship requirements for each academic year of the degree program. Such a framework is supported by the research of Kolb (1984) and Vygotsky (1978), whose work focused on processes that progressively build skills and knowledge through social interaction with adults.

Accounting department deans and chairs should also invite companies to participate in Executive in Residence (EIR) programs on their campuses to provide students with the opportunity to interact with leading business and accounting organizations. These programs may facilitate relationships with potential internships employers and allow the academic institution to maintain existing relationships with employers for which students have already completed internships. Furthermore, these programs may provide an ideal platform for direct interaction of industry experts with accounting and business faculty. The formation of strategic and purposeful alliances between accounting educators and the business world was strongly supported in the literature (Barth, 2015; Pryor & Cipriano, 2017; Vladu, 2015).

A more formal relationship between accounting faculty and accounting practitioners may also result in efforts to provide solutions to the numerous fundamental financial accounting questions that remain unresolved (Barth, 2015; Basu, 2012; Johnson, 2014). The results of this study revealed that participants believed that real-world problems, cases, and experiences were critical to their transition into accounting work. Therefore, accounting faculty should consider incorporating articles from the top accounting journals to access the latest news, updates, and trends into their tutelages and use them to supplement traditional classroom lecture and textbook

case problems. By promoting the relevancy and role of research into both the classroom and the practice of accounting, unresolved practice issues may subsequently be resolved.

Another revelation of this study was the significance of an interdisciplinary approach to accounting, a concept introduced by the AECC with its newly designed, broad-based accounting curriculum (Sundem, 1999; Williams, 1993). Participants in this study described acquiring aptitudes in various fields of accounting as well as in finance and information systems. Low et al. (2014) also emphasized an existing need for a new education framework that required professional competencies in accounting, finance, economics, and information systems. Since graduates are pursuing a variety of career paths, accounting department deans, chairs, and faculty should develop pedagogical models that de-emphasize "teaching to the test", the Uniform CPA Exam. Instead, they should continue to implement strategies for developing interdisciplinary skills and aptitudes within their accounting curricula, and expose students to at least the top five to ten accounting certifications that could potentially enhance their future careers.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on exploring recent accounting graduates' perceptions of the role that their collective educational experiences played in developing their workplace readiness. The 13 participants in this study were from a small, private, rural western Pennsylvania university. Although similar studies have been conducted at non-U.S. post-secondary institutions in countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, Asia, and Romania, there has been little research of this type conducted at U.S. post-secondary institutions. The first recommendation for future research is for other U.S. post-secondary institutions to conduct similar studies of their accounting graduates' perceptions of the importance of an apprenticeship to determine the extent to which the findings reported here apply elsewhere.

Future research is also suggested to further explore the students' levels of technical and non-technical skill development before the internship experience. A more in-depth study on the specific activities and tasks that students performed during the internship which led to the acquisition or improvement of certain skills would bring relevance to academic programs, particularly if faculty wanted to find ways to develop better these competencies through classroom activities. Additionally, further research could also determine if the students' perceptions of their soft skills development were impacted by their level of involvement in extracurricular activities, such as sports or clubs. There also exists an opportunity for research studies that focus on comparing the accounting graduates' perceptions of the level of soft skills improved or acquired to the internship sponsors' perceptions of the professional characteristics developed in the accounting interns before and after their internships programs. Such research may be helpful to accreditation agencies and academic institutions that want to create education models that institute the long-term career aptitudes necessary to meet the changing demands of the contemporary accounting profession.

As an alternative or complement to the qualitative case study research design, future researchers could consider conducting qualitative phenomenological research studies of accounting students' experiences during their internship programs. Future researchers could also employ quantitative methods to examine further graduates' perceptions of certain aspects of their educational experiences and transition to work or to ascertain the impact of internships on how and what students learned. Since the participants in this study were not required to complete an internship as part of their academic program, there is also an opportunity for future research that focuses on comparing the academic performances of students who completed an internship with students who did not complete an internship. Lastly, there are opportunities for future

researchers to explore the obstacles to developing and implementing job placement programs from the perspectives of employers and university administration.

Conclusions

The problem examined in this qualitative research design case study is the lack of progress in reconciling expectations of accounting industry practitioners with competencies proposed in university accounting curricula. Despite some of the progress that has been made in closing the expectation gap, recent studies have confirmed that declines in the quality of both an accounting education and the accounting student persist (AICPA, 2017; Madsen, 2015). The inability of academic programs to meet the challenges of the profession is the most common reason offered in the literature, but researchers have drawn these conclusions mainly from the perceptions of students, faculty, and employers (Beck & Halim, 2008; Stanley, 2013). In this study, the researcher examined accounting graduates' earliest experiences in the accounting profession and the role that internships and their academic experiences played in their ability to gain and maintain employment. The hope was to gain insights that could contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the theory-practice gap. The conclusions drawn from this study were based on data obtained from interviews with recent accounting graduates who participated in an accounting internship during their academic programs and were later employed in the accounting industry.

All the participants in this study found exceptional value in their educational journeys, their internship experiences, and their resultant employment. The internship, in particular, was perceived to be the irrefutable link in merging theory and practice. The findings were generally aligned with the results of previous research concerning accounting graduates' perceptions of their internship experiences. The internship provided the stage whereby students developed the

skill sets that aided their transition to practice and removed some of the barriers that contribute to the theory-practice gap.

The practical application and knowledge learned from the findings of the study indicate that the recent accounting graduate is in a prime position to help foster relationships between academic institutions and accounting professionals. Acting as a consultant, the recent accounting graduate could aid employers in identifying best practices and structuring successful internship programs. Simultaneously, the recent graduate could assist academic institutions with establishing internship requirements. The alumnus, also having participated in an internship and later obtaining a full-time position, is also in an ideal position to partner with the educational institution to build relationships with business leaders to establish or promote EIR programs. Finally, the recent accounting graduate would make the perfect mentor or partner for a current accounting student. The recent accounting graduate may be the means to a more formal relationship between the academic and practice communities and to overcoming the most significant impediments that have inhibited the progress toward aligning core accounting competencies with professional expertise.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

Introduction:

My name is Angela Seidel. I am a doctoral student at Northcentral University. I am conducting a research study to explore recent accounting graduates' viewpoints of their educational and internship experiences. I am completing this research as part of my doctoral degree. Your participation is completely voluntary. I am seeking your consent to involve you and your information in this study. Reasons you might ***not*** want to participate in the study include a lack of time or concerns about your privacy. Reasons you might want to participate are: Your insights may contribute to the lack of published work on the issues. The findings could impact your current or future roles as practitioners or professors. You may gain personal satisfaction from simply participating. An alternative to this study is simply not participating. I am here to address your questions or concerns during the informed consent process.

PRIVATE INFORMATION

Certain private information may be collected about you in this study. I will make the following effort to protect your private information. I will identify participants in the study by a number, such as P1 (Participant #1), rather than by name. I will save all documents to a USB flash drive where related files will be password protected. I will retain the flash drive in a locked filing cabinet. I will shred all paper records after the required seven-year period. I will erase any records stored on a computer hard drive. Even with this effort, there is a chance that your private information may be accidentally released. The chance is small but does exist. You should consider this when deciding whether to participate.

Activities:

If you participate in this research, you will be asked to:

1. Read the informed consent document (10 minutes).
2. Read the interview protocol guide (15 minutes).
3. Answer the interview questions (30 minutes).
4. Review your answers (15-30 minutes).

Eligibility:

You are eligible to participate in this research if you:

1. You are age 18 or over.
2. You earned an undergraduate accounting degree at SFU between 2013 and 2018.
3. You completed an accounting internship program while enrolled in the undergraduate accounting degree program at SFU.
4. You were employed in the accounting field after completing your undergraduate degree in accounting at SFU.
5. You are currently NOT enrolled in or attending classes in the SFU MBA program.

You are not eligible to participate in this research if you:

1. Are not age 18 or over.
2. Did not earn an undergraduate accounting degree at SFU between 2013 and 2018.
3. Did not complete an accounting internship program while enrolled in the undergraduate accounting degree program at SFU.
4. Were not employed in the accounting field after completing an undergraduate degree in accounting at SFU.
5. Are currently enrolled in or attending classes in the SFU MBA program.

I hope to include 30-40 people in this research.

Risks:

There are minimal risks in this study. Some possible risks include: Your private information may accidentally be released. If you are a current graduate student, you might be concerned that not participating in this study will in some way negatively affect your grades.

To decrease the impact of these risks, you can skip any of the questions. You can quit the interview at any time. You can choose to have any of your data and survey answers excluded

from the study. If you are a current graduate student, your unwillingness to participate will not adversely affect your grades.

Benefits:

If you decide to participate, there are no direct benefits to you.

The potential benefits to others are: The information might contribute to the body of knowledge on the issue. Business schools might use the results to map accounting program curricula. Accrediting agencies might use the results to map accreditation standards. Accountancy bodies might use the results to map concepts statements.

Confidentiality:

The information you provide will be kept confidential to the extent allowable by law. Some steps I will take to keep your identity confidential are: I will identify you as P1 (Participant #1) rather than by name. I will remove any report identifiers after all data has been collected. I will give you the chance to have your data and survey responses left out the study.

The people who will have access to your information are: myself, my chair, and my dissertation committee. The Institutional Review Board may also review my research and view your information.

I will secure your information with these steps: I will save all transcribed individual interviews to an external flash drive. I will keep the flash drive in a locked filing cabinet in my office. I will keep your data for 7 years. Then, I will delete electronic data and destroy paper data.

Contact Information:

If you have questions for me, you can contact me at: a.seidel8103@o365.ncu.edu or at (814)244-8004.

My dissertation chair's name is Ole Ruankaew. He works at Northcentral University and is supervising me on the research. You can contact him at: truankaew@ncu.edu or at (610)741-3960.

If you contact us, you will be giving us information like your phone number or email address. This information will not be linked to your responses if the study is anonymous.

If you have questions about your rights in the research, or if a problem has occurred, or if you are injured during your participation, please contact the Institutional Review Board at: irb@ncu.edu or 1-888-327-2877 ext. 8014.

Voluntary Participation:

Your participation is voluntary. If you decide not to participate, or if you stop participation after you start, there will be no penalty to you. You will not lose any benefit to which you are otherwise entitled.

Future Research

Any information or specimens collected from you during this research may **not** be used for other research in the future, even if identifying information is removed.

Audiotaping:

I would like to use a voice recorder to record your responses. You can still participate if you do not wish to be recorded.

Please sign here if I can record you: _____

Signature:

A signature indicates your understanding of this consent form. You will be given a copy of the form for your information.

Participant Signature	Printed Name	Date
_____	_____	_____

Researcher Signature	Printed Name	Date
_____	_____	_____

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Dear Research Participant:

I would like to thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview. As I have mentioned, I am conducting a research study to explore recent accounting graduates' viewpoints of their educational and internship experiences. I am completing this research as part of my doctoral degree. Your participation is completely voluntary. Page one will give you some information about the interview process. Page two is a copy of the post-assessment form I will use. Please read over these documents prior to our meeting.

The interview will last 45-60 minutes. In the first 5 minutes, I will briefly describe my research study and review the informed consent. I will also confirm that I have your permission to audio record our conversation. During the next 30 minutes or so, I will ask you the set of predetermined questions. The first set of questions relate to demographic information. The second set of questions relate to your educational and internship experiences. You may choose to answer all, some, or none of the questions. Please answer the questions truthfully. Please provide as much detail as possible. I will take notes. In the last 15 minutes or so, you will have the opportunity to provide feedback or discuss additional topics.

Below is a brief activity checklist:

- ☐ Review details of study
- ☐ Review the informed consent
- ☐ Confirm permission to audio record our conversation
- ☐ Ask demographic questions
- ☐ Ask survey questions
- ☐ Provide feedback

After the interview, I will complete a post-assessment to record the following additional data:

- Interview code number (P1, P2)
- Location of interview

- Date
- Length of interview

I will also note my impressions of the following:

- How did the interviewee appear to me?
- Atmosphere (location)
- Motivation to take part in the interview
- Gestures/body language
- Eye-contact
- Non-verbal signals
- Main points stressed by participant

Before we begin, do you have any questions? If questions arise during the interview, please ask them at any time. I am happy to answer your questions.

Interviewee: _____Interviewer: _____

Location: _____Date: _____ Length of Interview: _____

Activity Checklist:

- ☐ Review details of study
- ☐ Review the informed consent
- ☐ Confirm permission to audio record our conversation
- ☐ Ask demographic questions
- ☐ Ask survey questions
- ☐ Provide feedback

Post-Interview Comments:

- How did the interviewee appear to me?
  _____
  _____
  _____
- Atmosphere (location):
  _____
  _____
- Motivation to take part in the interview:
  _____
  _____

- Gestures/body language:

  _____

  _____

- Eye-contact:

  _____

  _____

- Non-verbal signals:

  _____

  _____

- Main points stressed by participant:

  _____

  _____

  _____

Appendix C: Demographic and Survey Questions

Demographic Questions:

1. What is your gender?
2. What is your age?
3. What is your race?
4. What year did you graduate?
5. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
6. Have you earned a professional designation? If yes, which one?
7. Are you employed in public or private-sector accounting?

Interview Questions:

1. What were your views of accounting and accountants before taking your first accounting course?
2. How important were your learning experiences in your introductory accounting courses?
3. How important were your learning experiences in your advanced accounting courses?
4. How important were your learning experiences in your elective accounting courses?
5. How valuable were the use of accounting textbooks, educational software, or other course materials in preparing you for an entry-level accounting position?
6. What specific classroom activities, other than lecture, (i.e., videos, handouts, group work, real-world examples, research, case studies, guest lectures, etc.) supported classroom learning? How so?
7. What specific classroom activities (i.e., videos, handouts, group work, real-world examples, research, case studies, guest lectures, etc.) prepared you most for your entry-level accounting position? How so?
8. How did your overall educational experience change your view of accounting?
9. How did your perception of certain characteristics of the accounting profession change after your internship experience and exposure to practice?
10. How did your perception of certain characteristics of accounting professionals change after your internship experience and exposure to practice?
11. Did you receive initial onboard training (new hire orientation process)? If so, how long did the training last?
12. Did the internship offer a structured or unstructured learning environment (i.e., being told exactly what to do or figuring it out on my own)?
13. Did the internship provide you with hands-on training related to the service line (auditing, tax, etc.) in which you were employed?
14. Did the firm provide adequate training so that you could do the duties you were assigned during the internship?
15. What new skills and/or competencies did you acquire by the end of the internship program?
16. What skills and/or competencies improved because of your experiences at the internship? How so?

17. Did the internship improve your knowledge in a specialized field such as:

	YES	NO	If yes, how so?
a. Auditing	□	□	
b. Taxes	□	□	
c. Financial accounting and reporting	□	□	
d. Management accounting	□	□	
e. Other	□	□	

18. How did the internship improve your ability to prepare, evaluate, and interpret financial statements?
19. How did the internship improve your ability to relate classroom theory to the practical work environment?
20. How did the internship validate the concepts you were taught in class?
21. How did the internship improve or develop the following skills:
    a. Communication
    b. Teamwork
    c. Adaptability
    d. Problem-solving
    e. Critical thinking
    f. Creativity
    g. Work ethic
    h. Interpersonal skills
    i. Time management
22. Did the internship persuade you to pursue a professional certification such as the CPA, CMA, or CFE exam? If so, which one(s) and why?
23. Did the internship expose you to the latest technologies used in an accounting office? How so?
24. Did the internship provide you with networking opportunities? How so?
25. Did the internship provide you with adequate job experience?
26. Did the internships improve your chances of obtaining a permanent position? How so?
27. Did the internship provide you with a full-time permanent employment opportunity?
28. Is there anything else regarding your experiences that you would like to add that was not already addressed?