

CPAs Can Help Others Reach Their Dreams

By Iralma Pozo

One of the most amazing things that CPAs can do is give other people the tools they need to realize their goals. CPAs teach their clients, colleagues and communities an array of life-transforming skills. For example, in fall 2014, I taught my first class as an adjunct lecturer at my alma mater Baruch College, a senior college of the City University of New York. It was the culmination of a journey that started during my own school days.

In high school, I took photography and creative writing classes, but I realized early on I was analytical and loved to

My first real exposure to CPAs was when I went to work part-time at the United Federation of Teachers while still a full-time undergraduate student. Not only was I impressed with the fine suits the CFO wore, I realized that the accounting department was involved in supporting operations and decision making organization-wide. Because I worked on Thursdays, however, I didn't really participate in accounting and business organizations until after I completed my undergraduate degree. At the time, professors stressed the importance of becoming a CPA, and I took all four parts of the exam during the last semester of my senior year. I ended up having to retake the parts, two at a time, for the next two cycles.

With the exam under my belt, I left my corporate accounting job and joined the IRS. This move was instrumental in my career, as it exposed me to lawyers, enrolled agents, CPAs, business owners, and individual taxpayers. Working at the IRS



solve problems. I remember working as a teen in different government agencies, helping the departments get organized, summarize documents, and so on. On a school trip, we were taken to an agency to take career tests, and my results said I'd make a good investigator, psychologist, or accountant. I didn't meet any actual accountants, however, until I went to college. I enrolled in Baruch's business school, took my first accounting course, and was hooked.

opened the door for me to be recruited into a midsize CPA firm. Shortly afterward, I became an active member of the NYSSCPA. Eventually, I was asked to join the Manhattan/Bronx Chapter board as treasurer. As if that wasn't enough, one day at a NYSSCPA scotch tasting, I met two managers from BDO Seidman. They asked me to stop by the office for an informal meeting, and I ended up staying for hours talking to the associates, managers, and staff.

Joining BDO Seidman was an amazing experience. There I learned to sharpen my technical skills, serve clients, manage multiple projects, get involved in different projects, and serve the public interest. While supervising associates, I realized that one is never too young to lead and influence others.

Teaching had been on my mind for a while. I had gone to the PhD Project Conference in November 2009, and had since been wondering if I should pursue a PhD to become a full-time accounting professor. But the timing wasn't right, and I decided to go back to school to pursue a master's of finance at Pace University instead. After graduating with my master's in 2012, I still wanted to teach. A fellow NYSSCPA board member who is an adjunct lecturer at Baruch College connected me with the assistant chair of the accounting department, and I was appointed to teach an introductory to accounting course. Since then, I have taught introductory and advanced accounting courses, as well as information systems courses, to hundreds of undergraduate students at Baruch College and Mercy College.

Academia should also do more to attract and retain diverse professors and instructors and create comprehensive support for nontraditional students.

Transitioning into academia was challenging. I learned that it doesn't matter how smart you are; you have to capture and engage the students. I learned that students bring their whole persona to class and that you have to put everything into perspective. I learned that learning and teaching can be fun and collaborative. I learned to avoid talking solely about grading policies, and instead to focus on helping the students to build a solid business foundation. I learned to sidestep negative student feedback that wasn't constructive.

I have learned to make classes as practical as possible. Showing students how the topics we are covering in class play out in real life is key. I try to vary my lessons with case studies, articles, and open-ended assignments where I ask students what exercise they'd like to give one of their peers. I always try to tell the class stories about the topic we are discussing. It is fortunate that I have worked in different roles and industries and have many stories to share.

I have learned that more effort is required to prepare our

students for the workplace of the future. I recall some students asking for additional group projects, Excel projects, and case studies. Curriculums and courses should include more technology-based, hands-on courses and assignments. Academia should also do more to attract and retain diverse professors and instructors and create comprehensive support for nontraditional students. Some students have come to me for additional help to discuss personal matters because I am a younger woman of color whom they can relate to. These students, who might otherwise have failed or dropped out of class or school, have committed themselves to working harder. I rarely had a professor of color in a business class myself, and I know that all students, not just those from low-income backgrounds or with high grades, should receive support they need to excel in school.

Academia should continuously improve supporting programs for students who are parents, veterans, or going back to school. I recall a student with post-traumatic stress disorder, for whom the scant resources available from the college were not enough. I recall a student missing an important test due to a toddler's doctor's appointment that could not be rescheduled. Some older students have confided in me that they were taking weekend courses because they didn't feel they fit in with the younger students in the daytime courses.

CPAs also need to do more to promote the profession to high school students. CPAs do more than taxes and audits, and, as technology continues to evolve, CPAs will continue to be strategic partners to businesses and clients. With current technological advances, college students can begin working in accounting remotely and more flexibly than ever, and entry-level accountants can assist with critical decision making from day one. The accounting profession must fill the pipeline with a diverse talent pool by demonstrating to students how rewarding it can be. It was music to my ears when a student in one of my courses told me that, because of me, she was switching her major to accounting.

Becoming a CPA was one of the best decisions I made in my life. This career has given me the tools to educate others, whether teaching a colleague how to prepare a budget, helping a senior with tax preparation, giving students a solid business foundation, teaching entrepreneurs about gross profit and operating margins, or helping nonprofits meet their missions. All the roles I've had have only helped me to see the value of this profession. I am grateful for all special people I've had the pleasure of interacting with on this journey, and I look forward to the amazing things this profession will afford me to do in the future. □

Iralma Pozo, CPA, is a consultant with Kiwi Partners, New York, N.Y.

Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.