

ACCOUNTING

SOME PROPOSED SOLUTIONS FOR THE DECLINE IN THE QUANTITY AND QUALITY OF ACCOUNTING MAJORS

By *Richard Vangermeersch*

There have been a number of helpful responses to the article, "Fifty Reasons for the Decline in the Quantity and Quality of Accounting Majors" (*The CPA Journal*, January 2000). Many of the responses dealt with the need to provide solutions. The following are some proposed solutions for solving the problem.

Accountants Do Good Things for Society

This must become the mantra of those teaching each and every course in accounting. This should be emblazoned on syllabi, on blackboards, and even on buttons pinned to our jackets. Every class day we must give at least one example of this saying. Think of those volunteering for Accountants for the Public Interest or the winners of the Accounting Exemplar Award of the public interest section of the American Accounting Association. Think of the good done each day in the business, not-for-profit, and governmental sectors. Professors have too long presented accounting, especially at the undergraduate level, as being a peopleless field. It is time to bring people into the accounting textbooks and classroom for the first time.

This solution was presented first because reason No. 50 for the decline in the quantity and quality of accounting majors, "failure to stress the good that accountants do for society," was by far the most cited by respondents to the January article and to a presentation at the Northeast Regional Meeting of the American Accounting Association. The remaining solutions are not in the order of importance.

There Are Many Professional Exams and Designations

Professors must be very aggressive in making this point, starting with prospective freshman accounting majors. One

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way to do this is to repeat the string of designations that accountants can hold, "CMA CFM CIA CISA CFA CFE CPA CFP," to reinforce the breadth of the professional possibilities in accounting. Prominently displaying these designations should help counter the presumption that the CPA is the only designation people recognize. This solution also counters the great financial cost of the 150 hours to sit for the CPA exam issue.

Undergraduates Should Have a Double Major or Minor of Interest

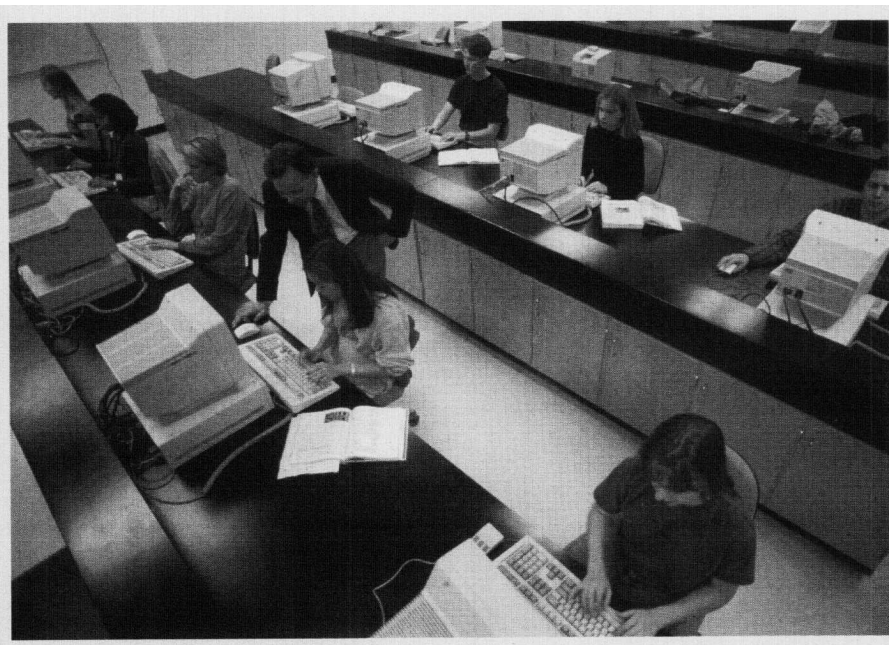
Perhaps the best response to the high cost of the 150-hour requirement is to take the offensive. If we encourage undergraduates to take an extra course each semester and two courses in one summer term, they will have 150 hours by graduation. If they specialize in an area like finance or management information systems (MIS) in addition to the accounting major, their future careers will be open in those areas, not to mention the possibility of consulting expertise in CPA firms.

Students should be counseled that majoring in accounting is an excellent path to the areas of finance and MIS. A double major in accounting and new business majors such as international business and financial services is an excellent starting point.

This solution not only deals with the issue of the high cost of 150 hours but also with the higher starting salaries in finance and MIS. It should also be an attractive solution to the problems of seemingly unlimited earnings in finance, the lack of stock options in CPA firms, and access to consulting opportunities.

Renew the Commitment to Elementary Accounting

"No one has ever been hurt by being basically sound in accounting, but countless billions of businesspersons and their employees have been hurt by the lack of basic soundness." This statement should be helpful in teaching elementary accounting. We must bring back our commitment to teaching the basics of account-



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ing. They must be known. They must be mastered. Without such a mastery, both accounting and nonaccounting majors are ill-served.

For accounting academics, this solution represents the most troubling of those recommended. This solution goes right to the heart of such issues as academic freedom and the "socially ideal accounting students." Quite frankly, it will be extremely difficult to change the nonbasic notions of teaching accounting that have developed over the last 10 years. However, an open dialogue on this issue would be a start, with the hope that it would lead to a greater awareness that academics should rethink their ways.

Revive Accounting Clubs

Revived accounting clubs would not compete with Beta Alpha Psi but, rather, could serve as a training ground for leadership in Beta Alpha Psi. My school has made two very concerted efforts to revive our former accounting association—dropped long ago when our Beta Alpha Psi charter was granted—and failed each time. However, with the decline in Beta Alpha Psi membership, we do not have the critical mass for student outreach.

We must not lose Beta Alpha Psi as an important reward for excellence in accounting. Nevertheless, we must attract prospective freshmen majors to accounting clubs and excite them about the accounting major. We must service new majors during their sophomore year. We must keep accounting clubs separate and equal with Beta Alpha Psi. Perhaps we should adopt the philosophy, "We want to be of service to all accounting majors." Quite frankly, my school—and probably many others—needs ideas on this matter. There seems to be a paucity of case studies on the issue. Please share your successes.

Varied Faculty Internships Are Vital

Accounting academics must learn as many aspects of the practicing field in as many different organizations as possible. We must be able to relate to accountants. We must see firsthand the arenas in which our students will be employed. Through varied faculty internships, accounting academics will see the significant good accountants and accounting do for society.

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This solution also addresses the lack of non-CPA experience by many accounting academics, as well as the lack of hands-on experiences in smaller businesses. Accounting faculty should also better appreciate the growing chasm between the accounting needs of smaller and larger organizations.

Educators Must Educate Various Organizations and Bodies

Improving the lot of students requires that accounting educators be more proactive than they have ever been. We are important members of society with a vital role to play in its dealings with accounting and accountants. This more aggressive role, perhaps, represents the most difficult of the solutions proposed, because accounting educators have drifted away from participation in societal issues.

We should take the role of educating the AICPA and NASBA about the importance of disclosing more of the CPA exam, as well as the other accounting exams administered by other bodies. Students need to be better informed about these exams, so that they do not take them just to learn what they are about. We should be actively involved in the current CPA exam changes and ensure that the written part of the exam is not downplayed. We must inform the AICPA and the Big Five that the downplaying of CPA independence and of the audit function is harming students' perception of accounting as a field that does good things for society.

We have to get the American Accounting Association (AAA) to recognize that many accounting programs are being marginalized and some are even threatened with extinction. We must democratize the AAA and make it part of the solution, not part of the problem.

We must educate recruiters about the relatively low starting salaries in accounting, especially for those students meet-

ing the 150-hour requirement. Recruiters should be reminded that most of our students are in their early 20s and do not have the executive experience of 50-year olds. We must educate publishers about the increasing complexity of their accounting textbooks.

There Must Be a Viable 120-Hour Program

The traditional 120-hour program must remain viable for individuals that, for various reasons, want to enter the accounting field after four years of college. These students cannot be forgotten. The traditional public accounting and auditing courses should be transferred to the fifth year and replaced by a generic auditing course in the fourth year. Advanced accounting should be moved to the fifth year and be replaced by an elective in either finance or MIS. Our students must be prepared for jobs in internal auditing. Colleges and universities must commit resources to early morning, evening, weekend, and distance learning courses so that 120-hour majors know they will be able to get their additional credits.

At a Crossroads

There is hope for a very viable future for accounting students and accounting programs—but only if some of these solutions are implemented. We are at the crossroads between marginalization at academic institutions and a potential revival of the accounting major. Remember, marginalization is one step on the way to extinction for many accounting programs. Such a calamity would have dire effects for our society, because *accountants do good things for society*. □

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