TOWARDS A PUBLIC ACCOUNTING CAREER DECISION AID FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS

Amanda M. Grossman, PhD, CPA
Murray State University
130 Business Building
Murray, KY 42071
270-809-4398
agrossman@murraystate.edu

Keywords: Audit versus tax; accounting career paths; accounting students; decision aid

TOWARDS A PUBLIC ACCOUNTING CAREER DECISION AID FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS

ABSTRACT

Often, accounting students in their first or second year of college are ill advised as to the nature and expectations of the profession into which they will soon enter. Using research results as a guidepost, this paper seeks to assist accounting instructors in outlining the foremost distinguishing attributes between the two major public accounting tracks, tax and audit, and among the major types of public accounting firms – Big Four, International/National, Regional, and Local. By utilizing a decision aid, students will be actively engaged in assessing the compatibility of their personal attributes in conjunction with track or firm type attributes. Such an approach to learning has been shown to increase the students' sense of fulfillment as opposed to more passive approaches, such as only reading or listening to information. Suggestions as to how instructors might disseminate the content of this paper, the ramifications of career path choices for the students, and key points of discussion are also provided.

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps one of the most stressful aspects of a college student's experience is trying to hone in on a fulfilling career path. Students entering college may have settled on a field of study without any substantial understanding of the academic demands of that field, or the possible career paths within its purview. This paper is aimed at providing accounting instructors with some suggestions, and a tool, to assist entry-level (i.e., first or second-year) accounting students in discovering the basic characteristics of their chosen academic, and presumably, professional career path. In addition, the content presented should help accounting students assimilate their personal attributes and desirable job attributes to arrive at the best-suited accounting career path. Since the landscape of accounting career paths is widely varied, this paper focuses on those paths within public accounting – although a brief outline of alternative paths is presented.

As a tool in aligning entry-level accounting students' perceptions and expectations with the attributes of the public accounting career path, a decision aid is provided at the end of this paper. The purpose of the constructed decision aid is twofold: 1) to provide insight into which basic area of public accounting the student might prefer (tax or audit) and 2) to provide insight into which type of public accounting firm the student might prefer (Big Four, International/National,

Regional, or Local). Marrying decision aid usage with an instructor-led discussion of the options within public accounting provides a means by which active participation can be solicited from students, as opposed to an instructor assigning a reading or simply lecturing.

The instructor of entry-level accounting students will need to choose an appropriate venue to disseminate the information, and utilize the decision aid, found in this paper. As an example, one college of business requires first-year students to participate in a pass-fail, one-credit hour course whose purpose is to inform the students about the particular profession in which they are about to embark. Such a course would offer an ideal delivery system for the content. Early exposure to details regarding the accounting profession may bolster student motivation to succeed in the accounting curriculum.

The content, and the decision aid, are geared towards entry-level accounting students for several reasons. First, accounting employers are recruiting accounting students very early in their academic career – it is becoming more common for students with only one completed semester of accounting to be offered an internship with an accounting firm. Second, early exposure to particulars of the profession may increase accounting student retention, since students perceive more of an involvement in their career path. Third, the transition into an internship, or full-time, position may seem less daunting or surprising. Lastly, increased immersion within the profession may ultimately lead accounting graduates to be more satisfied with their chosen field.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The first section discusses those attributes that all accountants should possess. The second section provides a simple differentiation between public and non-public accounting career paths. The third section provides some specific attributes of the public accounting career option, including accounting research results that feed into the construction of the decision aid. The fourth section discusses the development and use of the decision aid. The fifth section provides a summary of key concepts for accounting instructors. Lastly, the decision aid is provided.

UNIVERSALLY DESIRABLE ACCOUNTANT ATTRIBUTES

Although first or second-year college students may have chosen accounting as their major, they may not yet have a grasp on those attributes necessary to succeed in the profession, or the career paths available to them within the profession. The primary emphasis of college coursework is to teach students proficiency in technical competence. As students begin their accounting coursework, one of the first things they should examine is their aptitude for the technical aspect of the profession. At the introductory stage, the coursework applicable is financial and managerial principles. Students should be able to address basic accounting issues. For example, does the student understand the nature of double-entry bookkeeping, account classifications, financial statement components, assigning product costs, budgeting, etc.?

Beyond the technical aspects of the profession, several overriding attributes are important for accountants to possess. In her column on accountingweb.com, Myler (2015) suggests that the top attributes of a successful professional accountant are "excellent organization, killer time management skills, attention to detail, focus on the client, creativity, commitment to the sector [i.e., expertise within a certain industry], extreme trustworthiness, great communication skills, collaboration, and flexibility." Some of the items on this list, especially creativity and collaboration, may surprise students new to the study of accounting. In their study, Hood and Koberg (1991) find, to their surprise, that the attribute of creativity is insignificantly distinguishable amongst practitioners in the three major accounting profession categories – tax, audit, and consulting. Such a finding may run contrary to students' belief that accountants do not need to be creative, or that creativity is less important within a certain field of expertise within the profession.

In a like vein, Bryant, Stone, and Wier (2011) find that the current pool of accounting students may lack a desirable level of creativity. The researchers find no less creativity is required in the accounting profession as compared to health care, law, or engineering. Whereas the profession may be currently experiencing a shortfall of recruits with creative tendencies, an area of

opportunity is opened within the void. Accounting instructors should encourage students with creative talents to enter the field and dispel the notion that accountants are not a creative group.

The importance of harnessing creativity as an accountant will only increase over time, as evidenced by recent upheavals within the profession. According to an expert panel of professional accountants (Drew, 2018), technological innovations, such as artificial intelligence and automation, are changing the game for current and most definitely future accountants. Any accounting career path will focus more on analysis and decision-making, rather than on data entry and number-crunching. The panelists reaffirm that future accountants will need to sharpen that collaboration muscle, especially amongst data scientists or information technology specialists. Tomorrow's accountant should consider additional college courses geared toward data analytics and statistics.

PUBLIC VERSUS NON-PUBLIC ACCOUNTING CAREER OPTIONS

Equipped with the notion that accounting, in general, is their preferred area of study, students' next foray into the accounting profession hinges on whether or not to try public accounting, or another option, such as industry (private) or governmental. A starting point for such a decision might be to compile a list of those factors that provide the least differentiation. Research indicates that accounting firms are actively altering their working environments to attract, and hopefully retain, the future accountants of the profession; at present, the values and preferences of Millennials are key drivers in alterations (Durocher, Bujaki, & Brouard, 2016). Some key non-distinguishable factors among these career path options might include beginning salaries, which range from approximately $50,000-$60,000 according to Robert Half (2017), the opportunity and expectation to engage in community service activities, the availability of mentorship programs within the organization, and an enhanced advocacy of work-life balance. Next, students should discover those factors that do vary significantly among the options.

Apart from soliciting personal advice from an accounting instructor or a professional accountant, a wealth of sources on this topic exists. One particularly thorough source of information on

accounting career options is a website entitled “accounting.com.” The site provides descriptions of auditing, financial accounting, governmental accounting, and forensic accounting, as well as public accounting in general. An abundance of information applicable to entry-level accountants is available, including state-specific data within specific fields (e.g., state CPA license requirements, firms with headquarters in the state, state salary as compared to national averages, etc.).

Robert Half (2018) provides a blog entitled “Private vs. Public: Choose Your Accounting Career Path,” which outlines some key distinctions between the private and public sector of accounting jobs. Generally, some of the main advantages of public accounting are better opportunities to learn about a variety of industries, the possibility of quicker advancement for those with the ambition to pursue promotion, and a better foundation to transition to another accounting position (either within the public or private accounting sector). Alternatively, some of the disadvantages are a greater degree of pressure, longer working hours, and the possibility of consistent travel.

Private accounting holds its own advantages and disadvantages as well. For example, private accounting provides a more consistent work schedule, less travel, the ability to acquire valuable expertise within the accountant’s chosen industry, and advancement (to a certain point) in a particular industry may not require the attainment of a CPA license. Disadvantages are the possibility that career advancement may not come as rapidly, being somewhat confined to a particular area or industry, and performing repetitive or somewhat un-altering tasks.

On its website page, “This Way to CPA,” the AICPA provides accounting students with a tool entitled “Plan Your Career.” The first decision is to choose between the two options of business/industry/government or public accounting. Although beyond the detailed topical scope of this paper and the constructed decision aid, the first option expands into a plethora of different career paths. The drill-down categories provided become slightly cumbersome, however, and a beginner might become overwhelmed as an abundance of cascading options become available.

Since the focus of this paper is to expand upon public accounting career options, a few parting thoughts regarding private accounting follow. Generally, students may be told that an industry accounting job will, over time, foster expertise with the entirety of accounting and business processes within the particular company. Interestingly, students may have the impression that working in industry is less intensive than working in public accounting; however, this perception must be tapered according to the student's ambition. If the student wishes to rise through the ranks of a corporate structure, required effort and workload will be commensurate with those working in public sector accounting. In their research, Buchheit, Dalton, Harp, and Hollingsworth (2016) report that burnout is more intensive in an industry setting than at a small public accounting firm. Therefore, although private accounting may provide a more narrow focus, it should not be automatically viewed as an easier career path as compared to pubic accounting.

PARTICULARS OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTING CAREER OPTIONS

Although any accounting career path is capable of providing students with fulfilling careers, accounting professionals urge indecisive students to consider public accounting as a starting point (Robert Half, 2017). This tactic exposes students simultaneously to the public sector and, through client interactions, a variety of industry sectors. Such exposure should assist indecisive students in better aligning their traits and career goals with a specific career path.

Once the choice has been made to try public accounting, however, additional precursory decisions must be made upon entering the field. First, students must decide whether to choose the tax or audit track; second, students must decide in what type of public accounting firm they wish to work. Generally, the latter is a decision among a Big Four Firm, an international or national firm, a regional firm, or a local firm. The following two sections outline and discuss the various factors, including personal and job-specific attributes, involved in reaching a preliminary decision along these two career guideposts. The conclusions and implications of the research discussed provide the framework for the decision aid constructed in this paper. Some articulated concepts extend beyond only the construction of the decision aid and will hopefully prove useful in fostering continued dialogue between the instructor and students.

Tax versus Audit

The empirical research denoting the preferential abilities of tax and audit professionals, as well as delineating comparative attributes within each track, provide some intriguing insights. Within the tax field, Michaelsen and Nichols (1999) find that one aspect of becoming a tax expert is the ability to effectively analyze and communicate the internalized methodology one uses in arriving at a decision. In his analysis of the tax accountant judgment and decision-making literature, Roberts (1998) describes a few notable differences between auditors and tax accountants regarding the factors surrounding decision-making processes. Roberts makes the case that, whereas auditors are focused on examining the internal controls and account balances of the client, tax accountants are focused on using client-provided data to secure optimal tax outcomes. The researcher notes that auditors are bound by the requirement of independence and at times may become torn between the desires of the client and the auditors' duty to serve the public interest, as stipulated in the AICPA Code of Professional Conduct.

Alternatively, tax accountants have a duty to act as an advocate for their clients. Bobek, Hageman, and Hatfield (2010) argue that, even though a tax accountant is advocating for a client, the tax accountant must be careful to remain objective in an evaluation of the client's tax situation. Their research demonstrates that tax professionals tend to suggest more aggressive tax positions to clients who are considered lower-risk (i.e., the client will not incur a significant outlay of resources) to the tax professional's firm.

Roberts (1998) defines another stark contrast involving the nature of regulatory agencies between the two tracks. Although auditors of public sector clientele are subject to the regulatory standards of the Public Accounting Oversight Board (PCAOB), auditors of private sector clients are mostly self-regulated, using a peer-review process. An argument could be made that the regulatory environment of tax accountants is far more stringent, insofar as the prosecutorial powers of the Internal Revenue Service may surpass those of the Securities and Exchange Commission.

The research of Abdolmohammadi and Shanteau (1992) finds little difference among audit partners/managers, audit seniors or auditing students in articulating the most important characteristics of an expert auditor. Interestingly, however, the results indicate that auditing students tend to focus more on those attributes that are externally visible, such as seeking alternatives, rather than highlighting internally driven attributes, such as judgment and intelligence. The results of this research suggest that those individuals at an entry-level point in the profession may already be capable of accurately identifying characteristics of an audit expert, including acquisition of knowledge and confidence. These results should be reassuring for entry-level audit professionals, as their concept of expertise differs insignificantly from those of practicing auditors.

In a subsequent study, Abdolmohammadi, Searfoss and Shanteau (2004) find no significant differences among perceived expert auditor attributes within different industries, with the exception of regulated versus non-regulated industries. Stated differently, it appears that the factors that render an individual as an expert auditor may not correlate to the auditor's industry base. The researchers also note that leadership, recognition, and marketing factors (indicative of superior communication skills) are reported as important in the assessment of auditor expertise.

Bonner, Davis, and Jackson (1992), as well as McGuire, Omer, and Wang (2012) make the case that audit expertise differs from tax expertise in that the former is considered "backward-looking" and the latter is considered "forward-looking." Specifically, an auditor gathers source documentation (e.g., sales orders, shipping documents, invoices) to support the account balances on the client's financial statements. Looking back through the source documents may uncover evidence of errors or fraud. Alternatively, the tax accountant begins with a set of client-provided facts and attempts to formulate a strategy to mitigate tax consequences. Characterized differently, the auditor is, in effect, re-examining past actions and rendering a judgment, whereas the tax accountant is rendering judgment on a tax plan that will affect the client's future business operations.

McKnight and Wright (2011) performed an experiment to determine the most influential characteristics of high-performing auditors. Apart from technical ability, factors distinguishing high-performing auditors are well-developed client interaction skills and robust communication and self-confidence. Interestingly, the importance of non-technical skills vis-à-vis auditor expertise increases commensurate with increased job rank. In addition, auditors who devise situationally specific audit procedures, rather than relying on generically available audit procedures, are viewed as higher performing. Finally, some evidence exists that suggests auditors who are "internal" in nature, meaning more highly motivated and believe that they can affect control over an outcome, are more representative of the high-performing population.

Dalton, Buchheit, and McMillan (2014) undertook a pivotal study examining students' perception of tax or audit career paths. These researchers used the open-ended responses from masters' level accounting students to assist in the composition of a questionnaire for upper-level accounting students (juniors and seniors). Through this questionnaire, the upper-level accounting students then provided their perceptions of the most definitive attributes applicable to either the tax or the audit career tracks. Concurrently, the researchers asked tax and audit professionals to provide open-ended advantages to their track and to assess the degree to which they concurred with the masters students' perceptions of tax and audit career paths.

Relevant attributes of concurrency between the masters students and the accounting professionals are included in the forthcoming decision aid; for example, the audit track provides more opportunities for travel and the tax track supports strong client advocacy. Since Dalton et al.'s questionnaire targeted upper-level accounting students, some of its questions are not applicable to first or second-year accounting students; for example, the researchers find that an upper-level student's enjoyment of either their first tax or audit course significantly contributed to their current career path choice (no pressure audit and tax instructors!). The accounting professionals also perceive that tax coursework presents a more realistic simulation of work within the profession than does audit coursework. Such a perception seems reasonable, as it may be easier to simulate the completion of one or more tax returns, rather than to simulate the

gathering and multi-phasic analysis of an enormity of evidence necessary to simulate the complete an audit.

The research results also dispel some preconceived notions that students may have regarding the two career tracks. For instance, Dalton et al. find that students self-selecting auditing as a career path are no more extroverted than those selecting tax as a career path. Such a result upholds previous research findings that successful tax professionals, although provided more opportunities to work independently, still desire a high level of interpersonal interactions (e.g., Bertolini, Borgia, & Siegel, 2010). Other myth-busting results arise from the study. Specifically, professional accountants report that, in contrast to the students' beliefs, training for tax work is more difficult than for audit work and that tax work is less ambiguous than audit work.

Not surprisingly, both audit and tax professionals urge accounting students to procure an internship as a means to direct their career paths. Interestingly, the professionals suggest that the most advantageous internships allow the intern to work in both tax and audit. While this suggestion may not be viable for the Big Four or large international/national firms, such an option may be available in smaller firms with a multi-state presence or in regional or local firms. Another possibility for students is to participate in more than one internship, each in the alternative track.

Big Four versus Non-Big Four

Big Four clients are, for the most part, large international companies. This necessitates a substantial time devotion to service these clients, taking up to many months, or even most of the year. Consequently, incoming staff members could spend most of their time servicing only a few clients. Additionally, not only may the newcomer be working on only one or two clients, but also within only a narrow range of the required services. For example, a new Big Four auditor may work on only cash confirmations, since the client will have a voluminous amount of accounts based in different regions, segments, or subsidiaries. However, international clientele open the door for international travel, networking, and exposure to international business issues. Clients looking to hire often attempt to attract Big Four accountants into their companies.

With smaller accounting firms, clientele will be less prestigious and more local, commensurate with the relative size of the non-Big Four firm. For example, RSM and Grant Thornton have international clientele. Locally based accounting firms offer a new staff accountant the opportunity to rotate through a roster of several different clients at a faster pace as compared to their larger counterparts. The learning curve at a smaller accounting firm may also seem steeper, as new hires are expected to assist the engagement on a macro-level, rather than within only narrowly defined tasks. Such a broader engagement approach creates a more autonomous working environment, wherein the new accountant may be more intimately responsible for determining and completing the required workload for the client. However, smaller accounting firms may not offer a new hire the opportunity to specialize in a certain field or industry, as the person's talents will be required on a variety of client engagements. As a consequence, the new accountant may find it necessary to work on engagements that do not necessarily pique his or her interest.

Accounting research has sought to ascertain the perceived benefits and drawbacks of working for a Big Four, as opposed to a non-Big Four, accounting firm. A study by Bagley, Dalton, and Ortegren (2012) finds that both accounting students and Big Four professionals perceive that Big Four firms are more prestigious and provide better training. Other often-cited advantages by the professionals include better compensation and benefits, larger clientele, opportunity for international experiences, better resources, specialization opportunities, and future networking and/or job opportunities. The most common disadvantages are long hours, stressfulness, a less congenial working environment, and fewer opportunities for advancement.

Additional findings provide a more detailed picture of the differences between Big Four and non-Big Four firms. Whereas the Big Four firms target the highest-level GPA accounting students, non-Big Four firms are arguably more interested in students that will transition well into their organizational culture. Although all firms market themselves as fostering a high sensitivity to work-life balance, this is perhaps more readily applicable to non-Big Four firms. Bagley et al. find

that students who expected long hours and stressful working conditions thrived better in the Big Four environment.

The researchers note that students undergo more pressure, from either family members, instructors, or other persons in positions of authority, to choose a Big Four career path. To close the gap, national non-Big Four firms are looking for students who place less emphasis on prestige, and study results indicate that those students who are aware of their preferences at the onset are more apt to succeed in their chosen accounting firm type. In addition, work-life balance becomes more important to employees over time, whether they work for a Big Four firm or not. Commensurately, it appears that older students are less likely to find themselves employed by a Big Four firm. Whether the basis of this result is older students self-selecting out of a Big Four career path or Big Four firms preferring to hire younger students is unclear. Either way, the Big Four are seen as "stepping stones" to other possible career opportunities.

In their study, Bobek, Dalton, Daugherty, Hageman, and Radtke (2017) examine the ramifications of Big Four and non-Big Four CPA perceptions. Interestingly, the researchers posit that the organizational structure and goal orientations of Big Four accounting firms may be migrating away from historically professional organizations into commercial organizations. The former type of organization orients itself towards providing technical expertise and decision-making capabilities to protect the public interest, and the latter type of organization orients itself towards generating revenue. The research suggest that, by re-orienting themselves towards a mainly profit-seeking business model, the Big Four accounting firms are aligning themselves more closely with the corporate or industry sector businesses that the firms are charged with objectively evaluating.

While the aforementioned may present a disincentive to work for a Big Four firm, Bobek et al.'s research indicates that Big Four CPAs and non-Big Four CPAs perceive stronger ethical environments than CPAs working in industry. Further, Big Four CPAs perceive a stronger ethical environment than non-Big Four CPAs. Such perceptions are important, as the strength of the

ethical environment (measuring social norms, practices and policies, and punishments/rewards) seems to relate directly to judgments that are more ethical. Other Big Four advantages are less risk of litigation, more capital to thwart possible litigation, and highly recognizable reputations. Because of their clout and high visibility, the Big Four firms may have more of an incentive to train their employees on ethical practices, as opposed to non-Big Four firms.

DEVELOPMENT AND USE OF THE DECISION AID

The decision aid provided at the end of this paper incorporates as many of the specific attributes as possible (evidenced by research) that affect the choice between the audit and tax track, and amongst the various types of public accounting firms. Part One walks students through fourteen attributes applicable to the tax or audit decision. Part Two continues with an additional twenty-two attributes applicable to the type of public accounting firm decision. Many of the attributes within the two decision frames are interrelated. In Part One, students are asked to rate the importance of each attribute to them on a five-point scale, ranging from "not at all" to "essential" (a neutral rating is provided). Importantly, the numerical value associated with "not at all" or "essential" varies dependent upon the attribute described. Students are instructed to add up the total of the indicator choices. With a maximum (minimum) possible score of 70 (14), a higher total indicates a preference for the tax track.

In Part Two, students are asked to determine a similar rating, except that a four-point rating scale is used, in which each of the four points corresponds to a quadrant representing each of the four types of public accounting firms: Local (Quadrant I), Regional (Quadrant II), International/National (Quadrant III), and Big Four (Quadrant IV). Similarly to Part One, the quadrant associated with each importance indicator (e.g., not at all, somewhat, very, essential) will vary dependent upon the attribute described. Students are instructed to count the number of times each quadrant is picked; the quadrant with the highest count indicates the student's preference for that public accounting firm type.

The decision aid is constructed with the aim of being insightful, robust, yet not overwhelming to entry-level accounting students. While the primary purpose of the decision aid is to assist students in selecting an accounting career path, a few ancillary benefits derive from its usage. Firstly, use of the decision aid will move students towards a more active, as opposed to passive, learning environment. Secondly, while the initial usage of the decision aid is geared towards entry-level students, its usage at other points along the student's academic and professional career path may reveal interesting insights into changes in the students' preferences and possibly the factors that contributed to those changes – one notable factor might be the completion of an accounting internship. Finally, professionals in the field promote decision aid usage, as researchers contend that the completion of a decision aid to assist human resources in best aligning a CPA's personality traits with a job function may increase job satisfaction and reduce turnover (e.g., Bertolini et al., 2010).

As evidenced by past research, students find benefits in experiential or active learning. At a basic level, Wingfield and Black (2005) note that active learning insists on student participation and involvement during the learning process, whereas passive learning centers on the instructor simply imparting information to the students. The authors' research demonstrates that more active learning strategies (wherein student input is required), as opposed to more passive learning strategies (lecture), result in the students' perception that the learning was more meaningful.

In his study, Loeb (2015) discusses the advantages of active learning within the context of an ethics accounting course. One of the methods Loeb utilizes is a reflective learning strategy, in which the students self-reflect on their individual characteristics. Mapping this technique onto the subject matter of choosing an accounting career path, students are prompted to consider their agreement with or willingness to experience certain career path attributes. As opposed to simply listening to a lecture or reading about different career paths, this strategy may motivate students to take an active role in steering through the dimensions of personality traits, personal preferences, job environment traits, and preferred job tasks.

Using this decision aid within a longitudinal study design might provide the best indication of its predictive capability. After collecting responses from entry-level college students, the same students should repeat the decision aid at the end of their college career to determine if a shift in focus has occurred. As college students gain experience in their field of study, through an internship for instance, their perceptions change (e.g., Yu, Churyk, & Chang, 2013). If possible, the same students may be surveyed a year past graduation to examine changes in their original proclivities. For example, as time progresses, the decision aid may indicate that a particular individual's assessment of the importance of industry specialization may have changed, prompting a subsequent change in job placement.

The most experiential learning available to the accounting student is an internship with a professional firm. The internship experience can significantly affect intentions to consider public accounting as a long-term career goal. A study by Martin and Wilkerson (2006) finds that the internship experience enlightens students as to the demands of the profession, and this newfound revelation affects their willingness to engage in an accounting career – sometimes to the detriment of the accounting profession. Students in the study reported a heightened level of knowledge gained but not necessarily increased motivation to commit to accounting as a long-term career choice.

In her dissertation, Paine (2017) also finds that the difficulty of the work did not have a deleterious effect on the intern's opinion of the accounting firm, or the accounting profession. However, the importance of establishing congenial relations amongst the members of the accounting firm, and a significant connection between the student and a mentor cannot be overvalued. Additionally, if the intern has an already-established connection to a firm, such as an employed friend, or a family connection, the intern's perceptions of the firm are favorably biased. Devoid of these connections, interns were tempted to retreat from asking questions or actively engaging in the firm's culture.

According to Bullen and Capener (2015), the best internship experiences involve a coalescence of expectations derived from many sources, including the student, academic advisor, career services, and employers. These parties should be aware that students' timely perception of belonging to an organization directly influences their assessment of the internship experience. In light of these findings, educational institutions should emphasize maintaining ties with their accounting graduates in order to facilitate the fostering of beneficial working relationships with current students.

Lastly, regarding the influential nature of the internship experience, Hart, Kremin, and Pasewark (2017) offer several precautions, including the possibility of generational issues hindering the perceived favorability of the working environment. Surveyed audit interns in this study reported that an average of 47 hours a week seemed excessive in relation to commitment to a particular firm, whereas prior generations would view this workload as light. On a positive note, the interns did appreciate challenging work and meaningful interactions with peers and supervisors. Both of these factors seem to be driving forces in fostering a greater commitment to the profession.

SUMMARY

One possible approach for accounting instructors in disseminating this content is to first lead a broad discussion on the generalities of the profession, discuss some common misconceptions the students might have, and then ask them to complete the decision aid. Presenting the students with the specific characteristics of the audit and tax tracks, and the specific characteristics associated with each type of accounting firm, may contaminate the results of the decision aid. In other words, students are best served to judge each attribute without the precise knowledge of the track or type of public firm to which the attribute applies. Otherwise, a student may judge an attribute upon what preconceived outcome the student wants, as opposed to allowing the decision aid to function as intended. After the students complete the decision aid, the instructor can review the specific attributes and their relationship to the tracks and firm types.

Apart from the particular attributes presented in the decision aid, accounting instructors may want to emphasize a few key points. Creativity and excellent communications skills are highly valued within the profession. To excel in the auditing track, an individual should work towards the ability to generate original, and situationally specific, ideas as to how to retrieve and analyze pieces of evidence. In the tax track, an individual should strive to become an excellent researcher and to constrain client advocacy within the bounds of objectivity.

With respect to the choice of public accounting firm, students should honestly evaluate the amount of ambition, effort, and variety they are willing, or interested in, pursuing throughout their careers. Importantly, the firm culture, working environment, and perceived congeniality among coworkers plays a key role in determining an individual's satisfaction in the workplace. Therefore, instructors should strongly encourage students to utilize every opportunity to interact with as many employers as possible, so that the students are able to formulate at least a cursory opinion as to the workplace environment in which they may enter. Evaluations of these factors may change as the accountant gains life experiences. In conclusion, the instructor should emphasize that one of the multitude of options available in the accounting field will no doubt align itself with an accountant's circumstances.

Public Accounting Career Decision Aid for College Students

Part One: Tax or Audit?

Student Instructions: For each of the attributes below, indicate the degree to which you believe the attribute is important to you by circling one of the indicators on the scale. Note that the number associated with each indicator changes depending upon the attribute described. Afterwards, add up the numbers associated with each indicator you chose for the attributes.

1. Strong advocate for the client:

Not at all	Somewhat	Neutral	Very	Essential
1	2	3	4	5

2. Working mostly at different client sites (i.e., more opportunities for traveling):

Not at all	Somewhat	Neutral	Very	Essential
5	4	3	2	1

3. Predictability of daily routine:

Not at all	Somewhat	Neutral	Very	Essential
1	2	3	4	5

4. High level of ongoing research:

Not at all	Somewhat	Neutral	Very	Essential
1	2	3	4	5

5. Always working within a team on a client project:

Not at all	Somewhat	Neutral	Very	Essential
5	4	3	2	1

6. Comfortable with the possibility of many disagreements with a client:

Not at all	Somewhat	Neutral	Very	Essential
5	4	3	2	1

7. Detailed knowledge of a client's business processes:

Not at all	Somewhat	Neutral	Very	Essential
5	4	3	2	1

8. Learning and adapting to many different technologies:

Not at all	Somewhat	Neutral	Very	Essential
5	4	3	2	1

9. Regularity of working hours (although exceptions during busy season):

Not at all	Somewhat	Neutral	Very	Essential
1	2	3	4	5

10. More opportunity to work independently:

Not at all	Somewhat	Neutral	Very	Essential
1	2	3	4	5

11. Discussion and interaction with client representatives at all levels of the organization:

Not at all	Somewhat	Neutral	Very	Essential
5	4	3	2	1

12. Affinity for finding and interpreting legal cases laws and regulations.

Not at all	Somewhat	Neutral	Very	Essential
1	2	3	4	5

13. Greater opportunity to help clients make business decisions:

Not at all	Somewhat	Neutral	Very	Essential
5	4	3	2	1

14. Possibly easier, at some point in the future, to start your own practice:

Not at all	Somewhat	Neutral	Very	Essential
1	2	3	4	5

Note to Instructors: The highest score possible is 70, and the lowest score possible is 14, wherein a higher (lower) score indicates an affinity for the tax (audit) track. Students who score a 42 may be viewed as indifferent between the two tracks. This information is best conveyed after the students complete the questionnaire, since otherwise the students may be more tempted to bias their responses in a certain direction.

Part Two: Which Type of Public Accounting Firm?

Student Instructions: For each of the attributes below, indicate the degree to which you believe the attribute is important to you by circling one of the indicators on the scale. Each indicator is associated with a particular quadrant (I, II, III, or IV). Note that the quadrant associated with each indicator changes depending upon the attribute described. Follow the additional instructions after completing this task.

15. Larger salary projections over time:

Not at all	Somewhat	Very	Essential
I	II	III	IV

16. On the average, work less hours, especially during busy season:

Not at all	Somewhat	Very	Essential
IV	III	II	I

17. After having worked in either audit or tax for a few years, the ability to switch:

Not at all	Somewhat	Very	Essential
IV	III	II	I

18. Greater opportunity to travel to other areas of the country or abroad:

Not at all	Somewhat	Very	Essential
I	II	III	IV

19. Interaction with a highly diverse business community:

Not at all	Somewhat	Very	Essential
I	II	III	IV

20. Ability to work for a longer period of time without obtaining a CPA license:

Not at all	Somewhat	Very	Essential
IV	III	II	I

21. Exposure to most prestigious and/or highly complex client base:

Not at all	Somewhat	Very	Essential
I	II	III	IV

22. Exposure to a larger number of clients:

Not at all	Somewhat	Very	Essential
I	IV	II	III

23. More opportunities to leave public accounting for highly recognizable industry jobs:

Not at all	Somewhat	Very	Essential
I	II	III	IV

24. Greater opportunity to influence regulatory agencies and standard-setting bodies:

Not at all	Somewhat	Very	Essential
I	II	III	IV

25. Greater opportunity to use the most recent accounting-related technological innovations:

Not at all	Somewhat	Very	Essential
I	II	III	IV

26. Greater opportunity to examine a client issue in its entirety, as opposed to examining only a small facet of the issue, for the first few years of your career:

Not at all	Somewhat	Very	Essential
IV	III	II	I

27. Greater opportunity to interact with partners or owners:

Not at all	Somewhat	Very	Essential
IV	III	II	I

28. Ability to specialize within a certain industry, as opposed to needing general knowledge applicable to many industries:

Not at all	Somewhat	Very	Essential
I	II	III	IV

29. Having the opportunity, at the very beginning of your career, to try both audit and tax before subsequently determining in which to specialize.

Not at all	Somewhat	Very	Essential
IV	III	II	I

30. Greater opportunity to work with international clients or on international issues:

Not at all	Somewhat	Very	Essential
I	II	III	IV

31. Ability to take advantage of world-class entry-level training programs:

Not at all	Somewhat	Very	Essential
I	II	III	IV

32. Working in a higher-pressure environment to motivate optimal job performance:

Not at all	Somewhat	Very	Essential
I	II	III	IV

33. Obtaining a prestigious resume-builder:

Not at all	Somewhat	Very	Essential
I	II	III	IV

34. Ability to schedule a majority of the workload yourself:

Not at all	Somewhat	Very	Essential
IV	III	II	I

35. Working within large teams as opposed to with only a few individuals:

Not at all	Somewhat	Very	Essential
I	II	III	IV

36. Ambition, rather than availability of the position, is the barrier to promotion:

Not at all	Somewhat	Very	Essential
I	II	III	IV

Additional instructions: Use the quadrant grid below to serve as an indication of your preferred type of public accounting firm. Whichever quadrant has the highest count indicates preference.

Quadrant II **Regional Firm** Count the number of times you circled II:	Quadrant I **Local Firm** Count the number of times you circled I:
Quadrant III **International/National Firm** Count the number of times you circled III:	Quadrant IV **Big Four Firm** Count the number of times you circled IV:

REFERENCES

accounting.com. "Careers in Accounting." Available online at: www.accounting.com/careers/ (accessed 24 April 2019)

Abdolmohammadi, M. J. & Shanteau, J. (1992). Personal attributes of expert auditors. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 53: 158-172.

Abdolmohammadi, M. J., Searfoss, D. G., & Shanteau, J. (2004). An investigation of the attributes of top industry audit specialists. *Behavioral Research in Accounting*, 16: 1-17.

American Institute of Certified Public Accountants. "This Way to CPA: Plan Your Career Tool." Available online at: www.thiswaytocpa.com/work-experience/plan-career/ (accessed 24 April 2019)

Bagley, P. L., Dalton, D., & Ortegren, M. (2012). The factors that affect accountants' decisions to seek careers with big 4 versus non-big 4 accounting firms. *Accounting Horizons*, 26(2): 239-264.

Bertolini, M., Borgia, C., & Siegel, P. H. (2010). The social skill preferences of tax professionals in CPA firms: a FIRO-B analysis. *The Journal of Applied Business Research*, 26(2): 105-114.

Bobek, D. D., Hageman, A. M., & Hatfield, R. C. (2010). The role of client advocacy in the development of tax professionals' advice. *Journal of the American Taxation Association*, 32(1): 25-51.

Bobek, D. D., Dalton, D. W., Daugherty, B. E., Hageman, A. M., and Radtke, R. R. (2017). An investigation of ethical environments of CPAs: Public accounting versus industry. *Behavioral Research In Accounting*, 29(1): 43-56.

Bonner, S. E., Davis, J. S., & Jackson, B. R. (1992). Expertise in corporate tax planning: The issue identification stage. *Journal of Accounting Research*, 30: 1-28.

Buchheit, S., Dalton, D. W., Harp, N. L., & Hollingsworth, C. W. (2016). A contemporary analysis of accounting professionals' work-life balance. *Accounting Horizons*, 30(1): 41-62.

Bullen, M. L., Capener, E. D., and Kordecki, G. S. (2015). The accounting internship: Toward meaningful experiences for students, employers, and educational institutions. *Journal of Theoretical Accounting Research*, 11(1): 1-13.

Bryant, S. M., Stone, D., & Wier, B. (2011). An exploration of accountants, accounting work, and creativity. *Behavioral Research In Accounting*, 23(1): 45-64.

Dalton, D. W., Buchheit, S., & McMillan, J. J. (2014). Audit and tax career paths in public accounting: An analysis of student and professional perceptions. *Accounting Horizons*, 28(2): 213-231.

Drew, J. (2018). Merging accounting with 'big data' science. *Journal of Accountancy*, 226(1): 47-52.

Durocher, S., Bujaki, M., & Brouard, F. (2016). Attracting Millennials: Legitimacy management and bottom-up socialization processes within accounting firms. *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, 39: 1-24.

Hart, M., Kremin, J., & Pasewark, W. R. (2017). Growing up: How audit internships affect students' commitment and long-term intentions to work in public accounting. *Issues in Accounting Education*, 32(2): 47-63.

Hood, J. & Koberg, C. (1991). Accounting firm cultures and creativity among accountants. *Accounting Horizons*, 5(3): 12-19.

Loeb, S. E. (2015). Active Learning: An advantageous yet challenging approach to accounting ethics instruction. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 127: 221-230.

Martin, D. R. & Wilkerson, J. E. (2006). An examination of the impact of accounting internships on student attitudes and perceptions. *The Accounting Educators' Journal*, 16: 129-138.

McGuire, S. T., Omer, T. C., & Wang, D. (2012). Tax avoidance: Does tax-specific industry expertise make a difference? *The Accounting Review*, 87(3), 975-1003.

McKnight, C. A. & Wright, W. F. (2011). Characteristics of relatively high-performance auditors. *Auditing: A Journal of Practice & Theory*, 30(1): 191-206.

Michaelsen, R. H. & Nichols, N. B. (1999). An examination of the psychological traits that affect the ability of tax experts to communicate their expertise. *International Journal of Intelligent Systems in Accounting, Finance & Management*, 8: 145-158.

Myler, T. (2015). 10 traits every great accountant has. Available online at: www.accountingweb.com/community-voice/blogs/torri-myler/10-traits-every-great-accountant-has (accessed 16 March 2019)

Paine, B. E. (2017). Student perceptions of public accounting internships: A case study. Doctoral Dissertation. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. No. 10258257.

Robert Half. The Robert Half Blog. (2017). "Public Accounting or Private Accounting: What's Right for You? Available online at: www.roberthalf.com/blog/salaries-and-skills/public-accounting-or-private-accounting-whats-right-for-you (accessed 20 March 2019)

Robert Half. The Robert Half Blog. (2018). "Private vs. Public: Choose Your Accounting Career Path." Available online at: www.roberthalf.com/blog/job-market/private-vs-public-choose-your-accounting-career-path (accessed 20 March 2019)

Roberts, M. L. (1998). Tax accountants' judgment/decision-making research: a review and synthesis. *Journal of the American Taxation Association*, 20(1): 78-121.

Wingfield, S. S., & Black, G. S. (2005). Active versus passive course designs: The impact on student outcomes. *Journal of Education for Business*, 81(2): 119-123.

Yu, S., Churyk, N. T., & Chang, A. (2013). Are students ready for their future accounting careers? Insights from observed perception gaps among employers, interns, and alumni. *Global Perspectives on Accounting Education*, 10: 1-15.