



Upping the Count in Accounting

The tempest of controversy surrounding Enron's collapse has had at least one positive outcome: It's put the spotlight on accounting, a profession students often overlook in favor of other careers. Now that accounting has caught the public interest, the AICPA believes it's the perfect time to show everyone just what the field has to offer.

by Tricia Bisoux

illustration by Lou Beach

No one denies that the debacle that brought down Enron may have cast a negative light on the accounting profession. Don't be surprised, however, if you don't hear too many business school accounting administrators complaining.

"It's negative, but it's attention," says Dan Deines, a professor of accounting at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas. "The public has watched as a huge company has gone under and individuals have lost millions of dollars. Now, people are realizing the importance of a high-quality audit. They're realizing that audits, when they're done right, can make a difference in people's lives. Enron has added a stigma to accounting, but it has forced us out into the light."

Now that the public is asking questions, many stakeholders in accounting education believe that this may be the best time to take advantage of students' newfound interest in the field. "One challenge we have been trying to overcome is that students simply don't appreciate the broadness of the profession and the impact a career in accounting can have," states Beatrice Sanders, director of academic and career development for the American Institute for Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) in New York City. "Enron has raised awareness of the whole profession, among the public as well as young people. It's raised awareness of the importance of CPAs to the economy and the whole capital market system."

As two of the most outspoken advocates for proactive promotion of the accounting profession, Sanders and Deines are optimistic that interest in accounting will continue to build. By taking this opportunity to educate the public, business school accounting programs will not only attract more students to accounting programs, but also promote a more positive image for the profession as a whole.

Reversing the Trend

In the 1990s, even as demand for qualified accountants increased, student interest in the profession plummeted. From 1998 to 1999, the number of graduates in accounting decreased 20 percent in the United States, according to *"The Supply of Accounting Graduates and the Demand for Public Accounting Recruits—2001,"* compiled and published by the AICPA. From 1999 to 2000, the number dropped six percent more. And although there was a 19 percent

Adding in the Value of Career Planning

As accounting educators, we often find that the classroom alone provides students only a narrow picture of accounting as it functions in the real world of business. To broaden that picture for students at King's College William G. McGowan School of Business in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, we have expanded our accounting curricula to include comprehensive and ongoing career planning at all points of a student's development.

The accounting department cooperates heavily with the director of the Office of Career Planning and Placement in our "Career Development Across the Curriculum Project." We foster a partnership between faculty and career services staff in a year-by-year approach to learning that integrates hands-on coursework with self-assessment, career exploration and planning, skill building, and ultimately, job placement.

Year-by-Year Involvement

The department's retention efforts begin long before students declare a major with quarterly open house presentations to prospective students. At these events, members of the accounting department speak to students about the "core competencies" that an accounting education will develop: oral communication, critical thinking, effective writing, quantitative analysis, technology, library and information literacy, and moral reasoning.

These presentations are only a starting point. During each year of undergraduate study, we follow a carefully structured process of encouragement and career planning designed to show students what the accounting profession has to offer and prepare them for their post-graduation careers.

The Freshman Year—In the fall semester of their first year, all business majors who enroll in the introductory accounting course are encouraged to meet with a career counselor and enroll in CARP 211, a course taught by career planning professionals to help students learn about the profession, gain self-understanding, and facilitate the decision-making process. In the spring, students are encouraged to attend a presentation co-sponsored by the accounting department and the career planning office. There, recent accounting graduates relate their early career experiences, and director of the career office provides job market projections for accountants to give students a picture of what they face after graduation.

The Sophomore Year—In the fall, students are encouraged to enroll in CARP 211; in the spring, the career office presents a program on resume writing in the intermediate accounting course. Students then work with a career planning professional to develop an effective resume. At this stage, if we've been effective in communicating to students the rewards and challenges of accounting, more students who were undeclared will choose an accounting major over another discipline.

The Junior Year—In the summer before their junior year, accounting majors pursue work experiences to expand their

increase in master's degrees awarded from 1999 to 2000, there was a 10 percent decrease in bachelor's degrees and a 9 percent decrease in candidates taking the certified public accountant exam. Only 115,493 candidates sat for the exam in 2000, the lowest number since 1979.

The U.S. is not alone. In the last five years, countries such as Australia, China, and South Africa also have experienced a shortage of accountants, often caused not only by declining enrollments, but also by a lack of interest in the auditing process. Many students who earn accounting degrees do not become auditors, but instead pursue more glamorous careers as consultants or brokers.

In response, many accounting programs have begun to ramp up their efforts to reinforce the importance of an auditing career in today's business environments. To underscore these efforts, the AICPA has committed five years and \$5 million to a comprehensive direct marketing campaign to spark interest in accounting careers. The campaign, launched last fall, includes print ads and a student-run Web site (www.StartHereGoPlaces.com) that target high school students and young adults. One ad highlights the importance of accounting skills to running a movie studio. The ad stresses the job's flexibility, letting students know that if they "know business and accounting skills, they can go anywhere."

It's All About Image

At the heart of the accountant shortage is the fact that accounting simply has the hard-to-shake reputation of "being boring," says Deines. In his research of student enrollment and retention in U.S. accounting programs, he has found that neither high school students nor their teachers hold accounting in particularly high esteem.

In the late '80s, for example, Deines surveyed college-bound high school students in the Kansas City area, asking them to rank ten occupations, including attorneys, police officers, teachers, social workers, journalists, and accountants, in ten categories of career satisfaction. Accounting enjoyed its highest ranking under "salary," where students ranked it seventh. In seven of the ten categories, however, accounting came in dead last.

"I found that there still is a perception of accounting as boring, lacking personal satisfaction and challenge, among both students and teachers," says Deines. Furthermore, business classes offered in high school, such as bookkeeping, were also viewed negatively—even socially unacceptable—by students. "I found that to be disturbing. I look at the bright, articulate, caring students who have been in my classroom and who have gone on to rewarding careers," asserts Deines.



by Barry Williams

understanding of the field and build their resumes. When they return to school in the fall, students are encouraged to enroll in CARP 412, which provides a step-by-step approach to career assessment, occupational information, and effective job searches. Videotaped mock interviews with career planning staff are also recommended.

In the spring, juniors are encouraged to participate in the on-campus recruiting program for summer placements. The 412 course also prepares juniors for the on-campus recruiting program which occurs in the fall of their senior year. Representatives from high-powered companies such as PricewaterhouseCoopers, Ernst & Young, and IBM, as well as local accounting firms, private industry firms, and governmental agencies attend the event.

The Senior Year—When students return to campus, they register with the career planning office. They work with that office throughout their senior year, participating in the on-campus recruiting program and establishing placement files. Students who take cost accounting and auditing courses are required to attend professional meetings of the Institute of Internal Auditors and/or the Institute of Management Accountants, which provides valuable networking opportunities. Students considering graduate school are encouraged to discuss the possibilities with career planning staff. Our goal is to ensure that they are well-prepared for work or further study and satisfied with the career path they have chosen.

The New Accounting Profession

Although career planning is a part of most graduate business programs, it perhaps plays an even larger role in accounting, where student retention is so important. Integrating career planning into classroom activities gives students a greater stake in the accounting profession early on. They are better able to recognize from the onset that their education will meet the needs of the “new” profession. They also understand the variety of opportunities available, as business advisors, litigation support specialists, technology consultants, and financial and estate planners, as well as the traditional roles in attestation and compliance.

Although our program has been in place only two years, we have seen student interest increase significantly. Through a well-designed career planning program, accounting departments can win over the most elusive members of a business school body: the “undeclared.” We must show these students that they can look forward to a broad education in strategy, organizational structures and operations, and content-based accounting skills that will lead them to a successful and rewarding career.

Barry Williams is the chair of the Department of Accounting at King’s College, William G. McGowan School of Business, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

“How can we still have this incredibly bad stereotype when our profession has so much flexibility and opportunity?”

Campaigns aimed at dispelling the prevailing stereotype are an important first step, he believes. Even more important is to make sure that educational materials about accounting get into the hands of prospective students—and teachers—as students begin to make decisions about their future careers.

“In the past, many programs have made up brochures, but nobody sent them out. That was fine in the early 1980s when numbers were still going up,” Deines says. But in 1989, the numbers started going down; even worse, he says, the perception of accounting didn’t change, and has not changed in the last 15 years. “We have not done anything to change it. The academics traditionally just washed their hands of it and said, ‘It’s not our problem.’ But it *is* our problem, and we have a responsibility to solve it,” he emphasizes.

In 1989, KSU and 12 other schools each received a \$250,000 grant to do just that. With the help of the grant, KSU threw out its old, test-oriented accounting curriculum and transformed it into a hands-on, project-based curriculum that emphasized problem solving and teamwork. Next, the school began sponsoring community outreach programs to speak with students and teachers about accounting, which has had a tremendous effect, says Deines. KSU’s accounting department has seen its enrollment increase from 188 in 1989 to 325 in 1995, before it had to raise GPA requirements to control the number of majors at around 250.

An especially effective program is a one-day session at the school in which the college invites teams of teachers to learn more about accounting as a career. The school gives them an AICPA information package that includes a recruiting video, a poster, and lesson plans related to accounting that teachers can incorporate into the curriculum. At the session, accounting professionals and educators talk to them about the profession and what it has to offer.

“The teachers start to see accountants not as nerds, but as bright, talented people. Our ideal is that if we can bring these teachers in and change their minds, they’ll go back to the school and we’ll have long-term advocates for our profession. Every year, they’ll tell our story,” Deines says.

“Accountants have an image as boring geeks in green eye shades,” he adds. “We need to tell a better story.” In other words, it’s time to show the public that there’s much more to auditors than Enron. **Z**

For more information about the AICPA’s marketing campaign or to obtain promotional materials, contact Beatrice Sanders by phone at 212-596-6218 or by e-mail at bsanders@aicpa.org.