

Reducing the observed curriculum perception gaps between stakeholders

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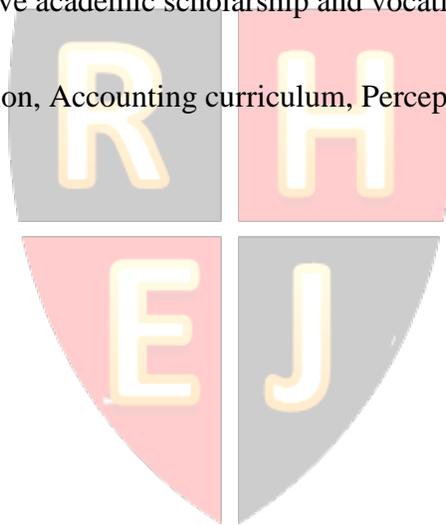
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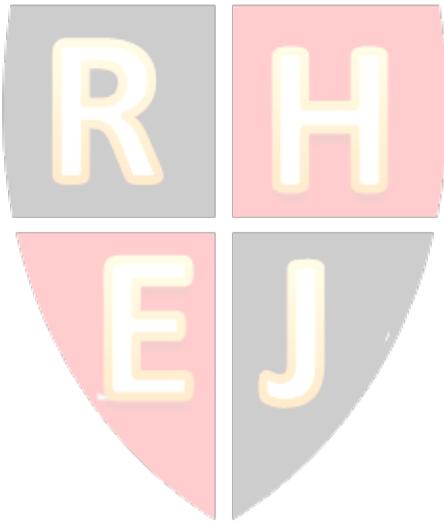
ABSTRACT

Developing a vibrant and relevant accounting curriculum requires involvement of many stakeholders such as interns, alumni, and firms. Each has a distinct perspective regarding the strengths and weaknesses of accounting education. Discussion of perception gaps between the three groups and the importance of aligning these perceptions are presented. This paper provides several attainable and practical approaches for educational institutions to consider incorporating into their curriculums to improve academic scholarship and vocational prospects, expanding upon Yu et al. (2013).

Keywords: Accounting education, Accounting curriculum, Perception gaps



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INTRODUCTION

In 2000, Albrecht and Sack concluded that practicing accountants regard current accounting education as obsolete. This finding is quite disappointing for accounting educators since they continually update the curriculum to properly equip accounting students for the profession. To address the discrepancy, this paper focuses on two issues: (1) a summary of the perceptions of an accounting curriculum by major stakeholders: intern students, new alumni (recently hired employees with one year of work experience), and firms, and (2) insights towards closing the perception gaps.

Yu et al (2013) examined perception gaps among employers, interns, and alumni through surveys of the three groups over a period of nine years. Findings indicate there are perception gaps between the three stakeholders. Major differences exist in the following areas: professional orientation and conduct, technology use, oral and written communication, and capability of solving structured and unstructured problems. All three stakeholders, on average, are satisfied with the curriculum. However, the degree of satisfaction varies. Interns are the most satisfied with their skills at the intern stage. New alumni are slightly less satisfied with their skills at that stage compared to their perspective as interns. Lastly, employers are the least satisfied with the skills demonstrated by interns. We create a visual presentation of the major differences found in the Yu et al. (2013) paper and discuss how to reduce the obvious perception gaps.

VISUAL PRESENTATION

Employers expect new accounting graduates to possess a diverse range of skills. They search for the perfect mix of technical and soft skills from employees to confront the many challenges in business. Technical skills usually refer to subject-specific knowledge, such as competence in financial accounting and database use. Soft skills usually help people to function in their daily work life, e.g., the ability to communicate and work in teams. Educators directly teach technical skills through lecture and hands-on application of subject matter. On the other hand, while soft skills may not be specifically addressed in the curriculum, educators can encourage students to develop these skills by requiring activities such as group projects and presentations.

In the Yu et al. (2013) questionnaire, interns, new alumni and firms were asked to rank their satisfaction with the curriculum and how well the course design developed needed skills. A uniform five-point rating scale¹ (1-5) was used as follows: 1 representing poor preparedness/satisfaction, 2 representing fair preparedness/satisfaction, 3 representing good preparedness/satisfaction, 4 representing very good preparedness/satisfaction, and 5 representing excellent preparedness/satisfaction.

Exhibits 1 and 2 provide a visual display of the survey results regarding technical and soft skills in Yu et al (2013). On average, interns, new alumni and firms rate the curriculum 4.28, 4.20, and 3.40, respectively. All rate the curriculum above average (the average value is 3) for many skills. Specifically, firms' satisfaction of interns' performance, on average, is above 3 out of 5 in all aspects, except for oral communication and spreadsheet usage. Interns rate their abilities at the intern stage with respect to technical and soft skills higher than firms. Intern students are always highly satisfied with their technical and soft skills, implying that interns believe the curriculum prepares them well for entering the workforce. However, it also may highlight the lack of insight that many young individuals have with respect to their limitations. Interns also have a higher satisfaction with skills learned in the curriculum relative to firm satisfaction before graduation (average of 4.28 vs. 3.40). With improvements in their skill sets after additional experience and time, the new alumni are expected to have more confidence in their skills relative to interns. In contrast, alumni rate their technical and soft skills lower than they had when they were interns. Such results indicate that to some extent, the alumni

¹ The results of the mean and median tests mentioned in this article are significant at the 0.05 level or above as documented in Yu et al. (2013).

perceptions of the curriculum become more aligned with firms as time passes. Alumni have less satisfaction with skills relative to interns, because they have successfully completed the curriculum with extra exposure to the upper level courses. This enables them to assess the entire curriculum. Additionally, they have more work and life experience to help adjust their perceptions.

There are several reasons why interns would rate the curriculum higher than firms. Interns are usually assigned easier tasks and fewer responsibilities due to the limitations in their understanding of the overall subject matter since they are still in the midst of their schoolwork. Consequently, interns may mistake their successful performance in the internship for job readiness. Accordingly, interns may be relatively naïve to the expectations of the business world. Thus, firms and interns probably use different criteria to assess the accounting curriculum. Another consideration is simply age and maturity. Interns may have too limited of a perspective to reliably assess their skills in the business field. Firm members have spent significantly more years in the workforce, and they are the most aware of current business needs and application. Their perspective would focus on the variance between skills learned in the classroom setting and ‘real world’ applications. Lastly, bias can cause the stakeholders to generate different conclusions about the successfulness of the accounting curriculum. There may be bias due to different expectations of working requirements in public firms versus industry. Also, individual biases can be present among the three groups. For example, firms may be more selective because they want to identify the best future employees. Interns may be more satisfied about the curriculum because they are proud members of the university.

REDUCE PERCEPTION GAPS

An analogy may be useful to illustrate the importance of aligning and improving the perceptions regarding accounting curriculum among interns, new alumni, and firms. As illustrated in Figure 1, the interns are the new products introduced into the market, and the firms are the potential consumers. Academia is the manufacturer that develops and designs the new product to meet the market need. Alignment between the new products and the customer expectations should lead to a positive sales outcome and a productive experience for everyone involved.

To ensure the quality of education in preparing students to enter the workforce and meet the expectations of potential employers, it is crucial to improve the skills that show the largest perception gaps among the stakeholders. Several approaches are recommended for educational institutions to consider incorporating into their curriculums.

Active Advisory Board

The advisory board, comprised of employers, is a critical communication avenue to be maintained and developed. It is crucial to have an effective advisory board that regularly meets to review curriculum concerns and successes. The vision and experience of each advisory board member is important to the university to understand the appropriate blend of technical and soft skills. Employers are in the best position to provide expert insight about their needs and the current changes in the profession.

Cultivating Business Relationships

Maintaining multiple connections with various industries and firms are important since some businesses may require specialized skill sets. For example, based on the assessment of local major employers, curriculums may want to consider adding modules related to specific industries (e.g., healthcare and nonprofit accounting). Students must have a strong overall background with good applicable skills to enhance the flexibility needed for successful employment facing a variety of potential challenges.

Engagement Activities

In addition to serving on advisory boards, employers should continue offering various engagement activities, such as internships and firm visits at an earlier stage of student study. These interactions will implant the anticipated future skill expectations for the students and universities. Future employers can also consider the following: (1) providing classroom instruction as guest speakers; (2) developing workshops to introduce the required technical or soft skills (the initial intern orientation can be used to ensure interns understand initial expectations and future challenges); and (3) offering early opportunities to students for interaction with employers to allow for closer alignment of expectations. All of these activities can help students understand the work place challenges they will face in their career.

Active Alumni Connection

Alumni are an incredible resource for the university. They have an emotional tie with the university and an interest in the positive reputation of their alma mater. Their recent experience as a new hire helps them understand appropriate expectations of the workforce. They can relay that information to current students. Formal alumni feedback may be constructive given their unique vantage point. They have a better understanding of employers' expectations, and they understand the strengths and weaknesses in their academic program. Also, they have an awareness of the variety of the positions that are currently available. To strengthen their involvement, universities can organize alumni events. One such event could involve the alumni and current students meeting at the alumni's place of employment. Alternatively, universities or student organizations could invite alumni back to the university and/or arrange for alumni to mentor current students.

Hands-on Faculty Members

Faculty members are crucial in aligning the perception gaps, because they are liaisons between employers and interns. Faculty members are in a good position to initiate the early dissemination of knowledge and skill expectations for successful employment; some new developments may occur prior to official curriculum changes. Furthermore, faculty should make efforts to ensure the accounting curriculum is designed to reflect current practices, which should help converge the different perceptions. In the classroom, professors can also expose students to the value of student organizations and internship opportunities. In summary, the university community should provide students with the opportunity to learn the essential knowledge and offer avenues to develop the needed skills.

Proactive Students

Successful careers require initiative and effort. Schools can improve the effectiveness of programs, but students need to accept the responsibility for their actions and preparation. Faculty support roadmaps for successful careers, but students must strive to reach their potential and destination. Many student organizations could design social events, such as inviting prior presidents or officers back to campus to discuss their career path. These stories motivate students to work and polish themselves in all aspects.

Effective Online Tools

Online tools have become increasingly popular and applicable in business settings. All stakeholders including interns, new alumni and firms should implement effective online tools to enhance active and effective communications. For example, some employers check LinkedIn regarding the job applicants as an earlier screening process. Students can follow the company on

Facebook and Twitter. These easily accessed online tools help to save time and to promote timely communication.

SUMMARY

Aligning stakeholder perceptions for accounting curriculums is critical to the validation of programs. To successfully position students in the job market, it is important to understand the demands and needs of the employers while developing and designing the product. Bridging the vantage points from the three groups will improve the practicability and success in accounting curriculums. Accounting curriculums that successfully prepare students for future employment enhance universities' reputations, student recruitment and retention. Overall, faculty may be in the best position to train students, but interns, new alumni, and firms are in the best position to craft and hone valued skill sets.

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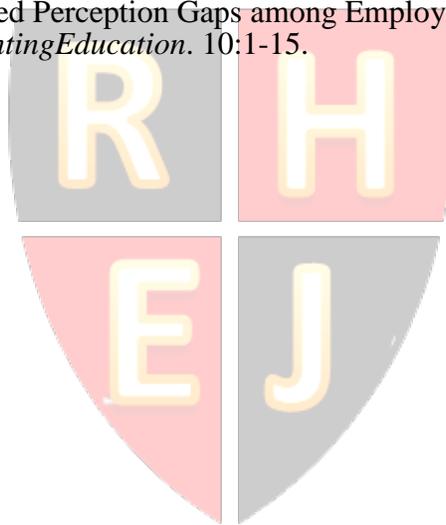
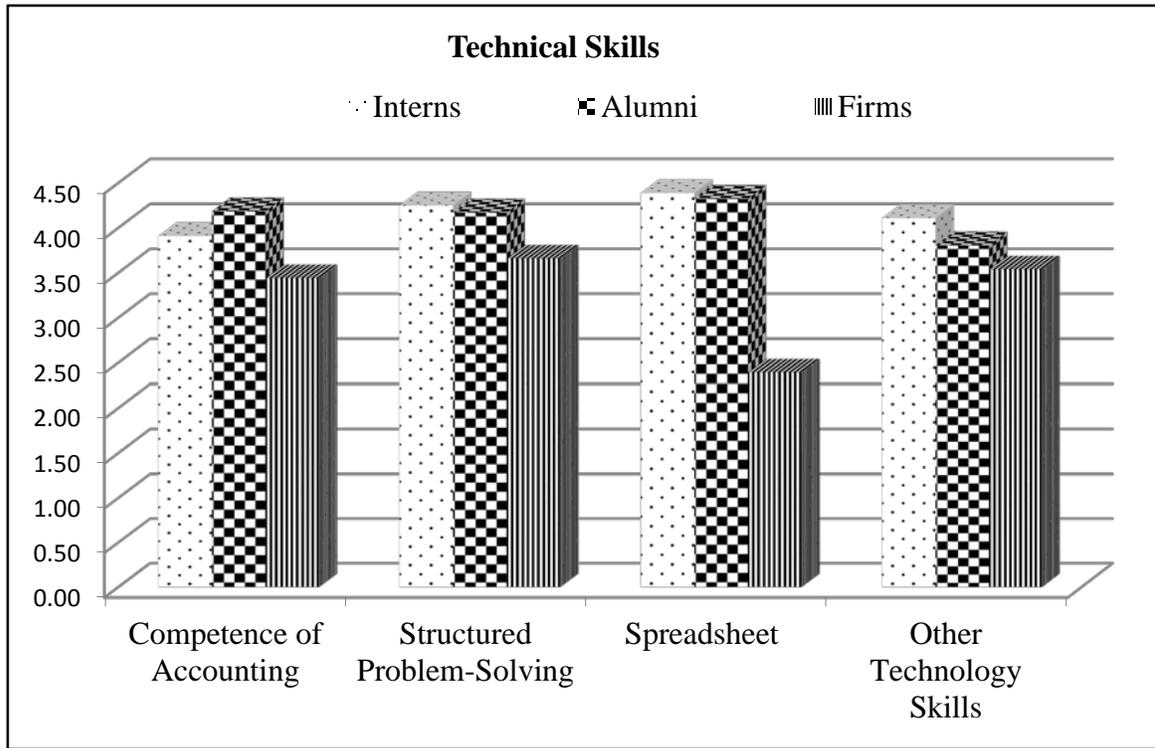


EXHIBIT 1*



- This exhibit is based upon data from Yu et al. (2013)

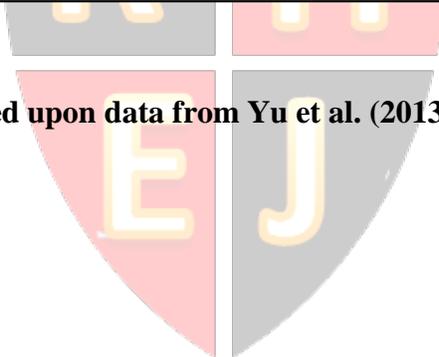
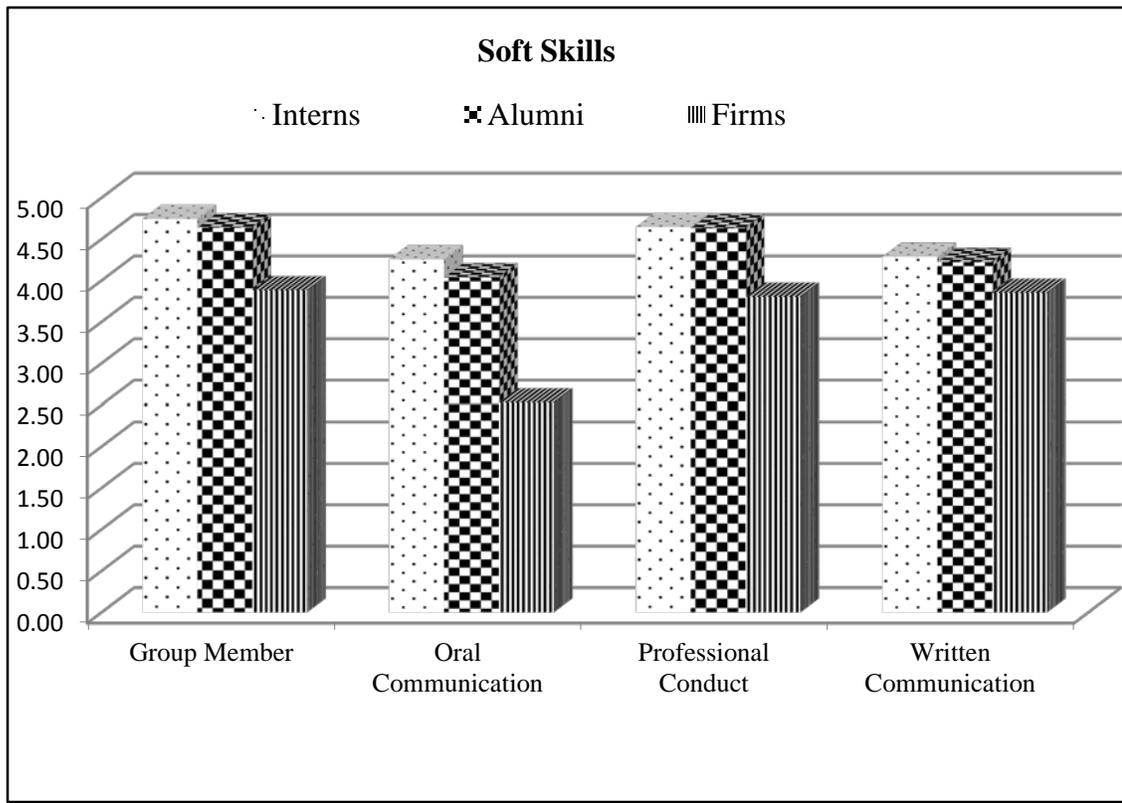


EXHIBIT 2*



- The exhibit is based upon data from Yu et al. (2013)

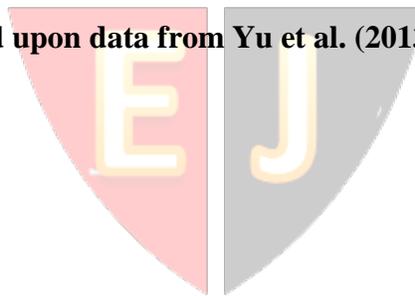


Figure 1 - The importance of aligning perception gaps

