

## **Student engagement activities to enhance professional advancement in accounting and business careers**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Strada-Gallup Survey of College Students (2017, p. 6) reveals “. . .only about a third of current college students express confidence that they will graduate with the skills and knowledge they need to be successful in the job market (34%) and in the workplace (36%).” This paper suggests how faculty of accounting and other business disciplines can enhance teaching and better prepare students for their professional business careers by encouraging students to become involved in co-curricular activities. Participation and leadership in business clubs related to their intended profession, including attendance at club, school and/or professional organization workshops, provides useful career and job search information. In addition, there are opportunities for networking with diverse groups of professionals and peers likely to be future colleagues. Faculty can contribute to student involvement by inviting practitioners to speak to classes and providing opportunities for relevant research related to the academic and practice needs of the profession. Encouraging and rewarding students for participating in practitioner-oriented activities helps expose students to practitioners who can shed light on the realities of their future careers. This has the added benefit of allowing firms to recruit and support students, while students learn about individual firms and their cultures. Networking is extremely helpful to students in securing internships and full-time jobs. This paper describes specific ways to develop these synergies, and offers suggestions on how educators can encourage involvement for their students’ long run success in the job market and their careers.

Keywords: accounting, business education; engagement, career readiness

## INTRODUCTION

Although this paper has a focus on accounting students, the spirit of the ideas and recommendations contained herein are applicable to other business majors. Career readiness and professional advancement are either stated or implied goals at many business school programs. Achieving these goals requires focus on both the supply (teacher side) as well as the demand (student side). Graduate quality often pertains to outcomes which may be meaningful employment for business students. It is often taken for granted that such things as curriculum strength and grade performance will help produce superior results, but “engagement contributions” are the value-added inputs, and the thrust of the current paper.

College faculty and staff who mentor and encourage student involvement in clubs and professional activities can make a meaningful difference in the quality of the graduates. Faculty complement teaching when providing a more nurturing learning environment, and keep students motivated by encouraging their own personal involvement. Accounting students can do their part by taking advantage of a wide range of activities that enhance their long-run learning. The proactive student engages in accounting clubs, attends school-sponsored and professional organization events, and participates in group case competitions.

## AUTHORS’ EXPERIENCES

Since the authors of this paper have had successful experiences with student activities outside the classroom enhancing students’ professional development, this paper seeks to explore these types of successes and how related benefits might be tracked relative to overall educational and professional outcomes. Individual faculty can usually incorporate suggestions into syllabi, and activities might be best implemented at the discipline or micro level. “Clubs” generally pertain to “on-campus” groups, and typically at the departmental level. Clubs may be part of a national or local organization, or a solo group created by students. The “school level” might be viewed as the broader type of organization that attempts to pull in students from across the entire college or university. The “professional organizations” are direct from the work force, the downstream constituency where the ultimate “outcomes” are realized, and strong relationships can be built. As an incentive or motivator, students may see these outlets as contributing to personal growth and the prospect for career employment.

In addition to practicing networking skills, which can be used throughout one’s career by making long-term professional contacts, student engagement activities both in and outside the classroom provide opportunities for friendship and social networking. Student grades may also improve attributable to increased enthusiasm to learn thoroughly the material in preparation for one’s career, and perhaps from some extra credit points designed to help motivate the student to try some of these activities.

Students, faculty, and practitioners benefit from participating in co-curricular activities. Students benefit as they supplement learning from formal class activities, as well as improve students’ success in their job searches and decisions about future career paths. Developing skill sets at a level beyond that addressed in the typical classroom provides the potential for value-added experiences. Encouraging and rewarding students for participation in outside activities helps expose students to practitioners who may shed light on the realities of accounting practice. This has the added benefit of allowing firms to recruit and support students who are a good “fit,” while students learn about individual firms and their cultures. Networking is extremely helpful to students in securing internships and eventually full-time jobs, and helps

draw a diverse population of students into the profession. It is likewise beneficial for faculty to attend these events to find practitioners to speak to classes and learn about challenges in the practice of accounting that might be resolved by research. Finally, some students enjoy seeing their professors outside the classroom.

## **DEVELOPMENTS IN ACCOUNTING EDUCATION**

### **Some Prior Studies**

According to Flewellen (1959) and other accounting pundits of the 1950s, accounting education constructs bridges to practice through providing technical background in the major, a strong general business background, and broad cultural training. This approach has continued into the 2010s, and is consistent with accrediting body mandates. In a survey of U.S. business schools, Schlee (2000) found that mentoring programs by business executives and alumni mentors were heavily involved in engagement activities involving advice, shadowing, work interviews, lunch or dinner, networking, and field trips. Infusion into the work environment can have positive effects. Kordecki, Haberland, and Hallock (2002) argue for full, comprehensive student service engagement with direct student mentoring in the educational process. Accordingly, consideration of additional activities such as resume assistance, mock interviews, professional conferences, training programs, and internships drive toward enhanced teaching and learning.

Campbell (2000) finds that “flexible learning,” ranging from continuing professional education to informal course audits, can be a way that differs from traditional course classroom credit, and even altering course content context, assessment, and advancing technology for communication over the entire class and capturing both full-time and part-time students. West (2002) illustrates how peer learning can occur outside of the classroom through the use of student ambassadors. Funded by the Ohio Society of CPAs, non-accounting majors received a taste of professionalism through a year-long program of peer-to-peer networking and counseling by accounting majors and practitioners. When faculty members are active, Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) find students experiencing higher engagement levels, including collaborative learning, student interaction, and overall value enriched educational experiences.

Following studies conducted in Turkey about external auditors’ perceptions of the quality of accounting graduates, Uyar and Gungormus (2011) had several relevant findings. First, they found that practitioners think it is the students’ responsibility to prepare themselves for gainful employment. Second, students must not marginalize their curriculum, but rather choose substantial, broadening elective courses, including technology. Third, students should engage in extra-curricular activities that develop personal and professional soft skills such as those involving team work, and time and stress management. Finally, students should select courses and activities that improve communication abilities, such as computer, oral, and written skills. New Zealand authors, Low, Samkin and Liu (2013) demonstrated the importance of soft skills, but those mostly obtained from formal course work in the first three years of a four-year

program. In a subsequent research effort, Low, Botes, Rue and Allen (2016) concluded that practical case studies where students group together outside of class, as well as internships, help ready accounting graduates for their careers in the work force.

Schoffstall (2013) found that students working 21 hours or more per week in their hospitality management major made significant gains over those students who were not working, Wessels and Sumner (2014) illustrate how an educational institution can provide a career tool kit to guide students through career development program elements within required courses over the students' majors to ensure that all students participate in supplementing the standard curriculum. While questions involving amount of compensation have risen by some, Ogden and Kordecki (2013) point out that both paid and unpaid internships can provide educational benefits to students. Bullen, Capener, and Kordecki (2015) report that long-run meaningful relationships may emerge between employers and educational institutions with properly programmed internships, service learning courses, and other student engagement activities.

### **Involvement by the Profession**

The 2012 Pathways Commission on Accounting Higher Education study was sponsored by the two major accounting organizations; the American Accounting Association (AAA) with an academic focus, and the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) with a practitioner focus. The Commission's purpose was to "study the future structure of higher education for the accounting profession and develop recommendations for educational pathways to engage and retain the strongest possible community of students, academics, practitioners, and other knowledgeable leaders in the practice and study of accounting" (Behn, Ezzell, Murphy, Rayburn, Stith, & Strawser, 2012, p. 595). Participants included leaders from both accounting practice and accounting education with the Commission seeking input from multiple stakeholders over eighteen months to determine which factors enhance the opportunities and relevance of the accounting educational experience. The final report, *The Pathways Commission on Accounting Higher Education: Charting a National Strategy for the Next Generation of Accountants*, contained seven recommendations, all with strong implications for student learning and long-run success. The number one recommendation was "Build a learned profession for the future by purposeful integration of accounting research, education, and practice for students, accounting practitioners, and educators" (Behn, et al., p. 597).

The commissioners comment that accounting classes generally present course material to students that greatly understates the complex, real-life settings students will face. Involving students in research can bring useful insights to practice. They note that accounting practitioners are not heavy users of academic accounting research—and that the lack of collaboration between practitioners and researchers is not typical of other professions such as medicine, engineering or law where more research is clinical and directed toward problems of practicing professionals. Behn, et al. recommend the following actions to better address the gap in linkages between research and practice, practice and education, and education and research:

“Objective 1.1: Integrate professionally oriented faculty more fully into significant aspects of accounting education, programs, and research.

Objective 1.2: Focus more academic research on relevant practice issues.

Objective 1.3: Enhance the value of practitioner-educator exchanges.

Objective 1.4: Integrate accounting research into accounting courses and programs.”  
(Behn, et al., p. 597).

The authors of the current paper agree with the spirit and recommendations of the Pathways Commission, and particularly recommend activities which enhance practitioner-educator exchanges. Other authors have expressed similar sentiments. Bloom (2013) agrees with Pathways stating that business students advance when engaged in outside activities that complement the classroom, and where data analytics and written and oral communications are utilized. KPMG, the international accounting firm, is providing specific learning initiatives that it desires as a firm in new hires and works closely with business schools in skills related to auditing and data analytics (Daylor & Saint Amant, 2017).

Students may benefit from practitioners teaching a full-scale course. Hinson (2017) emphasizes the benefits students can acquire from this type of teacher are numerous, including when practitioners. . .

- Speak to classes or student clubs,
- Serve as judges for class projects,
- Offer career fair and skills workshop involvement, and
- Serve as executives-in-residence.

Wright (2018) points to the benefits that accrue to students when they hear directly from practitioners about both their individual cases of success and failure in their practice. Learning from mistakes can generate a critical impression and long-run positive outcomes.

## **BEST PRACTICES**

Efforts are underway in Ph.D. programs to improve the quality of teaching accounting by the “soon-to-be-minted” doctorate holders (Holder-Webb & Trompeter, 2016; Smith & Emerson, 2017). In addition, professionally oriented faculty can contribute to students’ career learning (Daylor & Saint Amant, 2017; Hinson, 2017; Wright, 2018). Curriculum supplements, such as practitioner involvements are important in the development of skills including communication, networking and leadership. These are the “soft skills” needed in addition to core traditional technical and scientific aspects. They are the involvements which bridge the gap between academia and practice, and prepare students for both their job searches and professional advancement after starting their professional careers.

Professors of all backgrounds help students by making opportunities available for practitioner/student interaction to learn about the profession in the classroom setting—and by encouraging opportunities for this interaction and learning outside the classroom. The track to full-time jobs can become a process of two-way vetting. Professor involvements become an enhancement for the faculty as well, as they should welcome learning experiences in their service portfolios. These activities are consistent with the Pathways Commission recommendations.

Specifically, mentoring and research are examples of the unique contributions practitioner faculty bring to the institution of higher learning. Wright (2018) finds several valuable outcomes from practitioner mentoring, giving students and important perspective of the business world and preparing them for leadership. Wright notes how students often focus on the immediate goals of graduating, getting a job and passing the CPA Exam and then argues “But, ultimately the goal of professional-readiness training is to prepare students to become leaders in their field. By initiating mentoring and networking activities that reinforce core personal career objectives, effective professional training prepares students to apply the skills they have learned, coach others, and lead by example.” (Wright, 2018, p. 16).

Other authors also have noted the importance of the soft skills that we believe may be furthered by student engagement activities. For example, Daylor & Saint Amant (2017) argue that beyond key accounting and auditing knowledge, auditors need eight essential professional skills, including ethics and integrity, continuous learning, relationship building and partnering, communication, problem solving, innovation, teamwork and diversity. The findings of Showalter and Bodtke address the gap between research and practice not found in other professions--practitioner faculty "can help bridge this gap with practice and enhance the department of accounting's mission by informing research and preparing students to enter the profession with real-life examples" (Showalter & Bodtke, 2016, p. 39). Accordingly, the Pathways Commission goal to focus more academic research on relevant practice issues is advanced.

Table 1 (Appendix) highlights key features of student engagement activities both in and outside the classroom. Depending upon the discipline taught, and the interest and dedication of the teacher, results are expected to vary. For example, teachers of courses in accounting will likely have an easier time in identifying and implementing student engagement in professional accounting activities than teachers in the general area of economics where the external outlet is not as well defined. And further, the faculty who are intrinsically introverted, and/or unwilling or unable to use the course vehicle as an outreach into student activities, might be a limiting factor. The authors of this paper have experimented periodically with many of the techniques discussed. Three overlapping basic categories of expanded student engagement appear to surface where significant student gains can be made and the teaching and learning environment is served: application of technological tools, student organizations, and student research and practice.

### **Academic Engagement**

Table 2 (Appendix) lists what the current authors believe to be best practices, with some offering linkage of technology with the student major. While faculty cannot be expected to adopt everything suggested, making students aware of even some applications, can motivate students to search more on their own and be ready and excited to learn more when they enter the work force. Clubs in the discipline can become a great motivator. Business clubs can provide a more nurturing learning environment than just standard classroom practices. For accounting students, an Accounting Club or Beta Alpha Psi chapter can provide meaningful opportunities to learn about the profession, network with potential employers on or off campus, as well as develop camaraderie and possible long-term professional relationships with fellow students. Other organizations such as the Information Systems Audit and Control Association (ISACA) and the Institute of Management Accountants (IMA) also host informative meeting programs with useful accounting career information for students, invite students to professional events, and invite professionals to campus. All the clubs are run by students, so budgeting, marketing, conducting meetings, hosting events, communications, and managing elections develop leadership and other soft skills desired by employers. Dean (2017) illustrates how the IMA serves in this area with student leadership conferences and student chapters preparing students for the workforce.

Other business disciplines have similar student organizations which provide similar opportunities to enhance student learning about their desired profession and network with professionals who also may be potential employers, and with their peers. It is recommended that

as much as possible, faculty attend these events. Students enjoy seeing their professors in a more relaxed environment outside the classroom, and are happy for the support they provide in what may be a new networking experience. Academic organizations such as the American Accounting Association (AAA), Decision Sciences Institute (DSI) and the Information & Management Systems Society (INFORMS) and their global and regional counterparts offer some intriguing opportunities for business students to explore theoretical aspects of their student work and report the results of their work. These organizations often offer student tracks at their conferences, seeking student involvement in presentations and/or poster sessions at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

Networking is extremely helpful to students not only in obtaining internships and short-run relationships, but also in securing full-time positions, and is win-win for both employer and student where technical and soft skill-oriented students can be pulled from a diverse population. A clear advantage in proposing on campus clubs is that members can be age diverse, additionally offering a variety of opinions among peers. Rewards or incentives can be effective, and can vary from points earned in a course to some school-wide agreements.

If students have been mentored in school and exposed to outside student engagement activities such as involvement in professional organizations and networking, they may be more likely to continue to participate in these activities after they join their firms and progress in their professional and business careers. Mentoring activities are often encouraged at companies and working with a mentor may prove very beneficial starting in the early years of a young professional's career and moving forward. Later, giving back by taking on the mentor role can confirm a professional's commitment to the firm and the profession. Learning to network early and then continued networking during one's career can prove a valuable strategy for success. Whether a professional continues to work for a company or chooses to start off on his or her own, networking skills are important in attracting new clients.

### **Practitioner Engagement**

Meyer (2017) recounts the story of Kimberly Hardy, CPA/CFF “who described herself as a ‘wallflower,’ someone who perhaps wouldn't have naturally felt comfortable in a leadership role” (Hardy in Meyer, p. 23). However, firm partner Charles Lindsay recognized her potential starting when she was an intern, mentored her and brought her to networking events. Lindsay (in Meyer, p. 23) says, “That wallflower she described turned into a vibrant voice” in front of the firm's clients. Meyer (p. 23) indicates “The experience gained through mentoring and networking quickly set Hardy in motion to her fast track to the top” and at age 31 Hardy made partner at her firm, helping to develop several culture-changing programs including a flexible mentoring program that is changing the professional lives of both mentees and mentors.

Networking and involvement in professional organizations are activities which can be valuable not just in the first professional internship and full-time position—but throughout one's career. Stafford (2017, p. 97) states “Who you know really does matter.” and mentions a recent research report which found that while employers are hiring about 1 in 100 applicants, when the applicants come from employee references, the hiring ratio improved to 1 in 16. This author suggests that if a job candidate is targeting a company or position, and does not already know someone in it, the candidate needs to meet someone utilizing networking techniques to do so. The author suggests that besides reaching out about the job search to everyone the candidate knows, the candidate should find professional organizations and groups where the people are

likely to be that the candidate needs to know. Stafford (p.97) adds, “Effective networking means that you are clear and timely in your pitch about what you can bring to the organization—not what the organization can do for you.” The authors of the current study note that this point about effective networking is something that job candidates should start learning about while still students. Student interaction with practitioners can greatly benefit their job searches and future career paths.

As a way of involving and educating students about the profession, as well as offering mentoring and networking opportunities, professional organizations often invite students to join the organizations as student members for a significantly reduced price or free of charge. For example, the 42,000-member California Society of CPAs (CalCPA) offers free student memberships (as well as free faculty memberships) and the 14,000-member Georgia Society of CPAs (GSCPAs) offer student memberships at a reduced one-time fee of \$25. These organizations sponsor scholarships for students and “campus ambassador” programs, and in addition to providing student access to chapter meetings, have special programs for student members such as conferences for networking and interviewing with potential employers for leadership conferences, internships, and full-time employment. In addition, they also provide useful information for students on their websites and in other publications made available to educators and students on such topics as accounting careers and CPA licensure, including the 150-semester hour educational requirement. CalCPA also has a Young Emerging Professionals (YEP) group that students can join after entry into the profession.

Many other states also have CPA societies with similar programs to encourage students and young professionals to learn about and get involved in the profession. These professional organizations also have Codes of Ethics and provide assistance for members in interpretation of ethical situations. In the current climate of changing employers more frequently than in the past, loyalty to the profession, including its ethical code, is important. Providing the example of internships in public accounting, Hart, Kremin, and Pasewark (2017) find that the greater the student involvement is in professional activities, the more clarity that follows in career aspirations.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

“While 46% [of students] say their academic advisers provide very helpful guidance about which courses to take, only 28% report academic advisers are very helpful in identifying career options” (Strada-Gallup, 2017, p. 23). Would this void be filled if students had at their disposal student clubs, professional activities, and other related engagement involvements? Even though there have been significant advancements in teaching methodologies, assessments, and learning theories in recent decades, many institutions of higher learning still lag in preparing students adequately in those areas of applied professions.

The old adage that the academy is all about uncovering generalist information so that the student will later be able to be trained by the career employer is a model that no longer applies. Education is still predominant and must precede engagement with specific firm work methods, but that education must be meaningful. Just as basic survey courses can be overly general, students in applied areas of business and economics benefit as they infuse into specific endeavors. How large a dose is too much has been the question surrounding turf wars between academic departments, as well as employment statistics, and donor preferences. Table 3 (Appendix) shows some ideas that are on the authors’ wish list. These are not likely attainable

by faculty at all institutions because of monetary or administrative constraints. No institution can do it all, but some things work well in certain cultures and could be tried. Resourceful faculty may find ways to affect some of these at their institution.

The basic curriculum can be modified as little or as much as the faculty and administration desire to meet the current needs. Possible research questions for student activities include the following concerns:

- Where is credit awarded and how much credit to award students?
- What weights are placed on the various experiences of group learning, speaking engagements, research endeavors, field experiences, and other events?
- How is each experience to be assessed?
- Do all experiences/students need to be assessed?
- How to deal with free riders?
- What role does leadership and team-work play into each activity?

## CONCLUSIONS

Concerns remain on the supply, teaching side as well, with possible disruptions in measuring annual merit and promotion and teaching decisions. Another limit to expanded student engagement is finding the time to implement. Students, as with faculty and staff, may not only have limited hours to put forth in outside endeavors, but also the timing of such endeavors can conflict with other activities. Frequently, motivators may be needed to instill advocacy in outside work. This could range from extra credit points in one or more of the current formal courses the student is carrying all the way to formal compensation settings akin to internships. Once students appreciate the exposure to professionals and understand the implications for long-run career employment, the extent of incentives can be reduced.

The benefits of interaction with professional practitioners by faculty should not be overlooked. Not only do students benefit from seeing their professors outside of the classroom, the faculty keep their skills sharp on cutting edge issues and technology, and build future positive relationships between the world of practice and the academy. An area that seems untapped at many educational institutions is the use of faculty externships or fellowships to work for a term or more. Faculty can either become acquainted with work aspects they have not experienced or have only encountered in a theoretical exposure and subsequently bring that experience back into the classroom, and in some cases, include such in research. Student learning gains materialize in the long run.

Various side benefits can accrue to programs fostering increased student engagement. With a market-based approach and students selecting activities that are congruent with their long run interests for personal satisfaction and economic return, the lesser productive majors and academic programs will dwindle, and the universities will be forced to comply with faculty and other resources to meet the demand. Fewer student loan programs may likely fall into default as students more rapidly become gainfully employed. Student experiences with groups and technological innovations can greatly surpass the short-run rote lecture and testing approach, generating life-long enhancements.

The teacher begins to see students connect with the course material in ways other than text reading and attempting to absorb lectures. Faculty can find it very rewarding to see students use what they have learned. Students can be more motivated when they directly link their

studies to practice, and there is the additional bonus of trying to do even better when they feel a teacher cares about them.

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## APPENDIX

**Table 1. Engagement Opportunities**

Item	Description
1	Guest speakers visit classroom and engage with students
2	School business club informational and networking events
3	Professional organization meetings
4	Community service
5	Student ambassador for professional organizations
6	Case competitions often sponsored by firms in profession
7	Internships
8	Service-learning classes

**Table 2. Winning Applications for Student Engagement**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Description</b>
1	Student club, department and school, and professional and business organization meetings
2	Practitioner-oriented research possibly leading to presentation and or publication
3	Student involvement in current pronouncements and comment letters
4	Practitioner webcasts in area of course
5	Learning to use software that audit and tax accountants currently use in the field
6	Exposure to practice monitoring and regulatory efforts
7	Excel and its extensions for analysis
8	Big data applications
9	Social media merits and limitations
10	Blockchain ventures

**Table 3. Forward Looking Best Practices for Student Engagement Support**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Description</b>
1	Support for student professional organizations
2	Department/School/College sponsorship of workshops and programs supporting career information, leadership skills, professional job search and networking skills, and “meet the firms” events.
3	Firm sponsored leadership conferences for students
4	Internships and externships for students and faculty
5	Donor/foundation sponsorships
6	Student research and practice - conference posters, papers and presentations
7	Cooperative arrangements with firms
8	Alumni and emeritus involvement and support