

A Nontraditional Approach to Undergraduate Accounting

BY JENNY DOSCH, CMA

When people think about undergraduate accounting degrees, they usually envision traditional, four-year undergraduate institutions that are long-established universities. Some even picture previous generations of their family who may have attended the same institution. Metropolitan State University, located in the twin cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minn., is different.

Metropolitan State was founded just over 30 years ago in 1971, so it's a relative newcomer. The University began as an upper-division university offering bachelor's degrees for working adults and has since evolved into an innovative university serving older students of diverse backgrounds throughout a large metropolitan area.

The accounting program at Metropolitan State has also evolved. It's one of the largest undergraduate accounting programs in the state of Minnesota, serving roughly 700 enrolled students. In previous years when the AICPA published results of the CPA examination, Metropolitan State accounting graduates consistently placed among the top-10 finishers on the exam. How can a program become one of the largest programs in the state and achieve high

levels of success in less than 30 years? Two key factors set Metropolitan State's program apart from other accounting programs: cutting-edge course content and faculty who have a strong accounting foundation as practitioners.

Cutting-Edge Content

To provide cutting-edge course content, the program focuses on what accountants need to know on the job in today's business environment. Curriculum includes textbooks with current accounting content covering such topics as accounting for environmental costs, value chain accounting, target costing, utilizing the balanced scorecard, and how activity-based costing (ABC) helps decision making. Emphasis in the classroom is on using information to

make decisions as a manager.

Double-entry accounting isn't introduced until the intermediate level, while the foundation financial accounting course focuses on financial statement analysis. As part of the course, students work with local companies' annual reports to understand how underlying transactions are reported and the resulting impact on financial statement reporting. Transactions are followed through the financial statements, which allows students to assess the impact on financial results through ratio analysis and on the financial statements themselves.

Management accounting courses focus more on the accountant's role in providing relevant information for decision making within the business than on traditional cost accounting. They place special emphasis on the use of strategy in business and encourage students to think and apply concepts strategically. Lengthy class discussions are often held on the role of the management accountant in today's business environment to help students prepare to be business partners in the workplace. This includes enabling students to understand the need for cross-functional leadership

in identifying business opportunities to improve profitability.

Faculty as Practitioners

The second characteristic that sets Metropolitan State's program apart from other accounting programs is its emphasis on faculty as practitioners. More than 80% of the accounting faculty are practitioners from the local community. A typical Metropolitan State community faculty member is a Certified Management Accountant (CMA®) or Certified Public Accountant (CPA) and holds a master's degree. The instructor is currently working in the local business community or has many years of experience there, so he/she can enrich the classroom learning experience with current business applications of textbook material or personal-experience "war" stories.

Also, resident faculty members are practitioners from the accounting profession, and each has a minimum of two years' work experience in the accounting industry. Their scholarly work emphasizes the study of accounting from a practitioner's point of view, and they are encouraged to research current business topics with the goal of publishing the material for an industry audience. Although they can focus on the accounting industry specifically, faculty members often partner with peers in the University's College of Management to bring a cross-functional view of the research topic to a business application. These approaches reinforce the cutting-edge application of accounting information to management decision making.

Enriching the classroom with current business experience is important to Metropolitan State's accounting students since most are 30 or older. Many students who are work-

ing are looking to advance their career with a degree in accounting. Others recognize the value of an accounting degree and have returned to the classroom to obtain the highly sought accounting degree for job placement. Many plan to pursue CMA or CPA certification.

A Different Experience

The educational experience for an undergraduate accounting major at Metropolitan State University is often different from a traditional undergraduate university experience. Metropolitan State has a diverse student and faculty population. Of the nearly 10,000 students, approximately 60% are female and 40% are male, and students of ethnicity make up 25% of the total student population. An urban university, the Minneapolis campus is located in downtown Minneapolis, and there's a campus just several blocks east of downtown St. Paul. In addition, the University partners with fellow local community colleges to offer courses throughout the Twin Cities' metropolitan area, which provides greater flexibility for the older, working students.

The accounting program at Metropolitan State reflects the University's mission statement, which is "committed to academic excellence..." and supports "lifelong learning" as evidenced through the number of top-10 finishers on the CPA examination and successful employment placement of graduates. Although a relative newcomer, Metropolitan State University is well positioned to be a long-term provider of upper-division accounting education in the St. Paul/Minneapolis metropolitan area. ■

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