

The Amazing Accounting Race

One of the struggles in accounting education is getting students interested in the accounting field. In the real world, accountants are often at the center of multiple projects, working with all functions of the business to make important decisions. But sometimes the classroom experience can make accounting seem dull and boring.

Here's a tool educators can use to help their students learn and appreciate accounting.

By Amy Ford, CPA

Contributing to this dilemma is the gap between working through exercises in a textbook and solving real problems in a business. When given an assignment in the classroom, students can read the information provided, follow the specific directions, and solve the problem. But once students reach their first job, they quickly realize that they are now responsible for gathering, disseminating, and analyzing data to find answers that had seemed so straightforward in the classroom.

I teach the basics of budgeting to business students (sophomores through MBA candidates), so I've devel-

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oped a classroom game to bring life into the process and motivate students to consider an accounting career. Business students are naturally competitive, and when given a prize such as extra credit, they quickly rise to the occasion of playing a classroom game.

After lecturing and practicing budgeting problems with my students, I realized that they could reproduce schedules and calculations, but they really didn't understand the budgeting process. Many a student would produce a master budget but would have made a simple mistake in the beginning of the process with their sales or produc-

tion budget. Others attempted to start in the middle of the process without completing the necessary first steps.

To force the students to develop their budgets in order, yet provide them feedback on each step, I designed the Amazing Accounting Race. (It's a little like *The Amazing Race* on TV or maybe a treasure hunt.) Working in teams, students create a master budget, but they have to do this by putting together individual pieces of the budget by solving clues along the way. A team can't proceed to the next clue or "leg of the race" until it answers the current question successfully.

The Game

Here are the instructions I give my students as we get ready to start the game.

In a few minutes, you'll begin the most exciting race of your life—the Amazing Accounting Race. Your team will have to work its way through the budgeting process. Each leg of the race will consist of a calculation or piece of a particular budget.

Each team of four students will need to select a team captain. The team captain is the only person able to accept clues and turn in answers to the Amazing Accounting Race's host (a.k.a. your professor), except during Roadblocks.

Along the way, your team may encounter Roadblocks. These obstacles are similar to the roadblocks that occur during an organization's budgeting process. Something will get in your way and delay your efforts to complete the budget. An accountant in the real world will gather data from a variety of sources in order to complete the budget. Roadblocks occur when, on the path to finishing something, they realize they need to go back and gather more information.

When a Roadblock appears in the game, the team captain must select one team member to answer the Roadblock question, but each team member may participate in only one Roadblock. Roadblock questions are terms and concepts from the budgeting chapter in your textbook. For example, what do you call a 12-month budget that rolls forward one month as the current month is completed? You must answer your Roadblock question successfully to get your next clue. The team's progress in the game is stalled until that team member can answer the question. [The answer in my example is continuous budget.]

During today's race, you need to submit only the final answer to the host. Your team may find it beneficial to have one person be a record keeper, taking notes along the way, because answers from previous clues may be

Budget Topics and Questions for Clues

Here's an example of a clue:

Clue #1 – Sales Budget

The marketing department has estimated sales in units as follows:

July	3,000
August	3,500
September	5,500
October	4,000

The selling price of each stand is \$120.

What are the total sales budgeted for the third quarter?

More than once I've had a team get this relatively simple question wrong. I've had to remind them that there are only three months in a quarter or that the question is asking for the dollar amount of sales.

Here's a summary of the budget topics and questions I've used as clues in playing the Amazing Accounting Race.

- 1. Sales budget:** What are the total sales budgeted for the third quarter?
- 2. Cash Collections schedule:** What is the expected amount of cash to be collected in September?
- 3. Accounts Receivable:** What is the budgeted accounts receivable for September 30?

ROADBLOCK #1

- 4. Production budget:** How many stands will need to be produced in the month of September?
- 5. Direct Materials budget:** How many pounds of compound will need to be purchased in the month of September?
- 6. Expected Cash Disbursements schedule:** What is the expected cash disbursement for purchases of compound for the month of September?

ROADBLOCK #2

- 7. Disbursements:** What is the total expected cash disbursement for September?

ROADBLOCK #3

- 8. Cash budget:** What amount will XYZ Company plan to borrow during September?

The last clue says:

Congratulations! Your team has successfully completed the Amazing Accounting Race.

As I mentioned in the instructions to students, Roadblocks are conceptual questions from the textbook material. I may ask about terms such as responsibility accounting or the continuous budget. Since I use teams of four, I incorporate three roadblocks so that all team members will actively participate in the game at some point.

used in solving a question later in the race. At the end of the race, your host will provide you with a complete set of the race's questions and an answer key so that you can play at home (i.e., study for the final exam).

The team who wins today's race will receive extra credit. All teams who complete the race within the allotted class time will receive a 100% quiz grade for the chapter.

How to Play

The game is very simple. I take a comprehensive budget problem from my class materials and convert it into the game. All teams work the same problem. I introduce the game after we've practiced budgeting problems together in class, and it replaces my traditional end-of-the-chapter quiz.

No textbooks or notes are allowed in the race. Using only calculators and scratch paper (yes, this is a manual exercise), team members must work together to solve each clue. The team dynamics have varied, but I've found that if I select the teams, the game runs more smoothly. I attempt to have a mix of stronger students working with weaker students so the game is a learning experience for both. Strong students take on the role of captain and guide their team through the race.

The scenario for the Amazing Accounting Race reads much like a traditional accounting textbook problem. XYZ Company produces plant stands. Management is now preparing detailed budgets for the third quarter, July through September.

I give each clue in order. A team must correctly answer the question from clue #1 to receive clue #2. When the captains come to turn in their answers, it's much like a game show. I've seen them navigate chairs and desks to submit their answer ahead of a competitor.

The captains write their answer on the paper containing the clue. If their answer is incorrect, I return the clue and try to give them feedback on how to correct their answer. I might tell them higher, lower, or to check their math on a certain computation. The captain then races back to the team to rework the problem.

When the answer submitted is correct, I give the captain the next clue. Depending on the size of the class, I may have eight to 12 teams. Some teams take early leads but then slow down as the questions get more difficult. Other teams work at a steady pace. Often one team will be working on clue #6, several teams will be on clue #5, and one team will be lagging behind on clue #3. Much like a game show announcer, I keep the teams posted on the progress of who's in the lead and what number the competition is on in the game. The lead

can change many times during the race.

To help keep the clues organized, I print them on colored paper and give each team a different color. I use large type so that one clue fills a page and can be read by four people at once. The teams don't know how many clues are in the game, and I believe that helps keep the excitement building. The top students often realize that the game clues follow the master budget process and know when they are approaching the end.

After my first experience using the game in the classroom, I found it helpful to include hints on some of the clues. I hadn't anticipated that students might answer just the specific question asked and not complete the rest of the budget. For example, on clue #4, my hint says, "You may want to calculate August as well to help you later in the race!"

The Results

Students are immediately engaged in the game, trying to get the right answers and be the first team to complete their budget successfully. The fast-paced, competitive yet fun environment is reminiscent of my days in the real world.

One group of students was so enthusiastic after completing the game in my class that the game became the focus of the discussion in their math class the following period. Two years into my experiment, former students told me the game was one of their best classroom experiences during college.

After one class asked to play again, I added the Amazing Accounting Race—Part II to my course. Using the same setup and rules, I created a game for the decision-making chapter of our textbook, which comes later in the semester. In this game, each clue focuses on one of the special decisions from the book. Clues include questions about adding or dropping a segment line, the make-or-buy decision, special orders, utilization of a constrained resource, and joint product costs.

So far, all the teams in my classes have been able to complete the race during class in the allotted amount of time, which I usually keep to 30 minutes. The game has led to greater class participation and interest and to significantly higher exam scores on the topics covered. More importantly, it has motivated some of our business students to consider a career in accounting. **SF**

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