

## **The Value of Relationships in the Study of Accounting**

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*Career projects expose accounting students to relationship-building activities and mentoring possibilities that have purpose in accounting programs. Career projects and advisement services are recommended because the complexities in accounting careers can span years or students' entire programs. Adult students are handicapped because the accounting profession targets traditionally aged students. It is advisable that non-traditional students begin the "relationship-building process" early in their accounting programs. Accounting educators can jumpstart relationship-building strategies especially for non-traditional students in various accounting areas. With relationship-building activities, one creates mentoring opportunities that last a lifetime. Relationship-building activities should become normal protocol for accounting career programs.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Accounting educators recognize the very important skills that are learned when going down the accounting career path. It is not only the many accounting courses, rigorous math classes, or the culminating capstone courses and case study projects that result in an accounting career; but many mentoring opportunities and experiences with colleagues and professional affiliations formed over the years are necessary ingredients to the relationship-building process. Relationships add value and are a primary reason for career success in accounting. Such encounters with significant people can result in attainment of certifications, including the CPA or CMA certifications, other advanced degrees, and *securing accounting positions*. In retrospect, relationships are what mattered most (Vincent, 2014). As a veteran accounting educator, it is possible that without relationships, my career may not have happened. The purpose of this paper is to document the importance of forming relationships for nontraditional, adult students in accounting programs. Because nontraditional students are typically older in age, years are cut from their job searches thereby impacting possibility for positions in the accounting profession. A secondary purpose is to describe how students can utilize relationships that forge career paths that work in today's highly competitive environment. Lastly, this paper will examine relationship building from different perspectives and calls for further developmental activity in relationship building for accounting programs.

### **Accounting Career Paths for Adult Students**

Education often begins with the desire to emulate an instructor, who often becomes a mentor. With each new degree pursuit or milestone, protégées develop relationships with mentors who contribute to their professional growth. Certainly, mentoring by educators serves as a primary catalyst for students drawn to career areas in accounting. Other mentors who protégées can tap are work colleagues,

professional colleagues, neighbors, friends, acquaintances of professional colleagues, members of professional associations, speakers at meetings, etc. - all of whom can be the force and/or inspiration that results in attainment of ultimate career goals in accounting. Accounting has so many pathways within the profession where very unconventional paths can be taken. Mentoring is embedded in the career contexts and unconventional twists that are so commonplace especially for nontraditional students (Ragins, 2008). When teaching primarily adult accounting students in accelerated degree-completion programs, it is easy to get ingrained with the subject matter of accounting curricula that career skills are pushed to the background. The unfortunate consequences result in fewer linkages for relationships and fewer mentoring opportunities. There is a profound place in every accounting course to amass education for accounting career preparation. This paper will highlight the ultimate career goal of accounting curricula and bring those goals to the forefront; secondarily, mentoring and relationship-building activities can be sharpened by both accounting educators and students. Adult students frequently get stumped on career pursuits in the field of accounting; it happens to the best intentioned students. Young adults get extremely busy with life while career pursuits take a back seat to family rearing and working for a living. Some young people may realize in their final capstone projects that they do not like their potential careers. The life-changing revelation comes to other professions, such as nurses when they do not fully research their career paths. Students might realize they are going down the wrong career path -- and then make a fast, not-planned-for twist in their career path. It happens to accounting students when they fail to explore the many pathways that exist in the accounting profession (ACFE, p. 17). One student deviated to proceed down the road of forensic accounting when she worked for a major retailer as a store detective. Her interest began while unraveling crime dramas on television. Because of the expansive nature of forensic accounting in society, accounting educators have opportunity to expand knowledge in related areas and even to not-so-related areas so as to gain a well-rounded understanding of the vastness of different types of accounting fraud (Ibid, p. 17). The connections and linkages to not-so-related areas in retail merchandising can blossom to a career in forensic accounting as it did for Maria Kress who now works for the Office of the Inspector General in the Los Angeles Unified School District (Ibid, p. 17).

### **Relationship-Building Activities**

Relationship skills for accounting curricula kick in when life-changing revelations happen (like nursing students discovering a dislike for blood or accounting students discovering a dislike for numbers). Along with relationship building comes joining professional associations composed of many potential mentors. Identifying mentors is one such activity that students can begin to do for their ultimate career success. To have the insight to carefully select mentors who can guide oneself is no small feat. As Joseph A. Vincent states in the November 2014 issue of *Strategic Finance*, "Sometimes we may think that we don't need other people to help us succeed or provide support in our personal and professional lives, but that's so far from reality (Vincent, p. 6). Relationships matter a great deal when it comes to accounting careers; students need to be taught to *develop relationships* and to nurture existing ones (Ibid., p. 61). Students should repeat the relationship-building process throughout their entire careers in accounting. Professional associations like the IMA and the AICPA have mentoring guides that align with activities in professional associations. Accounting educators can encourage students' membership in such associations. Both associations have meetings whereby personal relationships can be formed and developed if students wish. Student memberships are commonly available at reduced rates. Relationship-building activities and/or strategies require immersion by the educator and/or mentor. Instructors should remind students to professionally connect with people, to document memberships on resumes, and to develop strategies that will be fruitful for career pursuits in their geographic areas. Relationship building requires that educators *do more, not less on career pursuits for students*. An immersion in professional associations requires attendance at periodic meetings, participation in career training events, and conferences on the local, regional, and national levels. Such participation may necessitate travel to professional meetings and/or conferences as well as other preparatory, organizational activities to be performed by instructors and students.

## Significance of Mentoring Relationships

Mentors are people with whom you reveal your hopes, dreams, fears, and shortcomings – someone with whom you develop a trusting relationship. Mentors are advisers who willingly share in the reciprocal relationship required for empowered mentoring. Mentoring relationships are profoundly dynamic; they change as one proceeds down the career path (Forbes, 2014). In order to learn more about mentoring, one should examine both sides of the relationship. Mentoring has two distinct sides - a 'give' and 'take' side. When questions posed by students result in answering the student's request for information with a question, such as, "Here's the problem I have. Can you help me?" Educators can respond directly, or they might respond with a question, such as "What can we learn together" or "What are you going to bring to the relationship?" If the answer is a specific goal or skill, protégés can hire a coach. But if students are prepared to give as good as possible (such as one would do for career preparation), one should look for a mentor (The Accelerators, 2013). Mitchell goes on to state "The best mentors never give definitive answers. Instead, they share a way to think about the problem that may not have been considered." Mentors are commonly wise people with whom accounting students can learn by listening to their life stories.

## Two Sides of Mentoring Relationships

In mentoring situations, the mentor is usually the influential party, the teacher or adviser, the one who imparts the knowledge. The recipient of the mentorship is a protégé, the person helped, especially in the furtherance of his/her career. As we move through life, we are surrounded by people, communities, and environments which support or thwart our development (Ragins, p. 404). In fact, the constructivist perspective proposes that humans do not simply happen upon reality but rather are continually engaged in an active process to construct that reality (Ibid., p. 403). With this in mind, educators should prepare to serve as mentors, and students should choose wise influential people to serve as mentors for career development. The two vantage points of mentoring begin from inception of the relationship. There are obligations from each respective side of the mentoring relationship. The AICPA's Mentoring Guide proposes mentoring programs for accounting students. Catalyst, a nonprofit organization that helps women succeed in business reports that *lack of mentoring* is a barrier to career advancement (AICPA, 2014). Mentoring concepts can be used by accounting educators in various ways, which this paper covers with the possibility for a forum to generate and exchange ideas at the meeting of the 2016 Global IBFR Conference. In order to break past trends and serious gaps in the bridge between research and practice of mentoring theory (Ragins, p. 11), students should be taught how to acquire mentors. Meeting groups of prospective mentors can entail walking into a meeting with strangers, which takes students out of their comfort zones. The acquisition of mentors can also entail email conversations with an author of an article or monograph. A more simplistic method is to get active with a professional association like the IMA or AICPA. Either way, students should develop an action plan and/or strategy to acquire mentors. Such practices may mitigate barriers to career advancement due to lack of mentoring as reported by Catalyst (AICPA p. 2). Another effective way to acquire potential mentors is with group work in classes or with clubs and/or extracurricular activities. Classmates especially in the adult environment create learning communities that provide many potential comrades who can become lifelong mentors. This sort of camaraderie is long lasting and can result in many innovative, savvy mentoring opportunities. Another technique can be for online students to interact with face-to-face students in a face-to-face class or other modality, i.e., face-to-face students interacting with virtual students is symbolic of changes in the global landscape.

## New Rules of Mentoring

Mentoring takes on new meaning when the concept is construed more broadly. New rules proposed by Lynette Lewis in her book *Climbing the Ladder in Stilettos* suggest that relationships should reciprocate between mentor and protégée, vacillating as situations warrant. The goal is to broaden one's view of mentors with protégées choosing mentors or different people as mentors at different times. The day of empowered mentoring enables us to find for ourselves the people we want and need. Empowered

mentoring demands that mentees take initiative in building mentor-mentee relationships rather than waiting for mentors to handpick them as mentees. Students should broaden the definition of mentors so as to look for creative ways to recognize and partake in mentoring activities that can create mentoring moments (Ibid., p. 159). Lewis writes that mentoring does not have to be with persons of “position.” Mentoring relationships can be up, down, and sideways. The Spanish proverb prevails: “More grows in the garden than the gardener knows he has sown.” Only over time will we recognize all the significant people and lives we have grown and the garden in which we blossomed (Ibid., p. 170). Accounting educators who serve as mentors should possess the following attributes (AICPA, 2014):

- Ability to influence and persuade others in positions of power;
- Credibility with and respect from colleagues;
- Seniority in relation to the protégé;
- A desire to help the protégé as well as the organization;
- Ability to help the protégé set and attain goals.

In upper-division or advanced accounting courses, students may be exposed to guest speakers or mentors who can impart advanced career knowledge. In these instances of mentoring students, mentors can provide assistance and upward career mobility very often needed by the protégées (Ragins, p. 150). Hence, student protégées can utilize a professional association that enables ‘give and take’ relationships between students/protégés and mentors. The AICPA’s Mentoring Guide identifies attributes for protégés:

- Desire to learn, grow and succeed;
- Ability to accept risk;
- Commitment and loyalty to the organization;
- Awareness of personal responsibility and goals;
- Ability to follow through with listen and directions.

Mentors are powerful forces for developing students. Protégés should seek mentors who they respect and admire. If possible, choosing someone other than their boss might be advisable. Educators can encourage students to begin choosing mentors because these allies can be invaluable for long-term career development. Job preparation skills to teach students to articulate their beliefs, to express their opinions to management or to talk about a problem with others such as one’s staff; or to interact with others – this is the kind of collaborative skills we should teach accounting students in group activities. Role playing situations or meetings especially with a professional guest lecturer can be rich activities that accounting educators can consider. Such learning activities with the oversight of a guest consultant can result in strong relationship building with a mentor for students as they progress through their career paths.

### **Savvy Strategies by Non-Traditional Students**

Non-traditional adult students display a multitude of innovative ways to build relationships with mentors. Mentors oversee and facilitate activities whereby students develop essential relationships. A retired military student who pursued an accounting career utilized his position as a mail courier to connect with target people who could net him a position. His ongoing and continued professionalism resulted in attainment of an internship in a major governmental office with promise for a permanent position. His savvy “bridging” strategy emulated from his military days when he learned team-building while working in supply logistics. Occasional weekend events provided opportunity for him to connect with potential mentors. Other students connect through professional associations which have meetings and/or activities that result in potential mentors, with whom contact continues in various ways. Another student while on a company-paid business trip got to form alliances with colleagues who informed her of company changes that potentially could result in an accounting position of her dreams. Other students who volunteer have found ways to connect with colleagues in target offices in which they might obtain accounting positions. Other savvy strategies paid off with scholarship winnings approaching \$6,000 for one student who performed engagement activities with a professional association. Truly, savvy students never know how

relationship building can bestow benefits. Accounting educators should be aware that with relationship-building activities come jobs, scholarships, and opportunities for professional success during a lifetime.

### **Mentoring Caveats**

Some caveats for mentoring activities are that it is better to take a mentor's wise counsel and keep comparing that counsel with data from other mentors. This happens when protégées hear the message over and over. Obviously, active listening is essential. Another step is to ask harder questions of mentors – that is, ask for personal responses, not just best practices. Huh said in the *Wall Street Journal*, that listening to mentors' thought processes is how one can understand how to choose an action; this is sometimes richer than the action itself (The Accelerators, 2013). Obviously, both parties in a mentoring relationship have to each want to participate and share, learn and grow for the ultimate success of mentoring to reach its full potential. If one pursues and truly wants to gain mentors, one can find people who will run with you at exactly your pace (Toor, 2013).

### **SUMMARY OF RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING ACTIVITIES**

Career projects can effectively expose accounting students to mentoring and relationship-building activities and definitely have a place in accounting courses and programs. Additionally, career projects and continuing advisement services are advisable because the complexities can span years or the students' entire program. Non-traditional adult students are further handicapped because the accounting profession commonly targets traditionally aged students for careers and potential positions. With relationship-building activities, one creates mentoring opportunities that can last a lifetime. It is advisable that students begin this process early in their accounting programs particular situations and especially that non-traditional students get relationships that work most effectively for their situations. Accounting educators can jumpstart relationship-building strategies for non-traditional students in various accounting areas.

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