BEYOND ALBRECHT AND SACK: A COMPARISON OF ACCOUNTING PROFESSIONALS AND COLLEGE STUDENTS

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BACKGROUND

The accounting curriculum is currently under attack from within the profession for the content and delivery of accounting courses. In a joint effort to examine these issues, the American Accounting Association, the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants, and the Institute of Management Accountants joined with the Big Five accounting firms to support a project by W. Steve Albrecht and Robert J. Sack (A&S) that examined the future of accounting education. In their study, *Accounting Education: Charting the Course Through a Perilous Future*, A&S considered content and pedagogy by comparing accounting faculty and accounting practitioner responses. This study is a continuation of the work of that study, specifically in the area of skill development.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this manuscript is to expand on the A&S study by closely examining the issue of skill development—specifically, this study was designed to determine if the skills seen as most important by accounting faculty and accounting practitioners are the same skills deemed important by today's business student.

The authors examined college business and pre-business majors to see if the view of these students is consistent with the view of faculty and practitioners in the A&S study. The group of students examined consisted of accounting majors and other non-accounting business majors. The authors hoped to see if assessment of the importance of

skills was the same for all business majors or if differences existed between students in different majors. The study further hoped to find out if the skills professional groups considered important were considered differently by students. Further, this manuscript hoped to establish if the students' perceptions of skills' importance are consistent with that of the faculty or that of the practitioners studied. Based on the results of this study, accounting educators may have a better understanding of how the faculty may employ pedagogy and content in a manner that will bring student perceptions of important skills into line with those of professional accountants.

METHODOLOGY

The authors used a survey instrument to interview pre-business and business majors currently enrolled in business classes at a regional Southern university. The students provided demographic data on their backgrounds and majors (see Appendix A). The instrument also asked a series of questions about the importance of various skills. Students were asked to rate these skills, on a scale of one to five, with one being not important and five being very important, to determine which they felt were most important to their future careers. The authors then compared the responses to accounting faculty and practitioners as reported by the A&S study with the accounting and other business majors surveyed by the authors. The data were then ranked and analyzed to find relevant differences in the responses of the four groups. Taking those average scores, the authors ranked the skills from one being the skill with the highest average score to 18 being the skill with the lowest average score for each of the four groups. An average of all the rankings was then taken. Those data are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION FOR GEORGIA SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY AND RESPONDENTS

Georgia Southern University, a public coeducational college, is located in Statesboro, Georgia. As of October 15, 2000, it had 12,648 undergraduate students. The average SAT score for first-time freshmen in the Fall of 2000 was 1008. The College of Business Administration is accredited by AACSB International: The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, and majors are offered in accounting, economics, finance, information systems, logistics and intermodal transportation, management, and marketing. There were 3,169 undergraduate students enrolled in the College of Business Administration. The School of Accountancy is accredited by AACSB International: The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, and there are 128 undergraduate accounting students and 16 faculty members.

The sample consisted of 223 undergraduate students in the College of Business Administration. They consisted of both pre-business and declared business majors. Fifty-six percent were male, 63 percent were between the ages of 18 and 20, and 67 percent were white. Fifty-two percent had over 30 hours of credit. Fifty-three percent had parents with less than a four-year degree. Ten percent were accounting majors, 13 percent were finance or economics majors, 16 percent were information systems or logistics majors, 40 percent were management or marketing majors, and 21 percent were other business majors or combinations of majors. (See Appendix B)

SKILL DEVELOPMENT

In its study, A&S pointed out that accounting education has frequently been criticized for spending too much time on content mastery and too little time while

ignoring skills that will enrich their lives and make them successful. They specifically charge that

> Students forget what they memorize. Content knowledge becomes dated and is often not transferable across different types of jobs. On the other hand, critical skills rarely become obsolete and are usually transferable across assignments and careers. Accounting education has frequently been criticized for spending too much time on content mastery and too little time and effort to helping students to develop skills that will enrich their lives and make them successful (A&S 55).

The major purpose of this study was to compare attitudes of skill importance between various groups to see if, in fact, students considered the same skills important as their professional colleagues. The authors found differences of opinions among faculty, practitioners, and students in what skills are viewed as most important. The A&S study asked faculty and practitioners to rank the skills they believe are most important on a one to five scale, with one being least important and five being most important. Students were asked to rank the skills they believe will be most important in their future career on a similar one to five scale. The results of the respondents are shown below in mean scores (Table 1) and overall numerical rankings (Table 2).

TABLE 1. MEANS RANKINGS

	Faculty	Practitioner	Accounting Student	Non-Acc Student	Average of Means
Written communications	4.39	4.32	4.65	3.97	4.33
Oral communications	4.22	4.27	4.57	4.20	4.32
Analytical/critical thinking	4.53	4.29	4.43	3.95	4.30
Decision Making	4.03	3.96	4.48	4.26	4.18
Interpersonal Skills	3.94	3.89	4.13	4.02	4.00
Teamwork	3.81	4.02	3.87	4.16	3.97
Computing technology	4.10	4.07	4.04	3.71	3.98
Leadership	3.58	3.83	4.04	4.19	3.91
Professional demeanor	3.64	3.66	4.39	3.92	3.90
Project management	3.26	3.66	3.61	3.90	3.61
Business decision modeling	3.65	3.65	3.78	3.68	3.69

Negotiation	3.13	3.35	3.57	3.78	3.46
Entrepreneurship	2.99	3.24	3.87	3.70	3.45
Customer orientation	3.23	3.34	3.61	3.64	3.46
Resource management	2.98	3.32	3.70	3.61	3.40
Change management	3.13	3.36	3.09	3.33	3.23
Salesmanship	2.61	2.79	3.26	3.58	3.06
Foreign language	2.60	2.56	2.70	2.80	2.67

TABLE 2. NUMERICAL RANKINGS

	Average Faculty Ranking	**Average Practitioner Ranking**	**Average Acct. Students Ranking**	**Average Other Students Ranking**	**Average Rank**
Written communications	2	1	1	6	2.5
Oral communications	3	3	2	2	2.5
Analytical/critical thinking	1	2	4	7	3.5
Decision Making	5	6	3	1	3.75
Interpersonal Skills	6	7	6	5	6
Teamwork	7	5	9	4	6.25
Computing technology	4	4	7	11	6.5
Leadership	10	8	8	3	7.25
Professional demeanor	9	9	5	8	7.75
Project management	11	9	13	9	10.5
Business decision modeling	8	11	11	13	10.75
Negotiation	14	13	15	10	13
Entrepreneurship	15	16	10	12	13.25
Customer orientation	12	14	14	14	13.5
Resource management	16	15	12	15	14.5
Change management	13	12	17	17	14.75
Salesmanship	17	17	16	16	16.5
Foreign language	18	18	18	18	18

ANALYSIS OF TOP NINE RANKED SKILLS

Chart 1 shows the respondents' ranking of the top nine skills as collectively ranked. The group as a whole considered that written communications and oral communications were the most important skills. While all respondents were fairly equal in their judgment of oral communications, there was a wide variation in the rankings on written communication skills. The practitioners, professors, and accounting majors were all very uniform in their rankings of written skills, considering it the most needed skill. Other business majors considered written communication to be the sixth most important. Perhaps this finding is due to the non-accounting student's view of written

communications. Many students are of the "DOT COM" generation and consider e-mail the standard means of written communications. Due to the free flow form of most e-mail correspondence, it is not surprising that many students felt that written communications are not as important as those professionals who are more accustomed to standard business reports and audit opinions. The accounting students may have been more influenced by their professors who continually stress the importance of written communications.

Analytical and critical thinking skills show a wide disparity among those surveyed. In general, the professors and practitioners rated this as a top skill, but it was considered fourth by accounting students and seventh by other business majors. This result among professionals is expected given the emphasis put on this topic by the interviewees in the A&S study. The non-accounting students may not have been exposed to as many situations that do not have "right or wrong" answers, and they, therefore, thought specific content knowledge was more important than critical thinking.

Another surprising result found by the authors was the attitude toward decision-making. The student groups tended to think this skill was much more important than the professional group. The non-accounting business students considered decision-making to be the most important skill, and accounting students rated this skill third. Practitioners ranked this skill fifth, while faculty ranked the skill sixth. The surprising part of these rankings is that it seems to contradict the statements given in the A&S study. Specifically, the response of a Los Angeles focus group where a respondent was quoted as saying,

> We have not trained our students in accounting to deal with uncertainty. Most of them say, "I've got to get my spreadsheet complete before I can make a decision." But today, you have to make some decisions with some risk. You have got to be able to make decisions without perfect knowledge. I think we should look at how

> we teach people and we should give them some more cases with uncertainty (A&S 55).

It seems interesting in light of these comments that the students are the ones who recognize the value of decision-making, but professionals seem to give little more than lip service.

Interpersonal skills were an area where there was general agreement among all respondents. All felt that it was one of the important, but not necessarily the most important, of skills.

Teamwork was a skill that had a wide disparity of responses between groups. The professional groups were fairly closely-aligned, but practitioners felt it was more important than professors. The practitioners gave it a fifth-place ranking compared to a seventh-place ranking for professors. The extremes were located in the student results. Accounting majors considered it rather unimportant, giving it a ninth-place ranking. Business majors on the other hand ranked it fourth in importance of all the skills questioned. Perhaps the reasons for this disparity may be the way classes are typically taught in many institutions. Business majors are exposed to a number of classes requiring team projects, while accounting majors are not as often involved in team projects in their major. This response may also be conditioned by the fact that a goal of accounting majors is to pass professional exams that are given on an individual rather than a group basis. This discrepancy between accounting and business majors may also be addressed by looking at a comparison of the two groups' responses to the questions of analytical and critical thinking versus group work. It might be assumed based on the responses that business majors feel that work should be done in groups and, therefore, an

individuals' ability to analyze is not as important since another member of the group might have more analytical skill. Accounting majors, on the other hand, rank teamwork considerably lower and may, therefore, feel there is a greater need for the individual to analyze problems.

Computing technology may be the most interesting phenomena in the data observed. Computing technology is ranked as a top skill and listed as the fourth most important skill by practitioners and professors. Students, on the other hand, list computer technology well down in the middle of the rankings. Accounting students find technology a mid-level skill, and business majors rank it as a lower-level skill. While at first glance it may seem strange for younger people to rank computer technology so much lower than the professionals, it may be a case of casual acceptance. That is, to professionals, computer skills were separately learned at an older age. For most students, however, computer skills have been acquired over their lifetimes, and it seems no more important than say penmanship or answering the telephone. In other words, they consider it a necessary skill but nothing other than a component of common knowledge.

Leadership skills were also an area where there was a large disparity in responses. This gap was surprisingly between accounting professors and business students. In the survey, practitioners and accounting students were in agreement that leadership was a mid-level skill. Professors, on the other hand, rated leadership a lower-level skill and business majors considered it to be the third most important skill needed in business. This may be due to the fact that non-accounting people may feel that for career advancement they need more leadership skills, because non-accounting students do not have clearly-defined standards or professional certifications to spawn advancement.

All groups interviewed, with the exception of accounting majors, considered professional demeanor a mid-level skill. The accounting students considered this to be one of the five most important skills. Perhaps the reason for this ranking is that accounting faculty tends to emphasize appearance and professional conduct in their classes and in Accounting Association and Beta Alpha Psi meetings. Other majors, the largest number of which are marketing and management majors, may tend to regard this as less important because their disciplines put more emphasize on interpersonal skills.

EVALUATION OF THE BOTTOM NINE RANKED SKILLS

The skills ranked in the bottom nine showed much less diversity of rankings than the selection of the nine most important skills. Those skills in the bottom nine that showed the most diversity were project management, business decision modeling, negotiations, entrepreneurship and change management. The respondent groups all ranked customer orientation, resource management, salesmanship, and foreign languages very nearly the same and were in general agreement as to their importance.

Project management tended to rank lower with professors and much lower with accounting students than it did with the professional group and the non-accounting majors. The reason for this may be that both professionals and non-accounting students tend to think of things in terms of total project, for example, an audit or group project. Professors and accounting students, on the other hand, may focus more on specific subject matter to be learned rather than an overall project.

Business decision modeling was found to have agreement between practitioners and accounting students. Professors ranked this as a high level skill, while non-accounting majors ranked it a low level skill. While the authors do not have a specific

reason for this disparity, they felt perhaps the title "Business Decision Modeling" may have differing meanings associated with it. The perception of the respondents might differ. This explanation may be supported by the large standard deviation in the scores of the student respondents.

All groups, except non-accounting business majors who considered it the tenth most important skill, ranked negotiations as a mid-low-level skill. This ranking may have been higher for the non-accounting group since, in general, they tend to be more involved with occupations, such as marketing and management, that have a higher need for negotiation skills.

Entrepreneurship was considered a very low-level skill by professors and professionals. Students, on the other hand, considered this a more important skill. Surprisingly, accounting majors thought it of more importance than their non-accounting peers. This may be due to the fact that students have not settled on a career at this point and may be more inclined to think of going into business for themselves than the professional groups. The professional groups are already employed and are not as likely to consider going into business for themselves.

Change management was found to be much more significant to professionals than students. Practitioners and professors have had more real-world experience and are more aware of the fact that change is a fact of life. Due to the young age of the students surveyed, there may not be the recognition that all businesses must change to survive in today's dynamic environment.

The ranks for customer orientation, resource management, salesmanship, and foreign languages among the four groups were consistent as to their importance. It was

somewhat surprising that foreign language was unanimously ranked last given the current emphasis on globalization. Apparently all groups felt that English was the language of business and, therefore, diminished the value of other languages.

COMPARISON OF ACCOUNTING AND NON-ACCOUNTING STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF IMPORTANCE OF MAJOR SKILLS

The average scores given the skills by accounting majors and non-accounting majors and the standard deviations of the two groups of students is shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3

	Acct. Mean	**Acct. St. Dev**	**Non-Acc Mean**	**Non-Acc St. Dev.**
Written Communications	4.65	0.71	3.97	0.45
Oral Communications	4.57	0.79	4.2	0.4
Analytical & Critical Thinking	4.43	0.9	3.95	1.22
Decision Making	4.48	0.9	4.26	1.14
Interpersonal Skills	4.13	1.14	4.02	1.13
Teamwork	3.87	1.1	4.16	1.22
Computer Technology	4.04	1.22	3.71	1.27
Leadership	4.04	1.36	4.19	1.19
Professional Demeanor	4.39	0.99	3.92	1.19
Project Management	3.61	1.31	3.9	1.2
Business Decision Modeling	3.78	1.35	3.68	1.2
Negotiation	3.57	1.24	3.78	1.25
Entrepreneurship	3.87	1.1	3.7	1.3
Customer Orientation	3.61	1.34	3.64	1.24
Resource Management	3.7	1.06	3.61	1.18
Change Management	3.09	1.38	3.33	1.21
Salesmanship	3.26	1.14	3.58	1.31
Foreign Language	2.7	1.33	2.8	1.3

The five skills with the largest differences in average scores between accounting and non-accounting students are discussed in the following paragraphs.

WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS

Accounting majors gave this a score of 4.65 and non-accounting majors gave a score of 3.97. The accounting standard deviation was 0.71 and the non-accounting standard deviation was 1.17. Accounting majors obviously viewed this skill as much more important than non-accounting majors. The accounting majors' much smaller standard deviation indicates consistency of thought on the importance of written communications within this group.

The much higher score given to written communications by accounting majors than non-accounting majors is surprising to the authors. Perhaps accounting faculty have placed a greater emphasis on the importance of this skill than was previously believed.

ORAL COMMUNICATION

Accounting majors gave this a score of 4.57 and non-accounting majors gave a score of 4.20. The accounting standard deviation was 0.79 and the non-accounting standard deviation was 1.20. Accounting majors apparently deemed this skill as more important than non-accounting majors, and the small standard deviation indicates consistency of thought within the accounting majors group. This would seem at odds with the stereotypical impression of accountants working alone in backrooms with eyeshades. Apparently accounting students realize the interpersonal nature of the accounting environment.

ANALYTICAL/CRITICAL THINKING

Accounting majors gave this a score of 4.43 and non-accounting majors gave a score of 3.95. The accounting standard deviation was 0.90 and the non-accounting standard deviation was 1.22. Accounting majors viewed this skill as more important than

non-accounting majors, and the smaller standard deviation indicates agreement within the accounting majors group. The reason for this discrepancy may be that accounting majors generally tend to be more data-driven than non-accounting students. The wider standard deviation in non-accounting students may be attributable to the fact that many were marketing and management majors who tend to use more art and less science in their decision making.

TEAMWORK

Accounting majors gave this a score of 3.87 and non-accounting majors gave a score of 4.16. The accounting standard deviation was 1.10 and the non-accounting standard deviation was 1.22. Non-accounting majors viewed this skill as more important than accounting majors, but the larger standard deviation indicates a wider variation of rating for this skill within their group.

Non-accounting majors may be giving teamwork skills a higher score because many non-accounting courses at Georgia Southern University are taught in a group setting and with an emphasis on team projects. Accounting classes do not use the methods as often.

PROFESSIONAL DEMEANOR

Accounting majors gave this an average score of 4.39 and non-accounting majors gave a score of 3.92. The accounting standard deviation was 0.99 and the non-accounting standard deviation was 1.19. Accounting majors viewed this skill as more important than non-accounting majors. Perhaps the higher rating by accounting majors of this skill may be due to their perceptions of accountants as “white collar” professional employees. The

accounting majors viewed their employment setting as office-based, and they know their future profession has a code of ethics and accrediting bodies.

Of the five skills with the greatest disparities, four of them (oral communications, written communications, teamwork, and professional demeanor) could be classified as non-technical skills. As such, the authors would have thought that non-accounting students would have rated those skills higher in importance than accounting students. The fact that accounting students rated these skills higher may mean that the accounting faculty has done a good job of stressing their importance.

The accounting majors were much more consistent within their group than the non-accounting majors, as indicated by the lower standard deviations. Perhaps the larger standard deviations of non-accounting students can be explained by the fact that the group includes all other business majors except accounting students, thereby indicating a more diverse group than the accounting majors.

One of most revealing statistics noted by the authors was the general lack of importance given to foreign languages. Both groups gave foreign language the lowest score, and the deviation between the two groups was nearly identical. This may be because a foreign language is not a required course at Georgia Southern to earn a Bachelor of Business Administration degree. It may also be the result of the perception that English is the universal language of business and that communicating on a global basis will be done in English, making a foreign language unnecessary.

One final note of interest is the rating of interpersonal skills. Given the common stereotype of accountants, it would seem that accounting majors would have ranked this lower than their non-accounting classmates. Surprisingly, both groups were in close

agreement in the level of importance of interpersonal skills, with accountants finding it slightly higher in importance. The emphasis put on interpersonal skills by professional organizations may be paying dividends in the minds of future accountants.

CONCLUSIONS

There was a distinct difference between accounting majors and non-accounting majors in the skill areas that they deemed to be important in their future careers. Surprisingly, the gap between accounting faculty, practitioners, and students is very narrow. These three groups recognize many of the same skills as being extremely important. A&S determined that accounting education has frequently been criticized for spending too much time on content mastery and too little time and effort in helping students develop skills that will enrich their lives and make them successful. In this study, the authors have concluded that accounting students agree to the importance of many of the same skills as do professionals in the field. The problem, therefore, may not lie with student interest or academic content.

It appears from the close proximity of rankings for many of the skills given by the three groups—accounting majors, accounting professors, and accounting practitioners—that the accounting practitioners may not realize that what they are getting is precisely is what they're asking for in today's college graduates.

When the rankings of practitioners were compared to the rankings of accounting students, the authors found that on 10 of the 18 areas questioned, the two groups were nearly in agreement varying by two or fewer positions in the rankings. The authors infer from these data that professionals are getting, for the most part, students who have similar views of which skills are the most important for success.

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APPENDIX A
SURVEY FOR STUDENTS IN BUSA 1105 (INTRODUCTION TO BUSINESS) AND BUSA 4610 (SENIOR SEMINAR)

		A	B	C	D	E
1	I am	Male	Female			
2	I am	17-18	19	20	21	21 +
3	I am	Black	White	Hispanic	Other	
4	I have completed how many hours of college credit	0 – 15	16-30	31 – 60	61 - 90	90 +
5	The highest level of education of my custodial parent is	Less than H.S. Diploma	H.S. Graduate	Associate (2-year) Degree	College (4-year) Degree	Graduate Degree
6	I am majoring in or plan to major in	Accounting	Finance or Economics	Info. Tech., Info. Sys. or Logistics	Management or Marketing	Other

Please rate the following areas in degree of importance for your future career, with A = Not Important to E = Very Important.

7	Managerial Accounting	29	Marketing	
8	Financial Accounting	30	Retailing & Sales	
9	Taxes	31	Analytical & Critical Thinking	
10	Business Law	32	Decision-Making	
11	Types of Business Ownership	33	Interpersonal Skills	
12	Information Systems	34	Business Decision Modeling	
13	E-Commerce & E-Business	35	Professional Demeanor	
14	Human Resource Management	36	Foreign Language	
15	Operations Management	37	Computing Technology	
16	Macro Economics	38	Leadership	
17	Micro Economics	39	Project Management	
18	Ethic & Social Responsibility	40	Customer Orientation	
19	Global Business	41	Change Management	
20	Teamwork	42	Negotiation	
21	Motivation	43	Entrepreneurship	
22	Transportation & Logistics	44	Resource Management	
23	Customer Service	45	Salesmanship	
24	Oral Communication	46	Assignments with Real Companies	
25	Written Communication	47	Role Playing	
26	Analyzing Financial Information	48	Writing Assignments	
27	Banking and Securities	49	Technology Assignments	
28	Financial Analysis	50	Case Analysis	

APPENDIX B
DEMOGRAPHICS

Gender	**Number**	**Percentage**
Males	124	56%
Females	99	44%
Total	223	100%

Race	**Number**	**Percentage**
Black	60	27%
White	146	67%
Hispanic	9	4%
Other	4	2%
Total	219	100%

Credit Hours Completed	**Number**	**Percentage**
<15	64	29%
15-30	42	19%
31-60	45	20%
60-90	20	9%
>90	51	23%
Total	222	100%

Education of Parents	**Number**	**Percentage**
< High School	5	2%
High School Graduate	61	27%
Two-Year College	53	24%
Four-Year College	65	29%
Graduate School	38	17%
Total	222	100%

Major	**Number**	**Percentage**
Accounting	23	10%
Finance / Economics	28	13%
IS/Logistics	36	16%
Management/Marketing	88	40%
Other	47	21%
Total	222	100%