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Sharon Sabba Fierstein

A Practitioner's View on Recruiting New Professionals

Over the past few years, the NYSSCPA's Quality Enhancement Policy Committee (QEPC) has been looking at peer review, ethics, and now education. We're studying education-related issues in two pieces: 1) pre-service education, meaning the preparation students need to become CPAs; and 2) post-service education, the continuing education of CPAs.

The committee includes large- and small-firm practitioners; educators; current and former regulators; and non-CPAs. The non-CPAs are valuable because they keep us grounded; for example, saying, "This is what we expect of CPAs and the kinds of skills that we expect them to have." Our approach to thinking about the types of skills CPAs are expected to have is very conceptual. Obviously a CPA should have some audit background, some accounting background, and some tax background. But most important is a good foundation of communication skills—generally not something people think of as essential for accountants. Most people think accounting is only about math skills. But we've found that communication skills—reading, writing, verbal communications, and, most important of all, listening, to your clients, your colleagues, and the rest of the profession—are probably the most important attributes for a CPA to have.

As Christie Dorsa mentioned, the extra 30 credits of a graduate program develop skills that most undergraduate courses don't. Post-Enron, the accounting profession has taken some hits, and

for a period of time relatively few new accountants entered the workforce. Practitioners are worried that students will say, "A fifth year? Why would I want to be in accounting when I can go right into business?" We've learned that other states that have already implemented the 150-hour requirement experienced a short-term drop-off in recruiting to the accounting profession, but the numbers have rebounded and the profession became stronger than before.

The change in recruiting has already started. Marks Paneth & Shron LLP has a staff of over 400 people. Until this point, our typical new hire has had an undergraduate degree and is expected to do handle a variety of responsibilities, including both audit and tax work. As students come in with 150-hour degrees, we'll need to adjust our recruiting efforts to recognize that level of education as the current standard. We will also need to think through what this will mean to client service and expectations, both from the firm's and the candidates' perspectives.

As Dan Dustin noted, it's going to be more expensive for these students to finish the accounting curriculum to become a CPA. As a profession, we need to recognize that we may have a two-tiered program, with four-year students who will want to work only in industry and may not complete their fifth year. However, for them to take that fifth year is in a CPA firm's best interest. Considered this way, there is an opportunity for firms to change how they recruit students. One possible answer is to hire students when they've had four years of college and for firms to help pay for the fifth year. I believe that this would create loyalty, to both the firm and the profession. In this way, students would still have the option of staying in the public accounting environment or moving into private industry later in their careers.

The NYSSCPA's Quality Enhancement Policy Committee is also discussing the drop-off in the numbers of accounting educators with PhDs and how this negative trend could possibly be addressed by other means. The apparent consensus is that exposing students to educators with experience both inside and outside of the academic environment provides the most positive results. As president-elect of the New York State Society of CPAs, I and other Society officers have had the opportunity to speak with students and chapter members around the state. Students tell us that they learn the most from—and are most impressed by—professors who share firsthand, practical experience as well as their academic knowledge. □

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