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Integrating Liberal Learning into the Accounting Curriculum

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In a field that may seem as far away from liberal arts as possible, accounting educators are using techniques and content from the arts and sciences to prepare students to succeed in a complex, global, technology-based business environment. The accounting profession, for the most part, has changed dramatically in the past 30 years. Where the focus may have been on recording transactions on green columnar ledger paper, almost all accounting is done today in information systems. The skills needed by students entering the profession are more sophisticated than they once were. There is still a requirement to understand the basic accounting model (assets equal liabilities plus equities), but accounting students need to know and understand so much more.

The new requirements for educated accounting professionals are dependent on knowledge, skills, and capabilities that most naturally result from an arts and science background. A strong understanding of the fundamental accounting concepts, as well as an understanding of business environments and transactions, are necessary to identify the appropriate accounting and reporting treatments. Accountants must exercise judgment to first ascertain the relevant options for recording an economic event and the associated disclosure, choose the best option, and then justify to stakeholders why that is the best option. The justification has technical requirements to it, but can also have ethical, global, and societal considerations. So, in addition to learning the standard debits, credits, accounting rules, and other components of a core body of accounting knowledge, students must also learn how to think critically, to be able to compare and contrast and consider several different perspectives, and to apply ethical decision making.

The importance of, and desire for, an arts and science foundation is not a new phenomenon in accounting education. When accounting
was first added to college curricula, it was widely believed that students should have at least two years of arts and science courses followed by two years of accounting courses. More recently, accounting educators have incorporated liberal arts concepts and techniques directly in the accounting courses they are teaching. Here is a brief history of accounting education, the justification for why it is important to incorporate liberal arts concepts and approaches into accounting courses, specific examples of this integration, and recommendations for the future of accounting education.

History

In articles in succeeding issues of the journal *Issues in Accounting Education*, Van Whye (2007a, 2007b) provides a two-part history of accounting education in the United States. He relates how accounting education started in the 1880s at Wharton. At first, accounting teachers provided the fundamental technical aspects of accounting, with a focus on balance sheets. As the accounting profession developed in the later 1800s, the American Association of Public Accountants was formed. The association pushed for a more theoretical basis to accounting education, to align it with other areas of study in college. Requiring a college education was considered imperative to establish the legitimacy of accounting as a profession, similar to medicine and law.

The early years of formal college accounting education at New York University were marked by a tension between instructors who developed a theoretical foundation for accounting and others who emphasized the importance of practical, laboratory-like experience. In the late 1930s, as accounting associations were trying to influence curricula, they mandated a significant amount of accounting content but also required two years of liberal arts education. There was recognition from the very beginning that the liberal arts component was important to the formal education of a professional accountant but it was not expected to be integrated with the technical accounting content. In light of the New York State college education requirement for accounting certification, McCrea and Kester (1936, pp. 106–117) explained the type of education that was most suitable for professional accountants. In addition to general business and technical accounting courses, aspiring CPAs should have ‘a sufficiently broad knowledge of the so-called arts and sciences to give him a proper appreciation of present-day civilization’ (McCrea and Kester, 110). Similar to other professions (engineering, law, and medicine), McCree and Kester prescribed a two-year liberal arts