

VOLUNTARY INCOME TAX ASSISTANCE: A TAX PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

Many similarities exist between a tax compliance practice and a university based Voluntary Income Tax Assistance [VITA] [program](#). This paper proposes that a VITA site can be run like a professional practice and takes the first step in the development of a handbook for such an approach. This handbook will address personnel issues (hiring, training, work guidelines, and performance review) and operational issues (client and worker scheduling and quality control practices). Emphasis will be placed on professionalism. Significant practical experience and unique opportunities for reflection and professional development will result when taking a professional practice approach.

SKETCH OF PROPOSAL

VITA is a program sponsored by the Internal Revenue Service. VITA sites typically exist on college and university campuses, military installations, libraries and community centers. An allied program, Tax Counseling for the Elderly [TCE], operates at selected community centers and senior centers.

The VITA Program includes IRS support functions—including volunteer training materials—and IRS provided software. VITA operates at approved sites with supervisors who, among other responsibilities, serve as the intermediary between the IRS and the volunteers and their clients. Volunteers are uncompensated and they are exempted under federal law from personal liability unless they intentionally act to the detriment of the taxpayer/client. In virtually every other regard, the relationship between the client and the preparer is the same as that between a tax professional and a paying client—trust in the volunteers' competence and professionalism, sharing of confidential personal information, etc.

This proposal is the first step in the development of a handbook for the operation of a VITA tax practice operated on a college or university campus. Although the operation is not a profit seeking enterprise, it should be organized in the same manner as a professional practice. Management consists of the chief executive (the [program](#) coordinator) and whatever paid and unpaid assistants that are utilized.

A job description for the position of VITA tax return preparer must be prepared. In addition to the task description, it should include a summary of volunteer qualifications, perhaps including satisfactory completion of an individual income tax course. In addition, an employment contract should be prepared detailing training obligations, performance expectations, and required time and schedule commitments. Interviews of volunteers should be held with the [program](#) managers. Appropriate criteria should be used to select the necessary number of volunteers. During the tax return preparation season, volunteers will be given regular feedback. At the end of the season, reviews will provide final feedback and recommendations—excellent reflection opportunities for professional development.

A cornerstone of this proposal is the goal of eliciting professional behavior. This involves courteous treatment of clients, reasonable turnaround, and zealous respect for the confidential nature of the material.