

# **IMPLEMENTING A MULTICULTURAL APPROACH TO AN ACCOUNTING ASSESSMENT PROGRAM**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to design an assessment program consistent with Accounting Education Change Commission (AECC) objectives for accounting curriculums and to determine if significant cultural differences could be substantiated in areas of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The specific methodology surveyed accounting alumni to measure their perceptions regarding their individual level in each of the AECC designated competencies. Data on cultural backgrounds was also gathered and analyzed for significant ethnic differences in student outcomes. Results from the study found significant differences in alumni perceptions of certain learning outcomes between ethnic groups. The implication of the findings emphasizes the importance of incorporating student cultural differences into an ongoing curriculum assessment program.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Traditional accounting programs have been designed around technical information relating to the various topics tested for professional certification. Assessment of these discipline-based content programs could easily be measured by the student pass rate on the national standardized exam. However, concerns were raised within the accounting profession that these traditional accounting programs were inadequately preparing students for success in the increasingly complex, high tech, global environment. In 1990, the Accounting Education Change Commission (AECC) recommended that institutions of higher learning broaden the scope of their accounting programs beyond technical skills and include for example, interpersonal, communication, and analytical skills [1].

In response to both external and internal pressures to adapt to the new business environment, many schools have revamped their accounting programs in accordance with AECC guidelines. However, change for change sake does not necessarily bring about program improvement. Implicit in the AECC charge is the need to assess the impact of curriculum changes on students' knowledge, attitudes, and skills. This paper analyses one assessment methodology implemented at a large state funded university on the west coast. The increasing diversity of the accounting student population enrolled in our institutions of higher learning, demands an increased awareness of differences in student learning outcomes. The vital research question addressed is whether or not the revamping of accounting programs adequately prepares a multicultural workforce to compete in the changing accounting profession. A survey instrument was designed and implemented to establish a benchmark of learning outcomes among recent graduates of the accounting program.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW ON ASSESSMENT OF ACCOUNTING PROGRAMS**

Within the accounting discipline, the recent literature tends to focus on an outcome approach largely attributable to AECC's charge to broaden the student's scope beyond merely technical skills. The

broadening of accounting curricula to encompass communication, interpersonal, and attitudes dictates some measurement of these outcomes.

Kimmel et al. summarized the history of assessment in higher education within the context of accreditation [6]. Their findings indicated only 42 percent of the respondents had implemented a comprehensive outcomes approach. DeMong et al. also presented an overview of multiple outcome assessment approaches specific to accounting programs [3]. They designed a matrix identifying the effectiveness of various assessment methodologies relative to specific outcomes.

One of the earlier empirical studies, conducted by Herring and Izard evaluated the effectiveness of the AICPA Achievement Test for Accounting Graduates as an assessment tool [4]. They found a significant correlation between this test instrument and other student intellect measures including accounting GPA and ACT math score. Akers et al. identified various measurement tools to assess accounting student outcomes at Marquette University [2]. Their assessment team identified 6 desirable student outcomes and established quantifiable goals to measure success in each area. Areas of weakness included: oral communication skills, business writing skills, and microcomputer skills. Stivers et al. used a variance analysis approach to identify discrepancies between actual scores on outcome and target scores indicating if any action is required to improve performance [7]. Hill et al. collected additional empirical evidence by assessing accounting student outcomes in the area of knowledge, skills, and attitudes [5]. Their study measured students' perceptions of their levels of understanding in each of these areas at the beginning of the junior year and at the end of the senior year. Noticeable improvements were noted especially in the area of accounting knowledge.

This study draws on the experience of the prior literature and attempts to assess student perceptions of their unique abilities in the areas of knowledge, skills, and attitudes as put forth in AECC objectives. The research extends previous works by incorporating student ethnic characteristics as a variable in relationship to learning outcomes.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research question is whether learning outcomes consistent with AECC objectives are statistically related to student ethnic background. In this study, accounting alumni from a state university over a three year period were surveyed regarding their perceptions on their skill level in each of the learning outcomes. The final sample of respondents included 160 responses that represent a thirty-four percent response rate.

Comparisons were made to measure significant differences between groups based on student ethnic background including: Caucasian, Asian, Hispanic/Latino, African-American, and other. The statistical methodology used to assess significant differences between groups is a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Demographic Data**

The statistics substantiate a cross-cultural group. Caucasians and Asians represented approximately 41 percent and 46 percent of the total, respectively. Hispanics/Latino, African American and others accounted for the remaining 13 percent. The language skill of the various ethnic groups was split.

Approximately 57 percent of the sample reported English as a first language, while the remaining 43 percent indicated that English was their second language. The age groups were evenly dispersed with an average age of 32. Finally, women represented the majority of the sample, 72 percent of the total.

## **Results of ANOVA**

Responses from students of different ethnic backgrounds were analyzed for significant differences using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). Post hoc analysis revealed significant differences between groups within certain variables. Student differences between ethnic groups in their understanding of the ethical and professional responsibilities of the accountant were significant at the .001 level. Post hoc analysis indicates Asians' perceptions of their knowledge over ethical responsibilities were significantly lower than both Caucasian and Hispanic/Latino groups.

Another interesting significant difference was observed involving the ability to solve unstructured problems using critical thinking skills. Again the post hoc analysis indicated Asian students reported the lowest mean of 5.15. This level of perceived capability was significantly lower than both Caucasian and Hispanic/Latino groups averaging 5.6 and 5.8, respectively. The ability to handle stress, was significant at the .05 level. The highest perceived capability was among the Hispanic/Latino group with a mean response of 5.8. Post hoc analysis revealed a significant difference ( $p < .05$ ) between the Caucasian and the Hispanic/Latino group. The ability to provide leadership, proved statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ). In this case, the highest means were observed among the Caucasian and Hispanic/Latino groups, 6.0 and 6.1, respectively. The mean response for the Asian sample population was 5.5. Post hoc analysis indicated the difference between Asians and Caucasians were significant at the .001 level; and Asians and Hispanic/Latinos were significant at the .05 level.

All variables in the communication skills area proved statistically significant. Both verbal and written skills were significant at the .001 level. The mean response for Asians of 4.9 for verbal skills was below the counterpart Caucasian mean of 5.5 and Hispanic/Latino mean of 5.7. These differences were significant at the .001 and .01 level, respectively. Similar results were found regarding written skills. The mean response for the Asian sample population was 5.1; whereas, the Caucasian and Hispanic/Latino group reported 5.9 and 5.8, respectively. Again post hoc test found the differences between Asians and Caucasians in perceived capability in writing skills significant at the .001 level. The results were similar between Asians and Hispanic/Latinos but at the .05 level.

Caucasians and Hispanic/Latino's sampled demonstrated the highest level of acceptance for the importance of integrity and fairness by mean responses of 6.3 and 6.4, respectively. The mean responses for Asians and African-Americans were 5.9 and 5.4, respectively. Overall this variable was significant at the .01 level. Post hoc tests revealed Asian responses were significantly different from both Caucasian ( $p < .001$ ) and Hispanic/Latino groups ( $p < .05$ ). The lower mean response from the African-American groups was also significantly different from both Caucasian ( $p < .01$ ) and Hispanic/Latino groups ( $p < .05$ ). The remaining variables tested by the survey instrument did not yield significant results.

## **LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

Methodological concerns related to this study center on the use of a self-report instrument in which subjects were asked to assess their individual levels of knowledge, skills, and attitudes pertinent to AECC objectives. The use of self-reported data has its limitations, but the clear advantage is alumni are in the best position to assess their individual preparedness for the chosen professional track relative to

their peers. In this study insight into the technical and intellectual skills required of entry-level positions in the profession with 1 – 3 years of experience was provided by the results. While these results pertain to one institution, and may not be generalizable to all graduates, they do represent a start towards a better understanding of student cultural differences and assessment of learning outcomes.

The evidence substantiated differences between ethnic groups in certain areas of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. In summary, Asian students' learning outcomes were significantly lower than Caucasian and Hispanic/Latinos groups in their perceived: understanding of ethical and professional responsibilities, ability to think critically, ability to provide leadership, abilities to communicate verbally and in writing. Both the Asian and African-American groups reported significantly lower acceptance levels of the importance of integrity and fairness when compared to Caucasian and Hispanic/Latino ethnic groups. Finally, the ability to manage stress was significantly lower for the Caucasian group compared to Hispanic/Latinos in the study. No statistical significance was found for other variables including the degree of satisfaction with their overall education in preparing for their current job position.

The results of this study may not be generalizable to all institutions. Yet, evidence strongly suggests student characteristics should be incorporated into an assessment program. In this study differences were observed between ethnic groups. Future research is encouraged to identify other areas of differences such as gender, language skills, age, etc. This study lays the foundation for building an accounting program that will fulfill individual student needs and meet AECC objectives.

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