

# Breaking The Ice: Career Development Activities For Accounting Students

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper describes two co-curricular career development activities, mock interviews and speed networking that we provide for accounting majors at our university. The driving force behind both activities was to increase comfort levels for students when interacting with professionals and to enhance their job interview and networking skills. Results indicate that both activities are successful, as a high proportion of students strongly agree/agree that the activities meet their objectives, and virtually all of the students strongly agree/agree that the activities are a worthwhile use of their time.*

**Keywords:** Career development, mock interview, speed networking

## INTRODUCTION

In Issues Statement No. 4, *Improving the Early Employment Experience of Accountants*, the Accounting Education Change Commission (AECC) recommended that students should:

- Seek opportunities to obtain first-hand knowledge of the business world and practice environment.
- Obtain information about career opportunities and the job search (AECC, 1993, 2).

Accounting departments can help students undertake these objectives by facilitating their interaction with accounting professionals. Indeed, we incorporated similar phrasing in objectives for our program mission and assessment plan, namely:

- To prepare graduates of the Program for their first position in the field of accounting.
- To promote and enhance employment opportunities for graduates of the Program.

The objective of this paper is to describe the development of two co-curricular career development activities, mock interviews and speed networking, with the goal of enhancing accounting students' interview skills and networking abilities, thus facilitating their employment opportunities. Indeed, obtaining such a competitive advantage is more important than in past years, given the most recent supply and demand survey results published by the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) that indicate the supply of accounting graduates is increasing, but demand for accounting recruits is flat or decreasing (Reigle, Bunning and Grant, 2009).

## BACKGROUND

Our accounting department is part of a major southwest university and has admitted 70 upper-division accounting majors on average each year for the past four years. We offer various opportunities for students to network with accounting professionals. Beta Alpha Psi is an active chapter through which members can interact with professionals through firm office tours, on-campus presentations by professionals and special social events. Students can also interact with professionals through annual "meet the firms" types of events and may have the opportunity to listen to professionals who serve as guest speakers in various classes. The department offers an Accounting eMentor Program that brings students and professionals together in a one-on-one mutually beneficial mentoring relationship

(described in Wilburn, Amer, and Kilpatrick, 2009). Despite all these opportunities, many students still do not interact with business or accounting professionals in one-on-one conversations.

For the past eleven years, the accounting department and Accounting Advisory Council (AAC) have sponsored annual accounting career panels in the fall semester prior to “recruiting season,” as described in Amer, Bain, and Wilburn (2010). The purposes of these career panels are to help recruit pre-business students to the major and to give accounting majors different perspectives of career opportunities in the field of accounting. The format has included rotating panels of about five professionals each, who engage in concurrent question and answer sessions with pre-business students and accounting majors (in separate rooms, based on class level). Topics of discussion are tailored to the particular student group, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Topics of Discussion at Annual Career Panels**

<u>Pre-business Students</u>	<u>Junior Accounting Majors</u>	<u>Senior/5<sup>th</sup> Year Accounting Majors</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruiting majors</li> <li>• Dispelling preconceptions</li> <li>• Career paths</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional certification</li> <li>• Routes to earn 150 hours</li> <li>• The “successful” student</li> <li>• Career paths</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Landing the job</li> <li>• Transition to work</li> <li>• The CPA exam</li> <li>• Careers and work/life balance</li> </ul>

Experience with the career panels has been very positive, with student evaluations of the event consistently indicating they learned much from participating in the panel discussions and found the sessions to be highly valuable. In addition, students in the principles level courses were significantly affected to consider accounting as a major (Amer, Bain, and Wilburn, 2010).

**MOTIVATION AND DESIGN FOR ADDITIONAL CAREER DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES**

**Mock Interviews**

After conducting the career panels for five years, the authors (one of whom was the outgoing, and the other the incoming, Department Head) held a focus session with selected accounting majors regarding possible ways to enhance their experiences at this event. The result of this focus session was the addition of mock interviews as a component of the career panel day. While the University’s Career Development Office offers mock interviews for students, participants in the focus group indicated that those interviews were generic and therefore did not provide targeted feedback specific to accounting majors. The two main tasks in the design of the mock interviews were (1) to recruit professionals to participate, and (2) to make it as efficient and productive as possible for students.

The first task was accomplished by the Department Head who contacted firms to identify the professionals. AAC members were already on campus for the day to participate on the career panels and meet students at the reception following the panels. Since firms were also sending additional professionals and human resources personnel for these activities, many professionals were already on campus. Thus, procuring around a dozen of these individuals to arrive a couple of hours earlier to participate in the mock interviews was a relatively easy accomplishment.

For the second task, we formed a committee of faculty and AAC members to design the mock interview process. The committee designed the process to be as easy as possible for the volunteer professionals, by creating a consistent interview process which includes a standard set of interview questions and evaluation sheet (see Appendices A and B, respectively). Since the AAC members were recruiters for their respective firms, the committee was able to select interview questions that would be similar to those used in actual interviews.

Designing the format of the mock interviews required some innovative thought regarding how to provide a productive mock interview for each participating student, given the relatively large number of students who desire to participate. To double the number of students who could participate, we modified the typical mock interview format (i.e., where a recruiter conducts an interview with a student) by having the students work in pairs, i.e., one student assumes the role of the interviewer by asking the standard set of questions to the other student, while the

professional assumes an observatory role. In order to simulate a real interview, students do not see these questions beforehand. Having the students act as the recruiter allows the professional to focus on evaluating the performance of the interviewed student and provide more constructive criticism via the standard evaluation form (see Appendix B). Additionally, the professional acts as a backup interviewer using suggested follow-up questions provided only to the professionals.

Mock interviews are conducted during two, 40-minute sessions and run concurrently with the career panel sessions. Each interview is limited to about 12 minutes, leaving around 5 minutes for feedback from the professional, which both students hear. Students then move to a second table (new professional, new perspective) and reverse roles for the second interview with a different set of interview questions (color-coded, to ensure different sets of questions are used). If time permits, the professionals may also perform a quick resume review. Since the mock interviews run concurrently with the career panel sessions, a faculty member serves as coordinator/ timekeeper to ensure that both students have their mock interviews completed within the allotted time.

**Speed Networking**

We conducted the career panel / mock interviews day format (described above) for two years, and continued to consider how we could continually improve the students’ experiences. One significant area that we targeted for improvement was the dismal attendance at the reception following the formal events. We noted that relatively few junior-level accounting majors attended the reception, compared to seniors and those students who participated in the mock interviews (who would be interviewing in the upcoming weeks).

Consequently, we immediately administered an e-mail survey with selected junior-level students to inquire about possible reasons behind the large absenteeism. The students’ responses suggested an overriding theme – these students were very intimidated by the professionals and did not realize the importance of networking. This theme is evidenced by the following responses:

- Students just feel awkward around the professionals.
- It’s hard to think of things to say, or ways of starting conversations with “strangers” who are older and more knowledgeable than you are.
- Talking to professionals is a little intimidating.

We then held a focus group with these students to brainstorm on an approach to alleviate the students’ angst in talking with professionals, and thus improve the attendance and quality of interaction at the reception. The outcome from this focus session was to incorporate a “speed networking” event (loosely analogous to speed dating) in between the career panels / mock interviews activities and the reception. The objective of speed networking was to create a structured “ice-breaker” event that would lead to enhanced attendance and one-on-one interactions between the students and the professionals during the reception. Table 2 presents the criteria considered in the design of the speed networking event.

**Table 2: Speed Networking Design**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Design</b>
Design the event in the spirit of speed dating.	Each student should interact with a professional for about one minute, and the discussion topics should be easy for all participants.
Keep the total length of the structured portion relatively short.	Thirty minutes seemed an appropriate length of time.
Assign students into small groups in order to increase their comfort levels.	Groups (referred to as stations) consist of 1-2 professionals and 4-5 students each.
Each student should interact with professionals from diverse organizations and levels within those organizations.	Groupings of four stations each (referred to as “pods”), with professionals assigned to pods yield the desired diversity. Professionals then rotate among the four stations.

We designed the speed networking activity to last about 30 minutes, consisting of four sessions of predetermined discussion topics, with each session lasting six minutes. We assigned small groups of four to five students into “stations,” each led by one or two professionals, with four stations in each of the assigned areas in the hallways of our building (“pods”). (Refer to see Appendices C and D). Eight pods, which required 36 total professionals, were sufficient to accommodate the approximately 130 student participants. A faculty member serving as the pod moderator gives each professional a topic card at the beginning of each session. After a minute of introductions, the professional presents the discussion topic to the students in the station and students answer in a round-robin format. At the end of each session, the professionals obtain the next topic card from the faculty moderator and rotate to the next station in the same pod.

**EVALUATION OF THE ACTIVITIES**

At the end of the final session for the career day, we administered a brief student survey to determine the level of students’ satisfaction with the particular activities in which they participated. Overall, survey results indicated that both activities have been successful additions to the career day. Additionally, student attendance and interactions with professionals at the reception has increased significantly.

**Mock Interviews**

Mock interviews have been conducted for four years with 149 students participating. Results from the mock interview activity are reported in Table 3. Of the various activities in which students have participated on our career day, student evaluations indicate that mock interviews have been the most valued activity. However, because this is a voluntary activity for which students must sign-up, some degree of self-selection bias should be expected. Overall, a very high proportion of students evaluated the mock interview activity positively, with 99 percent who strongly agreed/agreed that the event was informative, 98 percent who strongly agreed/agreed that this was an effective use of their time, and 98 percent who strongly agreed/agreed that they would recommend this event to their friends.

**Table 3: Mock Interviews Evaluation Results**

<b>n=149</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
I found the event informative.	85%	14%	1%	0%	0%
Attendance at this event was an effective use of my time.	84%	14%	2%	0%	0%
I would recommend this event to a friend.	87%	11%	1%	0%	0%

About a third of the students provided additional written comments about mock interviews, the majority of which were positive and constructive. Representative student comments regarding the activity included:

- This really helped me define some goals and was helpful in determining my interviewing strengths and weaknesses.
- Thank you! I was given good feedback on my interview. These suggestions will help me to improve during my “real” interview.
- This was very informative and the professionals were very helpful and very nice. They made an interview a lot easier.
- Mock interviews are a great opportunity to get more comfortable with the interviewing process.
- It was such good practice interviewing with real professionals. Their feedback was really insightful.
- They helped me with my resume [and] my performance at the interview.
- It was very helpful to run interviewing questions in a comfortable environment [and] getting recruiters’ feedback on those interviewing techniques.
- Professionals were very helpful. Gave great pointers, helped get comfortable with interviewing.

The primary suggestions that students expressed in their written comments about the mock interviews were for the mock interviews to occur prior to the College of Business career exploration day, for the professionals to provide more constructive criticism to students, and to have a longer time period with the professionals.

**Speed Networking**

We have conducted the speed networking activity for two years, with 250 students participating. Students also evaluated this activity positively, with the results reported in Table 4. Ninety-three percent of students strongly agreed/agreed that the session made them more comfortable in talking with professionals and 94 percent of students strongly agreed/agreed that the speed networking activity be offered the following year.

**Table 4: Speed Networking Evaluation Results**

<b>n=250</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
The session made me more comfortable in talking with professionals.	68%	25%	6%	1%	0%
I would recommend having this event next year.	74%	20%	5%	1%	0%

Additional written comments regarding speed networking were provided from about 20 percent of the students; again, most comments provided positive reactions to the activity, including:

- Good getting to know the professionals on a personal basis.
- It really gave everyone a little glimpse of how to socially network with professionals, especially with the reception following right after.
- Talking informally with professionals helps to not be so intimidated.
- Met [and] got business cards.
- This was excellent! It helped me realize that the professionals are people too, and that I don't have to dread talking with them.
- I like how you meet multiple professionals in doing these in a very informal manner.
- Speed networking was fun. The professionals were very down-to-earth.
- It was very nice getting to know the professionals in an informal setting.
- It made you not be as nervous. I think this one helped the best.
- Good to get to know each other [and] break the ice.

Although the majority of students enjoyed the informal nature of speed networking, a few students commented that they would have preferred the questions to be career-related. The other concern mentioned by students was the noise level which made it difficult for some students to hear the conversations.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

This paper describes two co-curricular career development activities, mock interviews and speed networking that we provide for accounting majors at our university. The driving force behind both activities was to increase comfort levels for students when interacting with professionals and to enhance their job interview and networking skills. Results indicate that both activities are successful, as a high proportion of students strongly agree/agree that the activities meet their objectives, and virtually all of the students strongly agree/agree that the activities are a worthwhile use of their time. Additionally, the accounting faculty has received numerous complements from AAC members, recruiters, and other professionals for our career day.

While our experience with the mock interviews and speed networking has been positive, it is important to recognize the costs associated with these types of initiatives. First, there are significant administrative costs associated with organizing these types of events, which are typically borne by the Department Head. Second, a commitment is required from all members of the faculty, advisory council (if any), and professionals. It is necessary

for faculty to support these efforts by making in-class announcements explaining the events, as well as facilitating the various activities during the career day. The accounting professionals provide their time and effort for preparation, travel, and participation in the various activities. Overall, we believe that the benefits of these initiatives significantly outweigh the costs.

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**APPENDIX A: Mock Interview Questions**

**Set A Questions**

1. How did you choose accounting as a major? What do you see yourself doing in five years?
2. What has been your favorite accounting class? Why?
3. Tell me about a difficult problem or decision which you faced in your work/college assignments.  
Suggested probing questions for professionals:  
What was the situation? / How did you discover this problem?  
How did you decide what action to take?  
What was the outcome?
4. Describe a project you participated in that required extensive planning.  
Suggested probing questions for professionals:  
What was your role? / Tell me exactly what you did.  
Did your plan require adjustments?  
How did the project turn out?
5. What would someone you've worked for describe as your strengths?  
Suggested probing questions for professionals:  
What about areas that need improvement?
6. Suggested question for professionals only if time permits:  
Is there anything else you would like me to know about you?

**Set B Questions**

1. Why did you choose accounting as a major? What are your career goals?
2. What was your least favorite accounting class? Why?
3. Describe a group project that you've worked on and the problems the group encountered in completing the project.  
Suggested probing questions for professionals:  
What steps did the group take to overcome the problems?  
What was the most effective thing you said or did?
4. Describe a time in school when you had many assignments or projects due at the same time.  
Suggested probing questions for professionals:  
What steps did you take to get them all done?
5. Describe the most challenging situation you've had to deal with.  
Suggested probing questions for professionals:  
How did you deal with it?  
How did it turn out?
6. Suggested question for professionals only if time permits:  
Is there anything else you would like me to know about you?

Note: The above interview question sets are provided to the professionals, as they contain suggested probing questions in the event a student's response appears insufficient. The students' versions contain only the initial questions.

**APPENDIX B: Mock Interviews – Professional’s Evaluation**

Please rate the candidate on the following:

1 = Needs Improvement    2 = Acceptable    3 = Very Good    4 = Exceptional

Clarity of career interests and goals	1	2	3	4
Verbal communication skills	1	2	3	4
Nonverbal behavior (eye contact, voice, body language)	1	2	3	4
Ability to formulate answers to behavioral questions (described situation, task, action, result)	1	2	3	4
Professionalism (appearance, self-confidence, motivation)	1	2	3	4
Resume review (layout, appearance, key points stand out)	1	2	3	4
Overall first impression	1	2	3	4

**APPENDIX C: Speed Networking Design**

Logistics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Total length ~ 30 minutes</li> <li>• 4 sessions of ~ 6 minutes each</li> <li>• Each session comprised of 4-5 students &amp; 1-2 professionals</li> <li>• Each student &amp; professional is primary talker for ~ 1 minute</li> <li>• 1 minute for professional to rotate to next station</li> </ul>
Session Format	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introductions</li> <li>• One topic for discussion per session, provided (see below)</li> <li>• Professionals rotate to another station &amp; repeat process</li> </ul>
Session Topics (Professionals receive cards with these questions.)	#1: Describe your favorite activity or hobby. #2: What is your ideal vacation? #3: What has been your favorite <u>non</u> -accounting class in college & why? #4: What was your favorite movie this summer?

**APPENDIX D: Sample Pod Rotation**

