$1.50 VOL. 33 NO. 29 www.ocbj.com JULY 19-25, 2010

ORANGE COUNTY BUSINESS JOURNAL

School's in Session

Accounting Programs Still Drawing in Students, Recruiters Despite Slowdown in Jobs

By MICHAEL VOLPE

The demand for workers at accounting firms may have cooled, but universities still are seeing enrollment gains for accounting programs.

Accounting firms surged in numbers after the passage of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002. That employment rush looks to be over as firms shed jobs due to a slowdown in accounting work during the past few years (see story, page 28).

That hasn't stopped people from wanting to be accountants, according to local universities, which have seen a growth in enrollment.

And employers still are looking to pick up the brightest of these students when they're needed, or when work starts to pick up again.

The accounting program at California State University, Fullerton, has seen steady growth for most of this decade, started by an enrollment jump after Sarbanes-Oxley was enacted.

The accounting program saw more than 1,000 undergraduates apply for majors in accounting this year, according to Betty Chavis, chair and professor of accounting at Cal State Fullerton.

A year ago, the school saw 900 undergraduates looking to become accountants compared to 2008's 750 students.

"We are pretty much at capacity right now," Chavis said. "We have had to hire seven teachers over the last three years to our accounting faculty to keep up and we're still hiring."

Demand for Cal State Fullerton's master's in business administration in accounting has grown as the downturn deepened. About 200 students are enrolled in the program for this school year. A year ago, about 100 students were enrolled in the master's program.

Cal State Fullerton Accounting Society recruitment drive: school one of few with separate accounting accreditation

"We're expecting the graduate program to continue to grow very rapidly," Chavis said. "Demand for our programs has only increased in the downturn."

Though jobs opportunities at many firms have waned, a degree in accounting still is desirable, according to many professionals.

"It's still a strong profession that is the cornerstone of business," said Gary Wilson, partner in charge of the Irvine office of Chicago-based Grant Thornton LLP. "There is value in the public accounting profession in this down cycle, but it will become more valuable when we start to recover."

Graduates with accounting degrees are being sought by the private and government sectors, even as accounting firms shed workers.

"I'm seeing an increase in demand for non-executive level accounting positions and demand for controllers and directors of financial reporting," Wilson said. "The government is always hiring it seems."

Despite the tempered job growth, local and global accounting firms with OC offices continue to work closely with several local universities, including CSUF; the University of California, Irvine; Chapman University in Orange; University of Southern California; and University of California, Los Angeles.

The goal: to get in front of the next batch of entry-level graduates.

Recruiters at Cal State programs have found students "tend to have good work experience, communication skills and leadership ability, all of which are qualities that go a long way in public accounting," said Stephanie Polon, national director of campus recruiting at New York-based BDO Seidman LLP.

Universities in the county have beefed up their accounting programs in response to demand.

UC Irvine has seen more interest in accounting at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

The university's Graduate School of Management offers an undergraduate accounting minor.

The accounting minor is made up of nine courses that qualify students to take the certified public accountant exam. UCI's Graduate School of Management also offers accounting electives for its graduate students, as well as required core courses in financial accounting.

Chapman University offers a bachelor's in accounting, in addition to a bachelor's in business administration.

CSUF is the only accounting program in Orange County separately accredited by the

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Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, better known as AACSB International. The association is an international accrediting agency for business schools.

The accreditation makes CSUF stand out among other local universities, according to university officials. The only other university in Southern California with a similar accreditation is USC.

CSUF also reaches out to local and national businesses through an accounting advisory board that's headed by Chavis. The board gives input on courses so that classes stay relevant to current accounting issues.

The board—which meets quarterly at members' offices—includes top partners from the Irvine office of New York-based Ernst & Young LLP, the Irvine office of Grant Thornton, the Irvine office of Seattle-based Moss Adams LLP and Irvine-based Haskell & White LLP, among others.

"I set up the board with one of the big four, one from the second tier, one from the regional and one local with a few others," Chavis said. "They give us input on how our students are doing and what changes we may need to make for the future."

In some cases, managing partners like Wayne Pinnell of Haskell & White actually step into the classroom to help teach accounting.

"I teach the auditing class for seniors," Pinnell said. "I kid with students at the beginning of the semester that I stand between them and graduation."

Many firms weren't surprised that much of their staff have some level of Titan pride.

"Cal State students manage to balance work and their personal lives from the start of their education and already know what it takes to be a good employee," said Fernando Jimenez, a partner in the tax department at Irvine-based Ramirez International and a CSUF accounting graduate. "It's not surprising at a firm like ours to find more than half of the staff is Cal State grads."

No firm could give an exact percentage of Fullerton alumni on staff or what percentage of first year associates are recruited from CSUF.

"Each year is different with recruiting, but I think it speaks very highly of the school that several leaders in BDO's Orange County office call CSUF their alma mater," Polon said.

Recruiting

Even with the slowdown in hiring, accounting firms are more active on college campuses in recent years in order to attract and groom top students to become future employees.

"BDO has developed a national campus recruiting strategy focused on a select number of schools that we feel produce the best candidates for our firm," Polon said.

Firms often sponsor programs and seminars and tap their employees to help teach classes, said John Belli, managing partner of the Irvine office of Ernst & Young.

"Meeting students early on is very important," Belli said. "When you get involved in accounting programs, teach courses and have good relationships with faculty, you meet good candidates along the way."

The firms often host on-campus recruiting sessions targeting sophomores and juniors.

Fall recruiting—which usually lasts from August through November—give accounting firms an opportunity to meet with senior-level students who are interested in full-time jobs for the following year.

Students usually participate in summer internships before their senior year. Internships typically last about eight weeks and focus on skill training and team building.

Firms interview junior-level students January through March for summer internship programs. ■