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Seizing Opportunity

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Innovative internship program gives accounting majors an edge

By KIM HILL

While their classmates enjoyed a few more days of winter break, 17 of the University's accounting majors stepped into the workforce as paid interns with public accounting firms.

Over the past decade more than 200 students have participated in IWU's unique and popular winter internship program, which allows students to work alongside full-time CPA associates during the firms' busy seasons and stay on track to finish their coursework in four years.

"Students at other universities often take a full semester off just to intern," said Laurie Diekhoff, associate director for career engagement at the Hart Career Center. "Our program is designed to allow students to experience a 10-week full-time internship for academic credit, then return to campus for five weeks of intensive classes before the semester ends, so students get a full four units of credit for the semester." The five weeks of accounting classes are affectionately called "boot camp" within the accounting department. Taking "boot camp" courses allows students to stay on track to complete the 150 hours of University course credits needed in order to register for the CPA exam, rather than taking five years to complete those credits.

Knowing she planned to major in accounting, Gail Mar '18 talked with students at other universities who would need a full five years to graduate. "Here we can graduate in four years and complete a prestigious, paid internship,

so that flexibility really had an impact on my decision to attend here," said Mar, who is interning at PwC in Chicago. In addition to PwC, IWU students are interning at the other "Big Four" groups, which perform the majority of the world's auditing services: Deloitte, EY and KPMG. Mid-level firms and Fortune 500 companies also participate.

This semester the public firm RSM selected eight IWU students for its internship program, among them Colin Gogoel '18. Although he had taken accounting in high school and enjoyed it, Gogoel came to Illinois Wesleyan as a business major unsure of a career path. After earning high grades in "Accounting for Decision Making II," his professor encouraged him to consider an accounting major. "The winter internship program was significant for me to declare the accounting major," Gogoel said. "I don't like uncertainty, so this major was very appealing to me in terms of having direction." At the end of the 10-week internship, he said he will know whether public accounting is the right fit for him. "I will have a sense of direction for my career," he said.

Jerry Olson, chair of accounting and financial services, said winter accounting interns generally receive full-time offers from their organizations at the end of the program. Matt LaLonde '14 received such an offer at the end of his 2013 internship. LaLonde interned with KPMG and was selected for KPMG LLP's Global Internship Program, working for several weeks as part of the U.S. Tax desk at the company's Paris office.

"The winter internship program is 'Busy Season 101,' where you learn things about real life and having a real job that aren't taught in college," said LaLonde, now based in Chicago as a senior associate, State and Local Tax, at KPMG U.S.

"The classroom is a safe environment to become familiar with new concepts, but it's outside the classroom where you're forced to juggle, balance and multi-task your way through the learning process, and that's where the real growth begins." The internship program is a chance to test-drive a career, he added.

"The combination of strong academic talent and quality internship experiences prepare our accounting graduates for success," said Diekhoff. IWU accounting graduates traditionally perform well on the CPA exam, University officials said.



Colin Gogoel (left) and Gail Mar are two of the students who interned this winter with public accounting firms. The program influenced Mar's decision to attend IWU and gave Gogoel a chance to determine if public accounting was a good career fit.

[Learn more about Illinois Wesleyan's Accounting Department.](#)