



Summer 8-2-2006

High School Accounting Students Encouraged to 'Pay it Forward'

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Recommended Citation

Welzenbach, Rebecca, "High School Accounting Students Encouraged to 'Pay it Forward'" (2006). *News and Events*. 3698.
<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/3698>

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Students played drums on the Eckley Quadrangle as part of evening activities during the week-long ALOT program at Illinois Wesleyan. *(Photo by Mark Von Brock)*

High School Accounting Students Encouraged to 'Pay it Forward' Aug. 2, 2006

If there's one thing accountants know, it is how to find differences—sums and differences. Or at least that's what most of the participants of Illinois Wesleyan University's second annual Accounting Leaders of Tomorrow (ALOT) program thought when they arrived in Bloomington on June 18.

The 32 urban high school students, from Chicago and Detroit, spent a week at Illinois Wesleyan attending panel discussions with accounting professionals, visiting regional corporations like State Farm Insurance, Caterpillar Inc., and Archer Daniels Midland Company, and completing a business simulation. Ultimately, they learned that accountants do much more than add and subtract. They also learned that a career in accounting could be "ALOT" different than they ever anticipated.

According to program founder Jerry Olson, professor of accounting at IWU, the mission of the program is threefold: to "increase awareness of the diverse number of career opportunities in accounting, expand interpersonal and financial skills of students, and develop leadership, teamwork and communications skills in competitive business simulations." By these standards, the camp was a great success: the students interacted with a wide variety of accounting professionals and collaborated to save a fictitious software company in a simulated activity.

However, Olson had one more major lesson to impart: "Do any of you want to make money but also give something back?" he asked students on the night they arrived. Throughout the week his "pay it forward" message was consistent: "I hope you've seen as business people that you have a responsibility to give back when you become successful."

The ALOT program itself exemplified the generosity of many local organizations and corporations. Every aspect of the program, from transportation in coach buses to lodging and meals on the IWU campus - even souvenirs from the IWU Bookstore and treats from Hattie's, a coffee shop in the Hansen Student Center - was free to the participants. Olson received funding from the University, as well as substantial support from State Farm, Caterpillar, PricewaterhouseCoopers and the CPA Endowment Fund of Illinois.

Gifts to the program were not strictly financial. Bruce Breitweiser, managing partner of Dunbar, Breitweiser and Company, LLP, a CPA firm in Bloomington, presented each student with a copy of the book *The Richest Man in Babylon*, by George S. Clason. A collection of parables and short stories, the book is considered a classic on how to sensibly increase wealth.

Perhaps the most valuable contribution to ALOT's success, however, was time. Olson and Sarah Riehl, visiting assistant professor of accounting, collaborated over the last year to organize ALOT, with the support of Sammie Robinson, assistant professor of business administration, and several IWU students and recent grads who helped plan and chaperone the program. The corporations, too, gave of time in addition to financial resources. Representatives, ranging from interns to senior executives from Caterpillar, Archer Daniels Midland, State Farm, PricewaterhouseCoopers and other organizations, led panel discussions about careers and opportunities in accounting.

"ALOT is getting some name recognition, people know what that means," said IWU President Richard F. Wilson at the program's culminating formal dinner. Wilson was referring to the increasing number of accounting professionals familiar with ALOT, but Olson also encouraged students to continue to spread the word of the program at their homes and schools. ALOT's growing reputation with students, speakers and contributors will help the program continue to expand.

Olson and Riehl were pleased with the improvements from ALOT 2005 to ALOT 2006, including lengthening the program by one day. However, they are already discussing further developments for next year. Olson hopes to invite the families of participants to campus, increase student interaction with professional mentors, and provide several laptop computers for the students to work on in the evening when The Ames Library is closed.

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