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Enrollments up as accounting programs change

BY JANA FROBERG

Enrollments are up and the curriculums are changing at South Florida universities' schools of accounting. The changes include a focus on forensic accounting and other investigative work, and a renewed emphasis on some of the basics of accounting. Like almost every organization in accounting, the universities are making their changes in response to last year's Enron scandal and the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, which Congress hopes will prevent such problems in the future.

"We were moving in this direction for several years and Enron and other problems brought it to a head," said Dana Forgione, director of the School of Accounting in the College of Business Administration at Florida International University.

The past year's changes at FAU include a new certificate program in fraud examination, designed to help accountants recognize potential fraud in clients' operations and gather information in investigations of purported fraud.

Forgione's counterparts at Florida Atlantic University and the University of Miami also are coordinating some changes that have a post-Enron stamp.

FAU this year began offering a Masters of Accounting program with a concentration in forensic accounting.

Carl Borgia, director of the university's School of Accounting, said FAU's research indicates it is the first U.S. university to offer a degree program in forensic accounting.

At UM, many graduate and undergraduate courses include a focus on the Sarbanes-Oxley Act's requirements for auditors and an increased emphasis on what Paul Munter, chairman of the university's Department of Accounting, calls "the quality of financial reporting."

A dean at the SEC

Munter is among accountants who can say they were "protest at the creation" of the Sarbanes-Oxley era.

Starting Aug. 1, 2002, days after the law was passed, he began a 12-month term as

Accounting firms help recommend curricula

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has grown from 785 in 2001 to 826 last year and 894 this year.

The number of candidates for accounting major's degrees at FAU grew from 41 in 2003 to 73 during that same period.

Two years ago, officials of the three universities said the number of accounting majors was declining and a growing number of accounting graduates were interested in starting their careers as staff accountants at various businesses, rather than joining accounting firms.

Now, FAU's Borgia said, more students are interested in jobs with accounting firms, and some national and local firms are stepping up on-campus recruiting.

Many students who take FAU accounting courses are professionals with degrees in other financial specialties who are considering career changes or feel they need more accounting courses in their current jobs, said Julia Higgins, an FAU assistant professor who teaches several audit courses.

On the trail of fraud

FAU has 25 students in its master's program focusing on forensic accounting, said Carlos Terraga, the university's coordinator of executive education programs in accounting.

The core work in forensic accounting involves reviewing documents to determine when and how fraud took place at businesses. Accountants often join attorneys and government agencies in forensic investigations.

Topics in the FAU program include money laundering, terrorist funding, white collar crime, litigation support and expert testimony.

Professors at the three universities said recommendations from accounting firms are an important factor in many of the changes they are making in their curricula, including an increased emphasis on writing skills.

People in the industry are telling us they want their people to be able to write better and explain their findings more clearly," Borgia said.

Accounting has always required justification and explanation of how work was done and is "not a case of just coming up with the right numbers," he said.

One certainty in the post-Enron world is that accountants will be asked for more - and clearer - explanations.

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