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GUIDE TO EDUCATION

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Enrollments up as accounting programs change

BY JIM FREER

Enrollments are up and the curricula 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 accounting scandal and the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, which Congress hopes will prevent repeats.

"We were moving in this direction for several years, and Enron and the 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 FIU include a non-credit 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

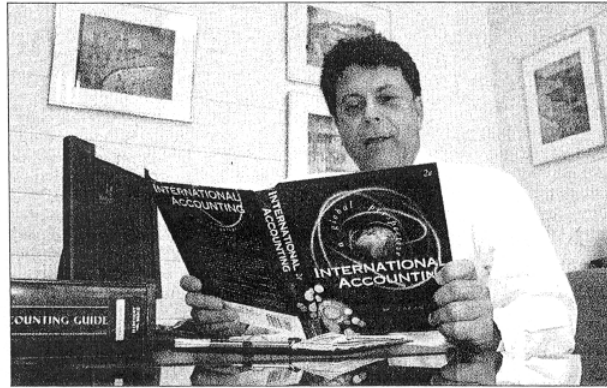
Munter is among accountants who can say they were "present at the creation" of the Sarbanes-Oxley era.

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

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Florida Atlantic University's Carl Borgia says firms are stepping up on-campus recruiting.

an academic accounting fellow in the Securities and Exchange Commission's Office of the Chief Accountant.

The SEC this year issued rules with detailed steps public companies and their accountants must take under Sarbanes-Oxley.

Munter joined SEC staff accountants in preparing reports the agency used to write its rules on companies' internal control reporting systems and auditors' requirements to maintain independence from public company clients.

Prior to last year, UM was already putting added focus on detection of fraud in audits and on what Munter calls a focus "on earnings quality."

Growth in enrollment

Meanwhile, the number of accounting students is growing at all three universities.

Forgione said that mirrors the popularity and increased enrollments that many universities' journalism schools

experienced following the Watergate scandal of the early 1970s.

Watergate put *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein and network television reporters into a limelight attractive to many college students.

Forgione said the current generation of students has seen accountants from major firms on news shows "talking about millions of dollars."

Students and other viewers "saw the impact that accounting has in the business world and the entire economy," he said.

The result is that applications for FIU's undergraduate accounting programs were "about 30 to 40 percent" higher this year than in 2002.

Two years ago, FIU had about 800 students majoring in its undergraduate accounting program. That figure is now close to 900 and Forgione expects it will keep growing.

At UM, enrollments in the undergraduate accounting program are "up about 40 to 50 percent over what we had two years ago," Munter said.

The number of graduates each year in that program should soon reach about 70, compared with about 50 several years ago, he said.

At FAU, the number of accounting majors in the undergraduate program

See ACCOUNTING, next page



Forgione

Accounting firms help recommend curricula

ACCOUNTING, from previous page

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

The number of candidates for accounting master's degrees at FAU grew from 41 to 73 to 89 during the 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 Higgs, 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 Terrago, 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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