

Whether there is an accounting profession?

A commentary on “Whither (or wither) accounting education in the new millennium” by M.R. Mathews

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In an article entitled “Whither (or Wither) Accounting Education in the New Millenium,” M.R. Mathews argues for graduate level entry into the public accounting profession in Australia. While this may potentially be a desirable proposition, one issue that ought to be raised as a preliminary matter is whether there is in fact an accounting profession in Australia, or indeed, in any other country. There can be no doubt that there are individuals throughout civil society who work under the title “accountant,” nor that there are persons who are referred to by others as being “professional” accountants, but is this sufficient reason to say that there is an accounting profession? At one level, the answer is that any occupational group can lay claim to the word “professional.” As such, there are professional flight attendants, professional hair dressers, professional sanitation workers, and so forth. This is not a derogatory statement. Many occupations seek to achieve greater status and respectability for their work by adopting the “professional” label (Abbott, 1988).

It is clear that Professor Mathews does not consider the accounting profession to include all persons who do accounting work. Implicitly he adopts a view of the accounting profession commonly held in the five English speaking countries that he analyzes, to the effect that the accounting profession includes only those persons who have been recognized as chartered or certified public accountants, or closely similar designations. Since the accounting profession defined in this way includes only a small percentage of persons who actually do accounting work, it is perhaps understandable that Professor Mathews advocates the abandonment of undergraduate programs in accounting where the pri-

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mary emphasis is on educating persons who will never become part of the "accounting profession." This, of course, was not always the case. From the emergence of the "accountant" as a distinct occupation in the early 19th century through the latter part of the 20th Century, most persons who trained to become accountants aspired to membership in the public accounting profession in sense that Mathews and others define it. The route to membership in the upper ranks of financial management in the United Kingdom and the United States, as well as in Australia, Canada and New Zealand, typically lay through training programs involving work as practicing auditors in public accounting firms. Even the middle ranks of accounting departments throughout the industrialized world were filled with qualified accountants who had spent at least some time in the auditing departments of large public accounting firms. At present, as Mathews points out, the vast majority of accounting students never become members of the public accounting profession, nor do they even engage in accounting work. Tinker and Koutsoumadi (1997, 1998) have characterized this change in the accounting workplace as being a "joyless future" where accounting work is bifurcated into a large deskilled sector and a much smaller skilled sector. Does this deskilled sector even constitute part of the "accounting profession," and should higher education even concern itself with this sector? Mathews seemingly argues no. Nor should those who do accounting work, but who are not qualified accountants, be considered part of the accounting profession. They should also not pursue undergraduate accounting education in universities.

There seem to be a number of myths at work here. One is that there is such a thing as an accounting profession for which there ought to be an appropriate educational background, as is the case with other "true" professions. This is a questionable proposition. As Mathews points out, a considerable number of professional accountants in the United Kingdom are engaged by their firms without having any university level accounting education. This does not seem to impinge on the ability of the large public accounting firms in the UK to perform audits, do tax consulting or undertake other kinds of professional service engagements. A similar trend is emerging in the United States where increasingly the large public accounting firms seek students who have not studied accounting. A roughly similar notion would be that a hospital would engage a surgeon who had not attended medical school. The absurdity of this observation leads to the conclusion that there may not be an accounting profession for which there is a necessity to develop an appropriate educational background. If the highest level practitioners of a profession can enter the profession without any university level education in their field, can this be a profession other than in words?

Another myth is that every person who does accounting work is a mem-

ber of the accounting profession. While there appears to be a continuing need for individuals who are literate in the language of accounting, there may not be a need for additional members of the accounting workplace. The US Institute of Management Accountants has gone to great lengths to point out that in major corporations there are few individuals who are classified as accountants (IMA, 1994, 1996, 1999). Does this mean that there is no need for accounting? Hardly. It is just that there may be no need for accountants. I would, therefore, continue to question whether there is such thing as the accounting profession, either in the narrow sense as being those who are chartered or certified, or in the broader sense as including anyone who does accounting work.

What we should concentrate on as accounting academics is developing a better understanding of how accounting works in organizations and society and trying to convey to our students how this may help them as they engage the future which confronts them.

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