

UIS graduate scores 4th highest on CPA test

Article printed in the *Illinois State Journal Register*, May 21, 1998

By Natalie Boehme



Zhifan Wang was still mastering the nuances of the English language when she enrolled in the accounting department at the University of Illinois at Springfield three years ago.

Since then, Wang, a native of China, definitely has proven she mastered the course work. She earned the fourth highest score in the nation on the certified public accountant exam given in November.

"I had to read the letter (from the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants) twice," Wang said. "I thought, 'Is this true?'"

Wang scored 393 points on the 400-point test, which is given nation-wide every May and November.

More than 50,000 candidates took the test in November. Only three outshone Wang: a Florida candidate who was four points shy of a perfect test, a Texas test-taker with 395 and a Michigan graduate who scored 394.

Wang, who moved to St. Louis after finishing her coursework at UIS, also won the Missouri Gold Medal for having that state's highest exam score, and served as graduate student marshal at the UIS commencement Saturday.

Although Wang received her master's degree in accounting only on Saturday, she completed her required classes last summer. She immediately began working as a staff accountant for CPI Corp. in St. Louis. Every free moment from work was spent studying for the exam, which she took in Missouri.

"I studied all the time ... before work, after work, every weekend," Wang said. "It's not as difficult as I expected. I felt, 'Yeah, I can do this.' It was just using what I'd learned and applying it.

"I didn't expect that high of a grade, but I had confidence I would pass. I did well at UIS, and they have a high pass rate."

Indeed, UIS accounting graduates do have a history of performing well on the CPA exam. For three years running, the school's accounting department has had the highest pass rate in the nation for people taking the CPA exam for the first time--running ahead of many larger and better-known institutions, such as UIS's sister campus in Urbana and the University of Notre Dame.

But Wang even stood out in this crowd, according to associate professor David Olson. Olson was Wang's faculty adviser on her master's project--an ambitious examination of the governmental use of audit committees.

"She's always been a delight to teach, and her performance is consistently at the top," said Olson, who knows Wang by her nickname, Jane. (Wang adopted the name after fearing her American classmates would stumble over her given name.)

"Jane's got a tremendous work ethic, in addition to being scholarly. She's very unique. I'd like to see one or two more (students) like her."

Don Stanhope, founder of the UIS accounting department, said Wang's accomplishment on a national scale will draw attention to the two-year university. But it just enhances the department's already solid reputation, he said.

"We've reached a critical mass now, with the number of years we've been around and the consistent skill of our students," Stanhope said.

Wang is keeping it all in perspective.

"It's a great accomplishment, but I'm going to move on. You achieve something and then set a new goal," she said. "I worked hard in school for myself, not a CPA grade."

Copyright *The Illinois State Journal-Register*. Reprinted with permission.