

## **Accounting for a Lot**

**UIS goes about its business differently than other places**

**Article printed in the *Illinois State Journal Register*, May 11, 1997**

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**Photographs by Rich Saal/The State Journal-Register**



For three years running, the accounting department at the University of Illinois at Springfield has had the highest pass rate in the nation for first-timers taking the CPA exam.



Leonard Branson, left, chairman of the accounting department, and Don Stanhope, former department chairman, have a lot to do with the success of the students.

Pam McClelland was a 39-year-old single mother when she enrolled in the accounting department of what is now known as the University of Illinois at Springfield. Her plan was merely to take a couple of classes to brush up on her bookkeeping skills

Former department chairman Don Stanhope had other ideas, however. And before McClelland knew it, she had a bachelor's degree in hand and was sitting for the grueling, four-part certified public accountant exam.

The former farm wife tested in the top tenth nationwide, earning the Elijah Watts Sells award, now known as the Excel Award.

She was promptly hired by one of Springfield's prominent accounting firms, where she has made a mercurial rise in less than four years.

And, when she wasn't busy climbing the corporate ladder, she managed to earn her master's degree.

"I didn't get there to get a degree. I went to brush up on my job skills," said McClelland, now a manager at Kerber, Eck & Braeckel. "They never expected anything but I'd get my degree. And before I knew it, I was taking my CPA, which I never dreamed of doing."

McClelland's career path from homemaker to accounting executive sounds extraordinary.

But, according to department chairman Leonard Branson, she is an average student at UIS's accounting department, which is making an anything but average name for itself nationwide.

For three years running, the accounting department has been ranked as having the highest pass rate in the nation for first-timers taking the CPA exam.

The department had a 61 percent pass rate for the test in 1995, 7 percent above the national average. UIS's pass rate outranks those at larger, four-year universities, including its sister campus in Urbana, the University of Notre Dame and the University of Washington.

UIS students are passing with flying colors -- graduates' names regularly appear on the Excel Award List.

The small department's feat has gone unheralded in the academic field, according to Karen Rosen of the Illinois Certified Public Accounting Society. But the school's CPA pass rate is one of the signs of a good program, she said.

"It's an indication -- but not the only indication -- of a good program," Rosen said.

UIS's accomplishments seem even more amazing if you look at who the students are that are earning accolades for their alma mater.

"I tell people I have more grandmothers than 19-year-olds in my class," said Branson. More than two-thirds of his students are women in their 30s returning to work after raising a family.

"These people are juggling jobs, families and school. when you work with them and you see what it takes for them to be here, these people become your heroes.

"It's one thing to have that CPA pass rate, but another to have students who are balancing families, jobs and school work. That is a tremendous balancing act."

Tina Rubin, in her mid-30s, returned to school when her daughter hit the "terrible two's." She was tired of her job in the travel industry.

"I had always managed to be in the business side of the work," she said. "And I always was sorry I didn't go on to college right out of high school."

Rubin, now an accountant at Bridgestone/Firestone, graduated from UIS in 1994. She passed the CPA exam on her first try.

"I chose the program because it worked out for me with so many night classes. They really cater to older students," Rubin said. "You don't feel like a minority."

Sue Barnes-Hall, a former trucker and social worker, thrives on finding a proper balance between all her priorities.

Barnes-Hall has made the two-hour trek from her Peoria home to the UIS campus twice a week to attend accounting classes. She is scheduled to receive her bachelor's degree this spring, and she plans to pursue her master's degree in the fall, after sitting for the CPA exam.

"Accounting, being the language of business, is also the art of drawing balance," said the 46-year-old grandmother. "There's a Zen-like quality in accounting. The professors bring that aspect

alive."

"This is an extremely demanding program, very rigorous. At the same time, each of the faculty has an affirming, can-do attitude. They have a million stories of others who've gone before. When I get discouraged, I look at the honor wall and there are all the names of people just like me."

Meeting the needs of people like Barnes-Hall means most accounting classes are offered in the evening, and the learning process has to be geared to a more mature crowd, Branson said.

"How we go about our business is different than other places," Branson said. "We don't have to spend time motivating our students. They're already motivated. Time management is our hardest aspect."

Despite the time constraints, mature students may be one of the reasons for the success of the accounting department.

Non-traditional students, to begin with, have their experience to draw from in the classroom. And most UIS accounting students already are or have worked in accounting-type jobs.

McClelland had kept the books for two businesses in her hometown of Raymond for seven years. UIS graduate Georgine Stephens worked 18 years at the Illinois auditor general's office before enrolling at UIS. Barnes-Hall kept track of finances at the office where she worked as a social worker.

"That makes the professors' ideas more concrete, not so abstract," McClelland said. "Everything you're hearing isn't new and you're applying it at work the next day."

The second secret to the department's success is a staff who knows how accounting works.

"Adult students like a lot of practical examples," Branson said.

They'll find plenty of it in the accounting faculty. The government accounting professor worked on the appropriation committee for the U.S. Congress. Auditing classes are taught by a former Air Force accountant. The financial accounting class is led by a former employee of the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants who spent two years writing the CPA exam. A former IRS employee teaches tax classes. Fortune 500 companies were the training ground for the business accounting professor.

Barnes-Hall said her professors' personal knowledge and stories of working in accounting make lessons come alive.

"When a student takes auditing from someone who audited for the military, government from someone who worked with Congress, it's too exciting not to do well," she said. "I find myself thinking when I sit in a new professor's class, 'I wonder where he's been.'"

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