

DISCERNING ACCOUNTING AND NON-ACCOUNTING STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS IN THE FIRST COURSE IN ACCOUNTING AS A PROXY FOR SEPARATE COURSE DELIVERY

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ABSTRACT

The first course in accounting is a mandatory course in most business cores. Research relating to the first course in accounting has mainly been focused on potential accounting majors. In most introductory accounting classes, non-accounting majors occupy the most seats. However, only limited research has sought to ascertain the perceptions of all students about the first course in accounting relative to their respective majors. More importantly, such studies are shortchanged as they do not tell us what to do with the differences in perceptions that they find. Are the perceptual differences in the first course in accounting among accounting and non-accounting majors so different as to warrant separate course delivery? This study investigates any differences in perception among all students by major and by gender to ascertain whether these differences are significant enough to suggest the need for separate course delivery. This study also extended related studies by incorporating open-ended questions in the instrument used to ascertain students' perceptions. All sophomore students who took the required course of their majors participated in the study. The study focused on nine research questions, including what students liked and disliked

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the most in the course. The aggregate study shows that one third of the students perceived the first course in accounting to be significantly important to their future career, irrespective of their major and gender as measured by ANOVA. However, while a third of students' interest levels dropped after taking the course, the interest levels of the other third stayed the same. Accounting and non-accounting majors were compared prior to and after the course on the basis of their relative interest, perceived level of course importance, and confidence levels. The results show that accounting majors have higher positive perception of all three attributes than the non-accounting majors. There is, however, no significant difference between accounting and non-accounting majors relating to prior knowledge of the course, course load and the number of courses enrolled. This suggests that separate course delivery is perhaps warranted as an encouragement to increase interest in the course among non-accounting majors. Further, with the exception of significant changes in interest and confidence, where male students have higher levels, gender results are not significant.

Key words: First course in accounting, perceptions, accounting and non-accounting majors, separate course delivery, pedagogy

Data availability: Data used in this study are available upon request

INTRODUCTION

The importance of the first course in accounting (FCA) in business and non-business schools has been well researched. It has also been recognized and emphasized as providing a necessary skill in developing business students in general and potential accounting majors in particular. Several accounting organizations such as the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA), the American Accounting Association (AAA), and the Institute of Management Accountants (IMA), as well as educators and professionals, are among those advocating the importance of the FCA (Geiger and Ogilby, 2000; Pincus, 1997; Vangermeersch, 1997; the Accounting Education Change Commission, 1996; AAA, 1986).

College accounting had experienced declining enrollments for some time; however, there have been large increases in recent years following the accounting scandals that took place in companies such as Arthur Andersen, WorldCom, Tyco and Enron (Titard et al., 2004). The increases in enrollments notwithstanding, academicians have been grappling with how to address unfavorable students' perceptions about the FCA pedagogy (Geiger and Ogilby, 2000). Some have attributed the problem of declining enrollments and the negative perceptions of the FCA to the quality of students and the structure of the course (Albrecht and Sack, 2000; AICPA, 2001). Chen et al. (2004) noted that the profession and others such as family members, guidance counselors, and other respected individuals, failed to portray the dynamic and changing nature of accounting activities. As a result, such misconceptions make it difficult for instructors to win the interest of students vis-à-vis other courses. There seems to be a predicament, especially where we have growing student enrollments in the FCA, and concurrently the course appears unmotivating, uninteresting, and misconstrued by many.

The objective of this study is to ascertain whether the pedagogy of the FCA that is being delivered is perceived or experienced as an “introductory accounting” course rather than an “introduction to accounting.” The FCA is considered *introductory* if the course content is heavy on substantive accounting materials that are technical in nature and intended for accounting majors (preparers). On the other hand, the FCA is considered an *introduction to accounting* if the course content is based on general knowledge where the emphasis is on the use and usefulness of accounting information (users). The aim of the study therefore is to see if the differences in perception among accounting and non-accounting majors are so significant that they would necessitate the requirement for separate course delivery. That is, what would be a plausible pedagogical initiative that would generate sufficient interest in students who might otherwise possess an aptitude for accounting? The major question that this study addresses is whether separate FCA classes are warranted, one for accounting majors and the other for non-accounting majors. For the purpose of this research, accounting majors include those majoring in accounting, corporate finance and accounting, and accounting information systems. Discerning whether or not to offer a separate FCA class is a function of the significance of the perceptual differences between accounting and non-accounting majors. The desire by non-accounting majors to have a FCA class separate from their accounting counterparts is only speculative and may not have been researched.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. A review of prior research related to perceptual studies and the introductory accounting course is provided. Next, research questions on the importance of and interest in the FCA, the level of relative course difficulty, and what students liked the most and the least in the FCA are formulated. The methodology employed in this study and the description of the instruments used and participants involved are explained. The study then presents the empirical results. Finally, discussion of the study’s implications for the FCA curriculum is presented.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Need for the FCA in a Business Core

Many studies have looked into the pedagogical concerns of the FCA and their implications in practice. For example, the 1989 white paper of the then Big Eight accounting firms expressed concern with the text-book and rule-intensive primary method of delivery (Arthur Andersen and Co. 1989). This concern was taken seriously by the Accounting Education Change Commission (AECC). The emphasis on “learning to learn” advocated by the AECC as a goal of the FCA attracted the attention of researchers, practitioners and educators. For example, the AECC (1992), in its Position Statement No. 2, commissioned several studies aimed at improving the accounting education so that graduates would possess the skills necessary to succeed in business. To achieve this objective, the AECC focused part of its mission on the first accounting principles course as an important building block for success in academic work for both accounting and non-accounting majors. The AECC identified two areas of the accounting principles courses which they considered needed immediate attention: *content* and *instructional methods*. That is, the AECC envisioned that the FCA should be an “introduction” to accounting rather than “introductory accounting” (AECC, 1992).

A study by Albrecht et al. (1994) was sponsored by the AECC to look into the accounting education curriculum relating to the structure of the FCA curriculum. Arendale (1994), recommended making the accounting education issues more attractive to encourage and motivate

students at the introductory accounting level. They also recommended that faculty motivate students to become accounting majors (Arendale, 1994; Albecht and Sack, 2000). Furthermore, Rao and Higgins (1999) used a case study method to ascertain the usefulness of the FCA in the society from the user's perspective. While the Rao and Higgins' study indicated that 97 percent of users see the FCA as serving a useful function in society, a significant number thought it is a difficult course compared to other courses and 43 percent anticipated receiving a grade of C or lower compared to a grade higher than C in non-accounting courses.

Individuals and sponsoring bodies were encouraged by the AECC initiative to conduct research about the importance of the FCA. As a result, two notable studies, Albrecht and Sack (2000) and the AICPA study (2001), emerged. These studies produced a pessimistic view of accounting education and showed evidence of a successive five-year declining trend of accounting degree graduates from 1994/95 to 1999/2000. The methodology adopted by Albrecht and Sack was primarily to look at institutional members. They sought the perceptions of key business, accounting, and education leaders via focus groups and personal interviews. While the methodology employed by Albrecht and Sack (2000) and their findings are important steps for the improvement of accounting education, one would argue that those perceptions and opinions were the points of view of the institutional respondents rather than those of the students. Prior studies also indicated that the FCA was not a popular course in the business core that would motivate a significant number of students to seek careers in accounting. Moreover, it was rather generally regarded as a high-risk course, which was characterized by high failure and withdrawal rates (Widmar 1994; Etter et al., 2000).

The FCA Pedagogy as Introductory or Introduction

The interest in the FCA pedagogy emerged, perhaps, following two related earlier studies. One of the studies (Williams, 1991) suggests that, (1) accounting education was not attracting sufficient numbers of students of sufficient quality to the study of accounting; (2) the accounting curriculum has lost its relevance; and (3) accounting education was not sufficiently developing the skills and attributes of students. Similarly, the second study (Baldwin and Ingram, 1991) pointed out two additional major reasons why accounting has declined in popularity. They noted that accounting education has failed to demonstrate to students why the information is important, and secondly, how the resulting information can be used.

Similarly, further studies in response to the AECC's concerns emerged (Geiger and Ogilby, 2000) which examined students' perceptions about the FCA and its effect on the choice of accounting as a major. The study found that intended accounting majors perceived the FCA more favorably both before and after the course than non-accounting majors. However, both groups showed a positive attitude towards the course.

Geiger and Ogilby's (2000) study also showed that some of the most significant predictors of a student becoming an accounting major were selecting accounting prior to taking the course, the instructor, usefulness of the course, and the level of boredom in the course. This study provided vital information, not only to the AECC, but also to the accounting education field in general. What was not explained in their study, however, was what to do with the differences in perceptions among accounting and non-accounting majors. Their study pointed out some limitations, which they were unable to address and therefore recommended for further studies. One such limitation required

further research to control for the varying teaching methods employed between traditional lecture discussion format and other formats, such as case-based teaching, cooperative learning, and multimedia presentations.

Methods of FCA Delivery

Subsequent to the AECC's clarion call, several studies continued to investigate the FCA pedagogy. For example, Springer and Borthick (2004) pointed out that eliciting a developmental shift from *knowing* to *thinking* in the FCA would produce a long-standing need for learning. That is, this would help students create learning experiences to develop higher-order thinking skills while generating interest in accounting for both accounting and non-accounting majors. In another related study, Diller-Haas (2004) advocated for a change in introductory accounting by abandoning the traditional approach, such as the heavy emphasis on teaching rules, technical accounting courses, the passive nature of students, and the sparing use of technology. Diller-Haas also recommended new approaches, such as learning how to learn, providing a broader general business education, promoting active participation, and integrating related courses and technology. The new approach, according to Diller-Haas, would provide an opportunity to emphasize the relevance and usefulness of accounting to the non-accounting majors who fill the majority of seats in the FCA.

In a related study, Huefner (2002) observed that what matters with the FCA is the quality the students admitted into accounting, who are sometimes regarded as the wrong individuals. Similarly, Malgwi (2004) wondered if the problem with the FCA was related to an anxiety problem. His study on the determinants of accounting anxiety among business students was found to be significant in four variables (academic majors, degree levels, experience, and gender) for both accounting and non-accounting majors. The study by Jones and Fields (2001) on supplemental instruction is another attempt that offers an alternative method of delivering the FCA pedagogy. The supplemental instruction is a proactive educational intervention program designed to assist students who are enrolled in "high-risk" courses, including the FCA. It involves introducing learning strategies and promoting critical-thinking skills. Jones and Fields' study showed that supplemental instruction was effective at increasing the grade point average level of the FCA students. While this approach is helpful, it does not negate the negative perception about the FCA relative to other courses in the business core.

Considering the variety of studies above which are aimed at improving the FCA, and the level of unsatisfactory perceptions by students about the FCA, one vital question which this study addresses is whether students' dissatisfaction is higher among the non-accounting majors than the accounting majors. Unlike the structured studies conducted by Geiger and Ogilby as well as other researchers, this study included both structured and unstructured questions to allow students to express their opinions and feelings about the course freely.

Research Questions

The objective of this study is to ascertain empirically the perceptual differences among accounting and non-accounting students to determine if they are significantly different enough to suggest a separate course delivery. The approach employs and extends the work of Geiger and Ogilby (2000) by including those limitations that they recommended in their study. Specifically, the study considers (1) the relative importance that the students perceive the course to have and the level

of students' interest in the FCA, both prior to and after taking the FCA; (2) the level of difficulty and students' confidence level relative to other courses taken concurrently with the FCA; and (3) open-ended questions regarding what students liked the most and the least in the FCA. Further, a comparative analysis between accounting and non-accounting majors according to gender is also examined. Given the preceding discussion of prior research in this area and the objective of this study relating to the FCA pedagogy, several research questions are constructed:

RQ1: Do accounting majors' perceptions in FCA significantly differ from those of non-accounting majors and by gender as to warrant separate course delivery?

RQ1 is the major research question. The remaining eight are classified into three subcategories as follows:

Importance and Interest in the Course:

RQ2: How important do students see accounting as a part of the business core?

RQ3: What was the interest level of students prior to taking the first accounting course?

RQ4: Have the students' interest levels changed significantly after taking the FCA?

Level of Difficulty and Confidence:

RQ5: How do students compare the workload of the FCA relative to other courses?

RQ6: What are students' confidence levels in taking the FCA examinations compared to other courses registered in the same semester?

Likes and Dislikes:

RQ7: What do students like the most in the first course in accounting?

RQ8: What do students dislike the most in the first course in accounting?

METHOD

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument was disseminated to participants via the web. Before the survey was sent out, it was pre-tested with one class of 35 students just before the course ended. Their responses helped rephrase some of the questions for clarity. The survey was administered at the end of the fall 2003 semester to all the FCA-registered sophomore students. Financial Reporting and Analysis is a three-credit first introductory financial accounting course required of all sophomore students at the Business School, even though non-accounting majors can be in fields other than business. With a cover message explaining the purpose of the survey, students were instructed to access the questionnaire using a given URL address, which was disseminated to them via e-mail. Students responded to nine perception questions consisting of both pre- and post-FCA on a five-point Likert

scale of varying style, ranging from very interested (“1”) to very uninterested (“5”), as one example (see Appendix A).

Perception questions on both pre- and post- course were required at the same time so as to allow respondents to evaluate their perceptions with independence and without fear. Thus, the course was over and therefore their responses would not have had any influence on their grades. Some respondents would think otherwise if they were asked at the beginning to respond to perceptual questions. The last section of the survey instrument provided two open-ended questions (RQ7 and RQ8), giving respondents the opportunity to express themselves freely regarding what they liked the most (RQ7) and what they disliked the most (RQ8) after having taken the FCA.

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test the significance of the interest level, perceived level of importance, relative level of difficulty, and confidence levels of perception variables. Since gender is a nominal scale, a non-parametric f-test was used to compare differences between male and female perceptions. Any level of significance indicating .05 or less was considered significant. Means were computed for frequencies where statistical tests cannot be applied. Additionally, open-ended questions requiring participants to freely indicate what they liked and disliked the most about the course were analyzed separately using cluster analysis.

Participants

The study was conducted in one rather than multiple institutions to control for differences in curriculum. The population of the participants was 796 registered sophomore students at the time the survey was sent out. The population consisted of all 27 course sections. Additionally, there were 12 different instructors who taught the course, but who utilized the same coordinated course materials, class notes, technology, course projects, comprehensive common final exam, and grading scheme. Students’ identities were not required. They were instructed to feel free in expressing their opinions, especially with the narrative open-ended questions regarding what they liked or disliked the most in the course. Out of the 796 students who received the questionnaire, 333 responded by returning the completed survey, yielding a useable significant response rate of about 42 percent. The sample presents the composition of the participants by gender which was comprised of 48 percent (159) male and 52 percent (174) female.

While several instructors participated in teaching the course, it was coordinated by one instructor. The coordinator made sure that instructors used the same syllabus, teaching materials and class notes, projects, mode of delivery (incorporating both traditional and computer-based) in all 27 sections. There was one common final comprehensive exam with one grading system, including the course projects. The survey results were collected over a two-week period towards the end of the fall semester. The participants were instructed to open and answer the survey only once.

A cluster analysis is used to capture similar words and phrases used by respondents. Two graduate assistants independently coded the frequency of these words and phrases into their respective clusters. These two sets of clusters were then analyzed using Koppa coefficient of variation. Responding to what students liked the most (RQ7), the words and phrases were clustered into thirteen items. Similarly, the same approach was applied to what students disliked the most (RQ8), where twelve items of such words and phrases were clustered. Both clusters for RQ7 and RQ8 were further classified into three groups: high, medium and low frequencies for purposes of easy analyses. For example, in the high category, there are four items that students liked the most and

five items of what students disliked the most based on the frequency of times the item was mentioned.

Table 1 shows the breakdown of the thirteen-degree concentrations, with their corresponding students' composition. Table 1 also indicates which majors are considered the most and least popular. Finance (N = 54), marketing (N = 49) and accounting (N = 38) were considered the most popular (a cumulative aggregate of 44 percent). Accounting information systems, mathematical sciences and international studies were considered the least popular business majors, at least among the sophomore students at that time, indicating only a combined five percent of the thirteen-degree concentrations. Concentration of majors by gender shows that that majority of the finance majors are males (N = 32), whereas female students dominate both marketing (N = 34) and accounting (N = 24). The demographic spread of the course majors is consistent with the study of Rao and Higgins (1999), where accounting majors were ranked third and most of the respondents (57%) were sophomores.

RESULTS

Accounting versus Non-Accounting Majors: Aggregate Main Effect

The main research question (RQ1), examines the perception of the participants relating to the perceived level of importance of the FCA, and the changes in their interest levels, workload, and confidence levels in the FCA vis-à-vis other business courses among other variables. Table 2 shows the mean scores of accounting (i.e., accounting, corporate finance and accounting, and accounting

TABLE 1

Classification By Degree Major

	Aggregate		By Gender			
			Male		Female	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Accounting (ACT)	38	12	14	9	24	14
Accounting Information Systems (AIS)	2	1	1	1	1	1
Computer Information Systems (CIS)	28	9	19	12	9	5
Corporate Finance and Accounting (CFA)	27	8	13	8	14	8
Economics-Finance (ECOF)	35	11	26	17	9	5
Finance (FIN)	54	17	32	20	22	13
Info. Design and Corporate Comm (IDCC)	9	3	0	0	9	5
International Studies (INS)	8	2	1	1	7	4
Liberal Arts (LIBA)	4	1	0	0	4	3
Management (MGT)	27	8	13	8	14	8
Managerial Economics (MECO)	17	5	9	6	8	5
Marketing (MRKT)	49	15	15	10	34	20
Mathematical Sciences (MAS)	6	2	3	2	3	2
Undecided (UND)	21	6	10	6	11	7
Total	<u>325</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>156</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>169</u>	<u>100</u>

TABLE 2

Mean Score of Accounting Majors versus Non-Accounting Majors

Item Variables	Means Score <u>Accounting Majors</u> ^a	Mean Score Non- <u>Accounting Majors</u> ^b
How interested were you in accounting before you took the course?	1.85	2.92*
Has your interest level changed after taking this course?	1.81	2.15*
Have you ever received a clear explanation about the importance of accounting as a business school student?	1.62	1.73
How important do you think accounting course is to you?	1.61	2.27*
Have you ever taken accounting course or bookkeeping class prior to this course?	1.63	1.77
What is your assessment of FCA workload compared to other courses you enrolled in this semester?	2.82	2.42
How many courses have you enrolled in this semester?	5.21	5.44
What is your confidence level in taking FCA examinations compared to other courses you enrolled in this semester?	2.82	3.92*

^a Accounting majors comprised of Accounting, Accounting Information Systems and Corporate Finance and Accounting majors.

^b All other majors (excluding those who were undecided)

* Significant at $p < .05$

information systems) versus non-accounting majors in terms of all eight variables. Students who did not declare their majors at the time of study (undecided) were excluded in the computation of the mean scores. The results suggest that there is a significant difference between accounting and non-accounting majors in terms of their interest levels, both prior to and after taking the course. That is, accounting majors show more interest in both situations than their non-accounting counterparts. Similarly, accounting majors considered the course to be more important and are more confident in taking accounting examinations than the non-accounting majors. However, the results do not show any significant differences between accounting and non-accounting majors relating to the level of explanation they received about the course, prior knowledge about the course, the workload, and the number of courses in which they enrolled in the semester.

Importance and Level of Interest in FCA: Interaction Effect

Research question 2 asks respondents to indicate how important they believe the FCA is as a course in the business core. Table 3 panels A, B, and C present descriptive statistics of the mean scores and ANOVA test showing the perceived levels of importance of the FCA and the interest levels in aggregate and by gender, respectively. Panel A specifically shows, in general, how important students see accounting as a course in the business core. The majority of students (N = 254, 77%) see the FCA as either important or very important. The gender effect shows that both male and female students see the importance equally (77%). This finding is consistent with an earlier study (Rao and Higgins, 1999) where 97 percent of respondents see the FCA as a useful function in society from a user's perspective. However, while some students (N = 41, 12%) are not sure if the FCA is important, others (N = 34, 11%) say it is either unimportant or very unimportant. Similarly, both male and female students are almost identical in opinion when considering the FCA as either

TABLE 3

Descriptive and Statistical Analysis of the Importance of the First Course in Accounting

Panel A: Importance of the First Course by Gender and in Percentages

	By Gender					
	Aggregate		Male		Female	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Very Important	92	28	44	28	48	28
Important	162	49	78	49	84	49
Neutral	41	12	19	12	22	13
Unimportant	23	7	9	6	14	8
Very Unimportant	11	4	7	5	4	2
Total	<u>329</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>157</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>172</u>	<u>100</u>

Panel B: Descriptive Statistics of Students' Course Importance Perceptions

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Male	157	2.09	1.015
Female	172	2.08	0.970
Total	<u>329</u>	2.09	0.990

Panel C: ANOVA for Students' Course Importance Perceptions

Source	SS	df	MS	F	P
Between Groups	.005	1	.005	.005	.943
Within Groups	321.612	327	.984		
Total	<u>321.617</u>	<u>328</u>			

unimportant or very unimportant (Male = 11%, Female = 10%). A one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) is used to test the significance perceived level of importance of the FCA among students and by gender. The mean and ANOVA results are shown in panels B and C of Table 3, respectively. The results did not show any significant statistical difference, given the mean score for male respondents (2.09) and female respondents (2.08) and a $p < .943$. This suggests that both male and female students view the importance of the FCA equally.

The third and fourth research questions (RQ3 and RQ4), asks about students' interest levels prior to and after taking the FCA. Table 4 panels A, B and C relate to their interest pre FCA, while panels D, E and F relate to change in their interest level. Panel A displays that slightly more than half of the students feel they were interested or very interested prior to taking the FCA (N = 172, 52%). This level of interest among male and female students is almost identical, showing 53 percent (N=83) for males and 52 percent (N=89) for females. There are, however, a high proportion of students who are unsure about their level of interest in the course (N = 85, 26%), while the rest (N = 73, 23%) say that they are either uninterested or very uninterested prior to taking the FCA. Students' lack of interest is not significantly different by gender either (N = 35, 21% and N = 38, 22%), for male and female students, respectively. The mean scores and the ANOVA test are shown in panels B and C of Table 4. The mean values for both males and females are 2.67 and 2.60, respectively. The ANOVA test shows no significant difference ($p=.559$) prior to taking the FCA at

TABLE 4

Descriptive and Statistical Analysis of the Interest in the First Course in Accounting

Panel A: Pre Course Interest Level by Gender and in Percentages

	By Gender					
	Aggregate		Male		Female	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Very Interested	46	14	19	12	27	16
Interested	126	38	64	41	62	36
Neutral	85	26	40	25	45	26
Uninterested	49	15	20	13	29	17
Very Uninterested	24	7	15	9	9	5
Total	<u>330</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>158</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>172</u>	<u>100</u>

Panel B: Descriptive Statistics of Students' Pre Course Interest Level Perceptions

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Male	158	2.67	1.137
Female	172	2.60	1.101
Total	<u>330</u>	2.63	1.117

(continued)

TABLE 4 (continued)

Panel C: ANOVA for Students' Pre Course Interest Level Perceptions

<u>Source</u>	<u>SS</u>	<u>df</u>	<u>MS</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>P</u>
Between Groups	.427	1	.427	.342	.559
Within Groups	<u>410.206</u>	<u>328</u>	1.251		
Total	<u>410.633</u>	<u>329</u>			

Panel D: Interest Level Change by Gender and in Percentages

	<u>By Gender</u>					
	<u>Aggregate</u>		<u>Male</u>		<u>Female</u>	
	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>
Changes Positively	99	30	59	37	40	23
Unchanged	112	34	49	31	63	37
Changed Negatively	<u>119</u>	<u>36</u>	<u>50</u>	<u>32</u>	<u>69</u>	<u>40</u>
Total	<u>330</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>158</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>172</u>	<u>100</u>

Panel E: Descriptive Statistics of Students' Change in Interest Level Perceptions

<u>Groups</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Std. Deviation</u>
Male	158	0.06	0.827
Female	<u>172</u>	-0.17	0.764
Total	<u>330</u>	-0.06	0.800

Panel F: ANOVA for Students' Change in Interest Level Perceptions

<u>Source</u>	<u>SS</u>	<u>df</u>	<u>MS</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>P</u>
Between Groups	3.196	1	3.196	5.058	.025*
Within Groups	<u>207.292</u>	<u>328</u>	.632		
Total	<u>210.488</u>	<u>329</u>			

* Significant at $p < .05$

the .05 level of significance. This suggests that both male and female students show no significant difference in their level of interest or lack of interest prior to taking the FCA.

RQ4 requires respondents to indicate how their interest level changed (positively, negatively or unchanged) after taking the FCA. The response shows a substantial change (see panels D, E and F of Table 4). Earlier in panel A, we saw a combined 52 percent of students who thought that the FCA was either very interesting or interesting. However, in analyzing the change in interest level (Table 4 panel D), the three items were coded as follows: changed positively = 1, unchanged = 0 and changed negatively = -1. Therefore, the results show that 30 percent of the students had their interest

level increased positively after taking the FCA and 36 percent negatively. More male students ($N = 59, 37\%$) had their interest level changed positively compared to that of females ($N = 40, 23\%$). While the interest level of many students ($N = 119, 36\%$) changed negatively after taking the FCA, a close percentage ($N = 112, 34\%$) remain unchanged. However, the mean values for gender differences (0.06 and 0.13) for males and females, respectively, and the ANOVA test ($p < .025$) indicates a significant difference in the level of change of interest. This means that the change in interest level of male students after taking the FCA is significantly different from the change in interest level of female students.

Workload and Confidence Level: Interaction Effect

The determination of the workload and confidence levels in the FCA compared with other courses can help explain the level of difficulty in the course. Typical workload in FCA consists of the main accounting text, a reading text (Movies-Door-To-Door), the use of Peachtree as an accounting software, separate handouts on enterprise resource planning (ERP) and management information systems (MIS), completion of two-part course projects in teams of two, three exams and a quiz. RQ5 asks respondents to compare the workload deliverables in the FCA relative to other courses. Table 5 displays the descriptive statistics of the workload, the mean values and the ANOVA test in panels A, B and C, respectively. As shown in panel A, the FCA workload is thought to be either much or too much work by 51 percent of respondents ($N = 171$) relative to other courses. A slightly lower number ($N = 146, 45\%$) feel it is about the same. Only a small percentage ($N = 12, 4\%$) of students thought the workload is less or much less. Male students ($N = 84, 54\%$) feel the relative workload is much or too much compared to a similar number of female students ($N = 87, 51\%$) who feel the same way. Female respondents are marginally higher than their male counterparts who feel that the FCA workload is the same with other courses ($N = 79, 46\%$ versus $N = 67, 42\%$). However, marginally higher male students feel the FCA workload is less or much less ($N = 7, 4\%$ versus $N = 5, 3\%$). The significance of these descriptive statistics is explained by the ANOVA test as presented in Table 5. Similar mean values for both male and female respondents (2.35 and 2.39) suggest that both groups feel the same way regarding the FCA workload relative to other courses. The ANOVA f-test suggests that there is no significant difference ($p = .620$) between male and female respondents regarding workload perceptions. Therefore, $p = .620$ suggests no significance in gender perceptions at the $p < .05$ level of significance.

The second analysis question (RQ6) in this category relates to the confidence level of students in taking the FCA relative to other courses. Table 6 panels A, B and C show the aggregate frequencies and by gender of the confidence levels, the mean scores and the ANOVA test result, respectively. Panel A shows that only 18 percent ($N = 58$) of all students feel they have high to very high confidence in the course when it comes to examinations. This level of confidence due to the difficulty of the course is also consistent with an earlier study conducted by Rao and Higgins (1999). Rao and Higgins' study shows a significant number of students (43%) who anticipated getting a grade of C or lower in the FCA. Here, male students tend to show more confidence ($N = 34, 22\%$) than their female counterparts ($N = 24, 14\%$). While 20 percent of all students ($N = 66$) feel their confidence level in the FCA is about the same with other courses, the majority ($N = 203, 62\%$) feel it is either low or very low. However, male students ($N = 90, 57\%$) show more confidence than their

TABLE 5

**Descriptive and Statistical Analysis of Students' Perceptions of the
First Course in Accounting Workload Relative to Other Courses**

Panel A: Workload by Gender and in Percentages

	By Gender					
	Aggregate		Male		Female	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Too Much	50	15	28	18	22	13
Much	121	36	56	36	65	38
About the Same	146	45	67	42	79	46
Less	10	3	5	3	5	3
Much Less	2	1	2	1	0	0
Total	<u>329</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>158</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>171</u>	<u>100</u>

Panel B: Descriptive Statistics of Students' First Course in Accounting Workload Perceptions

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Male	158	2.35	0.852
Female	171	2.39	0.747
Total	<u>329</u>	2.37	0.798

Panel C: ANOVA for Students' First Course in Accounting Workload Perceptions

Source	SS	df	MS	F	P
Between Groups	.157	1	.157	.246	.620
Within Groups	<u>208.603</u>	<u>327</u>	.638		
Total	<u>208.760</u>	<u>328</u>			

female peers (N = 113, 66%). With mean scores of 3.52 and 3.78 for males and females (see panel B) and $p = .035$ (see panel C) the results suggest that gender differences are significant at the $p < .05$ level. What the results say is that students are less confident about the accounting examination than about other examinations, and that female students are less likely than their male counterparts to be confident. Thus, male students tend to show higher level of confidence by 22 percent compared to 14 percent of the female students. The other corollary observation is that female students are more skeptical (66%) about their confidence in the FCA than in other courses than male students (57%). That is, female students find their FCA confidence level to be either low or very low when it comes to examinations versus other courses.

TABLE 6

**Descriptive and Statistical Analysis of Students' Perceptions of the
First Course in Accounting Confidence Level Relative to Other Courses**

Panel A: Confidence level (Exam) by Gender and in Percentages

	By Gender					
	Aggregate		Male		Female	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Very High	10	3	9	6	1	1
High	48	15	25	16	23	13
About the Same	66	20	33	21	33	20
Low	124	38	55	35	69	40
Very Low	79	24	35	22	44	26
Total	<u>327</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>157</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>170</u>	<u>100</u>

Panel B: Descriptive Statistics of Students' Course Confidence Level Perceptions

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Male	157	3.52	1.169
Female	170	3.78	1.001
Total	<u>327</u>	3.65	1.091

Panel C: ANOVA for Students' Course Confidence Level Perceptions

Source	SS	df	MS	F	P
Between Groups	5.273	1	5.273	4.478	.035*
Within Groups	382.678	325	1.177		
Total	<u>387.951</u>	<u>326</u>			

* Significant at $p < .05$

What students like and dislike the most about the FCA

Respondents were given open-ended questions (RQ7) and (RQ8) to express themselves about what they like and dislike the most in the FCA. Table 7, panel A presents a frequency of the cluster of words and phrases used by respondents to express themselves about what they like the most (RQ7). There are thirteen words and phrases that are clustered about what students liked the most. These frequencies of clusters are further categorized into three groupings of high (above 10%), medium (5% – 10%) and low (below 5%). Since all thirteen items are sorted based on their frequencies, the high category contains the highest number of frequencies. The high cluster category constitutes about 51 percent of all thirteen items. The most liked item in this high category is that students find the FCA to be *interesting and motivating*. This is followed by the *professors*,

TABLE 7

What Students LIKE and DISLIKED the MOST in the First Course in Accounting

Panel A: What Students LIKED the MOST in the First Course in Accounting

<u>Category</u>	<u>Item</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percentage</u>	<u>Cumulative Percentage</u>
High	Interesting and Motivating	43	14.53	
	Professor	41	13.85	
	Understanding/Learning/Delivery	36	12.16	
	Practicality and Relevance	32	10.81	51.35
Medium	Use of Technology and Technology Centers	28	9.46	
	Importance/Usefulness	25	8.45	
	Course Projects	23	7.78	
	Homework/Assignments	18	6.08	31.77
Low	Teamwork and Class Discussions	14	4.73	
	Text/Materials	13	4.39	
	Peachtree	11	3.71	
	Uniformity	8	2.70	
	It's Over	4	1.35	16.88
	Total Perceptual Statements	<u>296</u>	<u>100.00</u>	<u>100.00</u>

Panel B: What Students DISLIKE the MOST in the First Course in Accounting

High	Exam/Cumulative/Uniform/Saturday	74	18.41	
	Too Much Workload/Information	49	12.19	
	Professor	48	11.94	
	Difficult/Hard	47	11.69	
	Not Understanding the Concepts	45	11.19	65.42
Medium	Text/Materials/Movies Door to Door	28	6.96	
	Peachtree	26	6.47	
	Fast Pace	22	5.47	18.90
Low	Everything	19	4.73	
	Not Interesting/Boring	18	4.48	
	Course Project	15	3.73	
	Homework	11	2.74	15.68
	Total Perceptual Statements	<u>402</u>	<u>100.00</u>	<u>100.00</u>

understanding in terms of *learning and delivery*, the course's *practicality* and *relevance*, and the utilization of *technology*. The medium cluster category is about 32 percent of all the items where positive items include: *importance/usefulness*, *course projects*, *homework/assignments*, and *teamwork and class discussions*. The low category (17%), however, considered the *text/materials*, the application of *Peachtree*, the *uniformity* of the course across sections, the fact that *it's over* and its *ease* as items.

Respondents associated their interest and motivation in the FCA with instructors. For example, "It is informative, and my professor was very good at showing how accounting tied into other disciplines like economics, finance, management, etc." "Prof Xyz, he is straight to the point, very detailed and loves his vanilla coke," writes another. While workload is identified as one of the problems with the FCA, some students felt otherwise. For example, "The amount of work required was very fair and I enjoyed professor Xyz's class. He kept the whole class interested and presented challenging questions." Yet another had this experience, "I took the course this past summer with professor Xyz. He was comical and made the information relevant and interesting. He was available for questions and explanations, the homework he assigned helped me understand concepts that at times seemed to have reverse logic. The problem solving, and finding errors method of teaching was at times hard but satisfying."

A significant number of respondents seems to appreciate the way the FCA is delivered, especially relating concept with reality. For example, one respondent states that, "it is interesting to be taking the FCA ... the fact that the professor relates book material to real life events such as the fiasco of Enron and WorldCom make things more real and stimulating...and I was able to truly see and understand the meaning of judgment in accounting reporting." The difficulty of the FCA notwithstanding, one student was inspired by the amount he/she learned from his/her instructor and noted that, "the amount that i learned in that class. i had professor Xyz and she was the best professor i have ever had before. she teaches in a way that makes you wanna learn and makes you want to do the work. i know i am only getting like a 2.7 in that class but i learned so much. i like how everyone follows the same syllabus because it is convenient when studying for tests everyone can study together and help explain things someone might not get."

What students dislike the most (RQ8) is presented in Table 7 panel B, using the same method of clustering. Twelve cluster of words and phrases are identified and coded for this section and are similarly categorized into three break points: high (above 10%), medium (5% - 10%) and low (below 5%) frequencies.

More than half (65.42 cumulative) of the expressions about what students dislike the most are identified in the high category items (above 10% break). Top at the list is the *examination*, which students disliked, especially due to its uniform cumulative nature, which is often taken on a Saturday. Others see the *workload and information* as too much compared to other courses. Next on the high category list is the *professor*. Yet, others feel that it is a *difficult* and *hard* course to comprehend, and at the same time feel that they are not understanding the concepts.

At the medium level (18.90% cumulative), the *textbook*, *Movies Door-to-Door*, the *Peachtree* software used, and its *fast pace* are all seen as deterrents to FCA learning. It is not surprising to note that at the low level of what students dislike the most (16% cumulative), a good number of them feel it is *everything* (N = 19, 5%). Others see FCA as *not interesting/boring*, while others feel that the *course projects* and the *homework* are contributing factors in the low category.

In spite of the level of difficulty, some students are determined to persevere. “I loved accounting prior to taking the FCA. I am trying so hard to keep the love I had for accounting alive. I am not going to give up! I just need a really great professor to teach me accounting step by step. I sometimes feel that the accounting professors here assume we know a lot of things that we do not. I need to know the basics and build from there.” Unfortunately, others have a different opinion, “FCA is supposed to be an introductory to accounting. There was no need for us to have to prepare a statement of cash flows. I took two years of accounting previously and never even looked at a statement of cash flows. For a person that is not going into accounting or finance I believe that this course goes beyond an introductory level to a point where it turns most people off to accounting. I liked accounting in high school and planned on being an AIS major, however after taking this course I don’t believe that I even like accounting anymore and have changed to economics.”

While many students did not like the idea of a uniform comprehensive final examination, others attributed the exam problem with qualifications. For example, “FCA is really hard. I have taken other accounting classes before and FCA did not cover much more material than my prior classes, but for some reason I had a much harder time in this class than any of the others. I have asked around and most people feel the same way. FCA being an intro course, I cannot figure out why this course is considered to be one of the most difficult courses here. This should be the class that gets people interested in accounting and also should be the one that teaches students the basics, but it doesn't seem to do either. Some of my friends started out wanting to be accounting majors, but now they have completely turned away from it because they find it hard and uninteresting. I know what really helped me in my other classes was a workbook that went along with the book. Maybe this is something you should look into.”

Considering the responses to RQ7 and RQ8, there are similarities of clustered words and phrases on what students liked and disliked the most. One might think that these similarities cancel out each other. For example, about 13 percent responded that professors are what they liked the most, while at the same time about 12 percent thought professors are among the items they dislike the most. Therefore, there is a net gain of about 1 percent in favor of professors. This observation may not necessarily hold ground as each response is treated uniquely to the situation. What is worth considering in this situation is to look at every conceivable cluster of what students like and dislike the most and try to improve upon them, so as to increase and decrease such frequencies accordingly.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was two-fold. One was to ascertain whether students perceived or experienced the FCA as an “introductory accounting” course rather than an “introduction to accounting.” Second, whether the differences in their perception are sufficiently significant to warrant recommending separate course deliveries, one for accounting and another for non-accounting majors. It is apparent that discerning perceptions of individuals to construe a meaningful and accurate conclusion may not be achieved with a strong degree of certainty. The purpose of the study is to help determine the pedagogical approach that would assist students in not only successfully completing the introductory accounting course, but also to help them appreciate the need and relevance of the FCA regardless of their college major.

As earlier noted in this study, FCA is considered *introductory* if the course content is heavily focused on substantive accounting pedagogy that is technical in nature, which is intended for

accounting majors. It would seem therefore that, respondents who are accounting majors in this study would show higher perception in its interest, confidence and importance. At the same time, this group would perceive FCA not as difficult in terms of the course load and exams as their non-accounting counterparts. A result of no significant difference between the accounting and non-accounting majors would signal that there is probably no need to recommend for separate course delivery, where *introduction* rather than *introductory* accounting would be offered to non-accounting majors.

Responding to the dominant research question whether FCA is perceived as an “introductory accounting” course rather than an “introduction to accounting,” an overwhelming majority, especially accounting majors, acknowledge the importance of the first course in accounting in their curriculum and in their career. However, a significant number of non-accounting majors still see it as overly uninteresting, too demanding, and hard to comprehend relative to similar courses in the business core. These results are also consistent with prior study (see Geiger and Ogilby, 2000) where accounting majors showed significantly higher interest and usefulness in the FCA than their non-accounting counterparts. It is interesting to note that despite the rather negative publicity of the recent accounting scandals and the fact that a majority of the subjects in this study are not accounting majors (as seen in similar studies), most are aware of its important role, not only as it affects their careers, but also how it affects society.

The study also shows a significant difference in opinion between accounting and non-accounting majors relating to other variables. For example, accounting majors think of the course more positively and are also more confident in their ability to handle the course. Additionally, students who used the FCA as a determining factor for whether or not to major in accounting were discouraged by it, especially where 62 percent of all students thought their confidence level after taking the FCA was either low or very low. In fact, some students indicated that they had declared accounting as their major, but later decided to change to other majors after their experience with the FCA. Although female students do show higher positive perception of the FCA than their male counterparts, both male and female students seemed to agree about the importance of the course, but differ regarding the intensity of the course load and interest prior to taking the FCA.

Some expressions arising from unstructured questions suggest that respondents generally appreciated the importance of the FCA. For example, linking the course to real world situations, the practical application of accounting concepts to hands-on exercises using technology, and the thought process encouraged in the course rather than memorization are just a few. Similarly, the cogent teams of instructors are also acknowledged by respondents as inspiring. The positive remarks notwithstanding, respondents feel that the comprehensive nature of the final examination is unnecessary, and the workload and the supplementary *Door-to-Door* text are overkill. Similarly, the use of Peachtree, enterprise resource planning (ERP), and management information systems (MIS) materials in addition to the main text did not appear to be students’ favorites either. Others still see the course as more than introductory because of the volume of work involved and the types of topics covered vis-à-vis similar business core courses. Students felt that the demand for and the level of understanding expected of them from the FCA far exceeds that of other courses. They also noted that the current requirement of the FCA would be appropriate for students who would major in either accounting or finance, but not for those who need it only to fulfill their business requirements.

It is clear that most of the unfavorable perceptions come from non-accounting students who would otherwise not have taken the course if not a necessary requirement to fulfill their business core. Accounting faculty feedback from the study provided insightful suggestions. One such suggestion is that the results of the study could be used to propose and recommend to the college curriculum committee to have a separate FCA course, one for intended accounting majors (as preparers) and the other for non-accounting majors (as users). Another suggestion is that the recommendation to have two versions of the FCA course could be used as a marketing tool in recruiting sophomore students as accounting majors. This is because most students select their course majors immediately after taking the FCA course.

On the other hand, some accounting faculty expressed a different view point, especially as it relates to change of course majors. They noted that there would be no problem for a student who signed up for the accounting major version who later wanted to change their major away from accounting. However, this would be a problem for those who took the non-accounting major version to change their major to accounting. The two suggestions from the accounting faculty are likely to attract the support of students from both sides. It is important to note that, while a change in favor of separate course delivery would improve the FCA curriculum, it is not easy to implement without the support, cooperation and commitment of faculty, staff and corporate partners. However, given such agreement between the three parties, it would be desirable to recommend such a change even on a limited or experimental basis. Additionally, both student cohorts could have the chance to progress at their respective comfortable levels. This proposal can be put to test even on a trial basis and see if it has a promise of long-term benefit to students. This study is not without some drawbacks. It would be essential to extend such study beyond the sophomore year in order to include junior and senior years to see if their perceptions about separate course delivery will be supported. It will also help to see if students' perceptions change with maturity and experience in upper level courses. Similarly, a follow-up study involving the same students who have graduated and are working could also provide useful information.

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APPENDIX A

Sophomore students are required to take Financial Reporting and Analysis, first course in accounting (FCA) as a course in the business core requirement. FCA in particular is recommended to be taken in the first semester (Fall). Please log into the given website to respond to the questionnaire relating to your perception about FCA. Please respond only once as multiple responses will be discarded. The survey takes about 5 minutes to complete
Thank you for your participation

1. How interested were you in accounting before you took this course?

- Very interested
- Interested
- Neutral
- Uninterested
- Very uninterested

2. Have your interest level changed after taking this course?

- Changed positively
- Changed negatively
- Unchanged

3. Have you ever received a clear explanation about the importance of accounting as a business school student?

- Yes
- No
- Partially

4. How important do you think accounting course is to you?

- Very important
- Important
- Neutral
- Unimportant
- Very unimportant

5. Have you ever taken accounting or bookkeeping class prior to this course?

- Yes
- No

6. What is your assessment of FCA workload compared to other courses you enrolled this semester?

- Too much
- Much
- About the same
- Less
- Much less

7. How many courses have you registered this semester?

- 1 Course
- 2 Courses
- 3 Courses
- 4 Courses
- 5 Courses
- 6 Courses

8. How many hours, on average, do you spend (or plan to spend) studying in a week for all the courses you enrolled during this semester?

Total
hours

9. How many of these hours do you spend (or plan to spend) in studying FCA?

FCA
hours

10. What is your confidence level in taking FCA examinations compared to the other courses you enrolled this semester?

- Very high
- High
- About the same
- Low
- Very low

11. What do you like most about FCA?

12. What do you like least about FCA?

13. Which is your current major (check one)

- Accounting
- Accounting Information Systems
- Computer Information Systems
- Corporate Finance and Accounting
- Economics-Finance
- Finance
- Information Design and Corporate Communication

- International Studies
- Liberal Arts (English, History, Philosophy, Public Policy and Social Change)
- Management
- Managerial Economics
- Marketing
- Mathematical Sciences
- Other
- Undecided

14. Gender (Check one)

- Male
- Female