

AICPA Student Development Program Best Practices

*Preparing a diverse pipeline of high school, community college and university students
for studying accounting and becoming a CPA*

As the world and its markets continue to diversify, so too must the accounting profession. The AICPA is committed to creating and nurturing a more diverse and dynamic workforce that represents today's changing society. Among the ways it is demonstrating its commitment is by developing best practice programs that fuel the pipeline of underrepresented minority high school, community college and university students studying accounting, preparing for the Certified Public Accounting (CPA) exam and becoming CPAs. They also offer insights and identify resources that can help position diversity and inclusion as a core component of an organization's strategy.

These best practices, which reflect input from the National Commission on Diversity and Inclusion, state CPA societies, affinity partners, accounting organizations (including those in business, industry and government), and community colleges and universities, provide an overview of core features of student development programs.

STUDENT DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM BEST PRACTICES

PRE-PROGRAM

Best Practice for Program Goals and Objectives

- *Develop a clear mission and vision for the program.* A well-defined mission and vision, and the goals and objectives required to achieve them, can help guide program managers when developing program content, setting student-selection criteria, making speaker and other instructor decisions, and forging collaborative partnerships.

Best Practice for Alliances and Partnerships

- *Expand your program scope and your opportunities for success by collaborating with at least two other organizations that share your mission.* Fully achieving your program's purpose requires that all partners embrace your goals and have an equally vested interest in the program's long-term success. Partners can include high schools, community colleges and universities as well as accounting organizations and other businesses, affinity groups, state CPA societies and community organizations.

Best Practice for Program Planning

- *Create a realistic plan for a cost-effective, long-term program.* Successful and enduring programs require a results-driven fundraising strategy, a sound budgetary process and dependable sources of funding and sponsorships. Costs, financing and scheduling are among the other high-priority planning considerations and should be done early and often.

- *Include both pre- and post-program activities in your plan.* Pre-program efforts should mentally prepare students for the program, while post-program efforts should keep students and their influencers engaged and interested in the accounting profession after the program concludes. The results are long-term relationships with participants.

Best Practice for Location and Venue Selections

- *Choose a location and venue that maximizes learning and the overall professional-development experience.* Whether students and parents or speakers and sponsors, location and venue play a determining role in a program's success. Top selection considerations are space requirements and on-site resources and support. Program-specific considerations include:
 - For high school and community college students, a program held on a college campus can help ensure that students benefit from a first-hand college experience, which can encourage them to further pursue their accounting studies.
 - For university students, a program held at a hotel or on-site at a CPA firm or other business can expand students' perspectives beyond college life and provide an inside look into the business environment.

Best Practice for Communications and Marketing

- *Build and maintain a communications and marketing platform focused on informing and engaging key influencers.* Engagement efforts can be targeted toward high school, community college and university guidance counselors and other faculty who actively guide students' career decisions. Other influential audiences include parents, program alumni, youth groups, religious institutions, PTAs/ PTOs, accounting organizations, profession affinity groups and the AICPA.
- *Begin communications and marketing outreach approximately one year pre-program.* By launching your student-engagement efforts one year prior you can reach top students before they begin to consider other options such as summer programs or internships.

Best Practice for Application Process

- *Create a student-friendly and objective application process.* An application process that is organized, seamless and straightforward, and demonstrates your commitment to students from program start to finish, is a premium among students who are choosing from a rising number of program applications.
- *Open the application period approximately eight months pre-program. **For summer programs in particular, an*** application process that begins in the early fall allows you to attract the most in-demand students before they are recruited by other organizations offering summer programs/internships.

Best Practice for Selection Process

- *Select the most highly qualified students.* Selection criteria such as GPA (3.2 minimum), PSAT/SAT scores, transcripts, essays, recommendations, and leadership and service experiences

are the hallmarks of a competitive selection process. Application reviews should consider all appropriate criteria, while keeping academic excellence, as demonstrated by the student's GPA and standardized test scores, a leading criteria.

- *Enlist the assistance of the admissions office of the college hosting the program.* Student selection insights from the host college not only bring an additional academic perspective to the selection process but they also help identify students who are likely to be successful at the college.

Best Practice for Program Due Diligence

- *Fully understand all program expectations, and legal and health requirements.* Student and other participant safety, and your protection against liability, are critical program priorities. By consulting with legal counsel and/or a risk-management professional, you can learn the responsibilities and liabilities involved in offering the program.
- *Take a comprehensive approach in your due diligence.* Program practices and policies should address issues ranging from hold harmless agreements, liability and health insurance, and dietary restrictions to student photo releases, criminal and other background checks, and special accommodations.

Best Practice for Program Content

- *Develop a program offering a blended learning approach.* Content that engages and intellectually challenges students with a variety of different topics can deliver an incredibly rewarding program. It further encourages students to continue their accounting studies and obtain the CPA designation, builds academic success, and prepares them for the workforce. Career-development training, and personal and professional growth opportunities are additional advantages.
- *Present content in a number of creative ways.* Programs should allow for a balanced mix of small group collaborative activities, panel discussions/lectures featuring successful young CPAs and individual self-reflection opportunities.

Best Practice for Speaker and Volunteer Selection

- *Tap into the professional network of a wide range of organizations when identifying speakers and volunteers.* State CPA societies, accounting organizations, university accounting/business departments and the AICPA are invaluable sources of speaker and volunteer information.
- *Achieve a diverse mix of program speakers and volunteers.* Dynamic, engaging and inspirational speakers with different experiences, track records for inclusion and the ability to relate to underrepresented minority students, supported by dedicated volunteers, are strong program differentiators. Powerful stories of the challenges and successes speakers have encountered on their journey to becoming a CPA can motivate students long after the program concludes.

Best Practice for Program Management

- *Ensure that all program participants know their roles and responsibilities.* Informing program participants – from speakers, volunteers, state CPA society/AICPA team members and sponsors to program managers, students, parents and the host college or hotel – of how they contribute to the program’s success helps meet program goals and expectations. Orientation sessions, one-on-one meetings and roundtable discussions are among the ways participants can be prepared for the program.

POST-PROGRAM

Best Practice for Program Evaluation

- *Conduct timely and effective program evaluations.* A framework for continuous program improvement and accountability is best created using feedback from all participants and stakeholders. Feedback can be obtained at the end of each day or at the close of the program.

Best Practice for Tracking Alumni and Maintaining Relationships

- *Stay up-to-date on program alumni’s academic and career progress.* The services and support students receive during the program can continue post-program through ongoing aftercare between the program manager and student alumni. Aftercare strategies, which can maintain students’ commitment to studying accounting and obtaining the CPA designation, include social media platforms such as Facebook program alumni pages and LinkedIn, mentoring relationships, regular e-mail communications with other participants, and annual reunions.