

An Assessment of the Academic Support System Available to Principles of Accounting Students

**Susan M. Moncada and Joseph C. Sanders
Indiana State University**

Abstract

Students from two Midwestern Universities enrolled in principles of financial accounting classes were surveyed regarding the utilization and value of the academic support system available to them. The impact of threat to self-esteem on help seeking was also explored. In addition, students were asked to rate the likelihood that various factors would hinder help-seeking opportunities. Finally, data were analyzed with respect to major to provide information on the generalizability of the findings.

Students used all twelve forms of formal and informal sources of academic assistance to some extent. Some sources of help were used considerably more frequently than others. Help was sought most frequently from friends and classmates, followed by consulting instructors directly before or after class. All forms of direct contact with instructors were perceived as the most beneficial type of help available, yet these forms of help were not being utilized nearly as much as others.

The majority of students enrolled in principles of accounting classes viewed help seeking as a positive way to solve a problem. Approximately 15% of the students, however, associated negativism with it. A very small percentage actually avoid seeking help and associated it with threatening their self-esteem. Convenience and circumstances that threaten self-esteem were most commonly cited as conditions likely to decrease help seeking. Differences based on major were negligible. Recommendations for increasing usage and value and mitigating students' concerns as they relate to academic support systems are provided.

Many scholars who have studied the impact of college on students believe that learning is a product of the ways in which they integrate their in-class and out-of-class experiences [Kuh, 1993; Light, 1992; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991]. We have found that students often believe that the do-it-yourself side of

college provides some of their most significant educational experiences. The academic support system for students enrolled in principles of accounting classes provides an array of out-of-class experiences that can contribute to the successful mastery of the principles of accounting

courses should students elect to engage in them.

Yet, how often do we as educators take the time to assess this support system. Assessment is broadly defined as the "means for focussing our collective attention, examining assumptions, and creating a shared culture dedicated to understanding and continuously improving the quality of higher learning" [Angelo, 1994]. To meet the AACSB charge of continuous program improvement, Schools of Business, particularly departments of accounting, should consider including a periodic examination of the academic support systems in effect for students enrolled in their courses when conducting reviews of accounting programs.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to conduct an assessment of the academic support system available to students enrolled in introductory principles of accounting courses. The first part of this evaluation involved identifying the sources of help students were using most. In addition, we wanted to know the value students attributed to each source of help being used.

Next, we wanted to determine how students viewed help seeking as it relates to the learning process and their self-

esteem. What percentage of students view help seeking as a positive way to solve an academic problem versus a negative experience to be avoided? Is seeking help from various sources considered a personal admission of failure as some of the literature suggest [Shapiro, 1983; Nadler and Fisher, 1986; Nadler, 1991]? We also wanted to determine the extent to which students felt various factors decreased the likelihood of their seeking help. The results of this analysis would help us understand why some students might not seek help. It would also identify behaviors within or beyond our influence.

Finally, we felt it important to examine differences based on major (accounting, other business, and non-business). Principles of accounting classes are a service course to many different majors. Does one's major impact the use and value of the academic support system? Are these behaviors and perceptions relatively the same for all principles of accounting students? In any event, the knowledge gained from this assessment will allow us to add value to existing academic support systems and provide a basis for accounting educators interested in understanding the help-seeking behaviors of students enrolled in principles of accounting classes.

Background

Much has been written in the fields of psychology, medicine, and mental health concerning helping relationships and the attributes of professional service providers that affect help seeking. Extensive reviews of early works are provided by Fisher, Nadler, and Whitcher-Alagna [1982] and Gross and McMullen [1983]. A synopsis of various theories thought to impact help seeking is provided by Nadler and Fisher [1986].

Investigations of help seeking have been conducted at the elementary, secondary and college levels as well. From them much has been learned regarding the costs attributed to seeking help by students. First, some avoidance of help seeking might be attributed to how teachers react to and motivate students [Karabenick and Sharma, 1994; Newman, 1990; Newman and Goldin, 1990]. Second, threat to self-esteem and embarrassment can also have a negative impact on a student's desire to seek help [Fisher, et. al., 1982; Karabenick and Knapp, 1991; Karabenick and Knapp, 1988, Nadler and Fisher, 1986; Nadler, 1991; Shapiro, 1983]. Third, repeated help seeking may cause students to feel indebted and as a result they avoid seeking further help [Ames and Lau, 1982, Nadler and Fisher,

1986; Gross and McMullen, 1983]. Finally, the student's social environment may affect the amount of time he or she is willing to devote to seeking help [Gross and McMullen, 1983; Karabenick, 1990]. Little research to date has explored the perceptions of students enrolled in principles of accounting classes in regards to factors they perceive as inhibiting their likelihood of using various forms of academic assistance.

The literature most relevant to our investigation involves those studies that were designed to assess the factors that influence college students' typical academic help seeking behaviors [Ames and Lau, 1982; Karabenick and Knapp, 1988, Karabenick and Knapp, 1991; Knapp and Karabenick, 1988; Moncada and Sanders, 1995]. First of all, past results indicate that those students who could benefit the most from seeking help are most unlikely to seek it [Karabenick and Knapp, 1988]. Of the students who did seek help, informal sources of help were preferred to formal sources of help [Knapp and Karabenick, 1988; Moncada and Sanders, 1995]. Some students do not seek help because they attribute poor performance to a lack of overall intelligence [Ames and Lau, 1982], or associate the help-seeking process

with a threat to their self-esteem [Moncada and Sanders, 1995]. For the majority of students, however, help seeking is more likely to be related to academic performance rather than a behavior threatening to self-esteem [Knapp and Karabenick, 1988; Karabenick and Knapp, 1991; Moncada and Sanders, 1995].

Sources of Help.

Both formal and informal forms of academic assistance [Karabenick and Knapp, 1991; Knapp and Karabenick, 1998] exist at the college level to help students improve their performance. Formal sources of help include those that are professionally provided [Karabenick and Knapp, 1991; Knapp and Karabenick, 1988]. Help is typically available to accounting principles students at the instructor, department, and university levels. Instructors typically provide academic assistance to students during formal office hours as well as before and after class. Assistance might also be given by means of a phone call or electronic mail. At the department level, upper-level accounting majors or graduate students may provide regularly scheduled tutoring services. At the university level, student-counseling centers may provide formal tutoring services and workshops on

study skills and test anxiety.

Informal self-study means of help also exist. To enhance learning, textbook publishers often provide study guides, computerized tutorials, and video tapes to institutions that adopt their textbook. Computerized materials are usually provided free of charge to students enrolled in the course. Students can purchase the study guide that accompanies the text through their university's bookstore. Access to video tapes can be made possible through library media centers. In addition to publisher supplied materials, other informal sources of help include family and relatives or college friends and classmates.

This study attempts to extend the work of Moncada and Sanders [1995] by focussing on the assessment of an academic assistance system. The current study examined a more comprehensive set of academic assistance components as well as investigated factors that might inhibit students' use of various types of assistance. We also investigated the impact of threat to self-esteem on students' help-seeking to confirm whether avoidance occurred for a similarly low percentage of students.

Subjects and Methodology

Students enrolled in principles of financial accounting classes at two Midwestern universities participated in the study. Students were asked to complete an academic assistance assessment instrument during the last day of class (contact authors for copy). The participants represented fifteen sections of introductory principles of financial accounting I and II classes taught by nine faculty. On average the students were sophomores, enrolled in 14 credits hours, who worked an average of 13 hours per week. Their average age was 21. In terms of gender, 230 students were male and 199 were female. Forty-three students were non-business majors, 126 were accounting majors, and 251 were other business majors.

Results

Which sources of help do students use most? Students were asked to estimate the number of times they sought assistance from twelve different possible sources during the semester. The forms of assistance available to students were accounting department tutors, college friends and classmates, computerized tutorials, counseling center tutors, family/relatives, instructor (before/after class), instructor (phone

call), instructor (e-mail), instructor (office visit), solutions manual, text study guide, video tapes. Responses ranged from 0 to 6+ times. The percentage of students who reported they used each source of help at least once and the average number of times it was used is presented in Table I.

Students consulted college friends or classmates more than any other source. Approximately 88% of the students reported consulting friends or classmates an average of 4.4 times during the semester. Approximately 60% of the students reported that they consulted the instructor (before or after class) and used the textbook's student study guide. However, the average number of times the study guide and solutions manual are being used is greater than the number of times help is being sought from the instructor. Results generated from the SAS General Linear models procedure indicated that usage of the various sources of help was not dependent upon whether an individual was a nonbusiness, business, or accounting major.

Table 1: Mean Usage of Various Sources by Students Who Sought Help

<u>Source of Help</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>S.D.</u>	<u>Variance</u>
College friend/classmates	381	88.39%	4.4094	1.7245	2.9740
Instructor (before/after class)	260	60.32%	2.7846	1.6857	2.8414
Text study guide	256	59.39%	4.0625	1.7523	3.0706
Solutions manual	177	41.06%	4.1073	1.8110	3.3123
Instructor (office visit)	168	38.99%	2.4464	1.6370	2.6800
Family/relatives	128	29.69%	3.0547	1.7312	2.9970
Accounting department tutors	100	23.20%	2.6400	1.6728	2.7983
Computerized tutorial	100	23.20%	2.9300	1.6469	2.7122
Instructor (via phone call)	75	17.40%	2.2667	1.5275	2.3333
Counseling center tutors	41	9.51%	3.1707	1.9736	3.8951
Video tapes	29	6.7%	1.8276	1.0025	1.0049
Instructor (via e-mail)	15	3.48%	1.9333	.7988	.6381

How do students perceive the value of each source? Students were asked to rate the value of the sources of academic assistance that they had used based on a scale from 1=poor to 5=excellent. It should be noted that not every student who reportedly used each source of help, chose to rate its value. For those students who are using the various sources of academic assistance, the sources are perceived as being of some value (see Table 2). The average ratings ranged from slightly above good to slightly below very good (3.2 to 3.8) for 10 of the 12 sources of help rated.

Help provided by faculty during an office visit and before or after class was rated the highest in terms of value. Over 90% of the students who reported using these forms of academic

assistance rated interaction with the instructor as being good to excellent. Furthermore, the greatest percentage of students ranked instructor assistance during an office visit (34.8%) and before or after class (30.4%) as being excellent over any other source of help. The students who used the text's study guide, college friends/classmates, the solutions manual, accounting department tutors, consulting the instructor by phone, and counseling center tutors rated each source of help as being good to excellent.

Consulting the instructor through e-mail and viewing video tapes were used by the least number of students. However, at least 50% of the students who used these sources rated them as being good or better. It should

be noted that the only access students had to e-mail at the time of this study was through class accounts. It is not known how many faculty had created class accounts for students to use.

When the data are categorized by major, only one significant difference among the groups was detected. The means for the value associated with help

obtained from friends and classmates are significantly different. Specifically, the mean value assigned by other business majors (3.615) is significantly different ($F=4.44$, $p=.0124$) from the mean (3.163) value assigned by nonbusiness majors. Other business majors rated help received from their friends and classmates nearer to very good than did nonbusiness majors.

Table 2: Means Percentages of Students Rating the Value of Each Source of Help from Poor to Excellent

<u>Source of Help</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Poor</u>	<u>Fair</u>	<u>Good</u>	<u>Very Good</u>	<u>Excellent</u>
Instructor (office visit)	155	3.839	1.3%	7.7%	31.6%	24.5%	34.8%
Instructor (before/after class)	250	3.800	1.3%	6.8%	33.2%	28.4%	30.4%
Text study guide	243	3.572	0.8%	11.5%	38.7%	27.6%	21.4%
College friends/classmates	376	3.516	1.9%	10.9%	39.6%	29.0%	18.6%
Solutions manual	167	3.502	5.4%	10.8%	34.7%	26.3%	22.8%
Instructor (via phone call)	66	3.379	4.5%	13.6%	37.9%	27.3%	16.7%
Family/relatives	126	3.373	2.4%	19.8%	34.1%	25.4%	18.3%
Accounting dept. tutors	97	3.281	2.1%	15.5%	41.2%	24.7%	16.5%
Computerized tutorials	93	3.204	7.5%	22.6%	32.3%	17.2%	20.4%
Counseling center tutors	38	3.366	5.3%	13.2%	31.6%	39.5%	10.5%
Instructor (via e-mail)	14	2.927	14.3%	28.6%	21.4%	21.4%	14.3%
Video tapes	26	2.654	15.4%	30.8%	38.5%	3.8%	11.5%

How do students perceive the process of help seeking? Students were first asked a question about how they perceived help seeking in general. Sixty-nine percent of the students considered seeking help as a positive way to solve a problem being experienced. Another 11.8% considered the process an unpleasant, but necessary experience required to pass the class. Only 3% of the students perceived help

seeking as being a negative experience to be avoided because it is a personal admission of failure. No opinion on the issue was expressed by 16.3%.

Seeking help perceived as a personal admission of failure. This general question was followed by one that asked students to indicate their agreement or disagreement that seeking help from various sources

was viewed as a personal admission of failure. A five point Likert scale was used from 1=strong disagreement to 5=strong agreement. On average for those students who chose to answer the question, they did not view seeking help as a personal admission of failure. However, compared to the general question, the number of students who did perceive seeking help negatively increased (see Table 3). With the exception of using video tapes or computerized tutorials, as many as 15 to 20% of the students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that seeking help from the remaining sources of help was a personal admission of failure.

When the data is categorized by major (nonbusiness, accounting,

other business), two significantly different responses were detected. With respect to friends and classmates, the mean for nonbusiness majors (2.511) was significantly different ($F=2.86, p=.0585$) than the means for accounting (2.024) and other business (2.073) majors. The second difference involves obtaining help from the accounting department tutors. Again, the mean for nonbusiness majors (2.809) was significantly different ($F=4.02, p=.0187$) from both the accounting (2.208) and other business (2.303) majors. Nonbusiness majors felt more strongly that seeking help from friends or classmates and the accounting department tutors was considered more of a personal admission of failure.

Table 3: Seeking Help Perceived as a Personal Admission of Failure

<u>Source of Help</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Strongly Disagree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Undecided</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Strongly Agree</u>
Counseling center	419	2.3652	33.7%	19.6%	28.9%	12.4%	5.5%
Acct. dept. tutors	419	2.3245	36.0%	21.7%	23.2%	11.9%	7.2%
Instructor	422	2.2251	42.7%	21.6%	15.6%	10.9%	9.2%
Solutions manual	421	2.2019	39.0%	23.5%	22.1%	9.3%	6.2%
Video tapes	420	2.1262	36.7%	22.9%	32.9%	6.4%	1.2%
Study guide	421	2.0713	44.2%	25.4%	15.2%	9.5%	5.7%
Computer tutorials	419	2.0600	39.1%	26.5%	25.5%	6.9%	1.9%
Friend/classmate	423	1.2104	43.7%	25.8%	12.3%	12.8%	5.4%

What factors do students feel decrease the likelihood of obtaining help with their accounting class? Next, students were asked to rate fourteen factors as to the likelihood that each item

would negatively influence their help-seeking behaviors. These factors are shown in Table 4. The choices selected ranged from 1=never to 5=always. The characteristics included on

the survey instrument were relevant literature.
based upon a review of

Table 4: Means for Factors Affecting Help Seeking and Response Percentages

<u>Characteristic</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Never</u>	<u>Seldom</u>	<u>Sometimes</u>	<u>Usually</u>	<u>Always</u>
Busy work/class schedule	426	3.1221	13.8%	15.7%	28.6%	27.9%	13.8%
Performance anxiety	25	.5624	24.7%	20.2%	35.5%	13.2%	6.4%
Being inconvenienced	27	.4333	30.2%	20.6%	28.8%	16.4%	4.0%
Being an imposition	23	.3640	31.2%	22.7%	28.6%	13.5%	4.0%
Feeling embarrassed	27	.3466	32.8%	23.9%	24.6%	13.3%	5.4%
Feeling intimidated	27	.3162	35.6%	22.5%	21.8%	15.0%	5.2%
Availability of source	26	.3028	30.0%	25.1%	31.2%	11.7%	1.9%
Lack encouragement	29	.2960	35.4%	21.7%	25.4%	12.8%	4.7%
Feeling unwelcome	28	.2780	40.2%	17.8%	22.4%	13.3%	6.3%
Fear of questions	25	.1906	39.8%	23.5%	19.5%	12.2%	4.9%
Feeling incompetent	25	.0353	45.2%	21.9%	21.2%	7.8%	4.0%
Dislike of accounting	25	.9882	46.8%	21.9%	20.9%	6.4%	4.0%
Inability to reciprocate	420	.8905	46.0%	26.0%	21.7%	6.0%	0.5%
Task specific inability	419	1.8878	45.3%	27.4%	21.2%	5.0%	1.0%

On average students did not feel characteristics associated with negative teacher reactions, threat to self-esteem and embarrassment, ability attributions, reciprocity and equity, or social environment substantially affected the likelihood of their seeking help, with one exception. Approximately 70% of the students attributed not seeking help to their busy work and class schedules (the sum of those responding sometimes, usually, or always). In addition, nearly 55% of the students said performance anxiety would at times decrease their likelihood of seeking help. It is also worth noting, however, that at least 40% of the students felt factors 3-9 would

decrease their likelihood of seeking help.

When data is categorized by major, only one significant difference was detected. Dislike of accounting was thought to decrease the likelihood of seeking help more strongly by nonbusiness majors (2.447) and other business major (2.258) than by accounting majors (1.283). We would certainly hope that this would not be a significant factor for accounting majors.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to assess the academic support system available to students enrolled in introductory principles of accounting courses. We identified the sources of

help used most frequently by students and the perceived value associated with each source of help. Next, we explored the extent to which students considered seeking help a personal admission of failure. We discovered the extent to which students felt certain factors would decrease their likelihood of pursuing help. Finally, we also considered differences based on major.

Student usage. Students are using both formal and informal sources of help. Some forms of academic assistance are used considerably more than others. Academic assistance was sought from friends and classmates by more students more frequently. This is consistent with previous findings [Moncada and Sanders, 1995; Knapp and Karabenick, 1988]. The next most popular sources of help were the discussions with the instructor immediately before or after class in the classroom (60%) and the study guide that accompanies the principles of accounting text (59%). Nearly 40% of the students report consulting the instructor during office hours an average of 2.4 times and using the solutions manual approximately four times per semester. Family members or relatives were consulted by approximately 30% of the students at least three times. Accounting department tutors and the

computerized tutorial were used at least two times by 23% of the students. Nearly 17% of the students reported seeking help from the instructor by phone at least twice during the semester. Finally, a very small percentage of students (3-9%) reported consulting counseling center tutors, watching video tapes, or sending the instructor e-mail messages.

Value of the sources. With respect to value, the majority of the students enrolled in principles of accounting classes felt that most of the forms of help available to them were good to very good sources of help. Students, however, do not appear to be using the sources of help they value most highly as frequently as other sources. Interaction with faculty via an office visit, before or after class, or by phone, received the highest value ratings of all the sources used. Perhaps this phenomenon can be attributed in part to the times and days used by students to prepare for their classes (evenings and weekends). Most principles of accounting classes and faculty office hours are scheduled between the hours of 8:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. Attending other classes may prevent some students from consulting the instructor before or after class.

Two sources of help were rated less than good. Both

sources, videotapes and e-mailing faculty, were used by a very small number of students. These unfavorable ratings suggest that the content and quality of the videotapes may need to be improved by the publishers. As for the e-mail consultations, written questions and explanations may be less clear due to the inability of both parties to confirm understanding as is the case when the interaction is conducted in person.

Attitude toward seeking help. The majority of students appear to have a healthy attitude toward help seeking, viewing it as a positive problem solving alternative. A small group of students (12%) do associate threat to self-esteem with help seeking. A smaller group (3%) report they actually avoid seeking help, because to them it is a personal admission of failure. Nonbusiness majors are most likely to view seeking help from friends/classmates or accounting department tutors as a personal admission of failure. Future research needs to address what can be done to change the attitudes of those students who view help seeking as a negative process.

Characteristics hindering help-seeking. When students were asked to indicate how likely specific factors would affect their use of

academic support, the results are enlightening. Nearly 70% of the students said their busy work or class schedule decreased their likelihood of seeking help. Performance anxiety was cited by 55% of the students. Being inconvenienced and availability of sources of help were considered as contributing conditions by nearly half of the students. Feelings of imposition, unwelcomeness, embarrassment, incompetence and intimidation along with lack of encouragement and fear of being questioned were other conditions cited by at least 30% of the students as having an impact on help-seeking. This implies that convenience and circumstances that threaten self-esteem may be the prevalent conditions that tend to decrease the likelihood that certain students will engage in help-seeking.

Conclusion

Both the current usage and value attributed to the academic support systems in place for principles of accounting classes leads us to conclude that the needs of many students are adequately being met. Convenience and threat to self-esteem appear to be dominant conditions that affect the likelihood of students' seeking academic assistance.

Faculties need to be aware of the reasons students cite as impacting the likelihood of seeking help. We can control some of these characteristics. Faculty who want to increase student help-seeking behavior should consider:

- ❖ Providing feedback often to students using a variety of classroom assessment techniques.
- ❖ Scheduling some office hours during the evening.
- ❖ Keeping their office door open as a sign of welcome.
- ❖ Encouraging students to view academic problems as being controllable and a normal part of life long learning.
- ❖ Becoming more sensitive to threats to students' self-esteem, so that helping episodes are as non-threatening as possible.
- ❖ Demonstrating a concern for enhancing student learning opportunities.
- ❖ Demonstrating computer-assisted tutorials in class.
- ❖ Publicizing accounting department tutoring hours.
- ❖ Scheduling some departmental tutoring hours when accounting principles students are more likely to be studying.
- ❖ Coming to class as early as possible.

- ❖ Minimizing the number of new questions posed in response to student questions.
- ❖ Discussing performance anxiety in class.

This study has focussed attention on the academic support system available to students enrolled in principles of accounting classes. If we are to continuously improve the quality of higher learning, out-of-class experiences in which accounting students engage should also be included as part of the program assessment.

Limitations and Implications

Finally, several limitations regarding this investigation should be noted because they not only affect the generalizability of our findings, but also provide implications for future research. First, both universities did not use the same textbook. However, both textbooks did favor what could be described as a modified traditional approach as opposed to an entirely user oriented focus. A consideration for future research might be to investigate whether textbook and teaching focus has an affect on student help-seeking.

Second, no attempt was made to investigate the specific teaching styles of the faculty whose students completed our instrument.

Differences in instruction due to teaching styles might have influenced how some students responded to Section 5 of our survey instrument. This section attempted to identify factors that students perceived as contributing to a decreased likelihood of seeking academic assistance. Future research might investigate the impact of teaching style on the factors we have identified.

Lastly, we did not attempt to identify which

specific accounting topics required more or less help. Rather our investigation focussed on the overall usage of academic assistance alternatives by students enrolled in principles of financial accounting classes; the value attributed to these sources, and factors inhibiting student help seeking. Perhaps, future research in this area, might focus on academic assistance as it pertains to those specific accounting topics perceived as being most difficult.

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