

The Accounting Education Change Commission: Its History and Impact

Chapter 9 CONCLUSION

The Accounting Education Change Commission began its seven-year life in 1989. By the time it handed off its activities to the American Accounting Association in 1996, it had made its mark on accounting education. The role of the Commission was to be a catalyst for change, and it accomplished that goal admirably. *Webster's* defines a catalyst as "an agent that provokes or speeds significant change or action." The AECC both provoked and speeded change in accounting education. It did not cause that change—the environment was ripe for change when the AECC was appointed. But without the prodding and leadership of the Commission, change would have been slower and possibly quite different.

Despite the efforts and successes of the AECC, however, the change process in accounting education was not finished in 1996, and it continues today. The ultimate success of the Commission will not be measured by the activities it undertook, but by the nature of the accounting education programs in colleges and universities in the year 2000 and beyond.

The AECC used two approaches to encourage improvements in accounting education: (1) the power of persuasion, and (2) the power of the pocketbook. Neither approach alone could have achieved the Commission's objectives.

Persuasion had two distinct phases. In the early years of the Commission, it focused on convincing the academy (and, to some extent, practitioners) of the *need* for change. In the later years, attention shifted to conveying information about *how to improve* accounting programs. Extensive publishing and public speaking programs were combined with official pronouncements on issues deemed to be important to the change process. In addition, targeted workshops made details available to interested parties.

Several factors were responsible for the widespread impact of the Commission's persuasive efforts. First, the AECC had the resources and organizational structure to prepare and deliver a consistent and compelling message. Second, AECC members were respected representatives of the accounting academy and accounting practice and were generous in their time and efforts on behalf of the Commission's agenda. Third, the American Accounting Association, its Sections and Regions, and other organizations provided platforms, both written and oral, for the Commission's message. Finally, accounting faculty and administrators recognized both the threats and opportunities in a fast-changing environment and were receptive to exploring new educational approaches.

However, persuasion could go only so far. Committing financial resources to the change process was necessary, both (1) to gain the attention of those who would lead the change process and (2) to provide prototypes of change for those following. The grant program proved to be a good vehicle to accomplish both objectives. The AECC made 11 grants to 12 schools. As in most research and development investments, some were more successful than were others. But, in total, there were more successes than failures, and lessons were learned even from the less-successful projects.

The AECC was most successful in creating changes in accounting pedagogy, especially in promoting the development of communication and interpersonal skills in accounting curricula. Significant progress was made in changing the content of accounting courses to be more consistent with the recommendations of the Bedford Committee report, but much remains to be done. Limited success was achieved in developing measures for assessment of accounting programs, despite much effort by the Commission and several grant schools. The lack of success in developing assessment measures leads to concerns about whether accounting programs have moved to an environment of continuous improvement. The Commission did not seek a single, one-time change in accounting education, but a change in process that would lead to constantly monitoring and adapting programs to meet changes in the professional and practicing environments. The AECC certainly

helped break the inertia that impeded changes in accounting education in the last few decades, but it remains to be seen whether a new inertia is about to settle in.

The 1990s have been an unsettling but exciting time for accounting education. The Accounting Education Change Commission played a major role in defining and carrying out the agenda for change in accounting education that has been a hallmark of this decade. There may be disagreement about the extent of the AECC's role, or about the desirability of the changes promoted by the Commission, but it is hard to argue that accounting education was unaffected by the Commission.

As I mentioned early in this monograph, I am by no means an unbiased observer of the Commission and its impact. Nevertheless, I will venture a bottom-line assessment: The AECC, while not perfect, had a positive impact on accounting education that will be felt for years to come. I am proud to have played a part in it.