

Make it Add Up, Doc

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Abstract

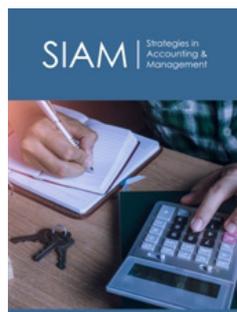
This physician is ever grateful for the lessons learned in high school accounting, even if the As earned there pulled down a stratospheric GPA sufficiently to cost a valedictory. Getting things in the right column and making them add up is important in medicine, and life. High schoolers would do themselves well to sign up for accounting class.

Introduction

Did you hear the one about the rheumatologist who was asked to write something for an accounting journal? Yep, that really happened, and here's the result. Accounting was one of the easier classes I took in high school. I'm not even sure why I signed up for it in the first place. I had zero desire to go into business of any sort, let alone become an accountant. I was good at math, but that was going to take me into something scientific. A lot of my buddies were taking accounting, so I did too. I ended up liking the class. Everything was very logical, with satisfaction to be had in getting the right number in the right column and seeing everything balance up. I think running numbers makes my brain put out endorphins. I got that from my dad, a time-study guy at G.M. (they eventually called him an "industrial engineer"); we would have a contest at grocery checkout, seeing who can add up the bill faster, and always beating the cashier. That machine got a lot of fun work in accounting class. The class was taught by workbook and we were allowed to go at our own pace. When it began to look like I could actually do it, I set out to finish the two semester course in one term and did. My three friends who took accounting most seriously didn't do that, although they got As too. Each went to Western and focused on business, Rod and Eric in accounting and Steve in marketing. All saw success, Rod and Steve in aerospace and Eric in banking. At our high school, only grades from the first seven semesters counted toward class ranking. Greedy for As and grabbing for that top prize, I asked that both my accounting As count toward my final GPA. Johnny Mac, our vice-principal, granted me that. I wonder now if he knew what the consequences would be. He was always one to teach you a lesson one way or another. It's been more than 50 years, but I can still give the details verbatim. My friends still ask me about it on occasion, just to bait me. At dear old Vicksburg High, class grades were weighted, with an extra point added to honors or advanced placement classes. After 6 semesters, my GPA was well north of 4.0. I think I may have gotten a B in Phys Ed, which mercifully was required only freshman year. Now you think Mr. number crunching genius would have added this one up. Accounting was neither an honor nor an A.P. course. 4 points was 4 points. And what did those 2 accounting As do to my GPA? Yep, they brought it down! That very smart girl Kay beat me for valedictorian by 7 ten-thousandths of a point! No, I'll never get over it. And yes, Mr. McDonald, I've learned to scrutinize more carefully the potential consequences of my greedy actions. Goes to show you can learn from a class long after the final exam.

Being salutatorian wasn't half bad. The salutatorian greets the assembled as the ceremonies begin, so no one has fallen asleep yet, then gets to sit down – job done – and take in the rest of the evening. There were no real consequences of my fall from the top spot. I got into the honors college at Michigan, graduated with high distinction in Zoology, then got a masters in micro as I waited to get into a very good med school (University of Chicago), had the computer stick me at Barnes in St. Louis, was welcomed back to Ann Arbor for my rheumatology fellowship then taken on as faculty for what was an immensely satisfying career that is still giving me things to write about even though I haven't seen a patient this decade.

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And the role of that accounting class? Maybe more important than I think. Many folks my age say the most useful course they took in high school was typing. I didn't take typing (would have brought down my GPA). While I disdained the business side of medicine, I understood what was being discussed when the numbers flashed up on the screen and kept careful track of my own clinical activities and occasional grant-getting to make sure I was getting proper credit. There may be a little more in my 401K as a result. Accounting is important in medicine. A PubMed search of those two terms nets

144,454 references [1]. Rheumatology as the crossed search term gets 2,799 [2]. So, yes, I would recommend that every high schooler take accounting. Life is better when you can make things add up.

References

1. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/?term=accounting+AND+medicine>
2. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/?term=accounting+AND+rheumatology>

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