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Accounting students made a profitable choice

BY Kathleen Lynn, The Record, Hackensack, N.J.

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Feb. 4--On the final day of her summer internship last August, accounting student Hilary Blum of Harrington Park was offered a full-time job after graduation, which was still nine months away. "I was extremely, extremely excited," said Blum, a 21-year-old student at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pa. "Not everyone goes into senior year with a job lined up after graduation. I called my mom to tell her. I was jumping up and down with the other interns. We were all calling our parents."

As Blum's experience shows, accounting is hot. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers, employers hiring new college grads say their No. 1 need is accountants. The average starting salary for 2006 accounting grads was about \$45,000, according to the association.

And it's not just new grads who are in demand. Ralph Thomas, executive director of the New Jersey Society of Certified Public Accountants, said employers are desperate for experienced accountants.

"If I had 15 experienced CPAs in my office today, I could probably make one phone call and get them all hired," Thomas said.

The demand for accountants has several causes. For one thing, corporations face stricter financial reporting standards required by the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, which Congress passed after the Enron scandal a few years ago. That means they've needed more accounting help. And although the Securities and Exchange Commission recently proposed easing some of those Sarbanes-Oxley rules, the changes are unlikely to lessen the demand for

accountants.

In addition, baby boomer accountants, now mostly in their 50s, will be retiring within the next decade or so and must be replaced. But there are relatively few younger accountants to replace them, because the number of accounting graduates declined during the 1990s. Students with a talent in math, who might otherwise have majored in accounting, instead were drawn to careers on Wall Street or in high tech.

When the economy slowed in 2001 and both Wall Street and the dot-com sector melted down, the job security offered by accounting started to look more appealing. The number of college students studying accounting rose 19 percent from 2000 to 2004, the most recent figures available, according to the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants. In 2004, there were 171,000 accounting students in the nation.

And more of these students are female. Women now make up about 56 percent of the new accounting graduates in the nation. As a result of the influx of women into the field, employers are offering more flexible work schedules to accommodate their family needs.

"Flexibility is not only the right thing to do, it's a retention tool," said Barbara Vigilante, manager of work/life and women's initiatives at the institute. "If your employer offers you the flexibility you need to meet your personal and work demands, it's a pretty good reason to stay."

Sax Macy Fromm & Co., an accounting firm in Clifton, offers part-time schedules to employees with family obligations. "You have to be creative," said Steven Kaplan, director of taxation.

The institute has a direct marketing campaign, including a Web site -- startheregoplaces.com -- to try to attract students to accounting. As part of the campaign, accountants visit high schools and colleges to talk about their profession.

Paradoxically, the Enron and Worldcom scandals have drawn young people to accounting, said Bea Sanders, vice president for

academic and career development at the institute. "It was quite clear that accounting is more than just number-crunching," she said. "People got a better understanding of accounting's importance and significance."

Kaplan said when he talks to young people, he stresses the satisfaction of working with clients. "We're able to be business advisers to our clients," he said. "We consult with them on business problems and help them plan for the future."

That's part of the appeal for Blum, who looks forward to starting her job as an auditor with the giant firm Deloitte & Touche in New York. Working on an audit team during her summer internship, she was impressed to see young accountants interact with top corporate executives.

The experience left her convinced she has made the right career choice, in part because as an auditor, she will visit different companies and be exposed to many industries.

"It's not the same thing every day," she said.