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Students Assist Community with Tax Preparation

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Story by Rob Baynard, '12

On Tuesdays evenings during this year's tax season, accounting student Tara Dimartino was at her local YMCA helping her neighbors file their taxes through the free IRS Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program. Dimartino was one of 24 College of Business students that trained on the IRS tax preparation and software procedures during winter break, qualifying her to prepare taxes through VITA.

"I feel great satisfaction knowing that I am helping people in my neighborhood and am having a positive impact on them," Dimartino said. "I figured that the VITA program would be a good way to get exposure to tax preparation without leaving my current job."

The VITA program offers free tax advice and preparation for people earning less than \$49,000 per year. Like other tax services, the volunteers and location supervisors ensure accurate tax preparation, monitoring the process from initial preparation to the receipt of return.

"What I think is good about this is that students don't have to do this," said James Fellows, professor of accounting and internship supervisor. "They're doing it because they want to. I think that's why we get the cream of the crop."

Fellows said the feedback he receives from site coordinators is overwhelmingly positive. VITA coordinators tell him that they have seen the quality of tax preparation increase since the students have become involved.

Not only do some of the students get academic credit for an internship, they also get the experience of preparing tax returns for people with a variety of situations while giving back to their community.

Robert Vivian, an accounting senior at USFSP, was involved in the financial industry and volunteered for the Boy Scouts of America for more than 15 years before going back to school to pursue his CPA. He saw a flier for the VITA internship being distributed around the business school in fall 2010. While Vivian said he does not necessarily need the academic credit, he saw the VITA program as a way to get back into helping people.

"I think a lot of us in the VITA program are getting as much or more out of the whole experience as the people we help," Vivian said. "I feel great when I walk out the door, after connecting with

all my VITA buddies and working together to solve problems and help people. When I was looking for my next avenue to help people, I would have never thought it would be taxes.”

The IRS VITA program staffs community centers all over the country during tax season. VITA sites are generally located at community centers, libraries, schools, and other convenient locations. Students interested in the joining the program next year should contact professor James Fellows at USF St. Petersburg’s College of Business.