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Accounting students provide free tax preparation assistance to Pinellas residents

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Accounting Professor James Fellows at the Lealman Asian Neighborhood Family Center with (l-r) a Pinellas taxpayer and students Adelina Dine and Thanh Ha Ly.

For the sixth year in a row, USF St. Petersburg accounting students are providing hundreds of hours of free income tax preparation for low- and moderate-income people throughout Pinellas County.

The students are volunteering through Volunteer Income Tax Assistance, a nationwide program that provides free tax preparation for people with annual incomes of \$52,000 or less. Many of the taxpayers the students help qualify for the earned income tax credit, which allows them to receive a refund with a low income.

“The program helps bring in millions of dollars each year from these tax credits, which aids the local economy,” said Accounting Professor James Fellows, Ph.D., who oversees the students’ work.

Chad Mello, a graduate student studying forensic accounting, is involved in the internship program for the second time this spring. He says he enjoys helping families because he knows how complicated it can be to file income returns.

The hardest part was the hours of intense studying and training he went through over the winter break, Mello says. But he knows his hard work will pay off.

“Being able to communicate a difficult topic and helping a family understand the reasons for the outcome of their return is satisfying to me,” Mello said.

Mello has an internship with Deloitte, one of the biggest international accounting firms in the country. He hopes to work there fulltime someday.

Each student who participates in the program is eligible for three hours of course credit. The USFSP program began in spring 2007 with six students. This spring, 21 students are working.

To qualify, students must take IRS tax prep courses during the fall and complete their tax certification exam during winter break. Eligible students then take an all-day IRS training course to prepare.

By the middle of January students are ready to get to work. Each student will spend at least 75 hours preparing tax returns during the semester for about 1,000 people.

The students work at 12 sites in cities throughout Pinellas, including St. Petersburg, Largo, St. Pete Beach, Clearwater, Safety Harbor and Tarpon Springs.

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