



THE COLLABORATIVE FOR THE COMMON GOOD

AT WINGATE UNIVERSITY

SERVICE LEARNING IN ACCT 426

Evolving “Volunteer Income Tax Assistance” to
“Volunteer Income Tax Experience”

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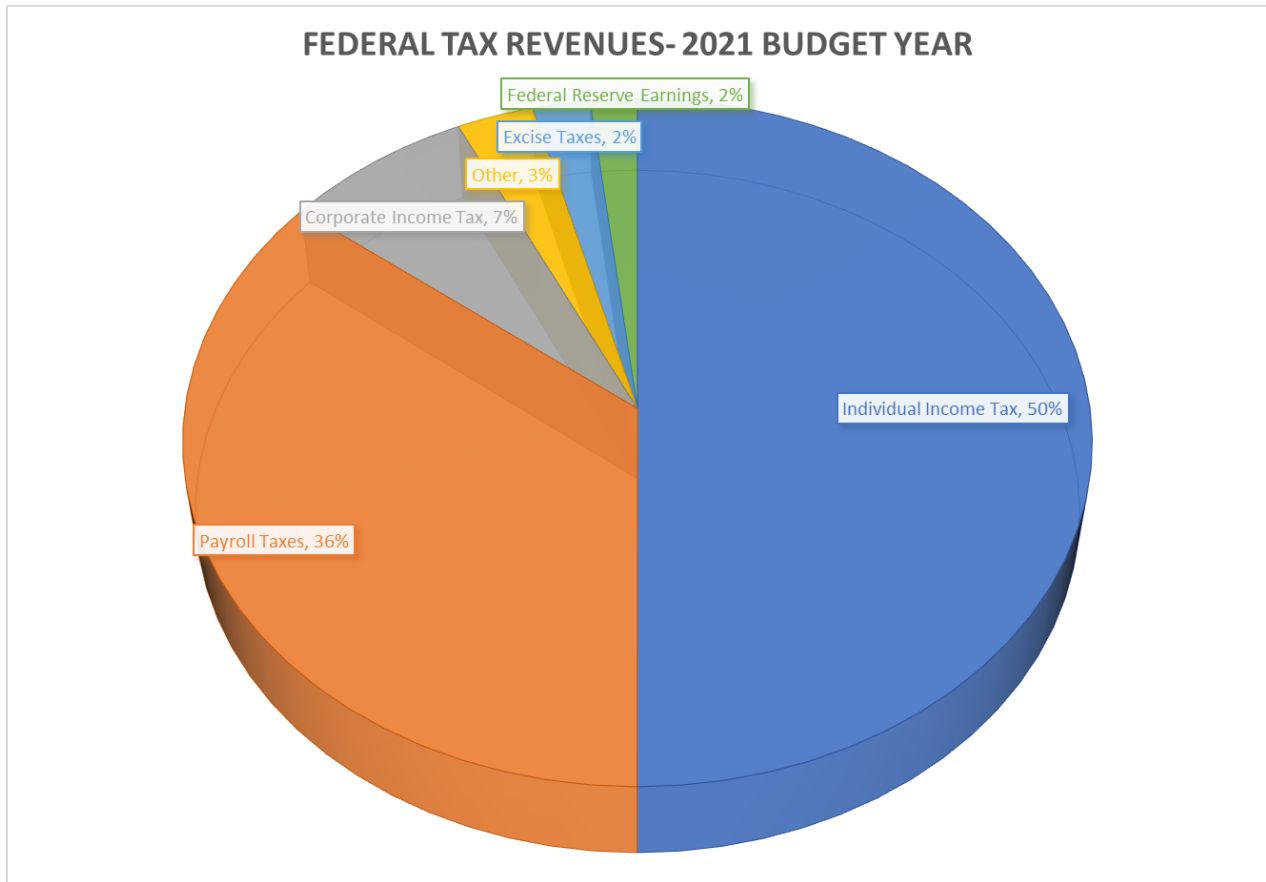
Abstract

Individual Income Tax makes up 50% of the federal government's total tax revenues. With the government relying so heavily on this, it is important that individuals file and pay in a timely manner. However, a recent study reports that 10-12% of households surveyed reported not filing Individual Tax Returns despite knowing the requirement. The same study found that households in lower income brackets were less likely to file than those in higher income brackets. Lower-income taxpayers often benefit the most when low-cost/free assistance filing tax returns is provided. Union County has been providing Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) services to qualifying individuals since 2005, and Wingate University has been supporting students interested in working with the VITA program on an individual basis. The university had never offered a dedicated course for this purpose until Wingate University's Porter B. Byrum's School of Business collaborated with Wingate University's Collaborative for the Common Good, to develop ACCT 426- Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) Program. Students are now working with both a University Representative and Union County Representative as they progress through an IRS-created training and certification program which allows them the opportunity to directly work with the Union County VITA program and the community members that they serve. Supplemental educational information and projects are incorporated into the course to ensure students have consistent interaction with their peers. Students are actively engaged, provide (and are provided with) consistent feedback, and help drive the successful delivery of a true community service learning experience. Former students have reported that the VITA experience to be both rewarding and eye-opening, but also reported a desire for more consistency and cohesion between their experiences and the experiences of fellow students completing the internship at the same time.

Background

Individual Income Tax makes up a large part of the tax revenue on which the federal government relies for its yearly operations. In fact, for the 2021 budget year, Individual Income Tax represents 50% of the federal government's total budgeted tax revenues. As illustrated in Figure 1, this is larger than the 36% of revenue that comes from Payroll Taxes and the 7% that comes from Corporate Income Tax (The White House, 2021).

Figure 1
Federal Tax Revenues- 2021 Budget Year



(The White House, 2021)

With the government relying so heavily on Individual Income Tax, it is important that individuals file and pay what is determined to be their “fair” share. There are a lot of instances where tax payments have either been withheld on the behalf of the taxpayer or paid by the taxpayer during the tax year. At the end of the tax year, a calculation (or return) is completed and this shows a resulting number of either how much more the taxpayer owes or how much the taxpayer has overpaid already during the year. The return either requests that the taxpayer submit the additional amount due or get a refund for the overpayment.

If an individual does not file and pay their tax return by the deadline for that year, they will be charged penalties and interest on any amount due or be kept from receiving any refund that would normally be due them until they do file the return. Erard, Lengetieg, Payne, and Plumley (2020) found that 10-12% of United States Households reported not filing a tax return even though they were required to do so. Erard, etc. (2020) went on to find that lower income

households were less likely to file than higher income households and/or ones with larger tax liabilities (Erard, Langetieg, Payne, and Plumley, 2020).

In order to qualify for the Union County Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program, there are certain qualifications that a taxpayer must meet. The most notable of these include that they: make \$57,000 or less per year, are a person with disabilities, or are limited English speaking. Volunteers work directly with these taxpayers, but before starting, the volunteer must complete and pass an IRS-certified exam. This requirement helps ensure that the taxpayers are receiving assistance from qualified individuals (Union County, 2021)

Course Development and Implementation

Wingate University's Porter B. Byrum's School of Business has developed, through collaboration with Wingate University's Collaborative for the Common Good, an official course- ACCT 426 Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) Program - that was built off of what the previous internship experiences provided and created a true service learning opportunity moving forward. Wingate University's Collaborative for the Common Good (CCG) is a program led by WU faculty and staff, who partner with students and like-minded community members to collaborate on and implement meaningful community service learning opportunities. Through the CCG's Fellowship program, Faculty members at Wingate University are trained in High-Impact Service Learning Pedagogy and how to format and run an effective service learning course. Research into the effectiveness of Service Learning and Civic Engagement courses (SLCE) including preliminary data collected from all SLCE courses offered in 2020-2021 suggest that civic skills, civic engagement and civic efficacy are significantly higher. For some classes, 21st century skills also trended higher after the course, making this an attractive model for the creation of ACCT 426. A future goal of the fellowship is to track institutional data (GPAs, retention, and persistence to graduation) to show the impact of SLCE pedagogy on student success.

At the beginning of the semester, students register for the course and meet with the instructor to ensure they understand the service learning aspect of the course. At the start of the course, students receive IRS-created review material for them to study and use to complete practice tax return assignments. Each student then takes the IRS-Certification Exam. A successful score is required here in order for a student to continue in the course.

The dual objectives of this course are to provide learning experiences through the student's host site as well as opportunities for dialogue and reflection with their fellow students. After completing their training and exam, students contact the Union County VITA program to

schedule times to work on tax returns in the community. Community volunteers who have worked with the VITA program in previous years are also present during the student's scheduled times at the VITA program site and offer assistance with questions. Students also have the opportunity to communicate with the actual taxpayers as appropriate while working on their tax returns. Communicating with taxpayers adds a much-needed interpersonal communication experience for students in the course.

The second objective, focussed on the student experience interacting with fellow classmates and supplemental information, ensures consistent experiences and exposure to topic-related information and provides a well-rounded experience for each student. The class meets once a week to discuss and share experiences of students that week while they were out at the VITA program. This is where students share the types of tax returns they have been working on and any insights they gained and can share with each other. To add to this dialogue-type experience, students also complete weekly journals where they document what they have learned that week so that they can later reflect upon their experiences. Reflection activities are incorporated at the midway and end of the course points to encourage students to reflect on the journals, class discussions, and their overall experience up until that point in time. Portfolios are created at the midway and end of course points to allow students to document examples (removing all confidential information) of their work during the course (Lail, 2021).

Conclusion

The success of the whole course relies on the great efforts of many individuals. Gloria Haney, (Union County) plays a vital role in helping schedule and oversee the students' experience while they are at the VITA program site location. Gloria Haney works very closely with Dr. Scott Lail, (Wingate University) who oversees the non- VITA location efforts of the students and monitors the on-VITA location site experience as well. Dr. Scott Lail works closely with fellow members of Wingate University's Collaborative for the Common Good for access to training, research, and support. Gloria Haney and Dr. Scott Lail both work closely with those who are making the greatest effort, which include each student who registers for and completes the course. The students are getting out of their comfort zone and gaining valuable practical experience working with individuals to provide them with a much-needed service. Community members, students, Gloria Haney, Dr. Scott Lail, Wingate University's Collaborative for the Common Good, and Wingate University are all working in collaboration to develop civic-minded student leaders for the future while providing a vital service to improve the lives of our eastern Union county neighbors.

References

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