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## Helping Tackle Tax Time

By Suzi Morales

For many Americans, gathering documents and navigating complicated forms make tax season a time of anxiety. But for a group of Mississippi State University accounting students, it brings a sense of purpose and an opportunity to learn, as they help low- and middle-income taxpayers prepare and file their returns.

In 2024, for the second year, members of the MSU chapter of accounting honor society Beta Alpha Psi offered free tax preparation services through the Internal Revenue Service's Volunteer Income Tax Assistance, or VITA, program.

Led by Assistant Clinical Professor of Accountancy Alan Stancill, students met with clients at the Innovation Hub in downtown Starkville, a co-working space operated by the MSU Center for Entrepreneurship and Outreach. For several weeknights in February and March, students reviewed clients' W-2s and other documents, asked about financial information and entered it into tax preparation software. Stancill and Associate Clinical Professor Kelly Walker reviewed the returns, which clients were able to e-file on the spot. The entire process took about an hour and a half per return.

For Sarah Modzelewski, a graduate taxation student who also earned a bachelor's degree in accountancy from the College of Business in 2023, volunteering with VITA offered the chance not just to help people complete their tax returns but also to explain a process that many find intimidating.

"I like to try to explain how [the information] flowed through, why it came to that number, why you were getting a refund or why you owed money," she remarks.

Like Modzelewski, Wyatt Reid is a graduate tax student who earned his undergraduate degree in accountancy at MSU. He was attracted to the major because it was "everything nobody had told me about money." He says working with VITA helped him understand how all the information needed to prepare a tax return is channeled into the one-page IRS Form 1040.

Founded by the IRS to provide free tax preparation for individuals meeting certain criteria, including an income threshold, VITA provides certification and training to volunteers.

Accounting students met with low- and middle-income individuals to prepare their tax returns.

Photo by Emily Van Dalen





MSU VITA program directors Assistant Clinical Professor of Accountancy Alan Stancill (left) and Associate Clinical Professor of Accountancy Kelly Walker (center) welcomed IRS VITA Territory Manager Maria Keyser for a visit.

*Photo courtesy of Alan Stancill*

“Not only are you giving back to your community, which is above all what the program is for, but you’re also getting practice on a software you’ve never used before,” shares Reid. “You’re getting to see what the process looks like.”

According to Stancill, MSU’s is the only VITA location within about a 45-minute drive. In its second year of operation, he was pleased to see a number of repeat clients.

Stancill says VITA gives students a safe environment in which to learn about tax issues.

“When you’re outside the classroom in a real-world setting, sometimes [a situation] is not as clean,” he notes. “It may not be something covered in class. There’s value in being put on the spot and having to figure things out.”

With an analytical mind, Modzelewski once considered majoring in computer science but feels she has found the right fit with accounting. It allows her to pair her practicality with an innate empathy, an approach taken with her VITA clients.

“My aim as a tax accountant is just to provide a peace of mind, like, ‘Hey, I’ve got you, you’re good,’” she says. “I feel like that’s my ultimate goal.”

