



Q&A with AICPA Legacy Scholarship Recipient in 2020-2021

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Q: You earned your first degree almost ten years ago. What made you decide to go back to school for a second degree?

A: I was young when I went to community college the first time around, and I had no idea what I wanted to do. I chose radiology because I had a friend who was studying it, and it seemed like something I could easily do that would pay well. I didn't put much thought into whether I would enjoy the work (I didn't!). I ended up leaving my radiology job after a few months and worked in a restaurant—first as a server, then as a manager—but after a while realized I wanted more. I'm a single mom of three, so I wanted a job that would allow me to spend time with my family and provide a good future for them.

I kept putting off going back to school because I felt like it would take forever to reach my goals. But then I watched a friend go back to school to become an RN. I saw how quickly the time flies by—before I knew it, she was done with school and making more money to support her family. That is what inspired me to finally just go for it, so I enrolled at the local community college and started taking classes.

Q: What other professions did you consider before deciding on accounting?

A: For a while I wanted to be an immigration lawyer—it's so complicated getting citizenship. There are lots of things involved, and I wanted to help others figure out the process. Immigrants don't have access to many lawyers, so I wanted to help people become legal citizens of this country and support them on their journey.

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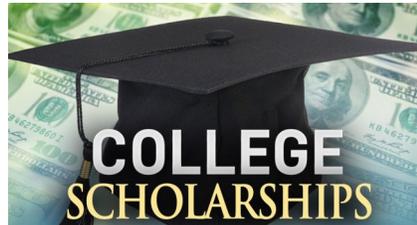
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Q: Who influenced your career path?

A: I'm very close with my family, but I didn't have many people to talk to about career options. I'm one of six siblings and the first to go to college. My parents are hard-working people, they emigrated from Mexico, and my father was 12 when he dropped out of school to work full-time. They're proud of my achievements but they don't really understand college. Without parents influencing my school, I relied on teachers; they are so influential. Once I enrolled in accounting, my teacher was really important in helping me figure out my career path.

Q: What do you like about accounting?

A: When I took my first accounting class, I thought, "I get this, I like it, and I'm good at it!" I would go into class with a smile. I absolutely love accounting—I love resolving problems. I find joy in making a budget; it comes naturally to me. I could talk all day about budgets! I also like learning about accounting because I think, "How can I use what I'm learning to help a small business owner?" I've seen from my experience working in a restaurant they are often clueless about accounting. I want to be an advisor and help keep them on top of things, help them save money and run a more efficient business.

Q: What was the transition like from community college to where you are now?

A: I'm in my second semester at Henderson State University in Arkadelphia. The transition itself hasn't been as tough as I thought it would be. I like that I can take a variety of classes; they can offer more options because of the larger student population. I'm taking a music class, and I love it! I'm learning about culture and music and how they work together and influence the way you think. I'm also taking federal income tax that has nothing to do with financial accounting, and it's hard—most people take it as a senior! But I enjoy the challenge.

Q: What are your plans after you graduate?

A: As soon as I finish college, I'm going to take the CPA Exam. I'm working for a bookstore right now—a job my teacher at my community college connected me to—and I want to stay at the bookstore and grow if I can. I know I want to stay in Arkansas because that's where my family is. I love that accounting is so flexible and versatile that there will be opportunities for me here and that I don't have to move away for a good job. Eventually I'd like to start my own business helping people with their personal finances, but I'm still figuring out my long-term plan.

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Be Prepared: Behavioral Questions

You have landed that critical interview for your dream job. Now you feel like the pressure is on to nail the interview, and there are a hundred different thoughts buzzing through your mind. Stop. Breathe. Relax. We have got you covered. No matter the type of interview – whether behavioral, situational, or technical, this article may help to prepare for the big meeting and give you the confidence you need to succeed.

First, we will explore what to expect when confronted with a behavioral question and how to maintain your cool and overcome any curveballs thrown your way.

What is a behavioral interview?

Employers are using behavioral questions more frequently for vetting potential employees, and the reason for that is embedded in the alternative name for behavioral questions: competency-based questions. Essentially, the interviewee is asked to provide specific examples of situations in their previous work/student experience and how they behaved/handled those circumstances. This helps give the employer insight into what to expect from the candidate in the future.

How will you know that you're in a behavioral interview? Here's a hint There are key opening phrases that will clue you in to the fact that you're in a competency-based interview; these questions begin with:

"describe a past situation in which...";

"give us an example of a time when..."; or

"in your past experience, how do you usually deal with..."

These questions are all priming to dig into your professional or academic history and explain your habits, competencies and even your mistakes. While this may seem daunting at first, sharing stories with the interviewer is a fantastic opportunity to showcase your skills and strengths and highlight areas you are actively working to improve. (No one is perfect, and admitting you're open to personal growth speaks volumes about you as a candidate!).

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Be Prepared: Behavioral Questions (Cont'd)

How can you prepare? With the rising popularity of behavioral interviews among hiring managers, it's almost a guarantee that at least part of your interview will involve competency-based questions, so it's always best to be prepared. Consider the following in advance:

Expect tough questions (and be honest): If the interviewer asks, "tell us about a time you made a mistake and how you handled it," they aren't trying to break you down or embarrass you; they're trying to gain a sense of who you are and how you react to adversity. It may be tempting to boast that you haven't made any previous mistakes (it may even be true!), but it's always best to offer an answer; it shows a willingness to admit to your mistakes and a strength of character in dealing with the consequences.

Reflect, explore, expound: Before the interview even begins, you can build an internal database of past experiences you think highlight your strong points. Make a mental list of situations in which you were under a lot of pressure and how you dealt with it. Focus on particular moments relevant to the company's environment and competencies of the position for which you are applying.

Examples that come up frequently in interviews may include:

- A time you were involved in a conflict with a colleague or manager.
- A time you were under a lot of stress due to an upcoming deadline.
- A time you failed to meet or exceeded all task expectations.
- A time you provided an innovative solution to a persistent problem.
- A time that miscommunication led to a setback in the work environment.

Spend time honestly analyzing the situations and reflecting on how you navigated the circumstances. When providing a relevant example in the interview, feel free to expound on what you learned from the experience. The more detail you provide, the clearer a picture the hiring manager will have in their mind of your potential.

When picking your examples, be sure to focus on those skills and situations that are most important to the position for which you are applying and situations that focus on your attention to detail, ability to collaborate, communication, leadership, and pursuit of goals. The right story told with the right details can make you seem like a superhero in the eyes of the employer.

Practice telling your story: No one likes to be caught off guard or put on the spot, so once you've gathered a handful of past situations in your mental database, spend time telling and retelling the stories. Tell them to your friends. Tell them to yourself in the car or in the shower, or while you prepare dinner.

Repeat them, adding and subtracting details as you become more and more familiar with each retelling. Interviewers don't expect you to deliver an Oscar-worthy performance. Still, for your own benefit, it's best to know your subject matter so you don't forget to include that single important detail that will leave the best and biggest impression on the interviewer.

Be your authentic self: As important as your work experience and skills are to landing a new job, the entire point of a behavioral interview and associated questions is for hiring managers to gain a deeper insight into your personality. They want to know what drives and motivates you, where your passions and strengths lie, and whether you'll make a good fit for the team.

Answer questions in your own unique voice. Don't allow a desire to appear perfect become a barrier to letting your true self shine in an interview. People respond positively to sincerity and authenticity. Remember, while behavioral questions may at first seem daunting, consider that they are an opportunity for you to share not only your experiences, but also your personality. And the strength of your communication, self-awareness and willingness to adapt and learn from mistakes might make all the difference in landing you that new job.

By Rob Ewart, Operations Manager at Wizco, a New York-based tech startup that connects job applicants with market experts who provide one-on-one guidance and coaching tailored to applicants' needs and the positions for which they apply.



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