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INTERCOLLEGIATE CASE COMPETITIONS FOR M.B.A. STUDENTS: INITIATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

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ABSTRACT

Intercollegiate Case Competitions for M.B.A. students have been increasing in number at universities throughout the country. This paper highlights the costs and benefits to be derived for each participant group in the Competition. In addition, this paper presents a framework for individual faculty members who may be interested in starting a Case Competition at their university.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of Case Competition for graduate students was begun at Miami University (Ohio) in 1975. Since then, at least two other universities have initiated Case Competitions (Cornell University and Texas A&M). For the forthcoming academic year, several other universities have expressed interest in starting a competition.

The host university for the Case Competition invites from five to eight other universities to compete in the analysis and presentation of an unpublished business policy case. More specifically, the teams of three graduate students are provided with an identical problem situation involving a substantial amount of detailed data. On the basis of the information contained in the case, the teams will be required to identify the problem(s) facing the decision maker; develop alternative solutions to the problem(s); select a preferred solution; and, finally, justify the solution. A team of judges from industry and academia select the best team solution and presentation.

OBJECTIVES OF CASE COMPETITION

The objectives of the Invitational Case Competition are to encourage a competitive learning environment among students from different graduate programs and to reinforce the concept that the analytical tools and concepts learned in the classroom are not only applicable but required in real-life decision making.

An additional objective of the Competition is to provide the Graduate Student Association of the host university with a leadership and program planning experience. Usually, the activities of most of these organizations center upon social activities, invited speakers, and industry tours. The Case Competition provides a practical exposure to project management. The student organization is responsible for planning activities, budgetary responsibilities, and program coordination.

The inclusion of judges from industry assists in the reinforcement of the interchange between universities and industry. Initial contact with industry may involve the financial support of the project. Industry foundations are particularly receptive to support sponsoring an activity such as this. The industry judges become highly involved in the

evaluation of the presentations. Overall, the judges have been highly impressed with the project and this positive effect becomes generalized.

PERIPHERAL ACTIVITIES

Activities peripheral to the Case Competition may include seminars designed for the faculty sponsors and the larger academic community. The seminar for faculty sponsors may include opportunities for interchange of viewpoints regarding ways of improving teaching effectiveness in the business policy area. Additional seminar topics may include particular research in the policy and strategy area.

Seminars designed for the larger academic community may include topics relating to graduate programs such as recruiting, curriculum change, and program revision. Industry involvement may include employment opportunities for graduate students, career preparation and career development.

COSTS

As previously mentioned, the costs associated with the Case Competition have a high probability of being underwritten by corporate foundations. Expenses such as lodging and meals for the participants, transportation expenses for judges, and incidental expenditures may range from \$2,000 to \$7,500. The Graduate Student Association should have complete responsibility for budgetary matters if this project is to be a meaningful learning experience.

IMPLEMENTATION

Once the decision has been made to start a Case Competition, initial implementation of the project should be jointly coordinated by the Graduate Students Association, Deans Office, and a Faculty Advisor. Each of these three should have definite areas of responsibility for the operational aspects.

The initial decision should center on facilities. Necessary facilities include 2-3 presentation rooms, 7-10 preparation rooms, luncheon and banquet facilities, and lodging arrangements for the competing teams, faculty sponsors, and judges. The Graduate Student Association handles this function.

The decision as to what other universities should be invited would be made jointly. Pragmatic factors such as proximity, natural rivalry, etc., should be considered. The optimal number of teams for an initial competition would be six, including the host university plus five teams from nearby universities. The teams would each consist of three M.B.A. students who would be currently enrolled or have completed the capstone Policy course.

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ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

The invitation to participate in the Case Competition would be handled at the Deans level. The letter from the host university Dean explains the competition, invites the university to participate and requests that a faculty sponsor for the competing team be named.

Assuming acceptance, further contact with the faculty sponsor would be made by the Competitions Faculty Advisor. The sponsor is responsible for selecting the members of the competing team and accompanying them to the Competition. During the Competition, the faculty sponsor does not assist the team in analyzing and preparing the case presentation.

The Faculty Advisor is also responsible for selecting the judges for the Competition. For six participating universities, the judging team would consist of six judges and a Head Judge. The Head Judge has the responsibility for selecting an unpublished policy case, distributing it to other judges, developing the judging criteria and presiding over the post-presentation evaluation session. The other six judges would be from industry and non-participating universities.

The Graduate Student Association is responsible for the operational aspects of the Competition as well as all the activities that center on the student teams. For the Competition, it is advisable for the Graduate Student Association to provide hosts for each competing team. The host is responsible for transportation, audio-visual material, library material, and other amenities.

COMPETITION STRUCTURE

The competing teams should arrive at the host university on the morning of the first day. At noon, there is an informal luncheon where the Head Judge passes out the case and arranges for a draw for presentation times. Except for a dinner break, the teams have the rest of the day and the morning of the second day to analyze the case and prepare their presentation.

On the afternoon of the first day, the host university usually has a seminar with the faculty sponsors as participants. That evening, there is an informal reception for the faculty sponsors, judges, and host university faculty.

On the morning of the second day, the Head Judge and the rest of the judges decide on the judging criteria for the case presentations. After an informal lunch, the presentations begin in the afternoon.

Dividing the six judges into two groups enables two concurrent presentation sections. After each presentation, the judges are rotated according to a prearranged schedule. The presentations are scheduled for one hour per team with approximately 40 minutes for team presentations and 20 minutes for judges questions. Although there may be an audience present, only the judges are allowed to question the teams.

Approximately 15 minutes should be allowed between presentations for the judges to prepare comments and evaluations on the teams performance. After the Competition is concluded, the Faculty Advisor collects these comments and returns a synopsis to each teams faculty sponsor.

In addition, we have followed the practice of video taping each teams presentation and returning the tape to the faculty sponsor. These tapes have been used as examples for subsequent policy classes and are often exchanged among

the faculty sponsors.

After all teams have made their presentations, the judges make their decision regarding one first place team and five second place teams. The judges decision is not announced until the Awards Banquet on the evening of the second day.

The Awards Banquet is usually one of the highlights of the activities of the Graduate Student Association. This banquet is open to the public and features a guest speaker--as well as the awards. The winning team receives a rotating trophy as well as individual certificates of accomplishment. In addition, all members of the competing teams as well as the faculty sponsors receive an appropriate memento.

BENEFITS

The benefits to be derived from Case Competitions are numerous. From an educational perspective, the competing teams are tremendously motivated by the competitive nature of the project. The capability of the interacting with students from other graduate programs and the judges enriches their learning experiences beyond the classroom setting.

For the Graduate Student Association, the Case Competition provides a practical experience in project management. The students are responsible for all budgetary activities, planning, and implementing these plans. As such, it provides a multi-dimensional learning experience for the students.

The judges profit from the interchange between industry and the university. They have been tremendously impressed with the seriousness, effort, and ability of the teams. In addition, it has promoted their appreciation of the educational efforts of the competing universities.

The faculty sponsors have been enthusiastic about this project. They often sit in on other teams presentations in order to determine how other instructors prepare their students. In addition, the faculty sponsor seminar enables the faculty to interchange ideas and techniques regarding pedagogy and research.

The host university benefits from the participation of all of the above interest groups. In addition, the university generates positive good will from these groups.

CONCLUSION

For a relatively low cost, Invitational Case Competitions can provide a meaningful learning experience for graduate students. Concomitantly, the benefits to be derived can extend to all of the other groups associated with this project.