



Al Quinton (The College of New Jersey) is a long-time user of the LINKS Supply Chain Management Simulation.



Al Quinton

Can you explain the mentoring program that you have set up for your LINKS Supply Chain Management Simulation with Johnson & Johnson?

We are very fortunate because Johnson & Johnson (JNJ) has a very strong relationship with our school of business and they have two co-op programs — one in finance...and the other in supply chain management. They approached the school and said “What can we do to interview your students in order to see whether they qualify for this co-op program?” It is a very selective program. So when I spoke to them, I said it would be great for them to get an exposure to our students by coming in when the students did their oral and written reports at the end of the semester.

Three years ago, JNJ said “We will send a team of people in and we will evaluate these oral reports at the end of the semester. That way we can become familiar with the students, we can see their level of knowledge and their ability to communicate orally. That led to “maybe we’ll come in and do some guest lectures on various topics within supply chain management.” The next semester they sent in a few of their professionals and they supplemented my lectures on particular topics—like forecasting, logistics, customer relationships.

That was very successful.

Not only did the students enjoy it but the people who came in enjoyed the contact with the students. So we went one step further the following semester where I said why don’t you form some teams and compete with the students in the simulation?

That’s what we did last semester. They formed two JNJ teams, I got in touch with Randy and we formed these teams. They weren’t the very best, they were in the top one-third of all the teams but they didn’t necessarily beat every team.

The JNJ people understand what the simulation is trying to accomplish. They often say to the students in the class “Gee, you’ve got to make 10 different decisions amongst a team of 3 or 4 people and we’ve got 40 people making these decisions.” They really are complicated decisions and they take a lot of time and effort to do them correctly, but the important point is that they learn the decision-making process rather than exactly how to make the right decisions.

So we said how can we make that even better? We have got this group of JNJ people that are familiar with the simulation so how can they better help the students and not just compete with them?

This semester we will put in a group of mentors.

JNJ said “we will provide each class* with seven mentors, people who are familiar with the simulation and are familiar with supply chain management who will interact through email or telephone conversations with each team.” We matched them up and we sent out information to each team telling them who their mentor was and their email and phone numbers, and we informed the mentors who found out who their team members were, so they are now in the process of getting to know each other. It’s a work in progress.

The amount of interest on the part of JNJ is very high.

What standards will you be using to evaluate the success of this mentoring program?

I will rely on the feedback that I get from both the students and the mentors. We’ll see if it is really working. Let’s say, if I have seven teams, and five teams tell me they really enjoyed it, they got good feedback, they got a reasonable amount of help, I will consider it a success.

If that doesn’t happen then we will have to go in and re-evaluate it and see what can be done to make it better.

But the most important thing to me is that it is going to continue to support this JNJ connection with my students because their co-op program is unique. They don’t just bring young people in for a semester and have them do some part time work. Their co-op program is a six-month full-time program. They work 37 and a half hours a week. And they get paid very nicely for it. The JNJ philosophy is they give them projects to work on right away. They explain the project to them and the students have to jump in with both feet. I guess I’ve got about six of my students who have graduated from TCNJ who are working for JNJ in their supply chain group. The relationship has built over the last six semesters into a really strong working relationship. I think that the simulation has helped. Now there is a closer connection with the simulation that will bear fruit.

Do the mentors have set goals or objectives to prove?

That’s a discussion we are going to have very shortly. I wanted to get the ball rolling and at least get them to meet the students. Now I am going to provide them with a recap and let them give me some feedback from their perspective from the real world.

This interview may inspire other professors to use this process in their courses. What words of encouragement or warning do you wish you had heard before you began this process?

In terms of “words of warning”, the old expression — “Rome wasn’t built in a day” — you have to give it a couple of semesters for you to be comfortable with it and for you to learn more about the simulation in order to teach with the simulation. There is no doubt that I am a much more effective teacher than I was seven years ago when I started the simulation.

This is one of the few things where you can honestly see and let the students see the results of the theory and the examples that you are giving them in class. The simulation provides the student with the answer to the question whether their ideas work or didn’t work.

Are there recurring questions or situations that you find come up with your students when they are using the LINKS simulation?

Yes, the students have to recognize that they have to do several levels of forecasting. They have to forecast not only the end product and how much of that product they need to sell, they need to forecast how many sub-components they need and how much raw materials they need. And they have to forecast plant capacity. I try to get them to understand that they just can’t say “we need so many of this product 1 or product 2”, they have to look behind that into the supply chain and determine what each member of the supply chain is going to do in order to make it all happen—when the final product gets to the customer.

They have to learn about trade-offs. In the simulation you have various suppliers with various characteristics—for instance, reliability. There is a reliability factor in both the different suppliers of the components and raw materials and there is a reliability factor for the transportation suppliers. They learn that getting the cheapest price is not necessarily the best deal. There are other characteristics that go behind the decision making process for a particular supplier or particular transportation provider.

The third thing that they learn is that all of this is fine from an operational standpoint but the supply chain group is there to provide an end product that has to be sold at a profit.

Not every student is going to know as much at the end of the semester as other students, but those are the three basic areas of what I consider to be the take-aways of the course and the simulation.

What advice do you give your students to help them succeed in this class?

I agree with Randy 110% that the students must read the manual. They are just not going to be successful unless they know what the various steps are. I tell them to read it and then I go through it in class very carefully, using PowerPoint slides at the same times we are going through the manual.

What strategies and tactics do you use to encourage or nurture the students?

The first thing that I do is use a teamwork situation where they can share information. They are sometimes willing to be more open with their fellow classmates about what kind of “dumb mistakes” they made than they are telling me. So this cooperative environment really does work much better.

The other thing that I stress a great deal is “Product Zero”, the postponement factor. I am a firm believer in the fact that supply chains can operate much more effectively by using the postponement theory and in the simulation; obviously, it is “Product Zero”. But again, students have to learn that you can’t use “Product Zero” in a distribution center that you don’t own. So they may not be thinking ahead. So they may say we don’t want to own that distribution center we’ll just outsource it, but then when they go to use “Product Zero” they can’t do it.

Have your teaching methods changed since you began using LINKS?

This year I have decided that since we have class periods that last for an hour and 50 minutes, I will normally run the class for an hour and 20 minutes, which is plenty long between class discussion and lecture, but I save at least 20 minutes at the end of the period where I strongly encourage the students to stay in the classroom with their team and have some discussion. Since we have class twice a week that means that they have at least 40 minutes a week with which to talk to each other face-to-face. Previously they would rush out of the room and would say “we’ll get together”, and I would get all of these different objections like “this student can’t come out for a meeting” or “that student is always late for a meeting.”