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Chris Puto (Dean of the Opus College of Business at the University of St. Thomas in Minneapolis/St. Paul) is a long-time LINKS user and a member of the LINKS Instructor Hall of Fame. He previously used LINKS (and its predecessor, BRANDMAPS) at the University of Arizona. The University of St. Thomas uses the LINKS Marketing Strategy Simulation in the 1st term of the full-time MBA program (in a marketing course) and then following-up with xLINKS Marketing Strategy Simulation [Extreme Edition] in the 4th term business strategy course. So, these full-time MBAs experience LINKS twice, a "medium-sized" version and then an "extreme" version.

LINKS Across The Curriculum



How do you use LINKS in your full-time MBA program?

In the very first semester of the program, in the regular marketing class we add the LINKS Marketing Strategy Simulation. They play LINKS for the complete 10-quarter cycle in that class. This is done outside of class on their own time and does not take any class time. The teams are assigned based on their materials in their application for the MBA program. We use multifunctional information in their backgrounds so we don't put a bunch of finance people on one team. The students have no choice of who is on their team and have nothing to do with the creation of their teams. Results from the LINKS simulation account for one-third of their course grade, and are not based on their earnings, but on a paper that they write that describes what they set out to do and what they have accomplished. At the end of the semester they make a 20-minute presentation to the class that is video-taped and graded both for its content and presentation style. It is a very rigorous version of the graduate marketing LINKS software.

There is no LINKS' activity in the second semester. Then, in the third semester, these second-year students first hold an election around mid-term across the class for the position of CEO. We determine how many teams we are going to use in the second administration of LINKS, say it's 20. Then we elect the 20 CEOs.

These CEOs are then responsible for recruiting four teammates from their class to be on their team. We have various, well-structured processes not unlike a player draft in pro sports. The CEOs have to send four invitations to teammates. These invitations have 24 hours to be accepted or declined. And then we move on to the second round and usually within two rounds everyone is on a team.

Each team creates a "team contract"—understanding what their expectations, obligations, and commitments are to the simulation team. They all sign that. Then we identify an existing industry that Randy has been running someplace else at some other school in xLINKS [Extreme edition LINKS] and I take that data from that industry and rename it so that the other school is not identified. No one ever knows the source. I



then put these materials out for the teams to put in a financial bid on what it would take to buy 49% of any company. It's a one-time auction. They put their best bid in. The highest bid gets first choice and we go right on down the list. If we are going to have multiple industries, I take the industry and clone it as many times as we need to get the correct number of teams. If we are going to have 20 teams, we may take a five-team industry once, sell it four times and clone it. This takes the better part of the second-half of the third semester to put this all together. I lend them the money for the bids. I lend it to them at whatever the Wall Street Journal prime rate is. I keep a spreadsheet offline. They buy 49%. I own 51% as the Administrator or the Czar of LINKS.

We also allow for teams to fire an individual if they have a teammate who is not performing, which is specified in their team contract. If somebody gets fired from an xLINKS team, they have two-weeks to find another team that they can be hired by or they have to write a 25-page paper on the value of effective teamwork and the highest grade they can get in the capstone course is a "C".

In the fourth and final semester we run the 10-period simulation. We allow mergers and acquisitions. One team can elect to buy out another. They have to approach the Czar who owns the other half to determine if there will be a sale or not. And then we have to negotiate how that all would work. I measure their overall performance on a separate spreadsheet that I maintain and look at variables such as the cumulative earnings, the cumulative return on investments and cumulative return on assets. We also look at the trends, to see if they are trending up or down. Finally we have a measure we call the net-change in wealth which has to do with the overall total earnings minus what they have borrowed from me. We take these measures and we give them unit weighting. They get 5-points for being on the top of each one and the one with the highest points so-called "wins" the game.



How are the teams evaluated?

At the end of the semester, each team has to perform a 360-evaluation on every team member. If there were five people on a team, then four would meet and evaluate the missing person and that would continue all around so that each team member gets an evaluation from their peers. The report has to be delivered to that individual in person, and they have to sign it. The report comes into the instructor and may be used as a weighting factor in the individual's grade vs. the overall team grade. So if the team got an "A" but everyone on the team decided that they didn't want to fire "Judy" but she didn't perform very well, she could end up with a "B" or a "C".

Do the CEOs get any perks?

When an individual is elected a CEO, they get to attend our meeting of the Business School strategic board of governors and present their activity of their team at the Spring Governor's

Meeting. These are real CEOs of real companies in the region. So they get the added visibility and the distinction of having been there and done that along with added experience so there are some perks attached to being a CEO but it's also got the added stresses and work-load.

How is the second LINKS session graded?

This second administration, the xLINKS part is all done outside of class but it amounts for 50% of the grade in the MBA capstone course. The only thing we do in class is at the end of the semester we take a separate day and the teams do a 20 minute presentation to me as their board, justifying what they accomplished. We video tape that too. We have a history of each student from their first semester to their last semester on video which we can use to measure their learning and their improvement in thinking and presentation.



How long have you been using LINKS?

I have been doing this since 1989 when I was at the University of Arizona, and Randy had BRANDMAPS. When I moved to the University of St. Thomas, I brought it with me. As far as I know we are the only school that does it this way. We have a long history originally with BRANDMAPS and we carried it on with LINKS. We started the multiyear application in 1995. For the most part, Randy created xLINKS for us in this form and then found other markets that were interested.

What is the reaction of the students?

They love it. When they start as first-year MBA students up through mid-term of the first year, they pretty much hate it because they find that each team is spending on-average 12 hours a week figuring out LINKS. This is in addition to a full-load of five MBA courses. They are frustrated and don't like it, but by the time they make their presentations at the end of the fall semester, they are convinced they have got it figured out. They are disappointed that they can't keep playing it in the next semester. That's how powerful it is. Some of them then begin planning for the following year when they are going to have these elections. They make up some elaborate spreadsheets for tracking things. I have had students that created an Excel file that wouldn't even fit on a standard disk it was so big to use for forecasting and making decisions and measure the impact before they ran the simulation. It is fabulous what they do.

Do the students campaign to be CEOs?

There is no formal campaigning for the CEOs, but I suspect there is a fair amount of informal "who are you going to vote for?" But we don't see that so it is not public. Several of our Fridays are designated as Professional Fridays when they are all expected to be on campus and doing things even though there is no formal class. We take one of those Fridays and have the election right then and there. And then the recruiting starts and by the next Tuesday we have the teams all set.

The whole idea of the first LINKS experience is to make them intimately familiar with all the nuances of the software as well as an understanding of the general concept. It takes awhile to adapt to any simulation software. By definition, simulations are not the real world, they are representations of the real world with nuances attached. There are certain things that if you do it wrong in the software you can make some grievous mistakes. There are two learning things going on...one is that they understand concepts that the simulation is wonderfully effective in delivering for business, and the second thing is that they get the mechanics of the simulation down pat, so they can then focus their efforts in xLINKS on the substance of what is going on because they are truly already expert LINKS players.



In my opinion we couldn't get nearly as much out of xLINKS without them having played LINKS first. We have a lot of coordination. We have faculty in other parts of our MBA curriculum who work to incorporate pieces of LINKS in the accounting faculty. They go over the financial statements in class so they understand what that means. We truly use LINKS across the curriculum.

What feedback do you get from your students?

We do two things with current students. There is a mid-semester interview that each team has to arrange with me, as the Czar/Administrator, to outline the strategies, what issues they are facing, and any questions that they have in this. We get interim feedback on that. At the end of the semester we do a standard de-brief on the whole course and there are points that the students can comment on. All we get are positives.

We are very close to our alumni. They stay in close contact with us. We have hosted events. Where this really comes home is...I can't tell you how many alumni who stop me a year after they graduate and they say, "You won't believe this, but I am living LINKS in my job." That is really neat when you hear that. Once they finish that last semester, they are convinced that this is the highlight of their educational experience. Even before they have a job, they see that this is a distinguishing feature of the MBA program



Do you need to tweak the system or does it run without changes from year to year?

There are parameters that Randy and I change or modify from one year to the next. We lay out the entire schedule in advance so his team knows when to execute parametric changes in the simulation. We put out bulletins to the students announcing a new market, or announcing a short-fall in raw materials and then they have to figure out how to deal with it.

What do you consider to be the biggest challenge to the students?

The biggest challenge the first year is to fit it into a very rigorous curriculum. In xLINKS, they have got the curriculum figured out but they are also in a job-search mode. They are traveling, doing interviews, and they have to meet and reach decisions and they realize the significance of it because of the grading in one of their key courses. The challenge remains “How do I make sure that I have given enough quality time to it to deliver the performance that I expect for myself.”

What is the most unique feature of your program?

The program requires awareness across all of the faculty. Often times, only a Dean or Program Director can orchestrate this. It would be very hard for an individual professor to sell this beyond their own class. What makes it unique is that we do use it across the entire program. Once the faculty saw its impact it took on its own being. The faculty come and attend the presentations even when they are not teaching the class. There are ten professors that teach in our core. The operations professor uses some of the production scheduling issues in his class, the accounting and finance people use understanding the financial instruments and some of the strategic implications in their classes.

