



## Why I Use the LINKS Benchmarking Survey



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### *Tell us about your experience with LINKS.*

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I am at West Virginia University. I use LINKS Multi-Channel Management simulation in my undergraduate marketing/distribution channels course.

I have been using it for about 3 ½ years. I looked at a competitor's product but I found that LINKS was more flexible and let me concentrate on the multi-channel management aspect. By turning some switches on and off in the LINKS simulation, I can emphasize the content that I want to get across to my students.

### *What form of course assessment do you routinely use at WVU?*

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Everyone across the West Virginia University is required to use a Student Evaluation of Instruction (SEI). We have mandatory questions that must be answered, and then the instructor can choose from a bank of predesigned questions.

Since I can't ask specific questions about LINKS with the SEI, I use the Benchmarking Survey. I can compare how my students react to LINKS to how other students in other universities react.

### *Why do you find the Benchmarking Survey beneficial?*

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The Benchmarking Survey is beneficial for several reasons—first of all, I get an idea of how much time my students are spending on LINKS because they like to complain that they are spending a huge amount of time and it is too much work, blah, blah, blah. But when I look at the survey I can see that they are not spending as much time as they lead me to believe that they are. So that helps me gauge the work load. My experience has been that most students are spending a couple of hours a week on LINKS and that's entirely appropriate.

The other way I use it is to gauge customer satisfaction. There are questions that ask how satisfied are they with their LINKS experience and ask if the LINKS experience offered them value.

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***Do the students generally give you a positive response that they do get something out of it, even if they complain that they are putting a lot of time into it?***

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There is a learning curve for instructors too. After the first semester of using LINKS, the students were not very satisfied and were not happy. I had numerous conversations with Randy over the years about how to impart more value for the students. He has given me some great tips, so I have spent more time with the students and more time with LINKS. Now, when we do the Benchmarking, the students are very satisfied with their experience.

I have spent more time with it and that has helped too. From my point of view, it is not just the time I put into it, I get a lot out of it myself, I get the benefit. I also get output. When the students do well, I feel satisfied that LINKS has been a good experience.

In, addition, I feel satisfied about my own participation as well as the value-added that it gives the students in the education experience.



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***What sort of evaluation do the students go through?***

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My course is roughly 35% LINKS, and a very small portion of that is performance—how well they do in the simulation. They do a presentation, and do a strategic plan, a short one, by the way, and they have a firing policy and send in activity reports, all of which are graded. Then to try and weed out any free riding, the students do a peer evaluation and I actually use that in determining individual grades for group performance.

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***Do the students get more excited and enthusiastic as the LINKS Simulation goes along?***

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Very early in the process, we have what Randy calls 'Presidential Meetings'. In the first or second round of decisions, I sit down with each group. It is a mandatory meeting, everyone in the group has to be there, and I give them feedback on how they can improve their performance. These Presidential Meetings have turned out to be really valuable. The students do better, they get more excited. They feel like, if they did poorly, they have a chance to recover. In fact, last semester, I added a second Presidential Meeting, and that has helped even more.

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***Where are you getting your tips? Is it just from personal experience? Do you talk to other instructors?***

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I get tips from the LINKS Newsletter. I skim everything and if there is something that might be useful to me, I zero in on that and read it more carefully and try to implement it.

Randy has been the most valuable resource. I see him at a conference and ask a question and he will spend plenty of time with me and provide me with ideas on how to change things to make it better.

When I first started with LINKS, I talked to other professors more than I have lately.

The Train-the-Trainer sessions where you are on conference calls with other educators who are using or about to use LINKS are good. You trade lots of ideas there.

Randy has breakfast at conferences with users of LINKS and those that are thinking about using LINKS. This becomes a forum of users and a lot of information, tips and good ideas come up there that are very relevant.

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***You do the Benchmarking Survey all the time. Do you feel that you have maxed on the information you learn from it?***

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No, I think it is a constant source of information. For example, one of the sections in the Benchmarking Survey asks students about ‘how well does LINKS help them with their general knowledge’? One particular item dealt with seeing the ‘big picture’. That’s one of the things that LINKS has done for our students. Instead of seeming to get one little piece of multi-channel management, they get to see the big picture. How sales forecasting impacts the inventory that they carry. And how that impacts the stock outs. And how stock outs affect their sales and their customer satisfaction. So everything is ‘linked’ together. Hence, LINKS helps students see the bigger picture than they might get just working on a series of problems in class.



LINKS is an experiential tool. It comes as close to real-world experience as we can get in the university.

There is another area in the Benchmarking Survey that other than general knowledge the students are asked about specific content areas in marketing or multi-channel management. I go through the survey and see what kinds of things students are getting and where they might need some remedial work.

For example, LINKS has these two products—metaware and hyperware. The two products represent a product portfolio. One thing that students don’t do very well is getting a good feel for portfolio management—how managing one product affects the other. That came out in the survey and I might not have known that without the survey if I had only relied on the results of the LINKS simulation and the other feedback I get.

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***When do you do the Benchmarking Survey?***

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We do it at the end of the LINKS experience. The very first decisions of LINKS are overwhelming to new students. Even if they read the manual three or four times, and most of them do not, you don’t know what it’s going to be like until you make some decisions and get some feedback. It’s like playing football. You need to get that first hit out of the way before you can start to find your comfort zone.

More and more students are becoming familiar with the product because their cable boxes and now Apple and Google have set top boxes that they are marketing. It is becoming more and more relevant to them especially with the advent of AC TV.

***What advice do you have for other instructors of LINKS who might not have used the Benchmarking Survey?***

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One piece of advice—I don't know about other instructors institutions, but our institution's promotion and tenure committee is looking at multiple measures of teaching performance. That means something beyond required evaluations so I stick the LINKS Benchmarking survey in my teaching dossier, along with my syllabus, class notes, and all the LINKS handouts that I give. It is evidence that I am actually doing something.

Another thing—it is useful to find out how your students react to the simulation vis à vis other students at the same time. Initially, I found that students didn't like LINKS and they had an unfavourable rating of it compared to other students but as I began to put more of myself into it, students began to put more of themselves into it and I think we have all benefited. I have benefited because I feel better about using the simulation. The students feel they are getting something out of it.



You make a huge investment of time anytime you add a simulation to your course. So it behoves you to stick with it yourself and invest the time initially and in return the results with the students will be even greater.