Professor's Column

Within-Section, Cross-Section, or
LINKS Global Competition Industries

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I teach three sections of the capstone course in Supply Chain Management at Penn State. Each section has about 25 students split into five LINKS teams. In preparing for the upcoming Fall 2013 semester, I started to really consider motivating my students to put more time into the simulation through participating in the LINKS Global SCM Competition. To make the final decision, I was forced to understand the issues, advantages, disadvantages, and instructional challenges associated with organizing 15 LINKS teams across three course sections into LINKS industries. As far as I could tell, there are three options.

(1) Traditional Within-Section Industries: The benefit of the traditional setup is the ease and familiarity of setup. Each section is easily split into one industry with five teams. Students like the experience of competing within their section as it provides some level of visibility of their competition and creates an easy scenario for the award ceremony at the end of the semester when the final winner is announced. However, students cannot learn from the other teams in their section until the end of the simulation without hurting their own grade. Discussions about strategies in class are extremely limited.

(2) Cross-Section Industries: Instead of creating an industry within each section, I could put teams into industries that cut across sections. With only three sections and 15 teams, students would need to be either in tiny (three team) industries or there would be several teams from each section in each industry. This could help the students discuss strategies with some other teams in their section but would not enable full communication. Class time could not be utilized to discuss the pros and cons of specific strategies without giving away "trade secrets."

(3) LINKS Global SCM Competition With Teams Spread Across LINKS Global SCM Competition industries: Putting students into the LINKS Global SCM Competition seems to provide the best opportunity for this setup. I can put one team from each section into a global industry so that teams A1 B1 C1 are in global industry 1, A2 B2 C2 are in global industry 2, etc. There are five industries to be aware of and determining the winners for the award ceremony at the end of the semester will be a definite challenge. However, the ability to discuss specific strategies and confront problems that all teams face in a group setting should overcome these challenges. The biggest benefit in this dimension will be the mid-competition "Presidential Review Meetings" where teams discuss the first half of the simulation and received feedback from me. Now, every group can openly discuss their strategy and teams can learn from others teams' successes and failures.