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OVERVIEW OF COMPUTER BASED BUSINESS GAMES IN BUSINESS POLICY CLASSES

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ABSTRACT

The following paper provides an overview of the content of a workshop presented at the 1981 ABSEL conference. The purpose of the workshop is to assist those who desire to use computer based business simulations and have been hesitant to implement their use. The workshop provides practical implementation detail beyond the scope of the following overview.

WHY SIMULATIONS IN BUSINESS POLICY CLASSES

An often stated purpose of the Policy course is to provide a synthesis for the graduate or undergraduate course of study. It is the writer's opinion that the hands-on experience of trying to manage a simulated firm is one of the excellent ways for many students to accomplish the desired synthesis and integration course work. The student has the opportunity to use accounting, finance, marketing and quantitative techniques, and make management applications when managing their simulated firm.

SELECTING A SIMULATION

The writer suspects we often select a simulation with which we had experienced as a student; certainly there are good reasons for selecting a simulation already well known to the instructor. However, there are several excellent simulations of varying complexity and each of which may be especially useful for specific learning goals. For use in a Policy class the simulation selected should deal with many variables within an organization and not, for instance, overly emphasize marketing decisions to the exclusion of cost control or asset planning.

The student and instructor manuals that are available for the simulation are very important to the simulation experience. The instructor's manual should provide information the instructor will need for comprehension and processing knowledge, this is very important if the instructor will have little computer data processing support within the institution. The clarity and completeness of the students manual is important to the overall success of the learning experience.

BRINGING THE PROGRAM ON-LINE

Probably the most important step in obtaining a program that is ready to run is to provide the publisher with detailed information pertaining to the computer hardware on which you will be processing the simulation. If one has successfully run standard statistical packages such as SPSS one will probably have little difficulty running the simulation; if your data processing skill is less than this level you probably need help. If the help is not available within ones own institution, it is not impossible to run the simulation. Faculty members elsewhere will help. The author of the simulation will, in the writer's experience, be most helpful in responding to questions.

GETTING THE CLASS STARTED

The writer's experience is to provide the class with a verbal over-view of the simulation with which they will be working, e.g., the nature of the industry, the decisions they will be making, the useful tools in the manual; then give them about one week to study the manual and make the first

decision. In the writer's opinion, the administrator must know completely the students', and instructor's manuals. The students must become completely familiar with the students' manual, the instructor Cannot read it for or to them. One must insist that the students read and re-read the student manual. The student must be charged with learning the manual, if the manual has work-sheets, forecasting sheets, and decision tools, insist that they be used.

Depending on class size and the number of firms permitted in the simulation, student group (firm) sizes of three to four numbers seem to be best and a group of two is acceptable. Because of privacy of information roommates almost must be in the same group, otherwise, counting-off seems to be preferred to friendship groupings.

INSTRUCTOR OR COACH-CONSULTANT

Perhaps one of the most difficult tasks is to shift from a lecturer-discussion leader role to a Coach-Consultant role. (The writer acknowledges that this is stated as a necessary shift.) If the student, not the instructor, is to manage the firm they require the freedom to make mistakes and make decisions. Only when the firm is making a fatal error or making repeated major errors does the writer become more active with a firm, and then becomes less active as soon as possible. Early in the simulation it seems wise to visit all groups to see if they need help, then move more toward a role of waiting for questions and working with those needing or seeking help. Also, as their understanding increases badger them a bit to use the tools from other courses, e.g., break-even analysis, graphing and record-keeping, testing various variables, and accurate cash-flow and balance sheet data.

EVALUATION OR GRADING

The writer asks for an end of term analysis on which the grade primarily depends; the firms are furnished with a list of the minimum content of the analysis. Further, student evaluations of their group members are obtained; their value seems to be only in identifying the strongest and weakest contributors to the group.