

# At testing time it's 'the real thing'

## Skidmore business students face local execs for class grade

12/1982  
Saratogian

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**S**ARATOGA SPRINGS — Business students at Skidmore took grueling oral examinations last week, making presentations to and fielding questions from substitute professors they had never met.

The program, in which business executives donate their time to grade student presentations, is a major part of reorienting the way business students are taught at Skidmore.

"The logic of the program is to introduce the students to the real world as quickly as we possibly can," said Dr. James Biteman, business department chairman who is coordinating the curriculum reorientation.

"Teaching business we can teach either a whole set of abstractions, and the students learn the abstractions, or we can teach them what it means to be part of that world, function in it, be effective in it, and so on. We don't want to do one to the exclusion of the other."

As students dressed in their Sunday best carried flip charts and organization tables in and out of their sessions with the visiting executives, Biteman explained, "The abstractions become meaningful if they have some sort

of experience base to relate them to. Most of the top graduate programs are now insisting on an experience base before they'll accept a student; two to three or five years of working experience. As an undergraduate student we don't have that. So we start to provide an experience base.

"And one of the most important, we feel, parts of the experience base is the actual stand-up presentation, communication of ideas and how those are received by the audience. So what we do here is mock that up as accurately as we can."

The format calls for each group of four or five students to take a previously published case study of a business, analyze its problems and then present recommendations to a panel of executives. The students take the role of consultants hired to evaluate the company; the executives act as the officials of the company that hired the consultants.

In the three semesters Skidmore has put all Business Division students through the program, it has come to be taken very seriously.

One reason is that the grade, determined solely by the businessmen, counts as 20 percent of the final grade of *Business Organization and*

*Development* or BU107 as Biteman said it is more familiarly known. Another is that making a presentation of the required type is a challenge unfamiliar to most college students.

At 10 a.m. Tuesday Burton J. Weinbaum and Erwin Bauer were seated in a small conference room of The Surrey building on Broadway. Each was participating in the program for the second year and thoroughly familiar with the case study of the Dennison Manufacturing Co. Bauer is a vice president of Schenectady Trust Co., and Weinbaum is vice president of the Northeast Group of The Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Co.

At approximately 10:02 Rick Beltz, Jamie Hamilton, Sarah Marx, Karen Waugh and Paul O'Connor filed into the room. They had chosen to have Beltz make the introductions and give an overview, with each of the others handling specific problem/recommendation areas.

Save for some initial nervousness in their voices, the 20-minute presentation went smoothly. Rehearsal helped, Beltz said later. There is no question the students take the presentations seriously enough to get nervous. One professor said before the presentations Tuesday that her students had been at her home

until 11 p.m. Monday, trying out their presentation with her as a rehearsal audience. Biteman said a few students have been so reluctant to go through the presentation that they have skipped it, thereby earning an automatic F.

The Dennison Co. is a real company, based in Framingham, Mass., and the case study of it, prepared several years ago at Harvard Business School, is well known. In the late '60s, when the study was done, Dennison was in need of and trying to determine the best way to reorganize itself so that it could grow.

The students focused strongly on Dennison's management structure, singling out the large number of executives (16) reporting directly to the president. It puts him in the position of "being asked to hit back 16 or 17 balls at once," Beltz said as he pointed to a cartoon of a tennis player besieged by numerous volleys.

The students speak in turn, outlining a very detailed reorganization of management built on a reorganization of the company into four divisions. They recommend bonus plans based on different criteria for each company and a three-year budget for retained earnings that puts 40 percent into development of Dennison's emergent copier business.