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MB107 presentations a business rite of passage

Each semester, a hundred or more Skidmore students will enroll in MB 107, the college's legendary introduction to business and management. And near the end of each term, those students face a major challenge: formally pitching an original business project plan to real-life executives. It's an experience that many Skidmore alumni—and not only management and business majors—share and remember well. MB107 attracts students across the board, from disciplines as varied as history, theater, dance, and environmental studies.

This year, the big day was Friday, Dec. 5. Beginning at 7 a.m., 125 students streamed through the Saratoga Springs Holiday Inn's meeting rooms, team-pitching a passel of innovative proposals to panels of real-life executives. The goal of all the presentations was to create an idea that would boost profits for the already successful online merchant Amazon.com by a cool \$75 million within the next five years; the reward for these junior executives' long semester of hard work would be neither big business deals nor bonuses, but fully one-quarter of their final grade for the course.

Among the concepts they came up with were a strategic alliance with Ticketmaster, a foray into online "adult-oriented" merchandise, a TV shopping channel, and a real-time analysis service based on data mined from Amazon's multimillion business transactions.

Throughout the fall semester, per MB 107 protocol, the students had lasered in on Amazon.com, analyzing its strategy, operations, and bottom line, starting with two Amazon.com case studies from Pearson Prentice Hall's Strategic Management series and numerous other resources. The students themselves had to define the company's major issues and challenges, explains Skidmore business professor Timothy Harper, who coordinates the MB107 presentations; then they had to team-tackle one or more of that company's actual business problems.

"Different teams might posit different categories of major issues or challenges," says Harper, "and their strategic recommendations must address the issues they identify." It's only after the intensive research, numbers-crunching, innovative brainstorming, and tough-love coaching by upperclass MB107 veterans that the teams present their plans, complete with figures and forecasts.

During breakfast with executives and student coaches, Harper explained the ground rules: "The students know the Q&A is going to be intense. You should be able to question their figures and why they chose them. They should have their PowerPoint [presentations] and note cards memorized—reading from them should count against them." And about those grades? "Last week they probably put in five hours a night—that earns them a C minus. We allow you to go below that mark, and anything beyond that C minus they have to earn from you all."

Harrison Shulman '11 majors in environmental studies, but he took MB107 because he considered it one of Skidmore's great core courses. "They gave us a kind of 'Scared Straight' talk early in the semester about how hard we'd have to work, so we knew the course requires a lot of crunch time. It's pressure, but it's positive pressure—it's good to know you're going to have to work really hard," added Shulman. "No student I know who's taken the class has had an issue with the work."

Saratoga insurance broker Bruce Clements, a 10-year veteran of MB107 presentations, saw only one "A" grade among the five pitches he observed. It went to a team proposing that Amazon supply six Northeast colleges with its popular Kindle electronic book on a free trial basis. Pluses included lower printing costs for publishers, cheaper textbooks for students, and as further incentive, a percentage of royalties for the colleges. The students even brought along a Kindle for the judges to examine. "It was a plausible business idea," Clements said approvingly. "They ran the idea past President Glotzbach, and he liked it."

Handing out grades on the spot, executives praised the junior execs' poise, preparedness, and fresh thinking, but they played hardball during each presentation's 15-minute Q&A period, often the toughest part for the students, the majority of whom are first-years. "We thought the presentation would be the hardest part," one student said while waiting with his team while the judges deliberated. "But the Q&A was the most wrenching." Wrenching it might be, but as one top executive assured the team,



Rachel Roderman '09 photo

Sophomore Michael Cohen '11, left, and first-year students Abigail Depew, Chase Kurokawa, John Manning, and Michael Kraines prepare for their case.

"This is the greatest business course."

MB107 presentations, and the substantive preparation they require, awaken students to the skills and rigor necessary to understand a business entity—and a wider corporate world—in depth. But according to Harper, the MB107 presentations are also a valuable part of a liberal arts education: "Researching and presenting their projects requires critical thinking, good writing, the ability to incorporate multiple perspectives, utilize feedback, revise and resubmit. These are all traditional liberal arts skills and learning processes."

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