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How would you make \$75 million for Netflix?

For 70 Skidmore students this spring term, providing an answer was a top academic priority. All gathered at the Saratoga Springs Holiday Inn April 29 for a day-long series of group presentations made back-to-back in four conference rooms. Playing the role of Netflix executives, their recommendations included creating partnerships with hotel chains and the National Hockey League, acquiring a gaming company, international expansion, and moving into niche markets—such as college campuses— all with the goal of increasing the firm's operating income by \$75 million in three years.

The assignment was entirely in keeping with the 30-year tradition of MB107, Skidmore's cornerstone introductory business course. The challenge of conducting a strategic analysis and developing a viable action plan for firms like Netflix, Amazon, American Express, and the Gap is an experience that bonds 6,600 Skidmore alumni over three decades. It's also an experience that has converted many students to management and business majors and successful business-related careers. In fact, 88 members (14 percent) of this year's graduating class will earn business degrees (28 others minored in business). Many of these veterans shared their knowledge as group coaches, task specialists, and mock executives.

Associate Professor Caroline D'Abate coordinates MB107. She says the Netflix case study was particularly complex and challenging. "Netflix isn't just highly dynamic, it's actually reinventing itself daily, which means students constantly faced new competitive environments, technological innovations, and socio-cultural trends."

Among this spring's participants were teammates William Heidepriem-Baird and Rachel Maltz, both first-year students considering business majors. Also on their team were Eliot Rosenfield, Samuel Jo, and Ni Fang. The group's recommendation: the creation of a customizable educational movie database called Uniflix for the higher education market. Informal research with Skidmore professors as well as a survey of students indicated there was demand for the idea (see accompanying brief video of their presentation).



But first they had to convince a panel of experienced business executives that their idea could withstand the realities of the marketplace. Drawn from the Saratoga community and the Skidmore community of alumni and parents, there were 21 executive jurors in all. Among them were Skidmore mother Joan Berger, general counsel and chief compliance officer for New York City-based Pzena Investment Management, LLC; Skidmore father Don Marks, a member of Capital Advisors in Madison, Wisc., and Deanne Pfeil, vice president of Pfeil & Co. in Saratoga.

Heidepriem-Baird and Maltz's group eventually earned a B+: strong idea and good presentation, but logistical question marks, including their balance sheet. Berger for one thought Uniflix was "innovative and strong" though "overly ambitious in terms of financial expectations. ... But if a theory is a good one—this one was—and you can tell that lots of work was put into all components of the project, that, to me, is what counts. I think sometimes we 'experts' get a little carried away with ourselves."

The two first-year students were satisfied with their mark (25 percent of the overall course grade). They focused on how much they'd taken away. "I learned a lot about the language and the culture of business and the process of analyzing a company and coming up with a strategic recommendation," says Heidepriem-Baird. For Maltz, group work was key: "This is the first real fancy presentation I've ever done. I definitely learned the importance of the team dynamic—working with a group of people you've never met before. We've become great friends."

Pfeil says this will help the students in the real world: "The teamwork piece is critical. Most modern corporate cultures rely on highly effective teams. It takes patience, tolerance and fortitude to work with a group of people who may have different styles. Out of those differences often come the best results."

Presentation skills are also important, says Marks. "Being able to make a clear, concise, and articulate presentation in front of a strange audience will serve them well. Some were excellent, some were a little nervous, but all did a professional job and knew their material cold."

So does Heidepriem-Baird plan to major in management and business now that he's survived MB107? "Yup," he says smiling. And while Maltz won't commit to a business major, she's already signed up for a business course next fall.

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