Achieving Competency Results through the Case Competition Experiences

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Abstract

The graduate school experience is an expensive proposition in terms of finances, time, and commitment to study. Students make the investment to enhance their career opportunities, to engage in life-long learning, and to build professional networks. The Commission on Accreditation of Health Management Education advises graduate programs to adopt a competency model that serves as the basis of curriculum, course content, learning objectives, and teaching and assessment methods. One such competency model is the National Center for Healthcare Leadership with its original 26 competencies in the domains of transformation, execution, and people.

The authors found the case competition experience advanced student learning the most and provided the opportunity for the student to enhance their skills in 15-competency areas.
The case competition experience enhanced the confidence, professionalism, and team leadership skills that prospective employers found attractive for recruitment.

Academic institutions invest resources in providing students with experiential learning activities through guest lectures, site visits, internships, and a host of other events to introduce the student to employment and networking opportunities. In examining the host of activities to which students participate, the authors find the case competition experience the one that provides the best and intensive introduction to competencies.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of the study is to examine what graduate school experience advance student competency learning and development. The objectives of the study are to:

1. Identify competency gaps in health management education
2. Classify career programming to close competency gaps
3. Make the argument for the value of the case competition relative to other experiential learning experiences
4. Develop a list of case competitions and themes
5. Describe the aspect of the case competition that make it attractive to attain competencies
6. Describe the benefits for companies, faculty, and students of the case competition experience

The "Why?" of Graduate School

The graduate school experience is an expensive venture for emerging leaders. Tuition fees in the United States can range from $20,000 to $60,000/year depending upon the university. Universities can struggle to provide value, meet the needs of students, and fulfill accreditation guidelines on limited operating budgets. For students seeking graduate degrees in health management, the Commission on Accreditation of Health Management Education (CAHME) requires graduate programs to specify where students are employed within 90-days of graduation. Students searching for careers in health management pursue graduate education in an attempt to advance their career options, enhance their salaries, and expand their network.

The Role of Experiential Learning

Contributors in the field of adult learning have pointed to the essential role of experience as a source for learning and development (Kolb, 1984). Some have developed theories of experience, also called "experiential learning theories," to explain this process (Fenwick, 2003). Experiential learning is important because it makes learning relatable to students, it links theory to practice, increases student engagement, assists in memory retention, and leads to development of skills where students can reflect, conceptualize, and plan for next steps (Kolb, 2010).

Adopting a Competency Model

Accredited health management programs adhere to the CAHME Criterion 3 which advises graduate programs to adopt a set of competencies that aligns with the program's mission. The competencies serve as the basis of curriculum, course content, learning objectives, and teaching and assessment methods (CAHME, III.A.1, p. 38).

For graduate schools, matriculating students through its programs, it is helpful to identify student career interests and then work to fulfill student employment goals. While knowledge for the sake of knowledge is instrumental in a career, the expense associated with a graduate degree creates demands on behalf of the student. The main question students want to know during an Admissions Committee interview is the percent placement rate post-graduation. The standard rule is to have a placement rate above 90% within 3-months of graduation. As Table 1 indicates at the Rush University graduate program, 96 percent of the graduating class was employed within 90-days of graduation. They were employed in consulting (27%); hospital fellowships (23%); other sites such as entrepreneurial ventures (23%); hospital/practice management operations (15%), and insurance (8%). Four-percent were in search of employment.

Table 1: HSM Employment for 2019 (Rush University Faculty Meeting, fall 2019)
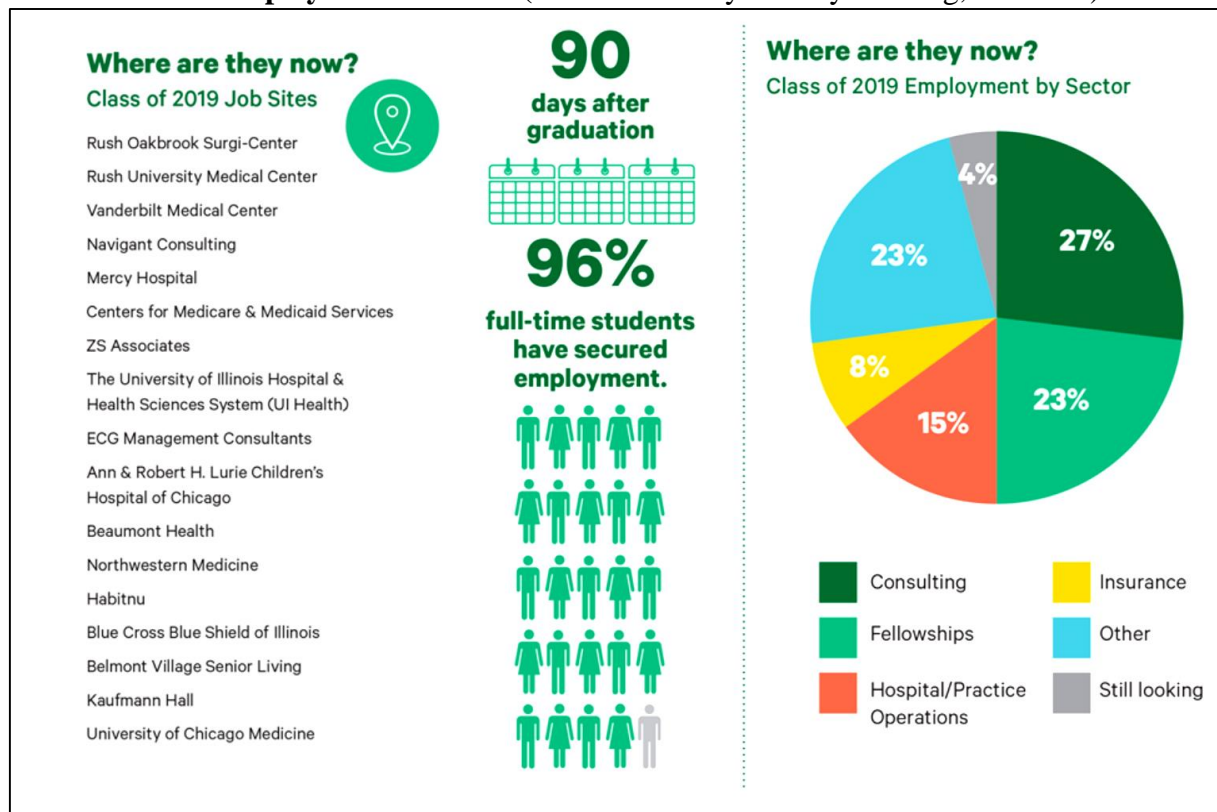
How does a student transition from the Admissions Committee interview to employment? What experiential learning and competencies are most important to propel a career?

The Rush University Program Experience

The Rush University graduate program was established in 1978 and has had 38 cycles of graduates. While the initial class began with 10 graduates in 1981, it now has over 25 graduates a year (HSM CAHME Self-Study, 2020). The program adopted the National Center for Healthcare Leadership Competency model in 2006 (NCHL, 2007) which initially contained 26 competencies that were organized under three domains including transformation, execution, and people (Howard, Howard, and Scott, 2019).

When students enter the Rush Health Systems Management graduate program, they are surveyed about their knowledge gaps in the NCHL competencies. Over the years, students have identified the competencies they feel they lack which includes financial skills, project management, analytical thinking, team leadership, and self-confidence (Table 2). This information is incorporated into a Student-Faculty Handbook and teaching and internship faculty are notified of the student knowledge gaps and asked to incorporate the skills into their curriculum and employment sites. In addition, experiential learning in the areas of guest speakers in lunch & learns, site visits to employers, American College of Healthcare Executives speed networking events in fellowship and consulting programming, book club, mentoring, and case competition participation are made available to students. The challenge for faculty in adopting any competency program is to identify strategies that work best in closing competency gaps.

Table 2: Rush University HSM Student Knowledge Gaps, 2014-2019

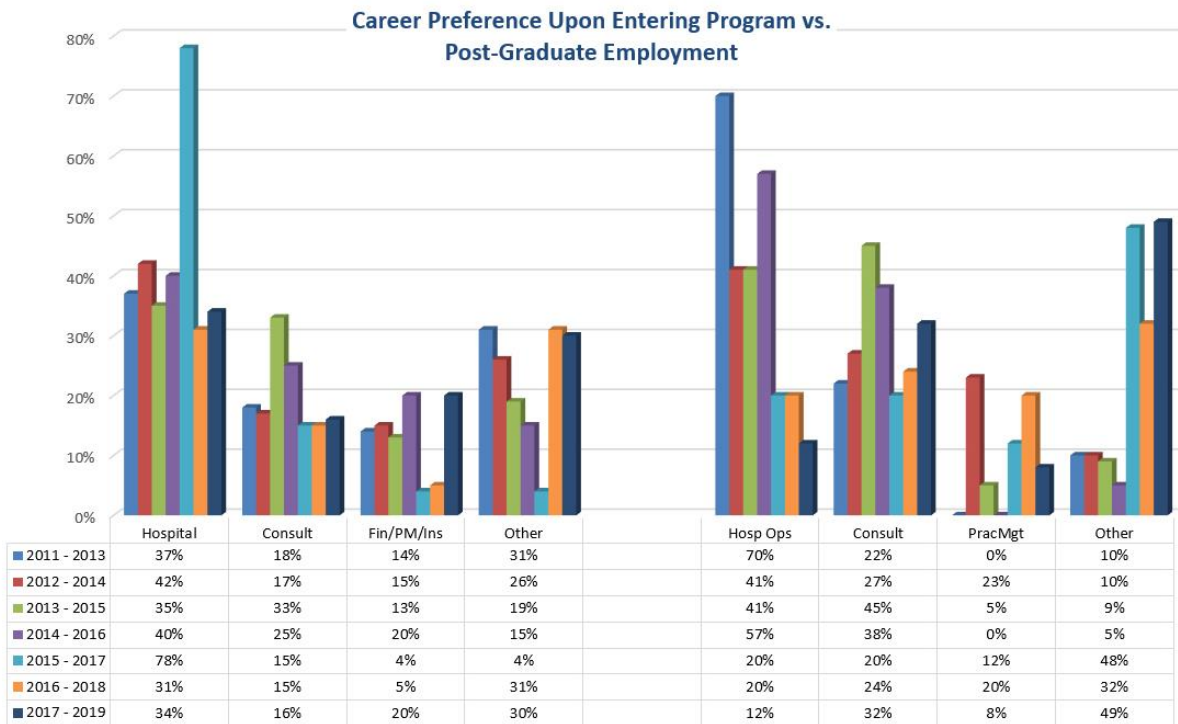| Rank	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
1	Financial skills	Financial skills	Financial skills	Financial skills	Financial skills	Financial skills
2	Project management	Strategic orientation	Innovative thinking	Team leadership	Project management	Team leadership
3	Analytical skills	Project management	Project management	Innovative thinking	Self-confidence	Innovative thinking
4	Innovative thinking	Analytical thinking	Change leadership	Process management	Information technology	Process management
5	Strategic orientation	Communication skills	Process management	Self-confidence	Organization awareness	Organization awareness

In addition, the HSM Graduate Survey is administered to students about their employment preferences post-graduation. Students are asked to rank their preferred employment sites. The employment sites include associations, hospitals, insurance companies, physician practices, pharmaceutical companies, and data warehouses, to name a few (Howard, Howard, and Scott, 2017). In tracking student interest pre- and post-graduate education, the students lock into a career preference at the beginning of their academic program and then look for positions and work experiences within that same preference area (Table 3). The best training tools that address the academic competencies to move students from the classroom to work can run the gamut.

**Table 3: Career Preference and Post-Graduate Employment**

Career Preference and Post-Graduate Employment — RUSH

Career Preference Upon Entering Program vs. Post-Graduate Employment

	Hospital	Consult	Fin/PM/Ins	Other		Hosp Ops	Consult	PracMgt	Other
2011 - 2013	37%	18%	14%	31%		70%	22%	0%	10%
2012 - 2014	42%	17%	15%	26%		41%	27%	23%	10%
2013 - 2015	35%	33%	13%	19%		41%	45%	5%	9%
2014 - 2016	40%	25%	20%	15%		57%	38%	0%	5%
2015 - 2017	78%	15%	4%	4%		20%	20%	12%	48%
2016 - 2018	31%	15%	5%	31%		20%	24%	20%	32%
2017 - 2019	34%	16%	20%	30%		12%	32%	8%	49%

From September 2011 through May 2019, 189 educational programs were presented. The educational programs included the following experiential learning strategies: guest speakers at lunch and learns, alumni events, site visits, mentoring sessions, book club readings, ACHE fellowship and consulting programs, and various case competitions. Of the Rush programming, the case competition appears to achieve the largest set of demonstrable characteristics and skills that advance students to the world of work.

Table 4: Total number of career programming

Total Number of Career Programming 2011 - 2019
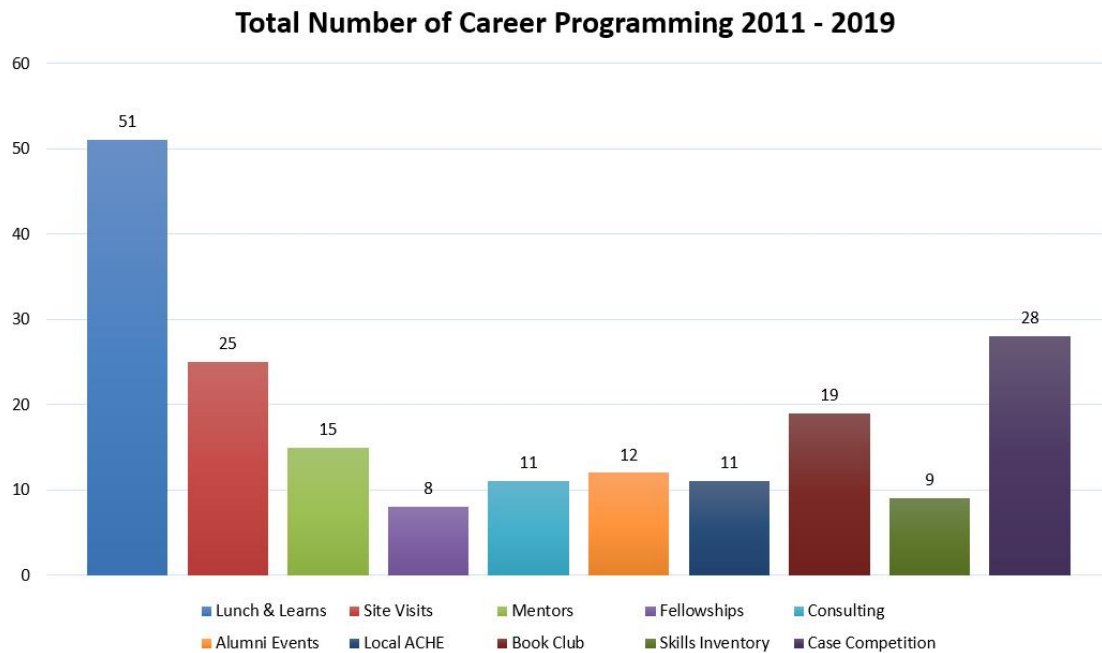
What Is a Case Competition?

A case competition is an event where teams of 2 to 4 students receive a case for a limited period of time. During the period, the teams must identify the prominent issues and develop a strategy to address the case issues. The time period for the case completion varies from 24-hours to 5-weeks for the submission of the project recommendations. The student teams must submit a PowerPoint presentation, executive summary, and some instances a poster in advance of the competition. The student teams arrive onsite and then select through a lottery the time of their presentation. The teams are allowed to visit the room where they will present so they can get acclimated to the venue. Depending upon the number of participating teams and judging panels, 5 to 6 teams are assigned to each case competition presentation room.

Team presentations are usually for 15 to 20-minutes with 5 to 10-minutes for questions from a panel of experts. Teams compete against the teams assigned to their presentation rooms. One team usually advances from each room. There are two to three rounds of presentations until the top three to five teams are identified for cash awards. The notable health care case competitions appear in Table 5.

http://journals.ke-i.org/index.php/mra

Table 5: Examples of Health Care Case Competitions

Competition	Established/ Registration Fee	Case Time Period	Requirement	Awardees	Awards
Baylor University Robbins Institute of Health Policy & Leadership www.baylor.edu	2014 Invitation only, 12 participating teams, $500/team	24-hours	Executive Summary and PPT	1st, 2nd, 3rd place; Best Presenters; and Best Q&A	1st place $3,000/team member and $3,000 for university 2nd place $2,000/team member 3rd place $1,000/team member Best presenter and best Q&A $1,500
Business School Alliance for Health Management https://bahm-alliance.org/	2011 Invitation only to 19 BAHM members	5-weeks	Executive Summary, PPT, Poster	1st, 2nd, 3rd place	1st place $10,000/ team; Publication
Cleveland Clinic Case Competition My.clevelandclinic.org	2014 Invitation to 16 teams who advanced from 1st round, Onsite registration $400/team	3-days	4 students/ team, Executive Summary and PPT	1st, 2nd, 3rd place	1st place $5,000/team member
Emory Global Health Case Competition Globalhealth.emory.edu	2009 Undergraduate and Graduate, 29 participating teams; $1,000/team	1-week	4-6 students/ team	1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th place, Honorable mention, Participants Choice	1st place $6,000/team
Global Case Competition/Everyone's Business Case Competition https://clubs.marshall.usc.edu	2017 $150/team	3-weeks	5 students, 50% must be women	1st, 2nd, 3rd	1st place $10,000/ team

Competition	Established/ Registration Fee	Case Time Period	Requirement	Awardees	Awards
Humana and Texas A&M Healthcare Analytics Case Competition Humanatamuanalytics.com	2019 Virtual and onsite; 42 universities; 109 teams	3-weeks	2-3 students/ team MA, MS, MPH, MIT, MBA students; Dataset analysis using SAS, SPSS, R, Python, Matlab, and Microsoft Excel	1st, 2nd, 3rd	1st place $40,000/ team 2nd place $20,000/team 3rd place $10,000/team
Kellogg Biotech and Healthcare Case Competition Kellogg.northwestern.edu	2003 Global event with over 60 applications, 10 teams invited onsite	5-weeks	3-5 students; 2 must be MBA students	1st, 2nd, 3rd place teams	1st place $5,000/team 2nd place $2,000 3rd place $1,000/team
National Association of Health Services Executives www.nahse.org	1996 30 teams, $350/team	3-weeks	1-3 students	1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th place teams	1st place $4,000/team member 2nd place $3,000/team member 3rd place $2,000/team member 4th place $1,000/team member 5th place $500/team member
Ohio State Student Case Competition cph.osu.edu	2001 First year MHA, 24 teams $500/team, 18 teams	4-weeks	3 students	1st, 2nd, 3rd place teams	1st place $1,800/team, 2nd place $900/team, 3rd place $600/team

Competition	Established/ Registration Fee	Case Time Period	Requirement	Awardees	Awards
Pennsylvania State University Case Competition hhd.psu.edu	2019 Graduate and Undergraduate $750 registration; 2nd team from same university is $600	36 Hours	3 students	1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th place teams	1st place $1,800/team, 2nd place $900/team, 3rd place $600/team, and Best Presenter Awards (6)
UAB Health Administration Case Competition uab.edu	2006 40 registered teams	3-weeks	3 students	1st, 2nd, 3rd place teams	1st place $3,000/team member 2nd place $2,000/team member 3rd place $1,500/team member
UCLA Center for Healthcare Management Case Competition https://www.healthcaremanagement.ph.ucla.edu	2020 No registration fee, 35 registered teams; Top 8 teams invited onsite	88-hours	Up to 4 students	1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th place teams	1st $2,000/ person, 2nd $1,500/ person, 3rd $1,000/ person 4th $500/ person
Yale Healthcare Case Competition som.yale.edu	2016 25 teams Interdisciplinary competition	1-week	3-5 students	1st, 2nd, 3rd place teams	1st place $5,000/team

Note: Information obtained by examining organization websites

How Are Students Selected for Case Competition Teams?

Each university has its method for selecting teams to represent the graduate program. Some use a lottery method or a course to select team members while others use a standard volunteer method to construct a team. Regardless of the method, it is an intense team experience that will challenge and frustrate the participants because it requires the student teams to integrate their knowledge from courses, employment, and general life experiences. Whatever the topic the student team addresses, the case will incorporate aspects of the following subject areas: finance, governance, legal, marketing, operations, strategy, and technology. The time period between team receipt of the case and the submission of its case analysis and PowerPoint presentation will determine the level of detail in the analysis.

Team Competencies

Using the National Center for Healthcare Leadership competencies in the domains of transformation, execution, and people (Table 6a), the competencies developed through the case competition experience include those contained in Table 6b (Calhoun, et al., 2008). Once the team is formed, the members meet and organize themselves. The team can designate a team captain who communicates with the competition organizers and serves as the spokesperson for the team. All correspondence will flow through the team captain. A core faculty member from the university is designated and the faculty member serves as a guide and monitors team performance to ensure compliance with competition rules and adherence to academic principles.

Figure 6a: NCHL Competency Model

Table 6b: Case Competition Competencies

Domain	Competency
Transformation	Achievement orientation, Analytical thinking, Financial skills, Information seeking, Innovative thinking, Strategic orientation
Execution	Accountability, Collaboration, Communication skills, Initiative, Project management
People	Professionalism, Self-confidence, Self-development, Team leadership

Getting Started as a Team

The teams that have the best outcome take control of the case competition environment. The team needs to determine the major questions the case calls for and then answer those specific questions. Once the team gets the case, they should read it and discuss the content. They should drop the issues into one of seven buckets: finance, governance, legal, marketing, operations, strategy, and technology. Using the STAR method – Situation, Task, Action, and Results – the team should describe the specific event/situation (situation); what goal the team is working toward (task), the specific steps to address the problem (action); and the outcome of the action (results) (Cheng, 2020).

Standing team meetings over the case competition time period are scheduled so the team can evolve through the standard storming and norming process (Colombini and McBride, 2012). Based on the rules of the specific competition, the team develops and interviews key informants who can help frame their response to the case questions and the team performs academic research to develop the case executive summary for submission. There are competition restrictions on what assistance the teams can receive so adherence to the rules is paramount so the team is not eliminated.

The teams develop their presentation outline to address the case issues. A typical case outline includes: background, recommendations, strategic plan, timeline, assumptions, metrics for success, financial analysis/budget, conclusion, and indices. The information is put in an executive summary, PowerPoint, or poster presentation for submission at a designated time before arrival of the case competition teams to the meeting venue.

Who Writes the Case?

Each case competition is different so the case can be real or imagined. The case usually revolves around a current event. The case theme is sponsored by a corporate entity with employees who serve as participating case judges who evaluate the team presentation, PowerPoint, poster, and executive summary. A representative sample of the case topics appears in Table 7.

Table 7: Case Competition Themes

Year	Case Competition Themes
2020	Home and Community-Based Care Challenge – Expanding Precision Medical Care via Business-Based Technology
	Strategic Market Entry Plan for Cardiac Chronic Diseases
	Therapeutic Approach of a Novel Gene Editing Technology
	Veterans Administration Metrics to Determine Success
2019	Golden Health: The Bridge to End Homelessness in San Francisco
	Reimbursement for Hip and Knee Replacement in New Orleans
	Cleveland Clinic and Oscar Health: Multi-Year Strategic Plan
	Bariatric Medicine for Baptist Health Florida to Combat Diabetes and Obesity
	Sustainability of Wellstar Paulding Hospital and Nursing Home Atlanta: Long-term Strategy for Long-Term Care
2018	Improving Senior Care through Quality and Innovation – Capitol Health Systems
	Cleveland Clinic Strategic Blueprint for Orthopaedic Excellence: A Seamless Patient Experience
	Strategies for Diabetes Treatment: Improving America's Health
	Multi-State Medicaid Managed Care in Underserved Communities
2017	Making Oakland the Healthiest City in America
	Clinical Transformation and Growth in the Southern Region of Ohio
	Introducing Value-based Care: Expansion into the Mid-Atlantic States
	Population Health in Baltimore
2016	Building a Stronger California in Behavioral Health
	Marketing The Cleveland Clinic in London
	Scarlet Health Care and the Provision of Obstetrical Services
	Ochsner Clinic Expansion of Population Health in New Orleans

It is important that the members of the team conduct themselves as a team. They should work to limit conflict and focus on their likability quotient because the judges will know if team members respect each other through their presentation. There is a dress code for the team where they should look and behave professionally. The team presentation should be organized to address the required content areas. During the question and answer period, each team member should actively participate.

What Companies, Faculty, and Students get from the Case Competition Experience?

Companies and company employees involved in a case competition can benefit in several ways. Companies can serve as sponsors to the case competitions and can

assist in writing the case and getting the best and brightest students from around the country and world to consult with them on issues impacting the organization. Some companies even fly the winning team to their offices to present to their senior leadership.

Companies can also staff information booths at the competition or serve as a case judge who can use the competition experience for professional development. It allows junior and senior executives to interact with emerging leaders and provide educational and recruitment opportunities for companies. Furthermore, the case competition provides visibility for the company to reach target markets and potential customers along with providing company recognition for its sponsorship (NAHSE website, 2020).

Faculty who attend the competition can ask: Is the curriculum rigorous enough, can the students integrate their learning from one course to the other, how are the students' presentation skills, do the students work well in a group, and how are their time management skills, among a host of other competencies. Students get the opportunity to address real life challenges in the case which gives faculty information on their undergraduate and graduate program curriculum. With the case competition come graduate program recognition and exposure to other health management and business programs so faculty and students can assess how they fare in comparison to other programs. It is a healthy way for quality control.

It also puts faculty and students in a business environment with exposure to industry executives where students will eventually work. It gives program faculty and students an opportunity for reflection on what is being taught and learned. More importantly, it brings the university together to cheer on their team. Regardless of whether the case preparation is for a weekend or

several weeks, the competition tests the team members' ability to work in a group. Students who perceive themselves as future consultants find out if they have the research skills to put the case concepts in a PowerPoint, to stand before an audience to present cogent comments, and respond to a panel of questions. Judges can tell if the team members respect one another and they can also tell by the manner in which questions are responded to who on the team did the work.

One University's Experience

Rush University has participated in case competitions since 2004. Over the sixteen-year period, the department has participated in five competitions including Baylor Invitational Robbins, Cleveland Clinic, The Ohio State University, National Association of Health Services Executives Everett V. Fox, and University of Alabama at Birmingham case competitions. Rush has supported forty-three teams and 136 students as case competition participants (note: students who participated in multiple competitions were counted once).

When we examine the student case competition experience in relationship to other career programming (Table 4), the case experience allows the student to develop more competencies (Table 6) over a concentrated period of time while working as a team member. The students who participate on a case competition team incorporate the experience on their resume and use the experience as they interview for employment.

In preparing for the case, students advance their oral and written communication skills and analytical thinking. Working on a team over a concentrated time period forces the team members to hold themselves accountable to practice and collaborate on their deliverables. Finally, the experience enhances the students' self-confidence and professionalism. Thirty-five

percent of the Rush University team members secure employment in the first-semester prior to graduation which makes them more attractive to prospective employers. The Rush faculty believes this is due to the competencies that the case competition experience inculcates into the students.

Conclusion

The graduate school experience is an expensive proposition in terms of finances, time, and commitment to study. Students make the investment to enhance their career opportunities, to engage in life-long learning, and to build professional networks. The Commission on Accreditation of Health Management Education advises graduate programs to adopt a competency model that serves as the basis of curriculum, course content, learning objectives, and teaching and assessment methods. One such competency model is the National Center for Healthcare Leadership with its original 26 competencies in the domains of transformation, execution, and people.

When the Rush University Health Systems Management program examined its career development opportunities which included lunch & learns with guest speakers, site visits to employers, mentor luncheons, professional association membership, book club sessions, and other events, we found that the case competition experience advanced student learning the most and provided the opportunity for the student to enhance their skills in 15-competency areas.

Thirty-five percent of the Rush case competition students secured employment prior to graduation. The students had the confidence, professionalism, and team leadership skills that prospective employers found attractive for recruitment.

In conclusion, academic institutions invest resources in providing students with experiential learning activities through guest lectures, site visits, internships, and a host of other events to introduce them to employment and networking opportunities. In examining the host of activities to which students participate, the authors find the case competition experience the one that provides the best and intensive introduction to competencies.

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