SMALL BUT MIGHTY

MBA teams top case competitions
by Siv Buchmuller

The Sauder S. Gill Graduate School of Business' MBA is designed around small class sizes and a multidisciplinary, integrative approach to learning. While the strength of the program is clearly demonstrated through the careers alumni go on to have, the young program has only recently claimed its proper place in another important success index: case competitions. In the few short years since our pioneering case competitors have begun to flex their business strategy muscles against the brightest minds in Canada and abroad, they have established the program as a powerhouse, already achieving extraordinary success.

In earning these accolades, they have also demonstrated how the intentionally small size of the MBA cohort, which could be a disadvantage in case competitions, can in fact give them the advantage of familiarity as they work together to solve some of the world’s thorniest business problems. Case competitions are time-limited challenges where teams of students develop and present strategies to solve a real-life business problem. Each team creates a proposed solution, which they then present. Dragons’ Den style, to a panel of expert judges. The company sponsoring the competition often chooses to implement the winning solution, making the team that comes out on top the chance to see their ideas in action.

The UVic MBA team’s performance at the international Davos case competition in 2015 was a turning point. Jesal Shah, MBA ’15, was fundamental in forming the school’s case competition team in 2015. “I wanted to see how the UVic MBA stacked up against other programs,” says Shah, a passionate competitor. The MBA’s 15 team answered the challenge with resounding success, as Shah, along with Susan Laidlaw, Andrew Spence and Karin Feldkamp, under the guidance of faculty adviser and sustainability professor Dr. Matt Murphy, took first place in the prestigious 2015 Business for a Better World competition in Davos, Switzerland. Winning the international contest was a major accomplishment, as top business schools from around the world take part.

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– Gozde Ozbilim

It was seeing this team’s success—before even enrolling in the MBA program—that inspired Bhupinder Dulku, MBA ’17, to form a team of his own the following year. Lightning rarely strikes twice, especially in such a competitive arena, but UVic’s team managed to win the same competition in 2016, with a roster that included Dulku, Mukesh Dhatwalia, Dorothy Pan and Laurent Sevigny—again guided by Murphy.

“My enthusiasm has rubbed off on the next crop of MBAs, who have actively participated in case competitions since beginning the program in August 2016. Most recently, they’ve found success at the National MBA Games (taking home the prize for best overall academic performance) and at Ivey Business School’s East Meets West Leadership Case Competition (placing 2nd).”

Winning the international contest was a competitive arena, but UVic’s team managed to win the same competition two years in a row. Lightning rarely strikes twice, especially in such a large competition circuit. Logically it would seem that smaller schools are at a disadvantage because they have fewer students to draw on, and, in competitions without a maximum team size, the UVic MBA is often the smallest. Yet Ozbilim says that the intentionally small class size, instead of being a handicap, actually boosts the team’s performance. She attributes their success to the large part of the significant amount of teamwork woven throughout the MBA program, as well as the diversity of the close-knit cohort. “Since we are a small cohort we all have experience working with every member within the cohort, which means we already know how our teammates work best. The various educational and cultural backgrounds of our class help to provide different perspectives and approaches for coming up with solutions for a case.”

Jesal Shah, Laidlaw, Dulku and Ozbilim all hope to see this run of success continue as fresh faces are welcomed into the case competition community. In their eyes, the competition accolades raise the profile of UVic, increasing the value of their degree. They also want to see this nascent legacy continue to grow and for new competitors to recognize this as one of the once-in-a-lifetime opportunities that can only be experienced as an MBA student.

“This competition brought it all together for me,” says Laidlaw. “The classroom learning, the presentation skills, the teamwork that’s emphasized throughout the program—and put it in a context immediately relevant to real-world business. I hope future MBA students likewise see the value in participating and have just as transformative an experience as I did.”