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# War games are preparing MBA students for strategic battles

BY SHERYL ESTRADA

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Good morning,

Students graduating with an MBA this year are facing uncertain economic times, and possibly a [recession](#) on the horizon. David Jacobson, a professor of global business strategy at SMU's [Cox School of Business](#) in Dallas says "war games" are preparing students to help companies with strategic battles.

"We have a lot of hiring partners in the Dallas area, and globally, from [American Airlines](#) to Mary Kay to [Toyota](#) to tech companies, biotech and hospitals," Jacobson explains. "When we talked about what their needs are, in their own way, they all said the same thing—'*We can hire lots of good MBA students who have gone through lots of good MBA programs, but what's missing is the ability to engage uncertainty.*'" And this skillset has nothing to do with having a finance or strategy concentration, Jacobson says.

He and Arjan Singh, an SMU Cox adjunct professor, have engaged students in war games, a virtual experiential learning experience, which is an extension of the business school curriculum. So, what exactly is a war game?

It's a practice that takes place in the business world where a company will divide management into teams, representing the company and its competitors, says Singh, also a strategy and competitive intelligence consultant. The teams all work to outmaneuver one another and pressure test an existing strategy or come up with a new one. War games aren't a typical part of MBA programs, he says. Through his company, Pharma War Games, Singh runs war-gaming strategies for global tech and biotech and pharmaceutical companies.

The SMU "battle" is a three-day event and participating students earn 19 contact hours. "We start on a Friday afternoon, and go through Saturday, and then Sunday morning through early afternoon," Jacobson says. "Battle for the Cloud" for online MBA students took place in February 2021 virtually. "The demand is such that we are now running five or six a year virtually," Jacobson says. An in-person war game was planned for this June, but postponed until the fall.

In "Battle for the Cloud," there were six teams and each represented a company—[Oracle](#), [IBM](#), [Amazon](#), [Google](#), [Alibaba](#), and [Microsoft](#). "We gave them a scenario of a cyberattack," Singh explains. "The students get a briefing document a week in advance," he says. (It's more than 100 pages with details about each company.) "But they don't know which company they're going to represent."

"At the beginning of the war game, we select teams by pulling names out of a hat," he says. Participants must then go build strategies, and come back to present to a panel of judges, who are typically SVP and C-level executives of the companies represented in the war game.

#### **'Actionable results'**

Sarah D'Souza is a recent SMU MBA grad who participated in the event during the last year of her studies. She told me about her experience. "The first exercise was on company strategy—its strengths, weaknesses and assumptions," D'Souza says. The next exercise was scenario planning.

The competition encouraged different perspectives, she says. "My team had three students from SMU, two students from Madrid and two students from Germany," she explains. "We all have such different backgrounds. So, we all had different ideas on how to respond." In January, D'Souza began a new job as a senior consultant for [Cognizant](#) within their life sciences business unit. War games enhanced her skills in creative thinking and using it in "ways that can have actionable results," she says.

"We tell students to put it on your resume that you've been through a war game," Jacobson says.

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