



Business

Put to the test at Bryant University

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College students compete in a Jeopardy-style competition at Bryant University. From left are Julie Bannick, Tiffany Costello and Erik Johnson, of Temple University, and at right, starting from the left, are Shaina Miller, Katie Effertz and Kristina Marsella, of the State University of New York at New Paltz.

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Alex, I'll take "Job Evaluation" for 800. Or maybe "Leadership Theories" for 600. How about "Labor Relations" for 100?

Actually Alex Trebek, longtime host of the game show Jeopardy, was not on hand at Bryant University last week. He may have been there in spirit, though, as students from 17 colleges who plan to work in human resources took part in "the HR Games," a series of Jeopardy-style competitions aimed at improving their knowledge of the field. The questions are taken from a certification test called the PHR (Professional in Human Resources), and the point of the games is to help students prepare for the test.

So a 100-point question might ask what MBO means. (The answer is management by objectives.) A 900-point question could ask the name for international framework of rules and principles to reduce trade barriers. (The answer is the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, or GATT).

After a long day of competition, teams from Penn State and Cornell universities squared off for the finals on the stage at Bryant's Janikies Theatre, with the rest of the students watching from the audience. Each team has three members. Team members said there was strategy as well as knowledge involved. Since teams are penalized for wrong answers, no one wanted to risk too many points if they weren't sure of themselves.

The four teams in the semi-finals were Penn State, Cornell, Seton Hill University and the College of New Jersey. “We didn’t expect to do this well,” said Penn State senior Brian Agreen from Pittsburgh after winning the semi-final match against Seton Hill to advance to the finals. “The toughest thing is performing in front of people. It makes it a lot more difficult to decide whether to take risks. Sometimes we knew the answers, but we didn’t know whether to take the risk ... the questions run a pretty full gamut, from stuff so simple you don’t even think about it to things you’ve never heard of.”

Agreen, a psychology major, said he doesn’t have a job lined up yet. “I hope if we win this I can add it to my resume,” he said. “It’s a nice way to prove you’re committed and know what you’re doing.”

For the finals, Penn State and Cornell drew their questions from a grid projected on a big screen. Initial categories were Leadership, Global Human Resource Management, Bargaining Concepts, Organizational Structure and Compensation. Maybe it was nerves, but a lot of questions in the first round were not answered by either team. When questions were answered, Penn State leapt out to a big lead in the early going, with Cornell making a comeback near the end. During the second round — categories were Health, Safety and Security, Legal, Job Evaluation, Starts with B, and Diversity — the dynamic was reversed, with Cornell taking the early lead.

Sometimes the crowd would offer an “oooooh” of recognition or a groan at a particularly tough question.

When it was all over, Penn State had eked out a narrow victory, 6,400 to 6,000.

Event organizers had planned to present the team awards at a dinner to be held after the final competition. But the Penn State students were looking at a seven-hour drive back to their campus, and wanted to get on the road. So they got their recognition on the spot.

“We were all nervous,” said Jordan Luft, 21, a senior at Penn State. “We were not expecting to make to the finals, being in front of all these people”

Luft, who studied labor and employment relations, said she will be working in human relations for Lockheed Martin after graduation.

The games were part of the Northeast Regional Student Conference sponsored by the Society for Human Resource Management. About 270 people, including team members and faculty advisers — some schools, among them Penn State, sent more than one team — attended the conference. An affiliate of the society, the Human Resource Certification Institute, administers the PHR test. Besides the HR Games themselves, the conference included career counseling sessions, lectures, and a panel discussion.

Some of the other colleges at the HR Games included New York University, Northeastern University, Suffolk University and the University of New Haven. There were students from Rhode Island College attending, although the school did not field a team in the games.

Susan Post, Northeast regional director for SHRM, said the PHR test assures employers that those who pass are familiar with the increasingly complex body of knowledge in the human resource field — areas such as health benefits, safety, anti-discrimination laws, job evaluation, and much more. “By design, it’s a difficult test,” she said.

Post said human resources is a growing field, as more and more companies find the need for people who can handle the diverse issues of the workplace. “It’s a very complex business,” she said. “You not only need to understand the human relations stuff, but also the nature of the organization you’re working for.”

But according to a SHRM survey of human resources professionals, nearly half — 48 percent — felt their departments were not valued by their organization and/or senior management. Post said SHRM is working to get more recognition for human resources from what she calls “the C suite” where the corporate leaders work. The name comes from executive acronyms such as CEO (chief executive officer) COO (chief operating officer) and so forth.

David Greenan, a lecturer in Bryant’s College of Business, is chapter adviser for the SHRM at Bryant, which has about 50 members. He said the school sent representatives to last year’s HR Games, at Rutgers University, and was impressed with the event. “It’s a great chance to network and learn,” he said. So when SHRM put out word it was looking for a site for this year’s games, Bryant applied.

Greenan said that having the HR Games at Bryant was an opportunity to showcase the school to the HR community, from its facilities to the spirit of Bryant students. “It’s a chance to network with other people, to see and hear first-hand what’s going on in the field. I think there’s a resurgence of interest in HR, both here at Bryant and around the country.”

Bryant had two teams in the competition; it placed 10th and 15th out of the 24 teams who competed. Greenan said Bryant’s team is already training for next year’s HR Games.

Lauren Poniatoski, president of Bryant’s SHRM chapter and Ashley Bingham, HR Games chairperson, were too busy with their hosting responsibilities to be on Bryant’s team. “This is great for Bryant ... a great learning experience, a great networking experience,” said Bingham, a 20-year-old junior from Nashua, N.H.

Michelle Morrison, a 21-year-old senior, was competing for Shippensburg University in Shippensburg, Pa. She’s also treasurer of Shippensburg’s SHRM chapter. She said her team was a little shaky in the morning but did better during the afternoon. “The whole experience is great,” she said. “Talking to other people, seeing people from other schools.” Morrison said that after graduation she will be working in human resources for an electronics company called Vectron International.

Vicki Taylor, associate professor of human resource, labor relations, and labor law at Shippensburg, and adviser to the SHRM chapter, said attending the HR games at Bryant is good for Shippensburg’s students for several reasons. It helps them prepare for the PHR certification, of course, but also raises the visibility of Shippensburg’s program and exposes students to other students, faculty members and HR professionals, making it a great opportunity to make job contacts.

She said the employment outlook for human resource students is good.

“Our profession is gaining respect it hadn’t had before,” she said. “We serve as the link between management and employees.... For those companies who say that our employees are our competitive advantage, then HR is the key to doing that.”

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