

Marshall Case Team Takes Trophy at Third International Competition Undergraduate Win at McGill Creates a Three-Competition Achievement

by Mike Martinez

In what is believed to be an unprecedented achievement by any national or international business school, USC Marshall School of Business won its third international strategy case competition this academic year held Saturday at McGill University in Montreal.

Earlier, Marshall [undergraduates](#) won two other international strategy contests in Singapore and Copenhagen. "This is unprecedented for any school," said Professor Michael Coombs, a faculty advisor to the Marshall Case Team and associate professor of clinical management and organization. "It indicates the breadth and depth of the preparation these dedicated students make to reach this level -- truly world class performances."



Assistant Professor of Clinical Management Communication and team escort Yolanda Kirk with McGill-winning case team Seiyonne Suriyakumar ('10) Xiaolin Gong ('10), Jeff Hassan ('09) and Pradyumna Kejriwal('10).

Professor Donna Miles, the other faculty advisor to the Marshall Case Team adds, "Win or lose, this experience is invaluable in the all-important job hunt. It makes them a very attractive candidate to prospective employers."

A Marshall student on the winning team at Copenhagen agreed. "I think it was an important factor in landing my first job, and I know a friend who graduated last year who felt the same way," said Craig Schleicher ('09), who has also competed in three other case competitions. After graduation he'll be heading to the consulting practice of PriceWaterhouse Coopers.

At the more than nine competitions the students compete in annually a team of four students analyze a complex business case and present their recommendations to a panel of judges from both the corporate and academic worlds.

Students on the winning team in Montreal were Xiaolin Gong ('10), Jeff Hassan ('09), Pradyumna Kejriwal('10), and Seiyonne Suriyakumar ('10). Yolanda Kirk, assistant professor of clinical management communication, who escorted the team said, "USC was pegged as the leading team from the start. This is truly USC's year."

Case competitions are fierce academic combat. Some of them are specialized in such areas as marketing, advertising, real estate, ethics and accounting. But it's the international competitions devoted to global strategy that are especially challenging. The Singapore competition last October was such an event, and the winning Marshall team was Suzy Ryoo ('09), Michael Cochran ('09), Noah Auerhahn ('09) and Shaun Sakhrani ('10).

"I tell students to consider the case as if it's their own business," said Naomi Warren, associate professor of clinical management communication who escorted the Marshall team that won the Copenhagen Business School Case Competition in February, Europe's largest academic business contest.

Local media in Copenhagen described the team, including Schleicher, Justin Saks ('09), Emma Browne ('09) and Shreya Oswal ('10), as "the conquering Californians."

To make a team, students typically take a course called "The Art of Case Analysis and Persuasive Presentation," team-taught by Miles and Coombs. Each semester as many as 40 students spend 15 to 20 hours each week training

with faculty from different business disciplines across Marshall to compete in these events.

Marshall is so involved in these rigorous tournaments that it even hosts the largest and most prestigious case competition every year, inviting 30 other schools to participate, usually 15 of them from outside the United States.

Held since 1997, the [Marshall International Case Competition](#) lasts five days, allowing time for students to acclimatize to a new time zone and explore their surroundings, said Guillermina Molina, director of undergraduate student services and one of the chief organizers of the event. "Other international competitions usually involve only eight to 12 schools competing over three days," said Sean O'Connell, associate director of undergraduate student services, who oversees the logistics of the week-long event.

In greeting an assembly of more than 100 students and their advisors before that event, James Ellis, the dean of Marshall, reminded participants of the purpose of the gathering: to think big and beyond home borders.

"You really have to understand how the globe works," Ellis told them. "It's great to have you all here because you're now all in the same time zone....Someone has to come out the winner, but you're all winners by virtue of being here."

To highlight the intensity of the challenge, 70 students served as volunteer hosts and wore black t-shirts with a palm-tree-lined logo evoking the TV show "Survivor." Its legend declared: "Only the strong survive."

Events like the Marshall competition become one of the most memorable experiences in a Marshall student's education, providing students with an opportunity to network globally and gain real-world experience.

"It's real-life, as if you're working for a firm as a professional consultant," said Coombs.

As an example of how the competitions use practical scenarios, the Marshall case contest required students to address an issue now facing the Nestlé USA company: how do you sell Nestlé's candies in a market more concerned about health and wellness? Nestlé USA is now considering such a strategy.

The situation was so real life that two Nestlé marketing managers, Daniel Jhung and Nichole Fisher (MBA '01), who judged the final round, said they just might steal some of the students' ideas.

Added Jhung, who was the real-life manager facing the quandary, "That's the whole idea."

About USC Marshall School of Business

Based in Los Angeles at the University of Southern California, at the crossroads of the Pacific Rim, the USC Marshall School is the best place to learn the art and science of business. The school's programs serve nearly 5,000 undergraduate, graduate, professional and executive-education students, who attend classes in facilities at the main Los Angeles campus, as well as satellite facilities in Irvine and San Diego. USC Marshall also operates a Global MBA program in conjunction with Jiao Tong University in Shanghai, China.