

## **DECA Dimensions**

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### **CAN YOU HANDLE THE CHALLENGE?**

What could be cooler than running your own business? How about winning a \$1,500 cash prize and international recognition for running your own business? That's just the beginning of what's possible when you enter the DECA Virtual Business Challenge.

If you've ever seen the game SimCity, you know the appeal of the VBC: it's you and your teammates controlling the operations of a retail store that exists on your computer. The VBC was dreamed up in late 1999 when DECA's executive director, Dr. Edward Davis, met with the technogurus at Knowledge Matters. The goal was to use the company's ability to develop highly visual computer simulations for a DECA competition that members would participate in over the Internet.

The result was a huge success when it debuted a few months later – teams from 33 states participated at the DECA National Career Development Conference in Louisville, Kentucky. Over 1,000 teams signed up for the first full year of competition in 2000-2001, and this year, some 3,200 teams from 48 states are in on the challenge.

So what exactly will they be doing? Not much – just controlling an entire store from top to bottom. As with all DECA competitions, marketing skills are important; you and your team have to plan what to sell and how much to sell it for, research the market and decide how to promote your products. But the VBC goes even further, dealing with all the other day-to-day realities of running a business, including managing staff, controlling inventory and keeping an eye on finances. Ryan Heath, Evan O'Neill and Jason Szwarc (Team Sting) from Manchester Essex Regional High School in Manchester, Massachusetts, have some advice they learned on their way to a second-place international finish in 2001: "Deal with your frustration, because there are a lot of different aspects of the game that you think you have figured out and you have not. It is just like life ... just because you have merchandising figured out, it does not mean you have staffing figured out."

There is a learning curve, and last year's international winners, Matt Calabro and Patrick Corey (Team VSD) of Irondequoit High School in Rochester, New York, spent about 40 minutes a day in school working on the monthly challenges, followed by another hour at home. "I would recommend this competition to other students who are interested in business," Matt says "and those who want to earn some extra money, but there is a lot of time that must be committed. The competition is going to be tough next year ... but I find that it was all worth it, whether we won or not."

But what if you don't win? All right, the top teams walk off with stuff like cash and plaques and get their names plastered on the Web and their picture in the paper. And winners of the monthly rounds get stuff like cash and free software, too. But what about the other 3,085 teams? What do they get?

Last year's competitors can answer that best:

"It basically gives you an opportunity to learn about every aspect of the business world ... you can learn what it means to have a business and to be able to make it prosper."

"This is a great opportunity for everyone who doesn't have the ability to speak in front of a judge or take a written test to have the DECA experience...."

"My friend and I were in financing and some of the orals I have had were about staffing or keeping certain banks open. Most of the time I would think about what I did in VBC to keep certain stores open and successful."

"Being in food marketing, it has helped me because I have had questions on written events asking about what the aspect of merchandising is. I say to myself that I have done this through VBC: I know this one."

"Now I know a lot more. I know product placement. I know production...."

"It's a lot of work but it is a lot of fun."

"Do not ever give up, because once you figure it out, it is going to be a blast."

Andrew Worthington, director of sales for Knowledge Matters, was at the 2001 DECA ICDC and saw DECA members in action during the final rounds. "The teams were fantastic," he says. "They showed us that they mastered the skills of running their own business. They handled the pressure of competition while maximizing their profits."

Now that is praise that any business owner would love to hear.