

Preparation for Defense Q & A

We asked MESM graduates for tips on surviving and preparing for the defense Q&A. Here's what they said:

My suggestion would be to first recognize that they may not have the perfect answer to every question. Other than that, I suggest they take a big step back and try and think about the project from outside their group. Perhaps role playing by trying to explain the process/project from soup to nuts to another person (even someone within their group) would be a good exercise to simply practice explanations. That should cover the "what did you do?" questions. It's much more challenging to cover the "what will you do?" or "why didn't you do?" questions. My suggestion is to make sure that **the group is organized based on categories of knowledge base. Have one point person for questions and a system where someone from the group can contribute to the answer without having to interrupt or talk over a colleague.** Last point: **Don't be afraid to give an answer.** Although they may not feel like it, they are the smartest people in the room with respect to this particular subject.

Matthew Riley, Bren MESM 2004

Infinity Wind Power

I would tell students to expect to get both questions that will make them look smart (i.e., give them an opportunity to talk about research details they didn't have time to include in the presentation) and questions that will make them look not-so-smart. The former are easy--everyone in the group should be intimately familiar with the project. Here are my suggestions to prepare for the latter: Often it's obvious which group member would be best suited to answer a certain question, but be prepared to deal with a question that isn't easily assigned--don't all talk at once, but don't go for the long awkward silence either.

Expect to get a question to which none of you will have an answer (the "why didn't we think of that" question). Be prepared with some potential responses (e.g., "time constraints didn't allow us to look into that" or "that's a great question—we'll look into that as we finish up our research"). Perhaps identify which group member is most skilled at thinking on the fly.

As far as preparing for the presentation in general – **practice, practice, practice.** Practice out loud. Practice together. Critique each other and give each other tips--find out ahead of time if you tend to wave the laser pointer wildly or hit the keyboard a little too hard when you're advancing the slides, or if you could explain something a little more clearly.

Aubrey Spilde, Bren MESM 2007

Santa Barbara County Association of Governments (SBCAG)

Something that was really helpful for our group was to **prepare a list of questions** that we thought our committee might ask us. We split up the project into topics. All questions relating to our carbon footprint calculations would be assigned to two people, all questions related to our competitor's analysis would

be taken by two people, etc. So, we had coverage by two team members for each topic (because you never know which specific questions you will get).

I think **reviewers tend to ask a lot about assumptions**. I think each group should make sure that it clearly states all assumptions used in calculations, models, or mapping. If you know there is a weaker part of your project, make sure you brainstorm questions related to that part. Also, once you know who your reviewers are, you may think about their areas of expertise and what questions they are likely to ask. For example, Charlie Kolstad will be more likely to ask about economic models and benefits than Arturo Keller.

Finally, it is really useful to **pair up with another group to have them watch your presentation**. Other groups will likely come up with several questions, especially if they are in a slightly different area of expertise. I think the main point is that the students need to be as clear as possible. If any portion of the project is unclear, it is vulnerable for more questions.

Kathleen Kokosinski, Bren MESM 2009

Clipper Windpower

During the defense and public presentation, **we used a green/red card system**. Each of us had a square of paper in front of us; one side was red, the other green. The cards were set on the table with the red side facing up. If a faculty member or individual from the audience asked a question that we were prepared to respond to, we flipped our card to green. This acted as a sign to the other team members that this person was going to take the lead. If an individual had something to add after hearing the first response, they would turn their card to green BEFORE the first person stopped speaking, so that the first person could **perform a "warm hand-off"** to the second...something like, "Kate (the 2nd person) can expand on this information." We were warned that we should NOT attempt to each answer every question, as this often invalidated the first response. Therefore, we generally capped our responses to just two.

Lara Polansky, Bren MESM 2009

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