

More than a GAME

By Rebecca Tavernini '11 MA

New frontiers for NMU are being explored through a strategy that's been a staple in military and government planning, but a first in a university setting. Game theory may sound like something requiring an Xbox and nimble fingers, but in fact is a thoughtful conversational procedure used to analyze a theoretical or competitive situation—or “game.” In it, participants work to identify the players in a current or future situation and their possible actions and reactions, addressing the “what ifs” and “then whats.”

Ron St. Martin '63 BA has been doing just this since 1979, drawing on a career with the U.S. Navy, and positions with the National Security Council, U.S. Defense Secretary and Northrop Grumman. He is currently a senior consultant for Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC), working in the Center for Gaming Excellence, which helps government clients identify and manage change in the national security policy environment.

“It is basically helping to devise a go-forward strategy shaped around what problems a customer is having,” says St. Martin, who was on campus in late January with two members of his staff of 16 to conduct a gaming session to identify ways that NMU can increase its international student enrollment by 25 percent for each of the next three years.

While St. Martin has designed and directed hundreds of gaming sessions for government agencies and major corporations, he says, “I have not heard of or participated in any at a university. It was masterful for David [Haynes] to say ‘let’s do a game on this.’”

At NMU, teams worked to identify the top six countries that the university should target and articulate effective recruitment and marketing strategies. Twenty-nine invitees participated in the session, which included international students, faculty and staff, the Marquette city manager, a city commissioner, eight alumni and others from around the country, many who traveled a great distance at their own expense. “The variety of people who took part made for a great experience,” says Brittany Andrews, who along with St. Martin’s other staff assistant

on this trip, Justin Guiffre, was charged with not only keeping the gaming dialog on track in the breakout sessions, but also building a brief in real time for use at the following plenary discussion. “When you get a group of smart people together you can’t help but have a great outcome,” adds Andrews.

Guiffre explains that most of their sessions provide insights of a probable future. Such as one they did the previous week for NATO to determine if the alliance would hold up over the next five years (it was determined that it is sustainable), or one they had done on the eve of the Arab Spring, which suggested that the government of Syria would fall in three to four years. “More often than not, the way ahead that’s articulated in these sessions occurs,” says St. Martin.

“Unfortunately, what that is is almost always a crisis. Even so, talking about it in advance helps prepare for what’s happening.”

The session at Northern, however, was more for strategy. “It gives you insights, but not the final answers,” says Guiffre.

“The go-forward strategy is often different than you think it will be,” says St. Martin, adding

that many participants take with them new perspectives and a more open mind that is helpful in other endeavors.

This session was a learning experience for St. Martin’s team as well. “I got out of it the sense of community that’s so evident on this campus,” Andrews says. That’s something they don’t often encounter.

“Ron made a huge donation of time and expertise to help us get more international students,” says NMU President David Haynes. “It started a dialog and brought consensus on how to prioritize our international programs and determine where we’re going—for strategic reasons.

“I am always amazed by the talent of our alumni,” says Haynes. “And by how they’re so willing to give back to Northern and keep us moving forward.”

Work continues on the details of the plan crystallized during the session. And St. Martin has promised to return to conduct more games to lead NMU into a clearly envisioned future. ■



Ron St. Martin, center, flanked by game strategists Justin Guiffre and Brittany Andrews