United we stand; divided we fall.”
“Together we shall achieve victory.”
“All for one, one for all, that is our device.”

Patriots fighting the American Revolution, Dwight David Eisenhower speaking to the American people on D-Day and Alexandre Dumas’ three musketeers swearing their allegiance all give voice to the same idea: Those who cooperate to achieve a clearly defined common goal stand a much better chance of achieving it than those who compete.

The integrated Master of Business Administration Program, launched in fall 1994, brings that concept off the battlefield, out of the world of fiction and into the reality of business in the 1990s. Entrepreneurship risked venturing to the forefront of business education ideology in the early ’80s, and leadership led the late ’80s. When the 60 or so new MBA students sign up for the two-year full-time program that will lead them into successful careers in the ’90s, they learn that teamwork, not just coursework, is the new name of the game.

“In our program, students are now placed in teams before classes begin, and they go from class to class with that same team all semester,” explains Alice Watkins, associate director of graduate programs and the person primarily responsible for the day-to-day administering of the MBA. “They have no choice in their classes. As is true in law school and medical school, students take all the same classes the first year, which is why this is called a lock-step program.

“At the beginning of the second semester, the students join new teams in which they stay until the end of the first year. When we assign the teams, we try for a broad range of backgrounds so they can draw from one another. If one of the group is a marketing major and a marketing-based project is due, this person may well assume the lead on that project. They learn to work together as a team, to draw from one another’s strengths and to cope with one another’s weaknesses.”

The lock-steppers, as the first-year students are called, have a chance to become accustomed to this new way of being a student.

In the spirit of international cooperation, Valery Gyourdiev, left, from Bulgaria, Fengchun Wu, from China, and Oklahomans Varand Chamras and Lyndell Byrd entrust teammate Aurora Ash to their boat-making skills.

Today’s MBA

An intense new graduate curriculum proves to OU business students that the team that hangs together succeeds together.

BY KATHRYN JENSON WHITE
during Prelude Week, a required five-day training camp for the rookie MBAs that precedes the fall semester. In Prelude, they are assigned to a team, given tools to help them succeed and warned of the demands of their undertaking.

Watkins remembers that when the program began, the level of difficulty and sheer volume of work required of the students left many of them reeling.

"The first year we didn't warn them enough in our recruiting because we didn't know how taxing it was going to be," she says. "So about the second week, they started coming into my office in tears. I gave them tissues, and they told me, 'This is just too hard.' I thought, 'We've created a monster!' I went straight to the dean and said, 'We're in trouble.' He looked up from his computer, said, 'That's the best news I've heard all day,' and turned back to the screen. I had to come back downstairs and say, 'Whoops.' We try to better prepare them in the Prelude Week now. And they have this office to come cry in, so they can have a tough program."

"Tough is only one of the words students use to describe the MBA experience."

Joseph Pilov, a first-year student from Bulgaria who came to the United States in August, says he likes what he has seen so far of OU and Oklahoma but knows this first year will be a challenge.

"My No. 1 impression is that this is very difficult," he says. "They make us work a lot, which I guess is the idea. They are trying to make this a nationally competitive program, so the standards must be high. Both the level of work and the amount of it are difficult. I have an undergraduate degree in business from the American University in Bulgaria, so I can handle most of the course content, but the amount of work is very high. I'm working on it."

Pilov's undergraduate program included team projects, but the semester-long team experience is quite different. He says that after the first week of classes, his team members were already interdependent and striving to do their best for one another.

"We encourage them to help one another," says MBA Director Nim Razook, who stepped into that position in August. "The team concept is so interwoven in the Prelude Week that the cooperation norm becomes part of the way
they do business. They have to cooperate. They have to work together to succeed. Here and in their courses we emphasize teamwork, but we don’t answer all their difficulties. Talk to the lock-step students, and they’ll say that first year is hell.”

They do say that, but not exactly as a complaint. They say it with a kind of pride. Those who have made it through the first year look back at their accomplishments with awe. They all say the orientation week that precedes that first year deserves some credit for their successes.

“Prelude gets you into the mode of knowing that every week during the year there’s just a whole lot to do,” says Candace Gethoefer, who is earning her MBA simultaneously with a juris doctor in a four-year program. “It’s a long week, but it gets you into the rhythm you need for success. Prelude was great for my group. We hung out on weekends, had lunch together, called each other for help outside of class. We were awesome.

“Our grades were all higher than they would have been individually. I was a math undergraduate, so I contributed a lot to our quantitative business analysis class. However, I had never had finance, so our finance undergrad really helped me.

“It’s a bartering system. We swapped out intellectual value.”

Gethoefer began her first year of law school in fall 1993 and her first year of the MBA in fall 1994. She is now in the final year of her combined program. Law students are fiercely competitive, she says, and for that reason she did not like the first-year experience in the law school. She admits that her “awesome” MBA team became less successful by the end of the semester as a result of differences within the group, but even that aspect of the experience was part of the learning process.

“The more I became involved in the MBA program and the more I studied the way the world really works, the more the team concept became important,” she says.

Several students earning a combined law degree and MBA reversed Gethoefer’s approach by taking the first MBA year before the first law school year. Those students, she says, did better than other first-year law students because they formed study groups and worked together on their classes. One of the women was No. 3 in her first-year law class, Gethoefer says.

Gethoefer’s first group was named the Prelude Week’s No. 1 team. Its achievements culminated in the capstone experience of the week: a boat race in the Murray Case Sells Swim Complex pool. Watkins explains that on the last day of the Prelude, each team receives a kit containing a large, cardboard flat, tape and other minimal supplies from which to fashion a poolworthy boat that will sail from one side of the concrete pond to the other. The team arriving first at its destination wins. Given that some never arrive at all, winning is a true accomplishment.

“The boat race was a definite high,” Gethoefer says. “It’s the ultimate test of how well you’re performing as a team—and it’s also fun. We were the only team that thought to fasten a rope to the boat. We took six plies of masking tape and twisted it to make a rope. We then pulled our boat, made from a cardboard box, rather than pushing it. One of my teammates wrapped the rope around his body and took off running through the water.”

The spirit of cooperation that such experiences engender is one that future employers clearly seek in their new hires.

“I talk about the lock-step program and the team concept in my interviews, and the employers seem to eat it up,” says second-year student John James. “They all said they do a lot of things in teams and that they know people who...
haven't had practice at working in that way can't perform as well.

"The team helps when the going gets tough. Sometimes you're so tired and giddy from working so hard and long that you have a ball when you're working together. Everyone is just barely holding on.

"It gets to be where you say, 'Man, I can't do any more work. I can't study any more. I'm at the end of my rope.' Then, they lay something else on you. The group helps."

In addition to Watkins and Razook, the team that manages the teams includes MBA coordinator Julie Knudsen and graduate business programs secretary Lisa Tullius. Razook credits former Dean Robert Lusch, now a faculty member in marketing and accounting, with heading the committee that defined the new curriculum. He praises current Dean and Fred E. Brown Chair Richard A. Cosier for the support necessary to the success of the program, which is once again ranked in the top quartile of U.S. News & World Report's "America's Best Graduate Schools" survey. The program ranked second in the former Big Eight Conference and now fourth in the new Big Twelve Conference.

Razook also points out that the teamwork concept does not end with the students and administrators. According to Razook, the MBA faculty has worked to overcome traditional concepts of academic turf to achieve truly integrated courses for the students. The MBA faculty meets routinely to discuss the program and adapt the curriculum as each new group of students expresses itself on the positive and negative aspects of its experience.

"To really have an integrated program, we have to think about it all the time," Razook says. "An integrated program demonstrates to the students that they have to think across functional lines. They can't think just about accounting or finance. They have to think about what the interrelationships are. They have to know that accounting is the language of business, that finance to some extent measures the effectiveness and value of a business, that there is an external environment called economics and law and ethics.

"The faculty gets together to talk about what we're doing to be sure it all works together. We like to think that when they walk out of any individual class, they are looking beyond that discipline's own area. We can't just preach integration; we have to show it to them in action.

"Fran Ayers in accounting may talk about a case that involves a kind of bottom-line mentality, one in which a CEO worked a deal for $15 million in bonuses even though the company wasn't making any money. Fran talks about the accounting procedure and looks at profit and loss columns. When the students understand the accounting, I talk to them about the ethics involved in the behavior."

Razook says the major redesign of the program began about five years ago when the College of Business Administration saw its competitors changing. The University of Tennessee introduced a fully integrated program. Babson Business College followed suit. Around the country, all the major business schools were jumping into the concept. Many of those schools also provided an orientation period before classes began. All wanted to equip students to succeed and drill into them the importance of the concept of working together.

The CBA also decided to refocus its recruiting efforts.

"Talk to the lock-step students, and they'll say that first year is hell."
"The top 20 programs typically go after students with three to five years' experience," Watkins says. "We understood that if that was our goal, we would have a difficult time attracting students, so we decided we were going to go after the best undergraduates right after graduation."

Razook explains that the diversity of these top-of-the-line undergraduates helps define the program and its Prelude.

"Some of our students have undergraduate degrees in mathematics and engineering," he says. "Some have degrees in letters and haven't had a math course since, maybe, their freshman years. They're marvelous students, but the skills are very diverse. In Prelude, we offer a math camp. For a share of these students, it's essential. For others, it's such a yawner, we tell them they may skip it. One of the things we have to do is dispel their aversion to mathematical symbols. They see a summation sign, and they get crazy."

Also included in Prelude are computer camp, sessions on time and stress management, an overview of accounting as the language of business and the production of a book of short biographical sketches of all the lock-steppers and their team affiliations.

While all involved point to the team concept as a major aid to success in the MBA program and a necessary preparation for success upon graduation, not all the group experiences are positive. Gethoefer talks about the different levels of commitment in her first group and the negative impact that had on the group's ability to function. Learning the pitfalls of working in assigned groups seems to be just as important as the benefits.

"Academically, the classes are all challenging," says second-year student Stephanie Doughty. "However, the first year was probably one of the best of my life. I've met some of my best friends and gotten a real sense of accomplishment." My highest moments have come from the closeness the group experiences. In this, we're a community."

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"The low moments of the experience have all been group-related, though. My lowest moments have all come from finding out a member of my team let us down by not performing his or her particular task, from discovering at the last moment that a project wasn't done properly or that it wasn't done at all. "My highest moments have come from the closeness the group experiences. As an undergraduate, I found it tough to meet people. In this, we're a community."

One of the best-known books on the MBA experience is titled Snapshots from Hell: The Making of an MBA. Author Peter Robinson begins the story of his experiences at Stanford Business School with a reference to Dante's Inferno, quoting from the canto in which the poet looks up at the inscription over the gates of hell to read "Abandon All Hope, Ye Who Enter Here." That, Robinson says, is a fitting inscription over the doors leading to the MBA program.

After experiencing Prelude and the intense support system created by the administration, faculty, staff and team concept, students understand that the MBA experience can be difficult without being hopeless. When they move into the second year, Watkins says, they choose their own courses, lose the assigned semester-long groups and resume working at part-time jobs, but they continue to work together.

"We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately," So said Benjamin Franklin at the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Maybe that should be the inscription carved over the doors of Adams Hall. Hanging together, OU's MBA students manage to sidestep the metaphorical gallows of graduate school and lock-step themselves into successful careers in business.