

Pamplin EMBA program Changing executives into corporate gold

“What you are committing to for the rest of your lives, is a change of lifestyle...a change of perspective,” Steven Markham, Diggs Professor of Entrepreneurship told a group of 24 executives one Saturday morning in January. “I’m going to convince you that a team is good and can be very positive,” he had told them earlier.

His listeners ranging in age between 30 and 60, with backgrounds as diverse as Chinese, architecture, law, engineering, and horticulture, comprised the second cohort in Virginia Tech’s Executive MBA (EMBA) program in the Nation’s Capital Region. Each student had committed to spend every other weekend for the next 18 months, plus \$54,000 in tuition for the opportunity to earn an MBA while balancing jobs and personal lives. Some in the audience had mentioned concern about picking up studies after a 20+-year hiatus, others posted concerns about working in teams.

Markham spoke strongly, but without exaggeration, of the experience of the first cohort who entered the program a full year earlier is considered. With a third of their program still ahead of them, members of the inaugural cohort described a change in perspective from doing a great job to understanding the bigger issues in an organization. They spoke of growing more thoughtful and considering more variables; they praised the effectiveness of strong teams and a team-based learning environment.

“I look at things differently,” said Mark Edwards, regional sales manager for Pinnacle Financial Corporation. “Now I think of my business decisions more from the top down...Before, I was just trying to do my job extremely well, or I was thinking, what is the best way to do this job? Now, I ask myself, ‘how do I measure this? How does this affect the core capacity? How do I manage risk on this?’”

James Rodda, a manager of accounting for the Universal Service Administrative Company, agreed. “Now, I am asking myself ‘what is good for the company’ not just, ‘how do I do this well?’”

Dawn Levy, a manager with BearingPoint, described learning concepts and issues in business that she had not previously encountered. Lucy Mondale, a manager for a medical practice, commented how often her coursework correlates with issues at work. “Our small business encounters the same issues as large companies and now I know the terminology, [metrics], and tools,” she said.

The evening before Markham addressed the new cohort, the inaugural cohort met for seven hours, in two sessions. The first session was the final class meeting of a short course on Program Management and Project Leadership, taught by Barbara Hoopes, associate professor of Business Information Technology; the second, the final class of E-Business Innovation and Implementation, taught by EMBA Director Charles Jacobina.

Beginning with a session where teams reported on their evaluation of other teams' planning documents, the students were instantly engaged, and made insightful comments that were diplomatically delivered and well received in often humorous exchanges. Energetic discussions involved when to supply an executive summary or manual, contingency plans, how much to pressure a project team, how to manage those that work only under pressure and employees who fold under pressure. In a discussion of a firm using deadlines to manage productivity, a student offered, "That's one of my clients and here's some background...."

The class shifted quickly and purposefully between discussions, analyses, and team presentations. The classes were fast paced, and completely interactive, with students giving and taking from their own experiences. During presentations from outside organizations, if a student question was misunderstood, another student picked it up, collectively drawing out the answer that was needed.

"We are all here to get our money's worth," commented Levy when asked about the level of participation. "We are all grownups and ready to learn."

"The feedback we get from classmates is a big plus," said Anthony Moses, a consultant with Deloitte Touche.

"We have been together for so long, that we are very comfortable with each other," explained John Johnson, a delivery services engineer for RealOps, Inc. "We get to dish it out and we get to take it."

Robert Enright, a sales professional with Mercury Computer Systems, described the class atmosphere: "We are here to learn. The coursework is applicable to our work environment, and we benefit from the classroom interactions with other professionals who come from a variety of industries."

"The EMBA students are all very accomplished individuals who have been successful in business and academia," said Jacobina, the program director. "We encourage them to share their experience in the classroom and their depth of experience stimulates a lot of interaction and discussion...They learn so much when they are freely exposed to the experiences from other companies and different ways of thinking. In a program like this, the faculty member becomes a facilitator and a guide."

The EMBA provides a complete, accredited program in a compressed time, with six modules of four courses. Most of the learning is via case methods, with cases carefully selected to focus on high growth companies, globalization, and executive leadership issues.

Students take only two courses at a time, ranging from three to six meetings per course and typically spend their off weekends on their studies as well. Students describe the learning as project- and discussion-based, without the pressure of tests, but significant

pressure of “deliverables,” including papers, projects, and presentations. Enright estimated that in the first 12 months, they had already developed 50 papers.

The students admit to a “huge” workload, which is possible only by working in teams. The teams are assigned at the first session and do not change during the program. Teams are carefully matched to include a diversity of experience and a functional mesh of personality types. “We want to make them uncomfortable and expose the students to different ways of thinking and different skill sets,” Jacobina said.

Several students mentioned early misgivings after the first couple classes. “At first, I was all excited about coming and what I was going to learn. Then, after the first couple classes, I thought there was no way I would be able to do this,” said Rodda. As the teams gelled and began working together, he gained confidence, and “by November, we knew we would make it through,” he said. “I’m amazed how well the teams are put together.”

Edwards, who is on Rodda’s team, had a similar experience and thought early on he might have made a mistake. “It was so much work.” Like Rodda, he credited the team with making it possible. “We rely on each other for different expertise. We get such benefit from working together...and learn so much from the other students in the class.”

Lucy Mondale said, “I couldn’t have done this without the cohort and team structure... In the end, one of the things I’ll walk away with is the experience of the other people.”

Mike Blaine, director of aviation safety for Battelle and former helicopter pilot in the U.S. Marine Corps, summed it up, “This experience was painful, but effective. It’s hard to learn an entire course in six weeks, plus balance work responsibilities and family life.” A father of four, with high school children, he described missing children’s basketball games, and other family events. “Painful, but effective,” he repeated, then added perhaps the ultimate praise from a business executive: “We’re getting our money’s worth.”

After their initial four-hour session and first team effort, what did members of the second cohort say? “I thoroughly enjoyed the outside reading and the four hours we have had so far. This is put together and presented very professionally,” said Russ Adamchak, a business development director for Mercury Computer Systems, Inc.

“I enjoyed the exercises. This looks like a great team. I am impressed at the openness and energetic attitude,” commented Deane Edelman, a corporate real estate manager for Anteon Corp.

“The group felt good. We might not survive a crash in the Caribbean (a survival exercise the class completed), but we’ll survive this program,” said Susan Reardon, Executive Director of the American Foreign Service Association.