

## Field Lessons

By re-enacting a pivotal Civil War battle, EMBA students tap their potential for leadership.

**Fought between April 29 and May 3 in 1863, the Battle of Chancellorsville, Virginia, was a pivotal event of the American Civil War. Outnumbered, General Robert E. Lee and his 60,000 Confederate soldiers withstood the attack of Major General Joseph Hooker and 115,000 soldiers of the Army of the Potomac. Lee's troops won the battle, sending Hooker's army into retreat.**

For the last six years, William Miller and Randy Barker, professors at Virginia Commonwealth University's School of Business in Richmond, have made the Battle of Chancellorsville the basis of an annual daylong field trip that requires incoming EMBA students to examine the decisions Lee and Hooker made during the battle. "We send students immediately into issues of leadership, communication, and team building," says Barker.

Before the trip, which occurs in August before classes begin, students are divided into three teams: the North team wears blue; the South team wears gray; and the judging team, which will determine the winner of the afternoon's exercise, wears green. Students spend the morning taking bus and walking tours of battle sites with a guide from the National Park Service.

In the afternoon, the North and South teams use what they've learned to devise new strategies that they think would have resulted in better outcomes for their



Below: EMBA students listen as professors Randy Barker (second from right) and Bill Miller (far right) explain the rules of Chancellorsville, a leadership exercise at Virginia Commonwealth University.



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sides. At the end of the day, both sides make presentations about how they would have approached the battle, and judges declare one team the winner based on the strength of its strategy.

Different teams tackle the task in different ways, says Miller, executive director for the school's Fast Track EMBA program. Some work as large groups; others divide into smaller squads. Some question the generals' decisions, while others justify their actions. Often, Miller and Barker remove each team's leader midway through the afternoon, mirroring the loss Lee experienced when his second in command, Stonewall Jackson, was fatally injured during battle. This unexpected twist forces other students to step in to fill the leadership gap.

Before their first class, students complete a paper in which they reflect on their experience at Chancellorsville. In the end, students emerge with a better understanding of the leadership challenges Hooker and Lee faced—and their own leadership potential, says Barker. "Some learn how much to push their own leadership on the group, while others realize they shouldn't stand on the sidelines," he says.

Barker and Miller wanted to create an exercise that would utilize local resources, integrate course concepts, and provide students with an experience they could take back to their jobs. "With Chancellorsville," says Barker, "we're able to accomplish these objectives in a way that's fun, engaging, and enlightening." 