For centuries, new generations of military leaders have been trained by touring the fields of battles fought long ago. Today, a UNH-Manchester professor has teamed up with a program to develop business leaders the same way.

UNH-Manchester assistant business professor Jack McCarthy takes participants, usually senior managers at private corporations, to Gettysburg, Pa., the site of a pivotal battle in the Civil War, and also incorporates the battle into his classes. McCarthy believes the three-day battle in July 1863 offers lessons in decision-making that are strongly analogous to the corporate world.

The central concept, he says, is “decision-making under chaos and uncertainty. When you’ve had a bad day, when you need to make decisions with limited information, you try to put yourself in the shoes of someone who is under cannon fire. That sort of pressure is timeless.”

McCarthy’s module starts with a discussion of business strategy and leadership, followed by a visit to the battlefield, where participants view the positions that affected the battle’s outcome. He then compares the orders given to two new officers: Confederate Gen. Richard Ewell and Union Col. Joshua Chamberlain, a rhetoric professor from Maine.

On the first day of battle, Gen. Robert E. Lee ordered Ewell, who was replacing the slain Stonewall Jackson, to lead a charge and take Cemetery Hill “if practicable.” Ewell made gains against Union forces, but when his troops tired, he decided not to take the hill, telling Lee that it was “not practicable.” That decision eventually undermined Lee’s trust in his subordinates, leading to poor decisions later in the battle.

“Jackson would have understood Lee wanted him to take the hill,” says McCarthy. “Ewell was new, and afraid to mess up.”

By comparison, on the second day of battle, Chamberlain, with less than one year of leadership under his belt, was left with just one order: hold the flank at all peril. By the end of the day, Chamberlain’s troops were exhausted and their ammunition depleted. But, remembering his orders, Chamberlain ordered his men to charge, using their bayonets. The Confederates retreated, and Chamberlain’s regiment captured almost an entire brigade with empty guns.

“The lesson there is to understand the capabilities of those you put in executive positions, and be aware of your own communication patterns,” says McCarthy, who works with colleagues at Boston University’s Executive Leadership Center to offer the program. “To what extent did Lee realize he wasn’t speaking to Stonewall Jackson? To what extent did he realize he should have been clearer in his orders, and not assume that the other person would understand? When you look at Chamberlain, a senior executive looked him in the eye and said, ‘Here’s the deal, you will hold this ground.’ It speaks a lot to the way you work with junior executives.”

—Jeffrey Klineman
On a chilly November night, a pig roasts over a pit fire on the lawn outside Smith Hall, and a line of brightly colored flags ripple in the wind. Inside the international residence hall, the inviting earthy scents of ethnic cuisine encourage students to learn about the heritages of their dormmates.

The international food feast at Smith Hall is just one of a number of activities the dorm sponsors in conjunction with its theme of international living. And many other dormitories at UNH are catching on to the concept with themes of their own.

Themed living communities allow students to live in an environment that reflects their academic or extracurricular interests. Ruth Abelmann, associate director of residential life, says in the last few years the idea has taken off.

Hundreds of students across campus now opt to live in themed dorms. This year, some of the most popular themes at UNH are “Chem Free” at Engelhardt Hall, community service and involvement at Richardson House, “Living in Harmony” at Devine Hall, as well as international living at Smith Hall. Two new themes this year are “Scholars,” for students looking to live with others who are academically focused. Hall director David Wilmes says the goal of themed dorms is increased “satisfaction and success, with both their housing and UNH as a whole.” And he thinks it’s working.

Jeffrey Sturtevant ’06 can attest to that: a resident of science-and-engineering-themed Sackett House for almost two years, he says, “The best thing about living here is that you can get assistance with class work fairly easily, since the majority of the residents’ majors are in the science and engineering field.”

—Suzanne Klunk ’95