

The hand of friendship

Business schools are backing efforts by partners of MBA students to overcome isolation, writes Deborah Gardiner

In a conference room with plush couches well-dressed men and women greet each other and chat happily, eating the cakes and biscuits laid out on nearby tables.

This is the Tepper Partners Club's annual cookie swap and one of several functions volunteers organise throughout the year. The group was formed four years ago to help the partners or spouses of MBA students at the Tepper School of Business to settle in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania find jobs and make friends.

The Tepper group is not alone. With more partners relocating with their significant other when they accept a place on an MBA programme, most leading business schools now offer similar networks.

Roughly 40 per cent of MBA students are in a long-term relationship and relocate with their partners for the duration of the programme - a rise of 25 per cent from a decade ago, according to business schools. Most see setting up the groups as a wise and long-overdue move.

Mary Wilken, leader of the International Women's Club, a partner forum catering for Thunderbird, the Garvin School of International Management based in Arizona, says for many partners, business school is their first move from home.

"Some have their first baby here and while it is tough for Americans too, troubles are always multiplied for foreigners, who often can't work and don't understand the culture," Ms Wilken says.

"The club becomes important. It becomes a lifeline."

With such demand, partner clubs are becoming complex and organised affairs. Members receive daily e-mails alerting them of events and requests for babysitters, hairdressers, doctors or help with a newborn. Volunteers diligently create guidebooks on restaurants, bakeries, sports bars and schools. At Tepper, several partners update its guide each year. Websites and blogs can be elaborate too. The site for the partner group of McCombs School of Business in Austin, Texas, is named SAS (Student and Significant Other Network).

Many charge a joining fee from \$40-\$120 annually and appoint "leaders" each year. The Chicago Partners group has a fundraiser, treasurer, president and even a histo-



Holding on: although MBA partner groups are important in making links, tensions can arise when job competition heats up

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rian, named "The Voice", to keep a diary of events. Liberal schools cater for all types of partner, not just heterosexual and married ones. With Out4Biz, Stanford Graduate School of Business started the US's first group for the partners of gay and lesbian MBA students.

Activities can be fun and inventive. The Haas Partner Group at Haas School of Business, University of California at Berkeley, last year cycled across the Golden Gate Bridge in SOMph headwinds and this year will visit Yosemite national park, while SAS offers Divanight - a "chick-flick, chocolate and manicure night".

Many love all this and believe the friendships will last long after the MBA. Ms Wilken, from Thunderbird, says: "Partners often arrive feeling very fearful and hating it. But at the end the friendships and interests formed are incredible and they don't want to leave."

However, there can be some darker elements. Although well-intentioned, some groups can become cliquish and rather destructive.

And as the MBA studies and job searches and interviews become more competitive, tension can flow to the partner scene, making some

functions awkward, combative and intense. Part of this might reflect the competitive nature of the programme. Most spouses and partners are business professionals, driven and well educated.

Like the MBA students these partners perceive the job search as essential but also a race. By quizzing one another on their spouse's

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progress, partners can keep track of who has done what and whether their spouse needs to work harder or ease their search.

One Tepper partner works as a nurse and finds the incessant queries too much. "I am sure I would understand the job-hunt obsession better if I came from a business background," she muses.

The rest might be moti-

vated by plain fear. After all, notes Meredith Dunn, an SAS leader: "Both the partner and MBA have taken a huge gamble; left their jobs, home town and gone into debt. This is scary for all of us."

Another strain is the lack of male partners. Most MBA programmes are still male dominated and most spouses are therefore women. Male partners can feel out on a limb if they do not enjoy scrap-booking or cooking. Another recurring complaint is that foreign and US partners will not mix.

At SAS, organisers recently started events such as international dessert night to bring the groups together, although Ms Dunn says this can be difficult: "The foreign ladies think we Americans impose our culture on them but that we have no interest in theirs. It's a real shame and a perception we are trying to change."

Others just find the partner scene slightly fabricated and artificial. One woman who moved away for her own MBA study notes: "Bring 100-plus people of varying ages, backgrounds and personalities together with only one unifying bond: their loved one is getting an MBA. There are bound to be

disconnects and trouble." Consequently many join other activities away from the MBA scene, study or just busy themselves with work.

Even so some concerned partners are keen to improve things. As the appointed 2005 leader at Tepper, Scott Freeman wanted to make the group more open and less hierarchical.

Incorporating relationship counselling into the partner events, a move that failed the previous year, is being tried again and both Mr Freeman and Jaysen Gillespie, a leader for the Haas Partner Group, want more men in the scene.

Mr Gillespie has added events such as poker, golf and Giants baseball to help make men less self-conscious. Mr Freeman rallied more men who have jobs elsewhere to at least join the partner e-mailing list. "Female MBAs need their support too," he says.

However, most partners have positive experiences and say their groups are a solid way to bond with others in the same boat.

Ms Wilken says even the non-English speaking partners understand immediately. "We all need at least some friendship and support. It is a cross-cultural thing."