

Alexander the Great. That is what some of his former students have dubbed Alexander (Alex) Kondonassis, who this fall began his 45<sup>th</sup> year teaching at the University of Oklahoma.

The reference fits. Kondonassis is a David Ross Boyd and Regents' professor of economics. He was a Fulbright professor at the Athens School of Economics in his native Greece and a visiting professor at Oxford University in England. He has lectured in Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America, authored 80 books, monographs and articles and presented 85 major professional papers. He is a past chair of OU's Faculty Senate and has served on dozens of University committees and councils. He is listed in *Who's Who in America*, *Who's Who in the World* and the *Dictionary of International Biography*.

To his students, past and present—who include U.S. House of Representatives majority leader Dick Armey; Philip Wu, executive director of one of the largest banks in Hong Kong; Federal Reserve System vice president Bill Cullison; Pat Choate, Ross Perot's 1996 vice presidential running mate; Chen Sun, former president of the National Taiwan University and now the minister of technology for the Taiwanese government; and numerous professors, department chairs and college deans—Kondonassis is all that and more. Tade Okediji, assistant professor of economics at OU and one of Kondonassis' former doctoral students, sums it up this way: "He's a great mentor, a notable scholar, an outstanding teacher and a very caring individual."

Born in Athens, Kondonassis came to the United States on a four-year scholarship to DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana, where he earned a bachelor's degree. He earned master's and doctoral degrees from the University of Indiana in Bloomington, where he stayed on as a faculty member. But after two years, he received a letter from Paul Brinker, then chairman



Robert Taylor

After 45 years in academia, earning accolades worldwide, distinguished economics professor Alexander Kondonassis still gets excited every time he walks into a classroom.

**“He’s a great mentor, a notable scholar, an outstanding teacher and a very caring individual.”**

of OU's economics department. "OU had a vacancy, and he wanted to know whether I was interested. I came for an interview. I liked the people and the potential to expand the economic development programs," Kondonassis recalls. "The president at Indiana, Herman B. Wells, was an old family friend. He said, 'What do I hear about you going to Oklahoma? I know [then OU President] George Lynn Cross. If that's what you want, I'll write him a letter.' He wrote a very nice letter to President Cross. But he also said I could come back to Indiana in a few years if I wanted to."

That was 1958. Kondonassis assumed he would stay at OU two or three years. But in 1961, the 33-year-old assistant professor was named chairman of the Department of Economics. While he loved teaching, he also relished the opportunity to expand the department's faculty as well as its undergraduate and graduate course offerings. "When I became chairman, there were nine faculty. When

I stepped down 10 years later, there were 16. I had good chemistry with the dean, which helped," he says with a laugh. He again took the reins of the department from 1979 to 1986.

Of the 150 doctoral degrees conferred through the economics department since the Ph.D. program was created in the 1950s, Kondonassis has directed one-third. Okediji's was one of them. Even today, he relies upon Kondonassis' guidance and friendship.

"Dr. K. [another favored nickname with his students] has influenced me in so many ways," says Okediji. "He is a fine mentor who has always encouraged me in my intellectual pursuits. He has been influential in guiding my career, always looking out for my best interests. Above all, he is a great friend. I can always rely on him for advice as well as confide in him. And I consider it a tremendous honor to be teaching in the same department with him."

Another colleague and former student, A.G. Malliaris, W.F. Mullady Sr. Professor in the economics department of Loyola

University of Chicago, first met Kondonassis in 1966 when Kondonassis was a Fulbright lecturer in Athens and Malliaris was assigned to be his assistant. “After one year, he told me that if I wanted to pursue my advanced studies, I should consider applying to OU. I did, got an assistantship and stayed to finish my Ph.D.,” he remembers.

Malliaris chose Kondonassis, who returned to OU after the lectureship in Greece, as his dissertation adviser. “While he has a broad range of interests, Alex encourages students to grow and develop along the lines of their own interests.”

At the same time, Kondonassis, whom Malliaris calls “eclectic” and “multi-dimensional,” challenges students to question easy answers. “He believes in the complexity of issues and believes that simplistic answers are usually wrong,” Malliaris says.

Widely known for his work in the field of global economics, Kondonassis remains in great demand at conferences worldwide. He frequently trots the globe to lecture and present scholarly papers, sometimes mixing business with pleasure, most notably when he visits the land of his birth. His last visit to Greece was in December 2001, when he presented a paper at an international conference on the Balkans.

“I speak Greek when I’m there. It’s rusty at first, but it comes back within a couple of days,” he says. “But when I lecture or present a paper, I speak in English. It’s easier for everybody.”

His focus, however, is on teaching, both on OU’s Norman campus and in places as diverse as Fort Sill and Hong Kong, two of the half dozen sites in the United States and abroad at which OU offers an accelerated master’s degree in economics through the Advanced Program in Economics. In the program, which Kondonassis created in 1968 and continues to direct, he teaches Contemporary Economic Methods and Analysis, a course in macroeconomics (the study of the entire economy, as opposed to microeconomics, which examines certain aspects of the economy, such as demand, supply and costs).

To the undergraduate and graduate students in his World Development class on the Norman campus, he stresses how, economically speaking, the world is getting smaller. “Four-fifths of the world—made up of countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia—is less developed [than the remaining one-fifth],” Kondonassis explains. “In this course, we discuss the relationships and links between those countries and the economic giants—the United States, the European Union and Japan. Because the welfare of the giants now depends on the welfare of the poorer countries, they provide the less developed countries with technical expertise and foreign investment.”



Courtesy Tade Okediji

Ph.D. graduates he has mentored twice have organized academic conferences and come from all corners to honor “Dr. K.,” standing at right. Professors joining Kondonassis in April 2002 included Pat Sanderson from Mississippi State University, left, Abdul Turay from Western Carolina University, Luvonia Casperson from Louisiana State University in Shreveport and Tahany Nagar from West Chester University.

As he guides and mentors today’s students, Kondonassis stays in contact with many of his students from years past. In fact, he has been such a steady influence over the decades on Malliaris, Okediji and other former students that they have organized academic conferences to honor him, once in 1989, in conjunction with his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, and again last April. Many—including Wu, coming all the way from Hong Kong—made it a point to attend one or both of them.

As a precursor to last spring’s conference, the organizers persuaded Kondonassis to publish a book of 21 of his articles: *Economic Development and Economic Integration*. The book is divided into three components of his area of specialization: the economy of Greece, the economies of less developed countries and the economic integration of Europe.

“In academia, former students often give a conference to honor a professor who has reached a certain point in his or her career in order to recognize the professor’s contributions to the field,” explains Malliaris. “Alex is very special. His students organized conferences in his honor not once but twice, not only to recognize his contributions but also because we are grateful to him for unselfishly nurturing our own professional interests.”

Kondonassis’ reaction to the tributes is typically modest. “They said some good things,” he says. “As a professor, you don’t get paid a lot, but there are some fringe benefits. Conferences like these are one of them.”

At age 74, Kondonassis continues to teach, not because of the accolades and the recognition, although, he says, they are nice. He teaches because he loves it. “I still get excited when I walk into a classroom,” he says. “I’ll stop teaching when I don’t get that feeling anymore.”

That, his students say, is the essence of Dr. K.

—DEBRA LEVY MARTINELLI