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Professor uses humor to teach economics

By JENNIFER ANDREWS
Reveille Reporter

Word travels quickly among LSU students that the "teacher to take" for Economics 2010 and 2030 is John Vrooman.

Vrooman, with his rather stocky stature resulting from his college football days at Kansas State, acts more like a stand-up comedian than a college professor. Students tease him lightheartedly about his limited wardrobe, consisting of about two Polo shirts, one forest green and the other burgundy.

"I wear these because they're comfortable," he explained.

He also has a reputation for an unconventional teaching style.

"My colleagues have a hard time dealing with me," Vrooman said, "and they dismiss my success as popularity."

His awards for teaching from numerous states may suggest otherwise.

"I'm impressed that the students

universally think he's a great teacher," said W.P. Culbertson, a professor of economics.

"I was really nervous about taking economics during my freshman year," said Derek Leroux, now a junior at LSU. "When I took Economics 2010 with Vrooman, I started to really like it, because he made jokes and made it interesting. I'm a business major now and I think the main reason is that I got a good first impression of economics through him."

Vrooman incorporates humor and reality, which he attributes to his parents, into his lectures. His conservative father is an engineer in Texas and his politically outspoken mother is lovingly described by Vrooman as "a rebel."

He chose to teach economics because it combined his interests in both math and social science, qualities that he inherited from his parents.

When Vrooman was young, his father spoke intellectually, which

confused and embarrassed him. Because of his father, he uses humor and terms not found in a typical economics book.

"I teach the way I want to be taught," he said.

At the beginning of every class period, Vrooman greets his students by asking, "S'up? Howyadoin'?" with a Brooklyn accent. He often makes fun of sorority women and fraternity men, whom he refers to as "bowheads" and "capheads," respectively.

"I try to make people laugh so they don't sleep in class," he said.

"His cracks about bowheads were hilarious," said Tommie Milam, who had Vrooman for Economics 2010 last semester.

"He would spend the whole class period relating economic topics to things that affect your life as a college student, like the bars scene, instead of using a book. It was great and it helped me learn," Milam said.

Teaching came naturally for

Vrooman because he likes young people. He managed to avoid the draft during the Vietnam War because he was teaching inner-city kids in Oklahoma City. After teaching at the University of Texas as a graduate student, he taught at the University of Utah and at Colorado State.

Vrooman decided to teach at LSU because he did not like the people in Colorado, and he wanted to live closer to his mother, who resides in Texas.

"I missed the cultural differences, the ethnic mixes, and the Southern values."

Vrooman is concerned about the future of LSU students. "LSU does things that don't always have the student's best interest at heart. The tighter the budget crunch, the less important the student becomes," he said.

"Vrooman taught me a lot about economics," said Ryan Forbes, a senior. "I appreciated the fact that he treated us, the students, like

people and did not talk down to us like some teachers do."

"LSU students are better than they think they are," Vrooman said lovingly. Vrooman tries to give students self-confidence and encourages them to have their own identity and opinions.

"I try to teach them how to think, not what to think," he said.

Unlike many teachers, Vrooman does not prepare for class by making several sheets of notes from which to lecture. "I go to class with a few ideas and then I expand on those ideas. You can overprepare."

Vrooman is modest when complimented on his popularity, and attributes this popularity among students to the fact that he relates more with them than he does his colleagues. "I want the student to get economics," he said sincerely.

Vrooman's sense of humor is what makes him stand out as a teacher. He has a way of getting his point across to students, often when they least expect it.