

Profile

PROFILE: JOHN TAYLOR

As a stately professor or as a wrinkled California raisin,
he likes to court disaster in the classroom

By Kathleen O'Toole

To Stanford undergraduates, John Taylor normally looks and sounds the part of a former member of the President's Council of Economic Advisers and a man with Alan Greenspan's ear. On the stage of Kresge Auditorium, he stands high above the students, his broad shoulders fit precisely into a tailored dark suit. His thick, gray-black hair behaves as if it never met a wisp of wind, and his clear, rich voice booms explanations, in proper English sentences, for the red, blue and green line graphs projected on two screens behind him. But a few years from now, what these students will remember is the morning their stately professor morphed into a brown, wrinkled California raisin with six white stubs for fingers.

"I woke up this way this morning," he mumbles to the class, his misshapen hands fumbling to straighten his supply-demand curves on the overhead projector. "But the lecture must go on."

And on it goes at its usual pace until Kresge suddenly is jolted by a blast of bass guitar. The pudgy raisin on the stage, graph pointer still in hand, begins to wiggle, bend and shuffle to Marvin Gaye's voice blaring "Heard It Through the Grapevine." The lyrics miraculously replace the supply-demand curves on the overhead. By the time the raisin stumbles breathless, rumpled and sweaty through the last chorus, Kresge is rocking like Mem Aud on "Flicks" night.

Taylor, the author of the famed Taylor Rule that Wall Streeters and now even Main Streeters use to predict what the Fed will do about interest rates, is considered conservative in his economic philosophy. But the Mary and Robert Raymond Professor of Economics is willing to "court disaster," he says, to persuade students that economics is interesting and informative.

John Taylor

"What I hope they remember [from the raisin] is the lesson of the demand curve moving to the right, and in the case of raisins, as a result of government intervention," Taylor, black-suited and coiffed again, recently told a gathering of Stanford teachers. "What I am trying to do with these surprises is to make economics less abstract, more intuitive, more interesting and relevant for large lecture classes. I think of entertainment and education as closely related."

In a class of 650, he says, it is easy to appear unapproachable. Part of the message of his raisin performance is unspoken: "If I can do this in front of 650 people, you can ask a question."



Taylor routinely recruits his wife, Allyn, and his son, John, to help support him in his inspirational and off-beat teaching tactics.

Economics 1 was transformed last fall thanks to Taylor and Stanford's new emphasis on improving the classroom experiences of freshmen and sophomores. His raisin impersonation - patterned after a commercial that helped raise the consumer demand for raisins and reduce the government subsidy to grape growers - has been an annual treat for some time. But the course is undergoing a substantial overhaul with a three-year grant from the office of

Undergraduate Studies. In a university where the word "center" usually refers to research or extracurricular activities, Taylor proposed and received approval for a new "Economics 1 Center" devoted to improving the teaching of the beginning economics course taken by three out of five Stanford undergraduates. Under his leadership, the center has expanded the training, coordination and tools for a larger number of teaching assistants, and makes extensive use of the World Wide Web.

Taylor, 51, treats teaching Econ 1 as a mission. His aim is to make sure each student leaves with an understanding of the basic concepts that he wishes were grasped by all the politicians he has advised in Washington. Beginning economics is a tough subject, he says, because it is fraught with "little hurdles" - abstract ideas or simplified models of the real world - that are difficult for many students to grasp.

Taylor, the son of a Westinghouse engineer, took to math early in school but says economics baffled him at first. He didn't know whether he was supposed to take notes on the "techie" or "fuzzy" parts of lectures. Luckily, someone in high school had taught him a trick: Take notes on things you think unimportant at the time and label them WGAD - for "who gives a damn." Today, Taylor's *Economics* textbook incorporates WGADs - little boxes with examples, like the California raisin story, that illustrate each chapter's main concepts (his editors made him drop their irreverent designation).

For the second edition of *Economics* the publishers added a videotape of Taylor lecturing on key concepts. The publishers included colorful graphics developed by an animator and video clips of economic activities around the world to replace some of the WGADs he normally uses. The videotape supplements the book in Econ 1 courses all over the country, and viewers can see Taylor's facial expressions more clearly than those seated in the second row of the auditorium.

"The videotape does make you wonder about the future value of large lecture classes," he concedes. But he isn't ready to bolt for the movies. On stage, he can still surprise them, by overlaying three economic graphs on the projector to form the words "Beat Cal" just before the bell rings, or by planting his daughter, Jennifer, visiting from Princeton, in the audience and letting the students vote on whether to erect a "free trade barrier" and kick her out.

"Perhaps we'll have fewer live lectures in the future," he says, a tinge of sadness in his voice, "but I think it's inherently more exciting to be there."

Taylor's research career, in fact, has been focused on WGADs. His search for more systematic ways to analyze economic choices always has been driven by messy real-world questions about such things as recessions,