

Meet the Prof: Marianne Johnson

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The following faculty Q&A was submitted by the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh Faculty Advocacy Committee, a committee of the Faculty Senate. David Siemers, associate professor of political science, wrote the introduction.

I met Marianne Johnson on our first day on campus when we attended orientation together eight years ago. She is one of the most engaging, bright and pleasant people I know.

Marianne exemplifies what a professor should be: someone who cares deeply about students and does excellent and enlightening research in her field and who is willing to do her share to make this public asset, the state university, work.

Despite still being relatively new to the University, Marianne's excellence has been acknowledged by the awarding of an Oshkosh Truck Corporation endowed professorship. In these tough budgetary times, I worry that it is our best professors like Marianne who will be most likely to leave Oshkosh for a higher-paying job.

How did you find your way to UW Oshkosh?

I grew up in Minnesota and went to graduate school at Michigan State University. After that, I worked in Boston for two years. While it was a lot of fun, I really wanted to come back to the Midwest to be closer to my family. I am still a Red Sox fan, but I'm working on developing an appreciation for the Brewers.

Why did you choose to go into your field?

I took an economics class as a freshman and liked it, so I kept taking more classes. I like the logic of economics and the flexibility to study many different kinds of problems.

What is your favorite thing about UW Oshkosh?

My favorite thing about UW Oshkosh is the students. Most of them are hard-working and earnest and really want to get the most out of their education. I really enjoy watching them grow from freshmen or sophomores to seniors, seeing them become involved in campus activities and seeing what they do after graduation.

While most of our students come from the area, they go on to do the most amazing things — they join the Peace Corps; they go to work in Washington, D.C., Minneapolis, Los Angeles and Chicago; they go to graduate school and earn Ph.D.s in economics; they study international business in London or teach English in South Korea. And, of course, many stay here in the Fox Valley, becoming productive members in our own economy and great resources for current and future students.

What leadership or service activities are you involved in?

I spend a lot of time working with study abroad on campus, including developing new programs and advising students. I am currently working on finding more affordable options and raising scholarship money. I am also now doing some data analysis for the College of Business to figure out how we can continue to offer a high-quality education given the significant budget cuts. It is definitely a challenging project.

What is the most common misperception about what you do?

The most common misperception is that economists know about the stock market — is it going up? Going down? Should I invest? Sure, a few economists do study the stock market, but most leave that to people with financial specialties. Economists are more likely to study topics such as taxation or other government policies, international trade, healthcare or economic development.

What is the most exciting project you are working on right now?

I am working on a book about the impact Wisconsin economists had on the development of New Deal and post-WWII economic policies. It turns out that many of the policies they debated during the Great Depression aren't that different from policies being discussed today.

How does what you research help you to be an effective teacher?

My research keeps me active in my field and encourages me to keep up with current tools and techniques. I teach our research projects course called econometrics, where I help students develop their own statistical research project, collect data and analyze the data.

Keeping up on current econometrics research, like “Freakeconomics,” is really helpful because students pick all sorts of different projects. This past semester, I had students studying topics such as the relationship between unemployment and property crime, between unemployment and divorce, whether universal healthcare would lead to higher quality care, whether happiness is related to economic equality and whether small banks do better during recessions than large banks.

Describe some ways your department serves northeastern Wisconsin.

The economics department is very active in the community. Members of the department write columns for local and regional newspapers, do TV interviews and provide consulting services to local businesses. In addition, we house the Center for Economic Education, which helps Wisconsin K-12 teachers to develop economics curricula to better meet the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction standards.

Tell us about your family.

I've been married for almost 15 years; my husband is a professor in the mathematics department at UW Oshkosh. We are expecting twin girls — our first children — toward the end of the summer. We are looking forward to lots of visits from the grandparents and trips to Minneapolis so that our girls can play with

their cousins.

What are your hobbies?

I enjoy gardening and bicycling, but my favorite hobby is traveling. I really enjoy experiencing different cultures and different foods and just learning how things work in other parts of the world. I've been to about 50 countries on six continents, and I always come back with stories and experiences that I can use in the classroom. Sometimes, I'm lucky enough to be able combine travel with my job. I've taught economics in Estonia, Senegal and Peru — so far.

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