

Charles Plum sharing practical experience with students

By Kevin D. Higginbotham

He has been compared to everything from "your favorite uncle" to a "graphite engineer," but one impression stands clearly above the rest: Charles W. Plum is unique.

Plum, better known as Charlie or C. W. to many of his students, first came to Texas A&M University as a visiting professor three years ago as part of Standard Oil Company of Ohio's (Sohio) aid-to-education program.

As Sohio's vice president for accounting and management systems, Plum pioneered the company's Executive-in-Residence program. The program, part of Sohio's overall education program, allows upper-management personnel the opportunity to teach in their fields at a major university.

Plum says teaching has been his dream since high school. "I was going to be a math teacher," he said, trying to hide a grin, "but I gave that up when I flunked college calculus."

"I always had it in the back of my mind to leave Sohio and get into teaching," he said, "but I kept putting it off and putting it off."

Plum finally did leave Sohio and become a full-time professor at Texas A&M three semester ago.

Sohio's only request when Plum came here was that he teach a course which would bring him into contact with students other than just business majors.

As a result, Plum was given the duty of teaching Accounting 409, a course specifically designed for non-business majors.

Perhaps what sets Plum apart from many other professors is his knack for making a normally dull subject like accounting interesting to students who otherwise have no real interest in the material.

One way Plum helps students understand the material is to supply them with a series of handouts which cover his lectures and test material. The handouts, say most students, are much easier to understand than the text, and are given out free.

"I think it's good to have real-world examples, but you have to be careful in this situation," said the gray-haired Plum. "A war-story approach of telling students how you handled problems on the job is fine as a supplement, but the executive must teach a course based on the textbook."

Plum said many businessmen don't go into full-time teaching after retirement due to the "rigors of the schedule."

"Look," he said, waving his hands through the air, "I'm putting more hours in here than I ever did at Sohio. When a person gets to retirement age, many don't want to get into the discipline of teaching."

Another method the exuberant Plum uses to hold the interest of his students is to use himself as his own scapegoat. After stressing a contradictory point Plum will often say to the class, "Now you're probably saying, 'Wait a minute, C. W., that's not what you said last week,'" but then he will go on to explain how the newer method is better or more practical to use than the first.

Plum has what is best described as an "open door" policy when it comes to tutoring students having difficulty with the course. If he finds it necessary, Plum arranges for students to come to his home on weekends for study sessions.

Priscilla Pumphrey, Plum's graduate assistant, says it is his enthusiasm which makes him such a good teacher.

"He is so excited about teaching," said Pumphrey, "I think this excitement motivates the students' interest in the course." She also said that Plum's prior business background "adds more flair to the course," and enables him to relate to the real world what the students are studying.

"409 is his baby," said Pumphrey, who has worked with Plum since his arrival at Texas A&M. "He puts so much into the course, I think the students recognize this."

Recently a group of Plum's former students showed just how much they appreciate his efforts by presenting him with an Award of Merit for Teaching. The award, sponsored by Gamma Sigma Delta, the agricultural honor society, is presented each year to the best teacher outside the College of Agriculture.

Plum's nomination for the award came midway through his second semester teaching.

"When you think of the short time I was in the class that involved the students who made the nomination," he said, removing his glasses for emphasis, "I'm overwhelmed."

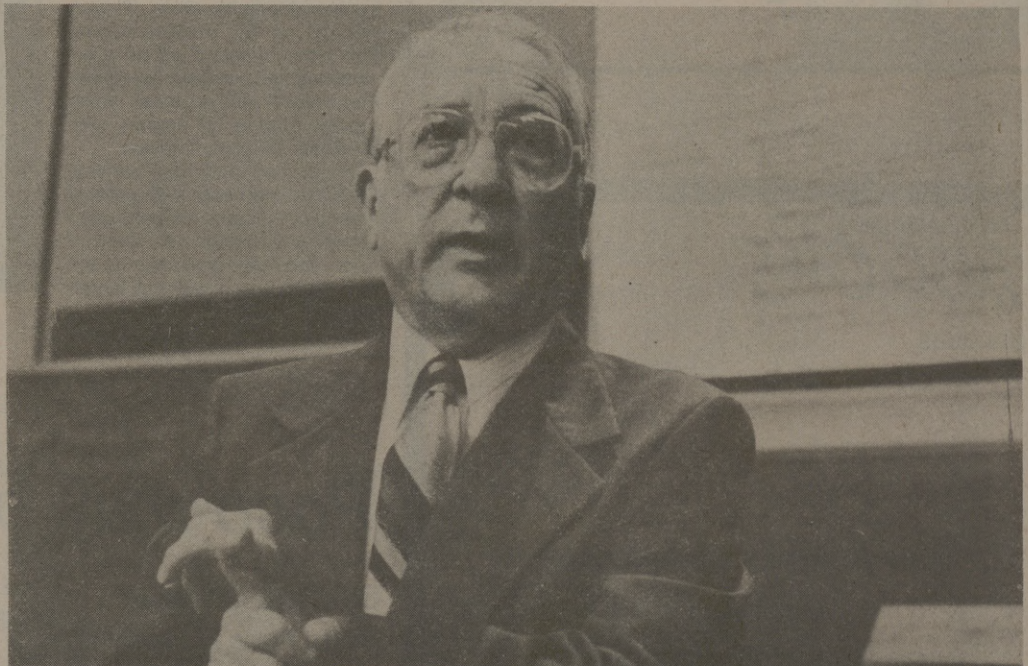
Plum is currently under a five-year, non-tenure contract to teach at Texas A&M. The contract, renewable at the end of each year, is an ideal setup for both the school and himself. Under it, he can remain teaching as long as he wants, and as long as the University thinks he is doing a good job.

"I love the classroom," he said, "though I'm not particularly thrilled with the big classes because I like to call students by name."

Plum's three sections of Accounting 409 contain about 540 students in 52 different major courses of study.

Looking to the future, Plum said that he thinks he might remain in Texas.

"Assuming I can teach two or three more years, and assuming we can get some roots here, we might just remain in College Station," he said, though adding that he and his wife had considered buying property in the Texas Hill Country.



ACCOUNTING PROFESSOR Charles Plum, above, has a very deliberate style in the classroom. Obviously, his style is successful in getting his point across, because he won an Award of Merit for being the best instructor outside the College of Agriculture after only a semester and a half of teaching. But his skill does not stop in the classroom. If students are having trouble with his course, he arranges for them to come to his house for additional tutoring.

RECORD COLLECTION

JAZZ and C&W

SALE!

\$1⁰⁰ OFF

All Jazz and Country-Western Albums.
Sale Ends Sat., March 3

RECORD COLLECTION

211 University Drive
846-3901