Faculty profile: Professor Kimberly Nalder

A sabbatical may provide professors with time away from their regular duties, but it’s no vacation. Just ask Sacramento State Government Professor Kimberly Nalder. She spent her spring 2012 sabbatical as a visiting scholar at the Institute for Governmental Studies at UC Berkeley; researched the issue of misinformation in the minds of voters; developed a project to combat that misinformation; and did a little light reading about partisanship, political psychology and political communication.

She’s now focused on the new Project for an Informed Electorate, a multi-approach venture that aims to foster greater understanding of politics by identifying, creating and disseminating accurate, trustworthy and nonpartisan information.

Nalder’s initial interest was sparked some time ago by a question from a first-time voter who wanted to know where she could get accurate information. Nalder used her sabbatical to realize a vision for the project and more fully develop it.

“One of the most frustrating things in a democracy is seeing people not understanding the basics of what they are voting on,” Nalder says. “There’s never been a time in our history when political information was pristine and nobody was misled, but it has accelerated.”

Websites and cable news programs that cater to a particular niche restrict the scope of information. While it may feel good to hear from people who reinforce your beliefs, Nalder says that if those beliefs are factually untrue, the viewer may never realize it. “And that’s a problem for our democracy.”

The Project for an Informed Electorate aims to counter that through events such as lectures, panels and gatherings to explain initiatives and debates, and by creating a website where people can learn and understand more about government, politics, issues and current events. “It will be a place that’s nonpartisan, safe, trustworthy and well-rounded,” Nalder says.

The Project also benefits students by having them perform academic research and otherwise participate in the process. Nalder is getting funds this year from Associated Students Inc. and hopes to get even more donations to pay the students for their time. “It’s important if you’re at a university and doing research to bring students under your wing and teach them what the ins and outs of social science research are,” she says.
Nalder is originally from Utah and, being an avid skier and backpacker, she was attracted to this part of California because of the access to outdoor activities. “I wanted to be someplace near the mountains and near natural beauty.”

So strong was her affinity for nature that she worked as a wilderness tech in Idaho, and as a seasonal firefighter in Utah and California. Nalder sees nothing strange about the transition from firefighter to professor. “I think a lot of people have that duality – that you’re interested in the life of the mind, and the more immediate rewards of physical activity.”

After getting her doctoral degree in political science at UC Davis, Nalder joined Sacramento State in 2002 and appreciated getting a job just across the Causeway. “It’s great for a political scientist to be in Sacramento,” she says.

Over the last decade she has taught a full course load, organized political events such as debate viewings, and conducted research projects. Now she finds great satisfaction in the classroom teaching three levels of classes – lower division, upper division and graduate. Courses include Women and Politics, Mass Media and Politics, Public Opinion, Introduction to American Government, and graduate American Political Behavior.

“My job is to help students be critical thinkers and to do that in the most objective, nonpartisan way possible,” Nalder says.

Despite the advent of online courses and distance learning, Nalder says the classroom is still the most important aspect of learning. “It’s not only a time for the professor and the students to interact and to form a relationship, but also for the students to learn from each other,” she says.

In addition, many of her students study logic, evaluate political speeches on how logical they are and what the logical fallacies might be in those speeches. They’re also required to read the newspaper every day and get personally involved with politics by doing such things as working for a candidate’s or initiative’s campaign or with an organization such as the Tea Party or Occupy movement.

Even though some lessons learned through political involvement can be hard ones to accept, Nalder says those, too, contribute to the students’ knowledge.

“Sometimes they learn things that might turn them off. They learn that politics are hard,” she says. “You have disagreements with parties and other citizens, and sometimes people running for office are not as skillful or good-natured or any of the things you hoped they would be. But I think that’s a great thing to learn, too. It’s reality and truth, and ultimately, that’s what the University is about – helping students to develop a lifelong ability to critically evaluate the world around them even when it’s not pretty.”

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