Communication professor delivers the Livingston Lecture


The Livingston Lecture is an honor awarded each year to a Sacramento State faculty member who has been active in the life of the University, including faculty governance, who displays consistent collegiality and a commitment to students, and who actively participates in creative and scholarly activities.

“The question in the title is intended to make a truism problematic, at least for a moment, to invite our thinking about it,” Stoner told the students, staff and faculty gathered in the University Union’s Redwood Room. “That’s a teaching strategy. The subtopics – communication, collaboration and coalitions of the minds – point to specific interests that have shaped my research and career.”

Stoner helped found Sacramento State’s Center for Teaching and Learning and served as its assistant director and interim director between 2004 and 2012. In 2012, he formed a committee of alumni, faculty and students to create NETS (Network: Extending Teaching and Scholarship). He also served on committees for accessibility and campus education equity, and on a task force that addressed the child care needs of student-parents.

He’s currently collaborating with Diego Bonilla, a fellow professor of communication studies, on two major projects: the first in a set of system-wide courses in information and communication technology literacy, designed by Bonilla; and Stoner’s 3-D interactive model of disciplinary knowledge structures.

“Diego and I have … now built a new device that creates a visual rendition of three dimensions of knowledge creation: framing, classification and epistemic culture,” Stoner said. “This device allows instructors or departments or colleges and universities – even university systems – to compare their instructional designs in the context of their own epistemic culture or the cultures of other disciplines.”

Knowing how different, but complementary, disciplines construct knowledge “may facilitate more purposeful formation of coalitions of minds,” Stoner said.

The professor used a variety of images, including a two-headed calf, the comics Abbott and Costello, and a bag of potatoes to illustrate his points.

The annual Livingston Lecture celebrates the life of the late John “Jack” Livingston, a professor of government at Sac State from 1954 to 1981. He was a respected scholar and a leader in developing the character of collegial governance throughout the California State University and at Sacramento State in particular.

“I am very honored and humbled that my colleagues Nick Burnett and Gerri Smith chose to submit my name,” Stoner said shortly after he learned he was chosen to be the
Livingston Lecturer for this academic year. “Bill Dorman (a retired professor of journalism and government) is one of my mentors. He was awarded the Livingston Lecture twice. His first presentation was about his research, and his second was a reflection on his career. Since I don’t expect to win this twice like Bill, I’m going to both talk about my academic work and reflect on my career.”

A colleague who nominated Stoner for the Livingston Lecture honor said he “is, in many respects, the conscience of our department. When our focus becomes too narrowly drawn on administrative or trivial concerns, he delicately and correctly returns our focus to the true matter at hand: the education of students at Sacramento State.”

Stoner grew up in the Pennsylvania coal-mining town of Altoona and was 12 years old during the Free Speech Movement at UC Berkeley – truly a world away. He was a kid fascinated by college students’ idealism and their lively protests over the university’s decision that political activities must be kept off the campus. Stoner later would write his dissertation on the seminal student uprising and “the innovation of new rhetorical visions.”

He earned his master’s degree and doctorate in communication at Ohio State University and his bachelor’s in English education at Pennsylvania State University. He taught high school English in Ohio and communication studies at Mount Vernon Nazarene University, also in Ohio, before he arrived at Sacramento State in 1989.

His teaching interests include instructional communication, rhetoric and public address, and interpersonal and small-group communication. His research ranges from instructional communication and mediated learning to the relationship of communication to thinking, learning and teaching.

Stoner is a Fulbright Specialist and has been a visiting research scholar at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland as well as the University of Newcastle Upon Tyne and the University of Lancaster, both in Britain.

Among Stoner’s many community involvements has been service as a communication consultant and trainer for the state’s Integrated Waste Management Board and Department of Toxic Substances Control.

Stoner is a fan of science fiction. His favorite author is Joe Haldeman (The Forever War). His wife, Daria, is a retired teacher. His son, Ian, is an adjunct professor of philosophy at the University of Minnesota, and his daughter, Heather, is an occupational therapist. His granddaughter, Olivia, turned 3 on the day of his Livingston Lecture.

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