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Career political scientist now heads Sac State’s Institute for Social Research

David Barker is “jazzed” about his new role as director of the Institute for Social Research (ISR) at Sacramento State.

“I have a lot of experience doing what we do: designing research and analyzing data,” he says. “I actually love this stuff. This is my thing, and hopefully I can bring a lot of energy to the position.”

Barker, 43, is just the third director of the Institute, which was founded in 1989 as a resource for nonprofits, government agencies and the academic world.

Its task is to perform surveys and program evaluations for a range of clients, including local, state and federal government agencies, nonprofits and private companies.

A project Barker hopes eventually to launch is an annual student survey on the California State University’s 23 campuses.

“The value would be twofold,” he says. “For the CSU, it helps them understand what students like and don’t like about facilities, administration, services, faculty, etc., and it would enable the CSU as a whole to identify what certain campuses are doing better than others, so they can learn from each other.

“The value to students and taxpayers is that it would be an accountability mechanism so they can keep an eye on the CSU and see where their money is going.”

Barker will continue to support the Institute’s ongoing work, including its many contracts with state agencies and its long-term evaluation of the CSU’s Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation.

In addition, ISR has expanded its partnership with Sacramento State’s Center for California Studies to conduct a statewide survey on how political misinformation affects municipal health and to provide survey services for its Envisioning California Conference. ISR also provides survey support and program evaluation for the state Office of Suicide Prevention’s efforts to decrease suicides among gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender teenagers. Barker is committed to maintaining the Institute’s historical
relationship with state government agencies, particularly the Department of Social Services and the Environmental Protection Agency, with which ISR has contracted on numerous large projects.

He also plans to expand ISR’s Election Data Archive, which contains information on all Sacramento city, county and school district elections for the past 19 years. He wants to add to the data and find ways to make it user-friendly for lawmakers, researchers and students.

ISR employs seven full-time research analysts and four part-time graduate research assistants, along with input from its two former directors, Carole Barnes and Ernie Cowles, who serve as senior researchers.

One of Barker’s priorities is to collaborate with more faculty members on upcoming projects. He’s working with professors in the departments of Psychology, Social Work, Government and Health Administration on a proposal to study the impact of social culture on health risks. And he’s working with faculty from Economics and Public Policy and Administration on a proposal to study economic development in suburban settings.

Among the faculty members who serve as ISR associates is government Professor Kim Nalder. Her media lab for the Project for an Informed Electorate (P.I.E.) is housed within the Institute, and she was a member of the search committee that selected Barker.

“Sacramento State is extremely fortunate to have such a talented and nationally respected scholar at the helm at ISR,” Nalder says. “Director Barker is bringing fresh ideas and new energy to ISR and will no doubt bring the institute even more prominence and success in the capital region and beyond.”

Barker was born in Reno and lived in Ukiah and Sonora before his family left California for Oregon. They settled in Texas when he was 12. He earned a bachelor of arts in professional writing from Baylor University in 1992, and a doctoral degree from the University of Houston in 1998. The American Political Science Association named his treatise on American politics one of the year’s best dissertations.


Barker taught political science at the University of Pittsburgh for 14 years before becoming the Institute’s director in December 2012.

“I had gotten to the point in my career where I was kind of sick of politics, as a lot of people are these days,” he says. “When you include my time in grad school, I had
been a political scientist for 18 years, getting up every day and thinking about politics. At a certain point, I was ready for more.

“This (job) provides me with the opportunity to do a lot more work that is interdisciplinary. And another thing that is exciting is that most of what we do is applied research, which means that when we put out a report on our work, we can see it making an impact. We see policy being affected by the work we do,” he says.

For media assistance, contact Sacramento State’s Office of Public Affairs at (916) 278-6156. For more on the Institute for Social Research, go to www.csus.edu/isr.

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