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## Retiring CSUS professor Barbara O'Connor wins praise throughout Sacramento

By [Stephen Magagnini](mailto:Stephen Magagnini@sacbee.com) [smagagnini@sacbee.com](mailto:Stephen Magagnini@sacbee.com)

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As what could be called the Barbara O'Connor Tribute Tour rolls through the capital, it seems everyone has a story about how the retiring Sacramento State professor has changed their lives.

Her mentees include an army of journalists, politicians and entrepreneurs, and 9,800 current and former students. O'Connor has provided generations of Sacramentans with jobs, internships, contacts and counsel.

After 38 years teaching communications at California State University, Sacramento – where she also served as director of the Institute for the Study of Politics and Media – O'Connor, 62, is leaving.

"I've taught enough," she said. "Why not go out on a high?"

At a dinner Wednesday at the university, Larry Tribe – a friend, U.S. Justice Department attorney and former professor to a young Barack Obama – remarked via video: "Retirement for Barbara is an oxymoron. Her real jobs are sharing her incomparable political and technological insights and seeing light where others see fog."

One of the country's most quoted political analysts – she returns all calls – O'Connor plans to remain a ga

Now on the national board of AARP, her mission will be to use technology to connect 39 million American to critical health care and Social Security programs.

"Geezer tech is my new thing," said O'Connor. "As we move all of our government services online because cost-cutting, those who are not online are really disenfranchised – primarily low-income seniors, many in California, and immigrants whose primary language isn't English." O'Connor has long worked with the Ca Emerging Technology Fund to close the digital divide.

Two years ago, at state first lady Maria Shriver's California Women's Conference in Long Beach, O'Connor met billionaire investor and philanthropist Warren Buffett getting out of a Prius. Nobody recognized him but she reads five newspapers a day. Inside of 30 minutes, she persuaded Buffett to pose for a photo handing her it's posted on her Facebook page.

"It's really interesting that she's so up-to-date with her Facebook and iPhone and Twitter," said one of her friends, Nichole Atoigue, 23. "She's more connected than I am."

"She's a 'network goddess,' " said her friend Ginger Jenkins. "She picks up a conversation right where she left it. When a person says, 'I need a job,' Barbara will give them four or five."

Jenkins' husband, Ted – a Republican – met O'Connor – a lefty – 11 years ago at the Aspen Institute, where she was on behalf of a free market and O'Connor was arguing for government regulation.



CSUS Professor, Barbara O'Connor, sets up her office with books and videos, along with items given to her by students, to fellow colleagues as they come by her office at CSUS during her last day of work before retirement, Tuesday May 11, 2010. - Iste Lezlie Sterling

Ted Jenkins, one of Intel's original employees, ended up team-teaching O'Connor's CSUS class on social n

On the first day of class O'Connor had students introduce themselves, say when they were graduating and not they had an adviser. "If you didn't, she said, 'I'll be your adviser,' " said Matt Larson, 22.

"The cardinal rule is, listen," O'Connor said. "You have to focus on them. You don't want to be the smartest in the room – that's arrogance. I learn something from every student."

O'Connor noted that 60 percent of her students at Sacramento State "are first-generation college grads lik

"She describes people as 'the cutest little thing,' " said student Christine Braziel, 21, who calls O'Connor the "mother" of Sacramento."

O'Connor, who was engaged three times but never married, said Tribe once told her, "You wouldn't be making millions of dollars if you were the mother of a few."

The daughter of an Air Force intelligence agent, she cut her political teeth on the maverick, anti-Vietnam War presidential campaign of George McGovern in 1972. She remembers 16-year-old Maria Shriver working on the campaign.

Shriver befriended O'Connor after becoming California's first lady in 2003.

"She communicates as a cheerleader, sends me notes of encouragement," said Shriver, who considers O'Connor a "nurturing, savvy sounding board." "I've asked her advice on where I'm going and how she sees my next steps. She recognizes what's unique about a person and lets it rip."

At O'Connor's farewell dinner, Sunne McPeak – whom O'Connor recommended for president and CEO of Emerging Technology – donated an oracle oak tree in her name. "It's perfect – she's enduring, strong and an oracle in this day and age," said McPeak.

O'Connor said everyone needs a mentor – "someone you trust." Hers have passed on: Bee editor C.K. McPeak, Sacramento public relations queen Jean Runyon and McGeorge Law School dean Gordon Schaber.

When she came to town in 1972, "I hated Sacramento," O'Connor recalled. "I called Gordon Schaber and said, 'McGovern said I should meet you before I shoot myself.' "

O'Connor offered this advice: "The reason we're put here is to give back. When you have an open heart, people will follow you." "e's met.