

Thomas Backer Brings Research and Resources to Valley Nonprofits Through CSUN

Chelsea K. Baxter | on March 18, 2015 | in [Community](#), [CSUN Leaders](#), [CSUN Profiles](#)

Psychologist Thomas E. Backer, Ph.D. remembers his first visit to California State University, Northridge. It was 1963, and CSUN was then known as San Fernando Valley State College. As a high school student, Backer had come to compete in regional debate championships held on the campus.

“CSUN was the first college campus I ever visited,” Backer reminisced, “It was a pretty heady experience for me as a high school freshman to visit a college campus and see what it was like to be in college.”

Although it would be several decades before Backer returned to CSUN, when he did, he brought with him Valley Nonprofit Resources (VNR) that serves the surrounding community.

Backer has a long history with the San Fernando Valley, first as a six-year-old in Reseda and now living in the same house in Sherman Oaks for 36 years. “I’m a Valley boy,” he said. Due to his love for the region, Backer devoted much of his work to improving conditions for nonprofit enterprises within the Valley.

As the long-time president of the nonprofit Human Interaction Research Institute (HIRI), Backer oversaw the formation in 2007 of VNR, a resource for the more than 4,500 San Fernando Valley nonprofit organizations. VNR offers services to staff and Boards of these nonprofits.

Backer came to the campus after two HIRI board members, CSUN faculty Richard Moore, Ph.D., and Herman DeBose, Ph.D., encouraged him to consider CSUN’s College of Social and

Behavioral Sciences as a home for VNR. After speaking with Social and Behavioral Sciences Dean Stella Theodoulou, Backer was convinced VNR should have its home at CSUN.

“Dean Theodoulou is practical and creative, and it was very clear to me that there were a number of resources here on campus — faculty, students and other centers — that could help us strengthen our own program,” Backer stated.

In 2011, Backer opened negotiations with CSUN to bring VNR to campus. In mid-2014, Backer officially closed HIRI, donating more than \$800,000 of its assets to CSUN, with a portion earmarked for future funding of VNR. On June 1, 2014, Backer and VNR moved into their new home in Sierra Hall.

Thanks to this gift, the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences was able to create HIRI Nonprofit Research Fellowships, which grants \$5,000 to \$10,000 for faculty research in the nonprofit sector a few times a year. CSUN President Dianne F. Harrison has emphasized the importance of research at the university.

“Offering the HIRI Nonprofit Research Fellowships is one small step in furthering this mission,” Backer noted.

In addition, Theodoulou has asked Backer to teach a course on philanthropy, focusing specifically on the Los Angeles area. Backer is developing the syllabus.

“Part of its purpose is to help students learn how philanthropy supports the nonprofit sector,” he said of the course.

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search fellow in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Backer had been active with CSUN as a donor and executive board member of the Mike Curb College of Arts, Media, and Communication, as well as a subscriber to the Valley Performing Arts Center. He is also chair of the Community Advisory Board for the Center for Southern California Studies in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences.

Backer’s desire to support the Valley in which he lives is apparent through his belief that supporting CSUN will help strengthen the community.

“All universities have a responsibility to relate to and support the community they live in,” he explained. “My coming to CSUN and my happiness in being here comes from knowing that my two programs will help increase CSUN’s leadership in the Valley.”