The College of Humanities Newsletter

From the desk of Humanities dean Elizabeth A. Say

As the academic year draws to a close, we have been able to enjoy all the traditional celebrations of completion and success. CSUN had over 11,000 students who were eligible for graduation and our commencement ceremony was made particularly special as we awarded an honorary doctorate to Reverend James Lawson. Lawson was a central figure in the U.S. civil rights movement and a close compatriot of Martin Luther King, Jr. For the past six years, he has been an active participant in CSUN’s Civil Discourse & Social Change Initiative. I was especially pleased to honor Dr. Lawson at the CoH commencement because I had an opportunity to study with him when he taught a course on King’s legacy at USC while I was a graduate student there in the 1980s.

This year I am delighted to report that we have hired 14 outstanding new faculty members in the College of Humanities. I know that you will be as impressed as I am with their scholarship, their commitment to our student population, and their enthusiasm for the mission of CSUN and the College. With faculty members such as those we have hired in recent years, the future of the College is very bright!

Not quite the PROUST QUESTIONNAIRE...with apologies to Vanity Fair and Marcel Proust

In fall 2015 the College of Humanities welcomed a whopping 14 new faculty members in the following departments and programs: Central American Studies, Chicana/o Studies, English, Liberal Studies, Linguistics, Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures, Philosophy, and Religious Studies. As they settled into their second semester at CSUN, we asked them to respond to a brief, modified Proust questionnaire, so named for Marcel Proust, who answered a similarly probing set of personal questions twice during his lifetime.

Many thanks to our faculty members, who so willingly shared with us their time, thought, wit, and honesty. Each answered only the questions to which they wished to respond.

Xochitl Alviso, Assistant Professor, Religious Studies

Dr. Alviso earned her Ph.D. in practical theology at the Boston University School of Theology. Her research is focused on new and postmodern forms of church, feminist theology, and feminist ecclesiology. Her teaching specializes in areas of women and religion and the philosophy of gender, sex, and sexuality in religion.

Which historical figure do you most identify with? I don’t know that I identify with her, per se, but I do surround myself with the art and image of Frida Kahlo—she inspires me and helps me feel courageous.

Which living person do you most admire? I have amazing women friends I love and admire—friends who have survived much and do amazing work in the world. Their synergy gives me strength.

What is your most treasured possession? My HAG ring. It’s a silver ring with the word HAG embossed across the band that used to be Mary Daly’s. I wear it on my ring finger and it really throws people off. It makes me smile.

Alviso continued on next page
**Which talent would you most like to have?**
I have always wished I could belt it out like Janis Joplin or Beth Hart—you can lead revolutions by singing.

**What is your motto?**
Resist, rebel, revolt!

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**Sindhuja Bhakthavatsalam**
Assistant Professor, Liberal Studies Program

Dr. Bhakthavatsalam earned her Ph.D. in philosophy and social sciences at University of California, San Diego. Her areas of specialization are philosophy of science, scientific understanding, and science and values. She also teaches in areas of ethics and society and philosophy of physics.

**What is your idea of perfect happiness?**
Good music and good company

**What is your greatest fear?**
Running out of creative steam

**Which historical figure do you most identify with?**
David Hume

**Which living person do you most admire?**
Nancy Cartwright, my Ph.D. advisor, and my dad

**When and where were you happiest?**
Couple of months ago, at the Getty museum: It’s a gorgeous place.

**What is your most treasured possession?**
My computer

**What is it that you most dislike?**
Condescension and display of power

**Which talent would you most like to have?**
Efficient management of time and not procrastinating: I think these really require some talent.

**What is your motto?**
Know thy voice.

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**Mauro Carassai**
Assistant Professor, Liberal Studies Program

Dr. Carassai earned his Ph.D. in English at University of Florida. His areas of focus include digital humanities, electronic literature and text, digital culture, American digital studies, and American literature and culture.

**What is your idea of perfect happiness?**
To always be able to develop new forms of enthusiasm for the human condition and for all the incredible things it has to offer. I believe I will be happy as long as I am going to be able to experience love, interest, and passion for all that surrounds me in this life.

**What is your greatest fear?**
I share the idea that, as someone famously said, “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” I think my biggest concern is the possibility of falling into a mental state of mind that would make me regret something for lack of trying. Life sometimes is pretty good at discouraging us and it takes a lot of energy to remind us that we should stay positive and tenacious.

**Which living person do you most admire?**
If I had to pick one single ideal figure, I would probably go for Bob Dylan. I think he is completely representative of an exceptional inner drive towards continual change in a pursuit of exploring his own identity with “no direction home.” However, my thoughts go also immediately to people in my profession. Among these I would single out Brown University professor George Landow and my Ph.D. supervisor at University of Florida, Professor Gregory Ulmer, two examples of academic genius and integrity that will stay for me as guiding lights in all the years to come.

**When and where were you happiest?**
It was in Italy no more than a year ago when I met Silvia, the woman of my life, whom I am going to marry this summer.

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**Which talent would you most like to have?**
I would love to be able to handle things perfectly in real-time situations. There is always room for improving your skills in interpersonal relationships and in social circumstances of all sorts and, from this point of view, I would really like to be able to have the best kind of savoir faire, of the kind you often happen to see in classic Hollywood movies, as it were.
Xóchitl Flores-Marcial
Assistant Professor, Chicana/o Studies

Dr. Flores-Marcial earned her Ph.D. in history at University of California, Los Angeles. Her research focuses on the arts, traditions, and practices of indigenous Mesoamerican peoples, with a particular focus on contemporary Zapotec culture in the state of Oaxaca. She teaches in areas of colonial and modern history of Latin America, history of Latin American women, history of Mexico, and world history.

What is your idea of perfect happiness?
Reading a new book in a natural setting. I recently read about mitochondria in a very shady and cool spot under a boulder in Joshua Tree.

What is your greatest fear?
Cutting open an avocado and finding out it went bad

Which historical figure do you most identify with?
A Zapotec lady, Qualala Xopa, from the Oaxacan Central Valleys who helped reorganize several communities one thousand years ago

Which living person do you most admire?
My mother

What is your greatest extravagance?
Travel

When and where were you happiest?
Today!

What is your most treasured possession?
My books

What is it that you most dislike?
Complaining

Which talent would you most like to have?
I’d like to play the cello.

What is your motto?
Dedicate to things right the first time so you don’t have to do them again and again.

Sarah Hansen, Assistant Professor, Philosophy

Dr. Hansen earned her Ph.D. in philosophy at Vanderbilt University. Her areas of specialization are bioethics, feminist theory, and continental philosophy. She also teaches in areas of science and technology studies, social and political philosophy, Africana philosophy, history of philosophy, logic, theories of race, gender, and sexuality.

What is your idea of perfect happiness?
The simple things—relaxing over a great meal with family and friends.

Which living person do you most admire?
I admire anyone that takes big risks in order to stand up for freedom and justice.

Hansen continued on next page
What is your most treasured possession?
A quilt made by my grandmother. She was an expert quilter and each quilt she made was a work of art.

What is it that you most dislike?
Greed, ignorance, prejudice

Which talent would you most like to have?
The ability to play guitar or sing. I come from a music-oriented family but I don’t have any musical talents myself.

Christopher Higgs
Assistant Professor, English

Dr. Higgs earned his Ph.D. in English at Florida State University. His major field is post-1900 American literary and cultural studies. He also holds an MFA in creative writing from Ohio State University. His fiction, nonfiction, and critical works are widely published in journals and anthologies.

What is your idea of perfect happiness?
When reading, I’d describe my idea of perfect happiness as somewhere near the intersection of complete confusion and complete awe. Sometimes. Other times, I’d describe my idea of perfect happiness when reading as the sensation of immersion and amazement. Either way, I’m always looking for the unfamiliar and the impressive, the baffling and the bewildering.

When writing, I’d describe my idea of perfect happiness as somewhere near the intersection of absence and presence. The less “me” the better, if “me” describes the version of myself I am most frequently performing. I’m happiest as a writer when I let go and allow the words to take over.

When teaching, I’d describe my idea of perfect happiness as somewhere near the intersection of give and take where learning happens in multiple directions and includes me in the process. I think I’m happiest teaching when my attempts to create conditions for experimentation prove useful to students, when something we’ve read or discussed returns during a different conversation in a way that signals its effect.

What is your greatest fear?
I’m a parent, so I fear everything.

Which historical figure do you most identify with?
Gertrude Stein

Which living person do you most admire?
Jean-Luc Godard

What is your greatest extravagance?
Coffee and books and records. And eating out. And...gasoline

When and where were you happiest?
August 2006 – July 2009, Columbus, Ohio

What is your most treasured possession?
I’m not really into possessions. A few years ago I might’ve said my computer, because so much of my writing is on it, but now everything gets backed up on the cloud so I don’t even need my specific computer anymore. Maybe my wedding ring? But even that, it’s just a symbolic object I could replace at any time without flinching. The more I think about it, the more I realize I treasure experiences more than possessions. I could list a bunch of experiences I treasure: meeting my wife, getting engaged on the coast of Ireland, our wedding in Ohio, the birth of our son, etc., but I couldn’t list a single possession that I treasure.

What is it that you most dislike?
Physical and emotional pain. Also, the passive verb “to be”

Which talent would you most like to have?
Piano playing

What is your motto?
From the immortal words of Savage Steve Holland, writer and director of arguably the greatest underrated comedy film of all time, One Crazy Summer: “Without a plan, there’s no attack. Without attack, there’s no victory!”

Junliang Huang
Assistant Professor, Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures

Dr. Huang earned her Ph.D. in Asian literature, religion, and culture at Cornell University. Her research interests include modern Japanese and Chinese literature, war memory, narrative analysis, postcolonial theory, translation theory, Marxism, and cultural criticism.

What is your greatest fear?
Losing interest

Which historical figure do you most identify with?
I most identify with people who are not written in history.

Which living person do you most admire?
My mentors

Huang continued on next page
John McGraw  
Assistant Professor,  
Central American Studies and Religious Studies

Dr. McGraw earned his Ph.D. in anthropology and cognitive science at University of California, San Diego. His research interests are the Tz’utujil of Guatemala, divination, ritual, distributed cognition, extended mind, materiality, decision-making, joint action, anthropology of knowledge, and Latin American cultures.

What is your idea of perfect happiness?
I don’t believe in a perfect happiness, just lots of varieties of happiness. Time with close friends, camping somewhere beautiful, hanging out with my chihuahua, reading a good book, swimming, and visiting hot springs are all pretty much perfect happinesses to me. Working at CSUN is pretty great, too!

What is your greatest fear?
Global thermonuclear war

David Medeiros  
Assistant Professor, Linguistics

Dr. Medeiros earned his Ph.D. in linguistics at the University of Michigan. His research interests include imperative constructions across languages and the structure of Polynesian languages. He teaches in areas of early language acquisition, language acquisition by adult learners, syntax, semantics, and computation linguistics.

What is your idea of perfect happiness?
A day at the beach with my wife and two kids

What is your greatest fear?
That I or a loved one becomes terminally ill before our time

What is your greatest extravagance?
The Internet...all of it, all of the time

What is it that you most dislike?
Cheese

Which talent would you most like to have?
Serious math skills

What is your most treasured possession?
Well, he’s not a possession, but my dog Chico is awesome. Otherwise, a nice buffalo skull my father gave me.

Primum non nocere

Beware those who flatter you!
Robin Muller  
Assistant Professor, Philosophy

Dr. Muller earned her Ph.D. in philosophy at the New School for Social Research. Her areas of specialization are 19th- and 20th-century European philosophy, philosophy of mind and perception, and phenomenology. She also teaches in areas of 18th-century philosophy, feminist philosophy, and philosophy of language and linguistics.

What is your idea of perfect happiness?
Sitting on a porch with a good book and a glass of bourbon, watching a thunderstorm

What is your greatest fear?
Losing people I love

Which living person do you most admire?
Anyone who, on seeing an injustice, acts

What is your greatest extravagance?
I grew up in a house of books, and my father always prided himself on being able to get up during a conversation, walk over to the bookshelf, and take down a book that answered precisely the question I had just asked him. If that requires an extravagance, I’ve inherited it: I buy and hold on to far more books than I could ever read in a lifetime.

When and where were you happiest?
Happiness comes, for me, from a sense of accomplishment. So anytime I finish something I started!

What is it that you most dislike?
Selfishness

Which talent would you most like to have?
I’d love to have a superpower for learning languages.

What is your motto?
Not a motto, per se, but three lessons from my parents: Study history, have a firm handshake, and always go to the funeral.

Stevie Ruiz  
Assistant Professor, Chicana/o Studies

Dr. Ruiz earned his Ph.D. in ethnic studies at University of California, San Diego. His teaching and research focuses on Chicana/o studies, environmental justice studies, U.S.-Mexico border history, comparative and relational ethnic studies, environmental history and law, indigenous studies, architectural history, cultural geography, and history of gender and sexuality.

What is your idea of perfect happiness?
Listening to music while cooking for friends and family

What is your greatest fear?
Writer’s block

Which historical figure do you most identify with?
Charlotta Bass

Which living person do you most admire?
My favorite novelist, Benjamin Saenz

What is your greatest extravagance?
Shoes

When and where were you happiest?
Underneath my favorite waterfall in Hawaii while eating lunch with my best friend last winter

What is your most treasured possession?
Xbox One, hands down

What is it that you most dislike?
Entitlement

Which talent would you most like to have?
Professional violinist

What is your motto?
Bring common sense to the nonsensical.

New provost hits the ground running

The 2015-16 academic year was Dr. Yi Li’s inaugural year as CSUN’s provost and vice president for academic affairs. Li brings more than three decades of higher education leadership, research, and scholarship to the institution. Li holds a Ph.D. in mathematics from the University of Minnesota and a bachelor’s degree from Xi’an Jiaotong University.

Li comes to CSUN from Wright State University, where he was dean of the College of Science and Mathematics. He previously served as professor and chair of the Department of Mathematics at the University of Iowa, and had taught at the University of Rochester and the University of Chicago.

With his stellar credentials, Li is perhaps proudest of his innovative practices to increase ethnic and gender diversity in the STEM student pipeline, and he is excited to continue this mission at CSUN. “I am honored to join together with CSUN’s outstanding faculty and staff to continue to equip students for future success,” Li said. “Higher education has changed my life, and that drives me to provide the same life-changing opportunities for others.”

Courtesy of Teresa K. Morrison

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Courtesy of Teresa K. Morrison
Colleen Tripp
Assistant Professor, English

Dr. Tripp earned her Ph.D. in American studies at Brown University. Her manuscript “Pacific Sensations: Seeing Yellow in 19th-century American Print Culture” engages with the global turn in American literature and considers the role of the China trade in print culture and racial formation in America. She was selected as a Jay T. Last Research Fellow at the American Antiquarian Society. She also has helped to mentor new undergraduate scholars through Brown University’s Leadership Alliance Mellon Initiative.

What is your idea of perfect happiness?
Beach, coffee, and a book in the 805!

What is your greatest fear?
Being stuck on the 405 during rush hour

Which historical figure do you most identify with?
Dinosaurs, definitely. That’s how old I feel amidst CSUN students. Also, Walter Benjamin. His imaginative storytelling and philosophy have always inspired me.

Which living person do you most admire?
All of my friends, who are talented educators, political activists, and tough-as-nails lawyers. It’s hard not to be inspired by their work!

What is your greatest extravagance?
My occasional $15-a-pound artisan coffee beans... It’s substantive and very necessary, I swear!

When and where were you happiest?
The day I passed my two-hour oral exams for my Ph.D. As I was looking out the window at the beautiful snowy white landscape of New England, I felt a sense of relief and confidence in my future.

What is your most treasured possession?
My new, inexpensive, pearly white Chromebook feels like my better half!

What is it that you most dislike?
Arrogance and misogyny. No thank you.

Which talent would you most like to have?
I started playing piano at the age of 5, but never had enough time (or maybe persistence) to practice. Music is an amazing tool for self-reflection, and I wish I could play professionally.

What is your motto?
“Training is everything. The peach was once a bitter almond; cauliflower is nothing but cabbage with a college education.” —Mark Twain

Svetlana Tyutina
Assistant Professor, Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures

Dr. Tyutina earned her Ph.D. in Latin American and Spanish literature at Florida International University. She has native-level competency in Russian, English, and Spanish and has acted as an interpreter at state functions in Russia and Spain. She is also certified as a teacher of Russian to speakers of other languages.

What is your idea of perfect happiness?
Probably, having time to do everything I’d like to

What is your greatest fear?
Fail my own expectations

Which historical figure do you most identify with?
Nicola Tesla minus the Tesla coil—I am still inventing it.

Which living person do you most admire?
My father. I admire the sacrifices he had to make for us and his kindness and unconditional support for our life choices and decisions.

What is your greatest extravagance?
I love traveling. I’ve been to 35 states in the U.S. and to about 40 countries, but the most memorable moment (probably, not really extravagant) was a hike through the clouds to Machu Picchu, Peru, on a Christmas morning.

When and where were you happiest?
I grew up by the sea, so I really enjoy long strolls on the beach on a rainy day. Lightning optional!

What is your most treasured possession?
It may sound sentimental, but my most treasured possession is the last photo of my grandmother I took while visiting my hometown. A veteran of WWII, she taught me how to be strong despite the circumstances. Her unexpected passing several years ago left a void in my life.

What is it that you most dislike?
Long cold winters, hands down!

Which talent would you most like to have?
I started playing piano at the age of 5, but never had enough time (or maybe persistence) to practice. Music is an amazing tool for self-reflection, and I wish I could play professionally.

What is your motto?
Gaudeamus igitur iuvenes dum sumus (“Let us therefore rejoice / While we are young”)—the life of an academic constantly opens new horizons and invites you to undertake new journeys. That is what keeps us young and makes our life one long exciting adventure.
The Mission of the College of Humanities is to create a community of learners who...

Explore and value the diversities of cultures, thought, perspectives, literatures and languages of humanity;

Critically reflect on and analyze multiple dimensions of human identity and experience;

Contribute to scholarship and creative production and innovation, and

Act as responsible global citizens committed to principles of freedom, equality, justice and participatory democracy.

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