

Departments & Programs

- ♦ Asian American Studies
 - ♦ Central American Studies
 - ♦ Chicana/o Studies
 - ♦ English
 - ♦ Gender & Women's Studies
 - ♦ Liberal Studies & Humanities Interdisciplinary Program
 - ♦ Linguistics/TESL
 - ♦ Modern & Classical Languages & Literatures
 - ♦ Philosophy
 - ♦ Religious Studies
 - ♦ Interdisciplinary Studies:
- American Indian Studies
 Civic and Community Engagement
 Jewish Studies
 Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies
 Queer Studies
 Sustainability Studies

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The College of Humanities Newsletter



Elizabeth A. Say, Ph.D.
CSUN Alum 1981

From the desk of Humanities dean Elizabeth A. Say

As the 2016-17 Academic Year draws to a close, we are happy to introduce you to several new members of the College of Humanities and to celebrate a truly game-changing donation to our Armenian Studies Program. This year we welcomed Axel Montepeque to the Department of Central American Studies (CAS). Having taught for several years as a lecturer in CAS freshman writing, Axel is now providing leadership to that program. We also welcome to the Dean's Office two new faces, both valued members of our faculty. Sheena Malhotra, a professor and former chair of Gender and Women's Studies, assumes her role as

Associate Dean of the College in Fall 2017. Also in the fall, Jackie Stallcup, professor and former chair of English, will take on new responsibilities as Director of Student Success Initiatives for the College. She will work closely with another new member of the team, Vanessa Martinez, our new Graduation and Retention Advising Specialist. Despite a record number of CSUN graduates this year—11,500!—we know there is always more we can do to support student success in the College, and Jackie and Vanessa will be leading those efforts. Finally, in this issue you will be introduced to Zaruhi "Sara" Chitjian, a career LAUSD educator who has made a comprehensive donation of her family archives along with a substantial endowment to support Armenian Studies at CSUN. Generous donors like Ms. Chitjian allow the College of Humanities to continue to grow and serve the needs of the many communities we serve.

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

Courtesy of Teresa K. Morrison

Each spring we ask new faculty members to respond to a brief set of questions styled after the "Proust questionnaire," named for Marcel Proust—who, depending on your source, may have answered a similarly probing quiz twice during his lifetime. Regardless of their origins, the questions are an interesting way to get to know our new faculty. This academic year the College welcomed just one new faculty member, in Central American Studies. As his first year at CSUN drew to a close, we asked him to join in the tradition, answering questions from the list at his own discretion.

Montepeque continued on page 7

Creating Awareness and Keeping the Promise for Armenians

Submitted by Sofia Kahn

This spring the Armenian Studies Program at California State University, Northridge (CSUN), held its annual banquet in the campus Grand Salon. The event celebrated the contributions of Zaruhi “Sara” Chitjian, an educator for 34 years and a pioneer in establishing Armenian studies programs in Los Angeles public schools. Also in attendance was Kevin Matossian, producer of *The Promise*, a dramatic film that gives voice to the men, women, and children who lost their lives in the Armenian Genocide.

Ms. Chitjian gave a generous endowment to CSUN’s Armenian Studies Program and donated her family’s archives to CSUN to teach and educate future generations about the Armenian Genocide. The Armenian Studies Program, offering both bachelor’s degrees and minors, was established in 1983 amid great determination by the Armenian Students Association and professor Hermine Mahseredjian, who initially taught Armenian studies on a volunteer basis. In recalling her own decision to introduce Armenian studies, Chitjian says she had only recently begun to teach at Dixie Canyon Elementary School in Sherman Oaks when she was presented the opportunity to design and teach a six-week mini course on original subject matter for grades 4 through 6. “It wasn’t just my first time teaching Armenian culture,” Chitjian says. “It was also my first time pioneering a program at school.” Chitjian found ways to teach her students in ways that sparked children’s natural creativity, allowing them to explore Armenian manuscripts, which are “pictorial and colorful and can contain bird or fish letters,” and helping them to create Armenian Easter eggs. Her classes emphasized relevancy and encouraged students to contextualize lessons in relation to their own worlds.

Chitjian’s work had a profound effect on her father, who began to write his own story as she honed her



From left: Suren Seropian, Dr. Hasmig Baran, Dr. Vahram Shemmassian, Sara Chitjian, Dr. Elizabeth Say, Lorraine Alexander. Photo courtesy of David Hawkins.



From left: George Elian, Dr. Annette Besnilian, Meline Elian, Kevin Matossian, George Besnilian, Melanie Besnilian, Suren Seropian. Photo courtesy of David Hawkins.



From left: Martin Eskijian, Effie Eskijian, Meaghan Matossian, Kevin Matossian, Maggie Mangassarian-Goschin, Nora Nalbadian, Sedda Anteklian, Christina Goschin, Ani Dikranian. Photo courtesy of David Hawkins.

curriculum. “When I was growing up, I remember that whenever my father tried to talk about his experiences, no one wanted to listen—no one wanted to hear his story,” Chitjian says. “It surprised him that non-Armenians would be interested in it.” The act of giving voice to his life was bittersweet. “When my father started writing, remembering every-thing and reliving it was so painful that he would wake up in the middle of the night covered in sweat, yet he did not stop,” Chitjian says. “He made sure to write something every single day.” It is important to Chitjian and her father that “disunity” be overcome in both the Armenian and non-Armenian community. “It is troublesome that the youth of today are forgetting this tragedy,” Chitjian says. “Creating awareness among the youth is important. *The Promise* is one step in that direction. It creates awareness among people of all walks of life, not just Armenians.”

Another step toward promoting awareness is the dedication of the Chitjian family archives, which date back to the pre-WWI Ottoman period. The archives—including letters, books, artifacts, clothes, jewelry, and even shoes—will be housed in Special Collections in the Oviatt Library. Dr. Vahram Shemmashian, who has directed the Armenian Studies Program for 11 years, says that the endowment and archives will help to preserve the Chitjian family name and history, and through their family’s story students may learn about the Armenian Genocide and the Armenian Immigrant Experience in Los Angeles. The collection will be available for viewing and studying, and experts will be invited to give talks inspired by the Chitjian collection. The endowment allows for guest lecturers to teach

Armenian Studies continued on next page



From left: Dr. Elizabeth Say, Sara Chitjian, Lorraine Alexander. Photo courtesy of David Hawkins.



Event committee, from left: Hakop Oganessian, Aida Shorvoghlian, Alina Sarkissian, Aleen Oruncakiel, Christine Dashdemirians, Hampik Shahinian, Suren Seropian, Dr. Hasmik Baran, Dr. Dianne Philibosian, Dr. Vahram Shemmashian. Photo courtesy of David Hawkins.



Guests gather for the annual Armenian Studies Program dinner. Photo courtesy of David Hawkins.

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courses at CSUN relating to the Armenian experience. Dr. Shemmassian says that the endowment encourages student engagement with the Chitjian collection through scholarship, adding that while people tend to take their own family artifacts for granted, “each and every house is a museum” that can help determine a family’s history. “Go home,” he urges. “Look at the voices of [your past]—your grandparents, great grandparents—see what they are telling you through the items.”

Ellen Jarosz, who directs Special Collections & Archives in CSUN’s Oviatt Library, says that although this isn’t the first collection relating to the Armenian experience, it is among the most comprehensive. “It is the nature of such tragedies that not only are immigrants forced to flee their homes, but they are also forced to leave such items behind as well,” Jarosz says, “which makes the Chitjian family collection even more priceless. It is a really great collection of materials that documents what is both a unique and shared experience—the Armenian Experience and the Refugee/Immigrant Experience in Los Angeles.”

Beyond Boundaries with the New Associate Dean

Submitted by Sheena Malhotra

I am thrilled to be joining the team in the Dean’s office as the Associate Dean, beginning in Fall 2017. This position will give me opportunities to work collaboratively with faculty across departments and programs on curriculum development and scheduling, as well as building innovative programs. Among other responsibilities (such as supervising assessment, grants, and centers in the college), the Associate Dean aids the Dean in her vision for the strategic plan. It is the kind of leadership role I am passionate about because I believe strongly in the mission of our college and want to be part of the conversations that move it forward. Our college mission values a diversity of cultures and perspectives while teaching students to be critical, responsible, and participatory global citizens committed to the principles of freedom, equality, and justice for all. To me, the heart and soul of our college are those students and our faculty, whose teaching and research are inspiring. Since our students come from a range of intersecting and diverse backgrounds, my own lived experiences as an immigrant, queer person of color from a multi-religious background will allow me to reach across various boundaries to serve.

I have been part of the College of Humanities as a faculty member in Gender and Women’s Studies since 2000. Over the past 17 years, I have worked in various leadership roles across the college and helped develop interdisciplinary curriculum for new programs such as the Queer Studies minor and the MA in Humanities. I served



Photo courtesy of Lee Choo

Malhotra continued

as the first Coordinator of the Queer Studies minor and worked closely with the Queer Studies committee to create Rainbow Graduation, making it accessible to all queer CSUN students and their allies. For four years I served as Chair of the Department of Gender and Women's Studies, which strives as part of its mission to interrogate injustice and inequalities that persist in our society. I have worked as the Academic Director for the MA in Humanities program for the past five years, shepherding it to become a fully online program so we could reach more students. As an active feminist scholar with an emphasis in media, I bring industry experience to bear on my scholarly analyses across various sites of culture. In short, I love and am committed to interdisciplinary approaches and working across intersectionality to create programs and curricula that support, feature, and foster our faculty while meeting the needs of our students.

Paying Mentorship Forward to Help Students Succeed

Submitted by Jackie Stallcup

I am excited to be starting as Director of Student Success Initiatives in Fall 2017. This position dovetails with new initiatives and programs in CSUN's Matadors Rising campaign, which aims to improve retention and graduation rates for all students while erasing opportunity gaps for historically underserved populations. I will be working closely with the College of Humanities advising team and department chairs on projects including:

- Reaching out to students who are on schedule to graduate in four years (or two, if transfers) to help them stay on track
- Conducting outreach to first-year students to encourage them to continue into their sophomore year
- Working with College Data Champions to create data-driven student success projects at department and college levels
- Working with faculty and department chairs to use new data dashboards to improve retention in their majors and minors
- Using data analytics to help department chairs create more effective and student-friendly course schedules
- Working with our Graduation and Retention Advising Specialist to create student-centered mentoring, peer counseling, and outreach
- Identifying and eliminating potential roadblocks to graduation



Photo courtesy of Lee Choo

I joined the faculty at CSUN in 1999 as an Assistant Professor in the English department. As I carved my path to tenure and promotion, I worked on a variety of department, college, and university committees and then was elected English department chair in 2011. My area of specialty is children's literature and I have taught courses on children's and adolescent literatures, 19th-century American literature, fairy tales and feminist theory, and the history of children's book illustration. My research focuses on issues of power, surveillance, and control in adult/child relationships as manifested in literature written for children. My community work includes presenting for teachers through L.A. Opera, organizing community read-aloud sessions, participating in One City, One Book celebrations, and performing public readings of controversial texts for Banned Books Week.

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Helping Students to Connect, Persevere, and Achieve “Impossible” Goals

Submitted by Vanessa Martinez



Photo courtesy of Lee Choo

The dean's office welcomes Vanessa L. Martinez, M.S., who will serve as the College of Humanities Graduation and Retention Advising Specialist, one of 10 such positions created campus-wide in the Graduation Initiative 2025 push to significantly improve graduation and retention rates. Vanessa, who is herself a first-generation college student, holds a master's degree in counseling psychology from the University of Wisconsin–Madison and a bachelor's degree in psychology from University of California, Irvine. This fall, she will be starting a doctoral program in Educational Leadership & Policy Studies at CSUN. Vanessa has conducted research nationally on challenges experienced by Chicana/o and Latina/o students and coping mechanisms they use to persevere. She has presented her research at the American Psychological Association and National Latina/o Psychological Association conferences and was recently published.

Vanessa hails from a small farming community in California's Central Valley, the daughter of Native American, Spanish, and Mexican migrant farm workers. Seeing how hard they worked to support the family, Vanessa was driven to go to college to train for a career she could truly enjoy, and she says her parents, who became small business owners, are very supportive of her choices to pursue higher education. In her new role as a Graduation and Retention Advising Specialist, Vanessa gets to help students make their own dreams a reality by supporting their efforts to stay in college and graduate—even when that seems like an impossible goal. Vanessa cites the difficulties CSUN students face in paying for college amid rising tuition and living costs. Many CSUN students come from lower-income backgrounds and operate with no financial safety net. A setback that might seem relatively minor to those in higher income brackets can completely derail the educational aspirations of our most vulnerable students.

Vanessa has served in various counseling and advising roles at colleges and universities in California, Idaho, Wisconsin, and Washington. Most recently, she served at Bakersfield College as a counselor and professor of student and career development. Vanessa has also been invested in creating welcoming university environments and campus climates via diversity training to mental health counselors, academic counselors, advisors, and college students in ongoing efforts to reduce discrimination and improve collaboration and respectful dialogue between people of all backgrounds. She stresses the difficulties students face when they live and work off-campus, often spending more time commuting to and from campus than they do interacting with other students and campus resources. This can significantly impede a student's ability to connect and develop a sense of college belonging. “It's a challenge to attend a campus of approximately 42,000 students and not feel like just a number lost in a sea of backpacks,” says Vanessa.

Vanessa may technically be off the clock come evening and weekends, but she's forever honing her

Martinez continued

understanding of student populations through her natural interests in languages and cultures. She's delighted to be at CSUN, where cultural events are routinely hosted at the Valley Performing Arts Center. And Vanessa, who is bilingual in Spanish and English, is also actively studying Arabic. "My primary motivation in learning about other cultures and learning new languages is to understand that although differences exist, there are many similarities that connect us as humans," Vanessa explains. "If we could all just take the time to learn about these similarities across cultures we could work together to reduce discrimination and promote peace and inclusion in our community."

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One of the things that I love about teaching at CSUN is that I recognize myself in so many of my students. I was born in Maywood and grew up in southeast Los Angeles. After attending community college, I transferred to Cal Poly Pomona, where I switched majors several times before finally settling on English. Mentorship from patient and caring faculty members was vital to my success as a student as I fumbled my way through figuring out what I wanted to do; it is important to me to pay that forward. My new position is the perfect combination of hands-on work with individual students and big-picture, data-driven planning that I hope will benefit many more students in helping them to stay in school, take the courses they need when they need them, and graduate in a timely manner.

Montepeque continued from page 1

Axel Montepeque, Assistant Professor, Central American Studies

Dr. Montepeque earned his Ph.D. in literature at University of California, San Diego. His research interests include Central American literature and cultural productions of the 19th and 20th centuries, Latina/o and Chicana/o literatures of the United States, and Latin American literature of the 20th century. He is also interested in literary theory and the theory of the novel. He enjoys working with film as well as hiking.

What is your idea of perfect happiness?

Reading a great book!

What is your greatest fear?

Not trying new things.

Which living person do you most admire?

I admire my mother for being such a wonderful person.

What is your greatest extravagance?

Buying fancy ice cream.

What is it that you most dislike?

Arrogance...

Which talent would you most like to have?

I would love to play the guitar.

What is your motto?

Innovate and create!



Photo courtesy of Axel Montepeque



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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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