



# The Collage

College of Liberal Arts & Sciences  
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**Dr. Chris Saidi | History  
Faculty Highlight**

Dr. Chris Saidi is a history professor who specializes in African History at Kutztown University. Dr. Saidi was awarded the Chambliss Research Award this past August for her extensive research on gender in Africa. She has researched and experienced how differently the understanding of gender is treated in Bantu-speaking African regions.

As a student, Dr. Saidi did not originally plan to major in history. She didn't like her original major in economics and switched to history after one of her teachers helped her realize how limited her view of the East had been. She hadn't considered that what she was taught about Africa was only the view that westerners had of the continent, and her teacher helped widen her view of African culture and society. Dr. Saidi's choice to focus on African history came after taking a college course taught by a professor who was South African. Dr. Saidi's husband at the time was from Somalia, so she started researching Africa and shifted her focus to early African history.

Her research first focused on gender roles in Africa, studying how matriarchical societies are more common and the women have more power, but her latest work is about the cultural understanding of gender and its fluidity in Bantu-speaking Africa. In

these regions, there is no binary gender; there is no "man" or "woman." They don't have strict categories like many societies do. "Gender is a fluid concept," she explains. "You can't say 'he,' 'she,' 'it.' They have none of those pronouns. You have to say, 'the person'." Dr. Saidi incorporates these pronouns into her own life. In her email signature, she has her pronouns listed as "the person" in honor of Bantu gender ideology. It is important to remember that Dr. Saidi is only talking about Bantu-speaking Africa, which is 75% of Africa south of the Sahara Desert (Somalia, Rwanda, Zambia, and DR Congo).

**"I chose history and I've never looked back. I'm lucky I get to do research and teach what I really care about."**

Dr. Saidi gives two examples of how she observed gender fluidity in these African regions. The first is "the maternal uncle is called 'a mother without breasts,' so he's biologically male, but he plays the role of mother." This idea of associating a man with being a mother figure is very different from what many people think in western societies. This is one of the main reasons Dr. Saidi thinks her work is important. "In the West, we have to stop

thinking that how we look at the world is how everybody else does," says Dr. Saidi

Another story comes from the family of one of Dr. Saidi's friends in Zambia: "Her daughter was killed at 21 and because she was too young to be an ancestor, in her community, it's believed somebody has to take on the daughter's soul," Dr. Saidi explains. So, the father took on the daughter's soul allowing the father to be both the sister and the father to the children. To Dr. Saidi's friend he's a husband and a daughter. Dr. Saidi finds it vital to acknowledge other cultures and their values and views of the world.

Her goal is to break down stereotypes and inform people about how gender is represented in Africa. "There's a lot of arrogance in how the West looks at Africa. And I like to play a little role in throwing a monkey wrench in that."



I'm writing these remarks during a conference for academic deans focused on "Navigating Uncertainty" as "Change Leaders." This theme is relevant to all our lives, as individuals and as members of various communities. Uncertainty is a constant in life; change is inevitable. What, then, does it mean to navigate, and what does it mean to lead?

Clarifying our core values can guide us through uncertainty, and living in alignment with values not only provides direction but also inspires others. As you read the profiles in this issue, consider the values that have shaped the lives of two of our College leaders, Dr. Chris Saidi and Ms. Valeria Mangiapane. They might inspire you to consider what matters most to you. How do your values guide you in times of change?

## DEAN'S CORNER



**DR. LAURIE McMILLAN**



## Valeria Mangiapane | Social Work Student Highlight

First-generation college student Valeria Mangiapane is a senior Social Work major at Kutztown University. Her interest in social work started when she took Social Work 130 with Dr. Stephen Stoeffler, where the discussions about poverty inspired her to change her major to social work. Her research project allowed her to go deeper into the study of dementia, a topic that is very important to her.

Valeria worked with Dr. Christopher Harris on the project "Understanding the Role of Family in Emergency Psychiatric Care for Individuals with Dementia" this past summer.

The project looked at how having a family member with dementia impacts the family members who take care of them or are close to them. Valeria says that "in class he asked if anyone was interested in the study, he mentioned the word dementia [and] as soon as I heard that word, I shot my hand up." She was very excited to be a part of this project because her family has a history of dementia, so she has seen the effects of the disease first-hand.

Over the summer Valeria and Dr. Harris conducted 700 phone calls to nursing care facilities to recruit them for the study. Dr. Harris then made flyers for the study to put in the facilities that were willing to participate. Valeria and Dr. Harris were also joined by Dr. LaBarre and two professors from other universities in conducting the study. They were focused on "exploring the lived experiences of family members with loved ones who may need emergency psychiatric care, who have dementia." This means they studied how dementia patients often have a hard time getting admitted to a facility because they lack the ability to consent to treatment. They looked at how a person with dementia impacts the family members that take care

of them. They also studied how difficult it can be for them without help from a skilled nursing facility. This project made her realize that she might want to pursue a career in dementia care. "I am leaning toward geriatric social work, so I feel that would be the specialty: dementia," she states.

**"Just being able to help is my goal."**

This project had special meaning for Valeria because this past summer she helped her mother care for her grandparents, who have dementia. Valeria said she enjoyed that work, "because family comes first" and helping her mom was important. Her research experience allowed her to offer a professional perspective on the situation. She hopes that in the future she can continue learning about the illness and how to help other families care for those who suffer from the disease.

Valeria has only one regret from her time at KU and that is not getting as involved on campus as she would have liked. She encourages those who are interested in a club or event to get involved now. She also has some advice for social work majors: "As long as you are passionate in helping people and willing to commit to social work, I would say just keep doing it."

## Bonus Q and A



### What do you do in your free time?

**Dr. Saidi:** I like to travel and do research. I like reading and I like hanging out with my grandkids and my great granddaughter.

**Valeria:** I enjoy scrapbooking and taking pictures of nature, so I like going on hikes or even just going for a walk.



### What is your favorite part about KU?

**Dr. Saidi:** I'm really glad I've been allowed to teach what I want to teach. And I love my students.

**Valeria:** I would definitely say the people that I've met and the diversity that they've brought to my life.



### Say a fun fact about yourself!

**Dr. Saidi:** My nickname in East Africa was "Mama Moisi," which means "rebellious woman."

**Valeria:** My father is from Sicily; he came here when he was 18.

