



## Dr. Mary Rita Weller | Social Work Faculty Highlight

"I'll often say that I am a Spanish-speaking sociologist, sexologist social worker," said Dr. Mary Rita Weller, Assistant Professor of Social Work. She has spent her eclectic career learning as much as she can to ensure that everyone, especially vulnerable populations, maintains healthy and happy relationships.

Dr. Weller's dream was to become a social worker, but when she received a fantastic financial package from SUNY Oneonta, a school that didn't offer a social work program, she could not pass on the opportunity. Between loving the campus and her advisor telling her that sociology and social work were the same thing, Dr. Weller stayed and graduated with a Bachelor's in Sociology and Spanish.

"I'm really glad I got my sociology degree because it gave me

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a good foundation around human beings and how we socialize," said Dr. Weller. If she had not followed this path, she would not have interned in Washington, D.C. where she worked for Special Assistance for Juveniles Association, an agency that assisted runaway children. She also would not have studied in Cuernavaca, Mexico where she experienced an entirely different culture—and stayed twice as long as expected.

Dr. Weller later attained her Masters of Social Work from Temple University. For over twenty years, she was the director of an agency supporting individuals with disabilities. She also began her

own private practice assisting people with disabilities to manage their issues with sexuality and relationships. While working with her clients, she felt as if she did not have enough knowledge to help, so she went back to school and earned her Ph.D. in Education with a concentration in Human Sexuality from Widener University.

Dr. Weller began looking more closely at individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and how they understood human sexuality and relationships. She is striving to help these individuals understand their own sex drives. Dr. Weller has advised people from all over the country who are seeking assistance in handling their vulnerable family members' relationships.

One aspect of her research is in consent laws. According to Dr. Weller,

consent laws are not only based in age but also capacity; people need to understand what they are consenting to. This means, that if a person's IQ is too low, they are not able to engage in or consent to sexual activity. Since a person is diagnosed with an intellectual disability when they have an IQ lower than 70, this law directly limits them. Dr. Weller is fighting to ensure sexual rights and freedom for these individuals.

Dr. Weller has focused on these individuals for most of her career, but she has recently decided to switch gears and focus on a new population: women. During a conversation with a student advisee, Dr. Weller realized that

for many years, the feminist movement has favored white, middle class and wealthy women, and many other groups of women have felt excluded. The womanist movement, which began in the 1980s, was a reaction to the traditional feminist movement by women of color. "It isn't necessarily that these other groups don't agree with feminist ideals, they just don't feel connected or welcomed," she said. "I guess we look at color, race, and gender too singularly, and they all have so many layers." She is trying to determine what exactly are the differences between feminism and womanism; she isn't sure where this conversation goes next but is excited to find out.

Dr. Weller's education and research just scratch the surface of everything she's accomplished in her life and career; she has memberships in various professional organizations, including the Pennsylvania Association of Social Work Educators and the National Association of Social Workers, and is helping to bring the KU Social Work bachelors' program to the RACC campus. Dr. Weller makes sure she continues to learn every day because "the older you get," she said, "the more you don't know."

## New Tenure-Track & Award Winning Faculty



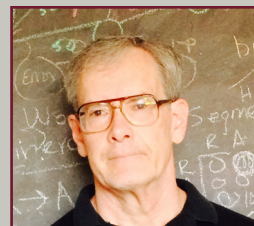
Dr. Heather LaBarre  
Tenure-Track  
Social Work



Dr. Muhammad Adeel  
2020 Chambliss  
Faculty Award



Dr. Brian Kronenthal  
John P. Schellenberg Award for  
Teaching Excellence



Dr. Fran Vasko  
LAS Dean's Outstanding  
Faculty Award



Dr. Albert Fu  
2020 Chambliss  
Faculty Award



**Laura Gale | Anthropology  
Student Highlight**

The sun beats onto your back as the hours tick by. You stumble over a rock, almost rolling your ankle, again. You gaze ahead, and towering cliffs and sparse vegetation surround you, with tiny homesteads appearing here and there.

A hike through the hot Arizonan spring sun into a canyon may not seem like an enjoyable pastime for most, but for senior anthropology major Laura Gale, there is no place she would rather be.

In early May 2019, Laura accompanied history professor Dr. Maria Sanelli on a Navajo reservation excursion in Chinle, Arizona. The Navajo Nation is the second-largest federally recognized tribe in the United States. Laura's interest in archaeology made her the perfect intern for a trip to the southwest United States—an archaeological hub. "I've always loved the puzzle and mystery of archaeology," said Laura. Returning to school years after receiving her

associate's degree in 2011, Laura came back excited to learn. "The more I learn," she said, "the more I love."

The trip was sponsored by the Frederick Douglass Institute (FDI) and the National Park Service. When Laura landed in Arizona to spend the next six days in the desert, she was joined by a group of JROTC high school students from Aztec, New Mexico. This excursion was part of a series of trips executed by the FDI with the purpose of "highlighting marginalized groups across the United States," said Laura. Together, everyone spent the next few days fully immersing themselves in the Navajo culture and history of Canyon de Chelly, located in the Four Corners region on the Navajo reservation in Northeastern Arizona. Aside from exploring archaeological sites and the Navajo culture, Laura assisted Dr. Sanelli in observing the JROTC students to determine whether immersive experiential learning is more effective than reading out of a textbook in a classroom, according to Laura.

One day, the group spent time at Diné College, the public tribal college for the Navajo Nation, where they took part in indigenous history courses taught by Navajo tribal members. "It was heart-wrenching," said Laura. "But it was important to learn from their perspective." The entire lower level of the college building is covered in murals depicting the Navajo people's creation story. From oral traditions to the many treaties that have controlled

the reservation for centuries, the group learned history not found in textbooks.

They also spent an entire day in the canyon itself. They hiked for ten miles, stopping along the way to explore archaeological sites and other places of significance in Navajo culture. The hike is one of Laura's favorite memories from the trip. The trek was intense, but she was able to see famous archaeological sites that she always read about, such as the White House Ruins Monument, which is a cliff dwelling situated beneath 600 feet of canyon wall.

The group fully immersed themselves in the culture while they were in the canyon. "We came across a traditional Navajo home," said Laura. "It's called a hogan. The hogans are round, and their doors always face the sunrise because you are never supposed to sleep when the sun is in the sky." Before Laura even learned this fact about Navajo culture, she found herself waking up before sunrise every

day when she was in Arizona. "The canyon magic was working on me the whole time," she said.

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This was Laura's first anthropological professional experience, and the trip confirmed that she is on the right path. "I learned to stand back and listen, especially when you are listening to someone else from another culture. You want to just accept what they are willing to give you and don't push too hard."

## Welcome Dr. Laurie McMillan

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences Dean's Office is excited to welcome Dr. Laurie McMillan, Associate Dean. Dr. McMillan recently held the position of Assistant Dean of the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences at Millersville University. She previously served as the Chair of the English and Modern Language Studies Department at Pace University. She was also an English Professor and Writing Director at Marywood University for over ten years. Dr. McMillan received her Bachelors of Psychology from Brandeis University before attaining both her Masters of Arts in English Language and Literature and Ph.D. in English Language and Literature from Duquesne University. She has published various articles and books throughout her career, including her November 2018 textbook *Focus on Writing: What College Students Want to Know* which focuses on engaging first-year college students in their composition and rhetoric courses. Dr. McMillan reflects on her first few weeks at Kutztown: "They say gratitude is related to happiness, and gratefulness has been easy at Kutztown. Colleagues have welcomed me, I've met people who care deeply about students, and we are facing an unusual time with an abundance of patience. I'm thankful every day to be at Kutztown!"

