Kaylen Sanders: Finding What She Loves

“After coming into college with absolutely no idea what I wanted to pursue, finding linguistics was like a revelation,” says Kaylen Sanders, a junior majoring in linguistics with minors in computer science and nonfiction writing. “The most rewarding experience I’ve had at Pitt has basically been finding what I love and getting to engage in it every day. I’m really grateful [that] I have the freedom to explore a diversity of interests and, ultimately, am able to invest in the ones that are captivating and meaningful to me.”

Sanders, a native of Pembroke Pines, Fla., recalls how challenging it was as a freshman to try to decide what career she should pursue without knowing what field of study really spoke to her.

“I was thinking about studying pharmacy,” Sanders says, “and it took me two terms of chemistry and biology courses before I realized that I wanted nothing to do with the natural sciences. I was kind of lost and put a lot of pressure on myself to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. It was when I started exploring linguistics that I remembered what it was like to genuinely love a subject, be excited about what I was learning, and even want to read my textbook for fun.”

In exploring her passion for linguistics, Sanders uncovered another passion as well—and discovered a career path that allows her to meld the two. “I’ve been passionate about language for years, but Pitt is where I actually got a chance to delve deeper. Beyond simply studying languages in the interest of writing and speaking, I started learning subjects like morphology, phonology, syntax, and semantics, which pull data from a wide range of languages to try to find patterns and develop theories. … I’ve also been mentored by computers since I discovered the existence of the Internet, so I thought the field of language technology sounded like a way to unite two of my seemingly unrelated interests.”

Sanders is spending her time at Pitt preparing for a career in language technology, which uses computer programs to analyze and model human language, improving the ability of humans to interface with machines by building systems that can comprehend and produce human speech. While taking courses focused on language technology, she has taken advantage of unique career-building opportunities outside the classroom as well. Earlier this year, Sanders met with a group of professionals who work in speech recognition for Amazon through the Pitt Python Linguistics Group, a group on campus focused on linguistics and computer programming. In spring 2015, she participated in She Innovates!, Pitt’s first all-female hackathon, developing an app to combat street harassment while being mentored by women working in the technology sector. “I like that I’m getting a chance to combine both my linguistic and programming skills and to learn about real-world applications of language engineering,” Sanders says.

Truly, Sanders has found many ways to explore her interests at Pitt. She serves as a research assistant to Associate Professor Scott Kiesling. She is the business manager for the undergraduate linguistics club, Pitt’s first all-female hackathon, developing an app to combat street harassment while being mentored by women working in the technology sector. “I like that I’m getting a chance to combine both my linguistic and programming skills and to learn about real-world applications of language engineering,” Sanders says.

Sanders encourages new Pitt students to do the same but notes that it’s important to know your limits. “I would say to try everything that catches your eye, and once you’ve had an array of experiences, boil down your life to the essentials—the clubs that really make you happy, the leadership positions that fulfill you, the research that perfectly aligns with your interests, and so on. It’s a useful method for getting and staying involved while making sure that you truly care about what you’re doing.”

ENGAGING STUDENTS COMPLETELY

The Department of Linguistics fully engages students both inside and outside the classroom:

- Yinzling, the University of Pittsburgh undergraduate linguistics club, is open to linguistics majors and minors and to any undergraduate interested in the mechanics of language. The group meets weekly and hosts events such as foreign movie nights, guest speakers, the Language Fair, and Friday linguistics colloquia. (Curious about the name of the club? It’s derived from the terms “yinz,” which is the plural form of “you” in the “Pittsburghese” dialect, and “ling,” a short term for linguistics.)

- Undergraduates can work closely with linguistics faculty members on their research projects. Students participating in First Experiences in Research through the Office of Undergraduate Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity, for example, have assisted with Associate Professor Scott Kiesling’s research on “Pittsburghese,” the name given to the unique way that some claim Pittsburgh residents speak. The research focuses on Pittsburgh speech and society.

- Students can earn a certificate in American Sign Language or Arabic language and culture.

- The linguistics department is home to three centers. The English Language Institute (ELI) provides English as a second language courses for students who want to improve their English for academic, professional, or personal purposes. It offers an intensive noncredit program in addition to for-credit courses for students enrolled at the University. Students from 101 foreign countries have studied English as a second language at ELI since 1964. The Robert Henderson Language Media Center supports the use of technology to enhance language learning and hosts 900 language classes each year. The center includes a recording studio, a multimedia development area, and the only computer lab on campus where students can record themselves speaking a foreign language. You can read about the Less-Commonly-Taught Languages Center on page 3 of this issue.
MESSAGE FROM THE ASSOCIATE DEAN

Being the First

According to the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, of the 7.5 million undergraduates attending four-year colleges and universities in the United States, about 20 percent are first-generation students—students whose parents have not earned a four-year degree. We know that being the first person in a family to navigate university life isn’t easy. That’s why Pitt has supported the TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) program since 1972. The program is housed in the Dietrich School’s Academic Resource Center.

SSS, which is funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, is designed to support first-generation students, among others, as they transition to college and to provide individualized services to the students throughout their time at Pitt. The program serves 250 students each year via a wide variety of services, including the following:

- **Academic Advising:** All SSS students are assigned an SSS academic advisor who works with each student one on one to customize and maximize his or her college experience.
- **Peer Support:** SSS peer mentors support new students as they transition to college and share what they have learned along the way. The SSS Scholars Network puts students in touch with older students and alumni, providing unique networking opportunities for careers, internships, and educational plans.
- **Academic Skill Building:** The one-credit Right Start to College courses provide valuable insight into what it takes to succeed at Pitt, covering topics like taking effective notes for college courses, managing test anxiety, working with professors, exploring options for majors, and preparing for graduate school. And, in conjunction with the Academic Resource Center, SSS provides individual and group tutoring as well as academic success workshops.
- **Cultural and Social Events:** SSS hosts cultural and social events across campus and around the city, providing students with the opportunity to relax with other SSS students and staff while connecting with the University and surrounding community.

The SSS program has enjoyed great success throughout the past 43 years. During the 2013–14 academic year, 94 percent of Pitt’s TRIO SSS participants persisted in college, and 96 percent were in good academic standing.

This ongoing success was affirmed last fall, when the U.S. Department of Education announced that it would renew funding for SSS for another five years. Through that grant, SSS will receive $395,846 per year over 5 years, totaling more than $1.9 million. Of the 24 SSS projects funded in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, the University of Pittsburgh’s received the largest award and scored 105 out of a possible 106 points in the grant application.

But the success of SSS is also illustrated by the students who have been impacted by the services that SSS provides. Alexa Johnson, a junior SSS participant from Philadelphia, Pa., who is majoring in psychology, has this to say about the program: “SSS has been a fundamental resource for me throughout my time here at Pitt. I don’t know where I would be without the help of the SSS advisors and all the activities and enrichment that the program has to offer.”

For more information about the TRIO SSS program at the University’s Pittsburgh campus, please visit asu undergraduate.pitt.edu/arc/trio-sss.

John A. Twynig, PhD
Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies

FACULTY PROFILE

A Conversation with Claude Mauk

Claude Mauk is director of undergraduate studies and senior lecturer in the Department of Linguistics as well as director of the Less-Commonly-Taught Languages Center. Mauk began teaching in 2004 and has coached, counseled, and helped hundreds of students throughout the years as a departmental advisor. His outstanding achievement in this role was recognized this spring, when he received the Ampco-Pittsburgh Prize for Excellence in Advising. You can read more about Mauk’s award at chronicle.pitt.edu/story/guiding-way-one-student-time.

What is your philosophy when it comes to advising?

“What I try my best to be as an advisor is someone who is there to listen as well as to advise. Students spend most of their time in academic settings listening. This is an opportunity for them to be heard. They appreciate being accepted as a full person rather than just as a face in a crowded classroom. When students appreciate their advisor, I think they also are more receptive to the advice that we give them. They know that I respect them, and in turn they respect what I have to say. I also feel that good advising is going beyond talking about degree requirements and navigating the University; it also includes advice about transitioning out of their student role at graduation.”

How does advising help students to succeed?

“Our students are all very intelligent. They are very good at learning the course content in their classes. What course work really does, however, is help students have good ideas of what specific thing they want to do after graduation or even how to figure out what that is. An advisor can work with each individual student to help him or her decide what is best for him or her.”

What motivates you to teach and to continue teaching?

“I think what motivates me to teach is something more than just a desire to share knowledge, though that is certainly part of it. As important to me is the chance to help students grow as people. Undergraduates, in particular, will change and grow a great deal while pursuing their degree. Helping to shape that growth is really rewarding. This is also part of why I enjoy being an advisor.”

What do you want your students to remember most about the classes they have taken with you?

“Honestly, I hope the students will remember that I treated them with respect and fairness. Then I hope that they will take that as an example of how to treat others and do that for the rest of their lives.”

What is it that excites you about linguistics?

“I think one of the great things about linguistics is that it’s a true crossroads of disciplines. Language touches on most areas of the human experience. Phonetics covers some information from anatomy, physiology, and physics. Morphology, syntax, and phonology include logic. Other areas touch on medicine, sociology, psychology, and so on.

“The research I do is on the phonetics of American Sign Language. Phonetics is usually defined as the study of the movements of the speech articulators, the acoustics of speech sounds, and the perception of those sounds. Sign doesn’t rely on sound, so the term phonetics might seem to be strange when applied to a signed language. What I look at is the movement of the signer’s hands, arms, head, and torso during signing using 3-D motion tracking. My hope is that the next thing I will be able to look at is a deeper examination of what we refer to as the signing space—the space that the signer’s hands are generally limited to and rarely leave.”

What advice would you give to undergraduate parents whose student may be interested in tackling this major?

“Parents often are most concerned about their child’s career potential and are concerned that an ‘unusual’ major might limit their child’s options. I would say that it’s just as important for parents to be educated about career options for a linguistics major as it is for our students to be educated about those options.

“For linguistics, there are two main directions our students tend to go: language teaching and language technology. However, there are many other possible directions for students to go depending on their interests and abilities—international affairs, translation, law, etc.”

Kiplinger’s Ranks Pitt as Best Public School Value in State

This story first ran in the University Times on January 7, 2016.

Kiplinger’s Personal Finance has ranked Pitt among the 100 best-value public colleges nationwide for the 11th consecutive year and as the top value among four-year public colleges and universities in Pennsylvania. Kiplinger’s assesses value according to admission rate, percentage of students who return for sophomore year, student-faculty ratio and four-year graduate rate. Cost criteria include sticker price, financial aid and average debt at graduation.

The rankings are available online at kiplinger.com/rank college, as well as in the February issue of Kiplinger’s Personal Finance.

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Studying a Less Commonly Taught Language May Help to Build a Career

For alumna Emily Olmstead (BA ’14), studying Persian at Pitt not only improved her language skills and provided international experience, it also laid the foundation for a career in international development.

Olmstead’s experience has been transformative. "I started learning Persian in my first year. I studied abroad in Tajikistan with American Councils [as a sophomore]. Just a few months after that, I returned to Tajikistan with the U.S. Department of State’s Critical Language Scholarship. At the end of the summer, I began working for a USAID project in Dushanbe—a direct result of my language skills. Now I am the gender and development intern at World Vision International in Washington, D.C., and in the summer of 2016, I’ll be headed to Moldova to begin training as a Peace Corps education volunteer." Olmstead studied Persian through the Less-Commonly-Taught Languages (LCTL) Center, which is housed in the Department of Linguistics. The center exists to broaden the range of options in foreign language instruction at the University of Pittsburgh. Course work is offered in 13 languages that are pertinent to many programs of study but not available through the University’s other academic departments.

"Our languages are from around the globe, representing five continents," says Claude Maul, director of the center. "Our language classes are just like language classes in other departments, covering grammar, reading, writing, speaking, listening, and culture. All classes in the LCTL Center can count toward the general education requirement for foreign language."

Why do students choose to study a less commonly taught language? Some students are engaged in research on a particular area of the world, and some have a personal interest in one of the countries where the language is spoken. Some, like current student Zoe Tillman, know that studying a less commonly taught language will enhance their academic program and can lay the foundation for their future career.

Tillman studies modern standard Arabic and Egyptian Arabic. His interest in Arabic stems from his family’s blended religious identity:

"In my undergraduate career, I also have studied mathematics, economics, and political science. Taking Arabic has generated many opportunities for me in these fields of study," says Tillman. "I am interested in our environment, the energy it provides, and the economic and political implications of the United States’ energy policy in the Middle East. My long-term career aspiration is to work as a policy analyst in the Bureau of Energy Resources housed in the U.S. Department of State. Learning the Arabic language and engaging in Arabic culture at Pitt has afforded me a wide perspective and given me invaluable tools to confront these issues."

Read more about the LCTL Center at lctl.pitt.edu.

Connecting Linguistics to the Community and Industry

Submitted by Abdessalam Soudi, PhD, visiting lecturer and linguistics internship advisor

The humanities face an uphill battle in the national conversation around improving the employment of recent college graduates. While internships and job opportunities involving disciplines like science, engineering, medicine, computer science, and business have been successful because there is a clear place for such graduates in the job market, the possibilities for applications of the study of the humanities in the world of business have been less obvious.

Linguistic analysis, however, has many potentially useful applications, from government to business to medicine. These applications include speech recognition systems, mobile development and software design, understanding the impact of technology on human conversation, and facilitating cross-cultural communication.

Over the past few years, I have become concerned that linguistics graduates do not feel confident in effectively selling themselves in today’s competitive job market. Linguistics can be such a useful and applicable field, and I wanted our graduates to learn to draw attention to their unique and valuable skill set.

My experience as a consultant in the community and my long-term collaboration with Pitt’s School of Medicine have given me insights into some ways linguistics could aid a variety of businesses. With this in mind, I created Linguistic Consulting Internship: Connecting Linguistics to the Community and Industry, a class for linguistics majors that aims to fill the gap between knowledge and application.

I established partnerships with health care organizations, technology companies, and others that could make use of linguistic tools and placed seniors there. The partnerships helped the companies by giving them a linguistic perspective and helped students by preparing them for challenging careers and giving them valuable experience. Some of the class’ alumni currently hold positions with Management Science Associates, Voci Technologies Incorporated, Amason, and HCL America at Google Pittsburgh.

Additionally, every year the class operates, it serves to increase the visibility of linguistics with participating businesses and institutes, including M*Modal, Semantic Compaction Systems, the Language Technologies Institute at Carnegie Mellon University, and the English Language Institute at Pitt. These businesses and institutes focus on speech recognition systems, and some of them use speech analytics to do market research and provide business intelligence to customers all over the United States.
Summer Classes Help Students Achieve Their Goals

Registration for summer sessions is now open! Summer sessions classes are designed to help students reach their educational goals no matter where they are in their academic careers. Summer sessions provide an exciting opportunity for students to catch up on needed credits, stay on track to graduate on time, or get ahead of schedule for the fall term.

Students nearing graduation can choose from hundreds of upper-level courses to complete their degree. Newer students can complete general education or specialized requirements, finish core and prerequisite courses, or enroll in popular courses and labs that fill quickly during the fall and spring terms. Summer sessions also provide opportunities to explore subjects without the pressure of a full class load, whether students want to really focus on their major, ace a tough class, or explore a new area of interest. And with the flexibility of enrolling in classes during 4-, 6-, and 12-week sessions, students can take summer classes without forgoing summer jobs, internships, or family vacations.

For more information on the benefits of summer sessions and to check out specific course offerings in all disciplines, students should talk with their advisor or visit summer.pitt.edu.

Questions or concerns? E-mail us at pittpride@as.pitt.edu.