

History major's speech analysis earns accolades, sparks interests in research

Part of a series profiling undergraduate researchers provided by University of Pittsburgh Office of the Provost.

By Niki Kapsambelis

It is perhaps a measure of the depth of Jennifer Kirk's intellectual curiosity that she would tackle a research project for a prestigious summer fellowship in a discipline that is outside her major.

And it is perhaps a measure of her intellectual acumen that the project was so well-executed that a professor from another university pronounced it a theoretical breakthrough, and was floored to learn that an undergraduate was its author.

"If the world of research had an amateur draft, she'd be a first-round pick," says Gordon Mitchell, associate professor of communication, who advised Kirk on her project. "She is a strong writer, a very smart researcher."

For Kirk, a junior history major from Murrysville, Pennsylvania, the project she wrote for the Brackenridge Fellowship last summer was simply an opportunity to explore presidential history, a topic on which she had not had a chance to spend much time in her regular coursework. Initially, she thought she might like to examine inaugural speeches. Advisors in the departments of communications and political science put her in touch with Mitchell, who suggested that much research had already been done in the area of inaugural speeches, but very little had been done on the speeches that presidents gave at the dedication of their libraries.

"I saw that there was an opportunity to bring a particular rhetorical theory to bear on her research," says Mitchell, who worked to bridge the disciplines of communications and history by challenging Kirk to read the work of rhetorical critics who analyzed inaugural speeches, then apply the same type of analysis to the library dedication speeches.

"She was off and running," he says.

"It became the backbone of my research," says Kirk, who contacted each library and obtained copies of the speeches. Some were available online; some arrived by fax on her father's machine at the family home in Murrysville; and — in the case of Harry Truman — Kirk also had to transcribe notes from an audio file. They ranged from the one-paragraph dedication speech of Jimmy Carter to the four pages of Ronald Reagan.

"They were all very different, but once I read them, I found a common thread among them," says Kirk. "It became clear that in each speech, the president had to

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— **Gordon Mitchell,
Pitt professor**

express a purpose for his library."

When Kirk had to create a transcript for Truman's speech from the audio recording, "it was at that point that I started to think, 'This is a serious researcher,'" Mitchell says. "She is spotting holes, and filling it in with primary material."

To be recognized as a genre, speeches must have a common setting as well as common formal elements. In early May, she presented her work to the Eastern Communication Association at its annual meeting. It was there that one of the discussants, an associate professor from the State University of New York, called Kirk's project a theoretical breakthrough and was stunned to learn that Kirk was not only an undergraduate, but not even a senior.

Kirk transferred to Pitt after her second year of undergraduate work with the intention of enrolling in the School of Education with the intention of becoming a teacher. And while she still has not entirely ruled out that idea, "this research has really opened my eyes to the more academic field," she says. "I love research — it's ridiculous."

So how does a rising young star follow a project that is so well-received? By delving into more research, of course. In a spin-off from her original project, Kirk serves as a co-author with Mitchell on an independent study piece that looks at two libraries that never happened: A Reagan library at Stanford, and a Nixon library at Duke. The paper examines the factors behind each controversy and why the libraries were not built at those locations. (Reagan's library wound up in Simi Valley, California, and Nixon's is in Yorba Linda, California.) They presented the work at a conference in Eugene, Oregon, in May.

As part of her contribution to the project, Kirk traveled to both Duke and Stanford to look through their archives and access such documents as memoranda of faculty groups who opposed the libraries, as well as correspondence between the schools and library supporters. The Honors College gave Kirk a grant to support her travel for the project,



Gordon Mitchell and Jennifer Kirk review Jennifer's paper for submission to a national conference on Rhetoric.

a factor that Mitchell says is key to supporting the work of talented students.

"You really have to tip your hat to [the Honors College] and the way they support undergraduate research," he says. "There's a good chance that she'll have two peer-reviewed publications by the time she heads into graduate school."

For her part, Kirk is happy that she has been able to pursue her interests regardless of whether they fit neatly within the boundaries of her major.

"I want my work to testify for what it is," she says. "Transferring [to Pitt] was probably one of the best decisions of my life."

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