Quite a bit of interesting research is going on in the University of Northern Iowa’s Communication Sciences and Disorders department. One of these many projects is being led by Dr. Lisa Kopf. She has been a professor at UNI for three years, and for all three she has had graduate and undergraduate students working with her.

Every semester, Dr. Kopf has had two graduate assistants working in her lab, rotating out over time. This is because the coursework for the graduate program only lasts a year and a half. However, Dr. Kopf has also had an undergraduate student working in her lab ever since her first spring teaching at UNI. This student is Anna Sagan, current senior Communication Science and Disorders student. Anna asked if she could work in Dr. Kopf’s lab after hearing about the professor’s research during her Phonetics class.

“Anna has actually helped in many ways to train some of the graduate students in the research because she’s been through it all and they’re learning it for the first time,” Dr. Kopf said.

Dr. Kopf recommends that students take initiative to learn about their professors’ research and learn how to become involved. One way to do this is to look at the UNI website and see what subjects different faculty are interested in. She believes that being a part of research can help students better understand the material in their classes. In addition, it helps students be aware of the cutting edge research in their field.

“We’re all very flattered whenever somebody contacts us about our research. It means that what we’re doing matters,” she said.

“When I was an undergrad, I was involved in research and I got to know the faculty member that I worked with much more closely,” Dr. Kopf explained. “You develop a closer relationship with faculty members as well as other students within the lab. You can learn some really valuable skills. With a lot of the things that we do in our lab, students are using equipment that they may actually end up using in clinics one day if they become speech pathologists.”

The big project in Dr. Kopf’s lab right now is the development of a voice monitor for occupational voice users, or people who have to talk a lot as a part of their job, such as teachers, salespeople, and actors.

“This monitor is going to teach them to be a better consumer of their own voice. We never really think about how we use the voice. We just do. Right now, the measure that we’re testing for this particular monitor is helping people to better know how much of the time they’re talking versus resting their voice,” Dr. Kopf said.

The next measure they are going to add is a feature to help users better estimate how loud they are, and another to estimate when they might need to rest it. Dr. Kopf explained, “Our thought is, if they can learn to better estimate their own voice parameters, this monitor can teach them and they can use it for like a month or two. Then hopefully they can take those skills and say,
“We’re all very flattered whenever somebody contacts us about our research. It means that what we’re doing matters.”

-Dr. Lisa Kopf

Dr. Kopf hopes that this project will help people become more aware of the importance of taking care of their voice.

“So many people use their voice as part of their job. Most people who do are not even aware of their risk of voice disorders. I really hope that through this project they learn that this is something that they need to think about. And if they do have any issues, we have a clinic on campus here that they can come visit. We can help assess and possibly treat any voice disorders they may get.”

Currently Dr. Kopf and the students in her lab are testing a display for that monitor. They are having volunteers test the monitor—on their own and without the help of a speech pathologist, since the monitor is intended to be easy to understand and intuitive to use. The volunteers will then provide feedback about the monitor and suggest changes to improve the display in order to make it easier to use.

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