LEARNING TO LISTEN

Adam Paul ’14, left, works in one of the acoustics rooms with Professor Robert Celmer ’78, at right. Paul is now employed by Shen, Milsom & Wilke, an acoustical consulting firm in New York City.
When it comes to sound, nothing gets past Robert Celmer '78, professor of mechanical engineering in the University of Hartford's College of Engineering, Technology, and Architecture (CETA). From the hum of a fan to a slight echo in a room, Celmer’s expert ears detect noises that most of us never notice. He calls his ability a blessing and a curse. Still, it’s what makes him uniquely qualified to lead CETA’s undergraduate acoustical engineering and music program, which is the only one of its kind in the country.

“[Sound] is invisible, but there are things you can do with it and control it. That was really fascinating to me,” says Celmer, whose interest in sound started when he learned how to play the piano as a child. “The more I learned, the more I realized this was a field I could get into.”

With that in mind, Celmer enrolled in the University’s mechanical engineering program. His mentor was Professor Conrad Hemond, whom Celmer calls “the godfather” of acoustical engineering. Celmer went on to earn his master’s and PhD in acoustics from Pennsylvania State University. By the time he was finished, Hemond was looking toward retirement and recruited Celmer to return to the University of Hartford to teach and eventually take over the new acoustical engineering and music program in 1982.

Over the next few years, Celmer and Hemond not only taught but also worked together on various acoustical projects, such as designing windows in a hotel at Bradley International Airport in Windsor Locks, Conn., so that air traffic noise would not disturb guests. This type of outside-the-classroom project and his relationship with Hemond serve as examples of how Celmer mentors his own students.

Each fall, Celmer, who was recently named a fellow of the Acoustical Society of America, teaches acoustic and engineering fundamentals. Students have the chance to practice in the University’s acoustics laboratory, which includes the Paul S. Veneklasen Research Foundation Anechoic Chamber, a room designed to prevent reflections of sound waves that is insulated from exterior sources of noise. In the spring, Celmer helps sophomores, juniors, and seniors put their new skills to the test in real-world settings. His students have taken measurements to improve the acoustics of restaurants, studied the effects of different flooring on the noise level in hospitals, and helped design a proposed music arts center.

“I’ve continued Conrad’s tradition,” Celmer explains. “The beautiful thing about these project classes is the intangibles for the students, such as having to show up on time, dress professionally, and translate layman’s language into scientific language.”

The students gain valuable experience for their résumés, which helps them land jobs upon graduation. In fact, Celmer says companies call him with more job opportunities than he has students to fill them. He believes his students are so successful because they already have a love of sound and the dedication required of the rigorous admission process. Applicants must play an instrument and pass an audition to be accepted into The Hartt School, the University’s performing arts conservatory. They must also meet CETA’s entrance requirements.

“They are already motivated when they get here, as opposed to having a guidance counselor tell them they will make a lot of money if they study engineering,” he explains. “That’s not motivating when you are working your way through calculus and physics. The passion for what you’re doing is what motivates you: trying to make concert halls sound terrific from every seat, or quieter machines, or better hearing aids for people. Making better sound for everybody—that’s what acoustics is all about.”
One by one, University of Hartford students stepped up to the microphone to deliver stirring recitations of words from African American history—a powerful performance of a Maya Angelou poem, a moving excerpt from Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” a rousing speech by Malcolm X.

The inspiring program of words and music, which left many in the audience visibly moved, was part of “Empowering Change,” the University’s groundbreaking celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act.

The force of nature responsible for the program was Joyce Ashuntantang, who choreographed the performances, guided students through their readings, and helped them get in touch with voices from the past.

Ashuntantang is an associate professor of English in the University’s Hillyer College and a passionate believer in the power of words. She is a published poet and actress with a growing, international reputation for her stunning poetry and colorful, dramatic readings. In recent years she has read at international poetry festivals in Nicaragua, Colombia, and Greece, while also bringing her distinctive voice to a number of events in the Hartford area.

Among the themes that run throughout Ashuntantang’s teaching, poetry, and scholarly work is her connection to her native Cameroon in western Africa. This past summer, she traveled to Cameroon as part of her work on a book that will use poetry and photography to document the disappearing folk art of the Manyu region of Cameroon, her childhood home.

Ashuntantang has written many poems about Manyu crafts that tell vivid stories about the crafts and their role in the lives of Manyu women, in particular. One poem, “Asoreh,” tells a story centered on an asoreh, a richly decorated dish that Manyu women created for their husbands. When a husband died, the asoreh was broken in a public ceremony, indicating that the woman was now free to remarry.

The heartbreaking poem is told from the perspective of a woman who has just witnessed the breaking of the asoreh after her husband’s death. In the poem the woman talks about her deep love for her husband and wonders whether she will ever be ready to love someone else.

Ashuntantang is hoping that her work will help preserve disappearing Manyu crafts like the asoreh. She also wants to use her poetry to help preserve Kenyang, one of the disappearing ethnic languages of Cameroon. While the official languages of Cameroon are English and French, the country has more than 200 ethnic languages, many of which are dying as those who know them pass away.

During the “Hartford Loves Poetry” festival in April, Ashuntantang read two poems that she wrote in Kenyang.

“I want to give back to the language. I want people to soak in the language, enjoy the words, enjoy the rhythm, feel it,” Ashuntantang said. “Language is a repository of the culture. If we lose that, we lose the culture as well.”
This year’s list of the top 25 university professors in the country, as ranked by RateMyProfessors.com, includes at number 20 Laura Pence, professor of chemistry in the University of Hartford’s College of Arts and Sciences. The popular website, which is owned and operated by MTV’s college network, mtvU, releases an annual list that ranks the nation’s top professors and universities based entirely on students’ input.

Pence is the only professor in New England on the list. With student comments like these about her on the website, it becomes clear why:

“She is always willing to help you in any way possible and manages to make pretty hard source material extremely easy to comprehend. She also managed to keep classes entertaining with her sense of humor. I would highly recommend taking her class if you get the chance as you definitely would not regret it.”

“Best teacher I have ever had in any class in any subject in my entire life. Professor Pence is so nice and willing to help, and has the most effective teaching style. Take this professor if you can, you will learn so much.”

“IN PENCE WE TRUST. This woman is a godsend. Such clarity and makes what you're learning actually interesting. If you have the option to take this professor in any class, DO IT.”

“She has a keen interest in her students. Not only in their success in class but also in life. Highly recommend for all!”

Pence, who won the University’s Roy E. Larsen Award for Outstanding Teaching in 2006, teaches courses ranging from introductory chemistry to advanced environmental chemistry and chemical synthesis. She says, “The reason I love teaching is the bond that forms with my students when my excitement about their learning and about chemistry is transferred to them. It’s a thrill to read the students’ comments because I can see how they value that bond and that energy as well.

“I’m really just one of many dedicated faculty members at the University, but being singled out by my students on Rate My Professors is quite an honor,” she said.

Pence spent the 2012–13 academic year on Capitol Hill as a Congressional Science Policy Fellow in the office of U.S. Sen. Michael Bennet of Colorado. Her portfolio included energy, environment, natural resources, and cybersecurity. Pence’s research publications have featured traditional laboratory research as well as projects incorporating technology—wikis, RSS, and a Google Jockey—into her chemistry courses. She also chairs the American Chemical Society National Committee on Environmental Improvement, which writes the organization’s policy statements on a wide range of issues, from fracking to sustainability.

The full list by RateMyProfessors.com can be viewed at Toplists.ratemyprofessors.com. RateMyProfessors.com is built for college students by college students and is the highest-trafficked U.S. college professor rating site.