



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

College of Letters & Science

Alumni Spotlight

This month's Spotlight features Joseph, a former Linguistics major who is now a Speech Therapist, throwing open the doors of communication for children with language impairments.

**Joseph Harrington:
Speech Therapist /
Special Education Teacher**



What are you up to now, post-graduation?

I just finished up a year and a half as a speech therapist. Speech therapy is essentially supporting and facilitating the progress of students with language impairments, anything from difficulty speaking clearly to having a hard time building sentences with correct pronouns, prepositions, etc. It was my job in a public school to determine what specifically each student needed in terms of services, outline a plan to meet those needs, and meet with the parents to agree as a team how we would work to get the student up to the highest functioning level. The best part, hands down, was working with the students in their own classrooms. We would work in stations and it was always so exciting and challenging.

There is a very, very heavy demand for speech therapists and pathologists. There are all these vacant positions, which means applications are taken super seriously. As soon as someone can show they're working toward, or has, their master's degree, you get incredible response times from HR. It's great.

How did you get to where you are?

I double majored in Linguistics: German Emphasis and Psychology. I thought Linguistics was about learning languages, but I took Intro to Linguistics and lo and behold, instead of it being, "Become a polyglot!" it was more, "Here are fifty verbs in Hungarian. Tell us what's going on." It was challenging in a way I'd never been challenged in academics before. I was always the kid where everything came kind of

"Follow your instincts and take a chance."



easy in school, but Linguistics was so logic-based and so analytical that there was no way for me to succeed unless I knuckled down and applied myself. Actually, when I was working on an assignment for that intro class, a girl I lived with looked over my shoulder while I was frustrated with a problem and said, “You’re not very smart, are you?” I was so offended, it fueled me to ace that class. I guess part of me went, “I’ll show you how smart I am! I’ll get a *degree* in Linguistics!”

The Linguistics Department had a fantastic atmosphere of support. We’d get these foreboding homework assignments, but you’d walk into a grad student’s office and they would just break down every step and do it with you. It wasn’t, “Ugh, this kid.” It was, “Cool! I love working on things like this!” I miss that a lot.

I spent the last couple quarters at UCSB working on a senior thesis in Linguistics rather than looking for a

job after school, thinking I’d just go to grad school for whatever. But a grad student in the Linguistics Department challenged me on that choice. She asked me how I was going to grow more in grad school. Was making that easy choice going to make me a better-rounded, more productive member of society? Or should I step outside my comfort zone for a while?

I was a little lost, and my sister gave me the idea to work as a substitute teacher. A lot of subs won’t accept jobs from low-income schools, but as a young man, I had enough privilege that I wasn’t afraid to walk into a classroom with students that were my size or bigger and say, “Hey, you need to sit down and do your assignment because your teacher’s not here today.” It was my first taste of education and particularly with special education. It opened my eyes to the patience and genuine care needed when working with special education populations, and I wanted to be a part of that.

On a really great staffing website called EdJoin, I found this temporary job ad to cover a speech pathologist on maternity leave that basically said, “Anybody with a language-related background whatsoever, please apply!” and I thought, “Hey, I studied Linguistics. That’s definitely language related!” They accepted me and I was able to shadow the outgoing speech pathologist for about three weeks before she took off. There was also a para-educator in the room with me all the time, so it was this perfect safe haven for me to learn. Now, while I wait to start my M.S. program, I’ll be teaching a Special Education class with a lot of students I’ve had previously for speech. It’s going to be great.

What was the best thing you did as an undergrad to help you get to where you are?

That’s a really tough question. I’m going to cop out and say there are two that tie for first.

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“We don’t have to follow these prescribed paths anymore—we can figure it out as we go.”

The first was definitely the relationships I established with faculty in the Linguistics Department. Dr. Kennedy became my thesis advisor. The first course I took with him was early on in my Linguistics career and I didn’t pass the class. I went to his office hours and not only did he remember who I was but he remembered I had only taken the intro class before his. I said that I’d really knuckled down for his class and I felt like I shouldn’t be a Linguistics major anymore. But he was like, “Don’t even worry about it! You didn’t take phonetics first and that was the whole base of the course.” I was worried he’d assume I was just some kid who was partying too much, but he was so jovial and accepting that I’d tried. It was a huge eye opener that this department was different—that these were some really good folks. That relationship with Dr. Kennedy extended beyond my undergraduate career to when I was applying to all these positions and to my M.S. program in Speech Pathology. He wrote me recommendation letters like nobody’s business. I kept promising him this one would be the last one and he’d say very honestly, “Even if this isn’t the last one, it’s no big deal. I have no qualms writing you a letter

of rec.” I think that’s an unparalleled opportunity you’ll find in the Linguistics Department. It can be kind of tough to stand out in a crowd of three-hundred and fifty kids in a lecture, but it’s almost impossible to not build a relationship with faculty in the Linguistics Department.

The second was my involvement in my fraternity on campus, Theta Nu Kappa. That was something that had not even been a consideration going into school. I had this prospective of fraternities as what we see in movies, with binge drinking and hazing people and objectifying women and jerks encouraging other jerks to be more jerky. But the people I met in it didn’t fit that stereotype at all, it was about supporting each other in a brotherhood, about giving back to our community, and about challenging yourself in meaningful ways. There was no point in getting into the fraternity or spending time in it where I felt compromised in my identity at all. They had expectations of us as professionals. I learned to always stop and ask myself if I’m putting my best work out there. And I’ve carried that forward into my professional life.

What do you wish you had known while you were in undergrad?

I genuinely wouldn’t have done anything different. I think the path that I’m on is an unconventional one. I just kind of studied what I wanted to study and I ended up in this position where I’m gainfully employed and can take these online courses to get my master’s degree. I think that really speaks to this new generation of who we are as professionals. We don’t have to follow these prescribed paths anymore—we can figure it



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information provided.

out as we go. There are so many lessons to be learned outside the classroom or even in a relatively small department on campus that might be a side note to some people.

What was the best thing about being a Gaucho?

At UCSB, there was an opportunity for me to celebrate every part of who I am. I could go hang out with Father Love and sing in a choir at St. Marks and cherish my Catholic identity, and at the same time I could go over to the RCSGD and learn about Queer issues and how to be an ally within the same hour. It was a really great place for me to mature and grow up.

Keep a journal. There are so many fantastic stories and memories. I started my journal when I was studying abroad and if my house was to burn down today, I would grab my journal before anything else.

Any final words of wisdom for the current Gaucho generation?

To the student who is hesitant to pursue a major that is not considered “practical,” for me, it was so much more valuable to have a relationship with my department and the faculty than it was to get a “practical” major in a larger department—they didn’t just support me academically, they supported me personally. If that grad student hadn’t encouraged me to take a risk and not go directly into grad school, I wouldn’t be where I am today, so I owe her a lot.

A fellow Gaucho, Marie Barranco, passed on this simple wisdom—most people in careers they are genuinely passionate about had no idea they would end up doing that. They might have bounced around to different positions figuring out what fit. Follow your interests and take a chance.



Joseph welcomes UCSB students to contact him via LinkedIn with questions about speech therapy or special education and for mentorship on how to use your time at UCSB to become competitive in the field. Requests to edit student resumes or inquiries about open positions will not be responded to.

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