FACULTY SPOTLIGHT

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College of Engineering
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7 Questions with **Computer Science** Assistant Professor
Silas Hsu

Hometown: St. Louis, Missouri

Tell me about your research interests and why you are passionate about this topic.

I research human-computer interaction. I like to describe it as the science of making better user interfaces for people. Compared to other areas of computer science, I work a lot more closely with users — much of my research is talking with people and trying to understand them better. I love learning new things about people and the feeling of being closer to the people I'm trying to help.

What is the most helpful advice you've received?

If you're stuck on something, talk to somebody. It doesn't have to be an expert; it can be anybody. — your friends, family, even a rubber duck. The process of explaining your problem and articulating it can ignite inspiration and grease the gears of problem solving.

If you were stranded on a deserted island, which band or musician would keep you entertained?

Vladimir Horowitz. Probably only people really into classical music know him. He is one of the most skilled pianists of the 20th century.

What is something you can't live without?

My wife, for all the reasons you would expect.

How do you like to spend your free time?

What free time?

OK, in all seriousness, I practice piano (I specialize in classical music), rock climb and play video games. I'm currently playing Stardew Valley.

How do you encourage engineering students to make an impact on the community?

In terms of user interface design, I encourage students to get out of the Cal Poly bubble. For their homework, for instance, I ask them to interview people who are not Cal Poly students and to seek out people different from themselves. Speaking to people who are different from you is a good way to learn!

How do you support the college's commitment to justice, equity, diversity and inclusion?

These virtues are surprisingly (or maybe not so surprisingly) relevant in design. When we design an app — a piece of software — we are designing for people, and we must be sure that the designs are usable for all and send the right message to all. I make sure I cover this in my classes. For instance, I discuss designing for the visually impaired and colorblind, for different cultural contexts, and how a design's ambiance can unconsciously make certain groups feel unwelcome.