Language is everywhere. Every day we use language to communicate verbally and through written mediums. From casual conversation to legal statutes, language helps us convey our thoughts and intentions. However, language can be ambiguous. “Any” is a particularly ambiguous word with respect to how much it widens the domain. In 2004, the United States Supreme Court decided in Small v. United States that “any court” in a statute is not interpreted to include courts in other countries. The majority’s decision argues that “any” does not widen the domain to include all courts, while the dissent claimed that this amounted to concluding, “‘any’ does not really mean ‘any.’” I disagree with the dissent. Theoretical linguists have argued that “any” widens the domain under consideration; however, this does not need to be an absolute. I hypothesize that “any” takes a wider domain than indefinite articles, such as “a,” but it does not necessarily take the widest possible domain.

In a questionnaire experiment conducted online, I tested native English speakers on their interpretations of “any” within contexts parallel to the statute in Small. I learned that it is difficult to effectively test subjects on their knowledge of “any” without revealing my objectives. Subjects were asked to imagine themselves as part of various selection committees, with selection guidelines such as, “Applicants nominated by a/any professor should be immediately scheduled for an interview.” Based on these guidelines and specific situations, they are asked to make judgments on whether a candidate should be included. Half of the participants saw instructions with “A” while the other half saw instructions with “Any”. In scenarios that were set up to be a borderline case for a candidate meeting a certain requirement, responses by subjects that saw “any” instructions indicated that they were more likely to count such cases as meeting the requirement.

What people think they know about “any” can be very different from their intuitions. In court, juries are asked to mull over specific details and make judgments about them. It is problematic when juries are faced with over analyzing language. They may judge “any” similar to the dissent in Small and interpret it to widen the context to the widest domain. However, likelihood of
acceptance in “borderline” scenarios is nonetheless lower than in the “standard” scenarios, which precisely indicates that widening with “any” is by no means absolute. The contextually salient domain is important.

Taking part in research is essential to the Penn experience. Working with Professor Schwarz has given me insight to how well thought-out and carefully put together experiments must be. There are many confounding factors that have to be considered and controlled. There is not a lot of experimental literature on ambiguities of operators such as “any,” which can inform legal issues, such as contract disputes surrounding language ambiguities. Working on this project has inspired me to continue my research and expand it to a senior thesis. I plan on attending law school after graduation because I find the intersection of linguistics and law fascinating.