

INDIE MAJOR PODCAST

1/22/24 Kelly Ruesta Cayetano

Individualized Major: Health Disparities among Marginalized Groups

Ken:

This is Indie Major, a show devoted to the wide ranging stories and visions of individualized majors at the University of Connecticut. I'm your host, Ken Cormier.

In this episode, I speak with Kelly Ruesta Cayetano. A senior at UConn who's doing an individualized major in the area of health studies.

Kelly:

My name is Kelly Ruesta Cayetano. I am currently a senior at the University of Connecticut doing an individualized major, which is titled Health Disparities Among Marginalized Groups.

Basically combining the anthropology, sociology, and science related courses to discuss more around health equities under underrepresented communities. Um, I developed the major. Because I felt like I wanted to address more of the social issues within the medical field that I was not getting from in science majors.

Um, and then I took a class called science medicine and race and that kind of was like my set off of like creating my own major.

Ken:

Wow. So what kind of class was that? What was the subject? I mean science medicine and race.

Kelly:

So basically the professor, this was the first time that the class was given. And basically, the structure of the class, they gave a lot of readings around, um, like, Connecting science and medicine with the social issues.

So, learning more around how, um, through a sociological perspective, uh, the medical field had started, was funded, and how it can we still have continuous, like, stereotyping within medical practices, and, like, racism within that space. That was also during the same time where I was wanting to expand upon my major and what I wanted to do and during the time I was considering minoring in sociology, but then I met, like, uh, Monica, like, I set up a meeting with Monica, and, yeah.

Ken:

Yeah, so, uh, Monica was the former director of the individualized major. So, so, so this was a sociology class that you took. Alright, so you spoke with Monica, and she said

Kelly:

Basically, Monica. I love her because she just let me rant out for the first 30 minutes of a typical conversation of I don't know what I want to do with my life, but I know that I'm interested in sociology.

I know that I'm interested in medicine. I have all these passions and interests, but I don't know where to put my passion into. And she very much just listened to me and was just nodding her head along the song, like conversation. And then she was like, have you thought about doing an individualized major?

Like, do you, would you want to know what that will entail? And from then on, it was more of a conversation of like, okay, I'm in my Second semester of my sophomore year. If I want to get this started, like I need to get this started right now. Uh, and so then I took that gateway course that all individualized majors like, um, take and within that class, it was a very like one month long class where we were discussing what different disciplines were, how can we apply them into the future and what it meant to create your own individualized major.

And so then afterwards, it was a process of getting into the. Academic advisors and statement of purpose and the plan of study. Right, right. So you actually, so you really have to Explain what the major is, in addition to what classes there are. You have to actually talk about the whole thing and how it makes sense.

Ken:

Yeah. And also kind of what you want to do with it, right? Like, are you, so when you think about your career, what's your next step after this?

Kelly:

Yeah, so I'm looking into doing the Masters of Public Health. I applied to the Fast Track for the Public Health at UConn. Um, but you still have to reapply for your fifth year, so during the re application period, I'm also going to try to apply to other colleges and universities.

Um, But I feel like with an individualized major, because I had to do the whole process of statement of purpose, plan of study, and getting my own advisors, I can get, I'm able to say like a mini elevator pitch in the beginning of every single time someone asks me what my major is, like, I'm easily able to say, hey, this is my major, these are the disciplines.

This is the issue I want to address with my major.

Ken:

So you seem to obviously have interests around medicine and other things, but then, and you have ideas of career, but it sounds like you have, you feel like you almost have like a calling or a vision. Like what, what do you imagine yourself doing in the world?

Kelly:

Yeah. So I. Um, during my junior year, I took, um, my, it was funny, during my summer year, I took a lot of sociology courses. During my junior year, however, I took a lot of anthropology courses, um, because those are my two disciplines that I, I want to combine. And through that, um, I was introduced to medical anthropology.

Um, I also did a research pilot program with the anthropology department. So, I imagine myself doing anthropology. medical anthropology, maybe as a doctorate, which is very big, a lot of time, uh, but within that space, I do want to address, like, uh, the health care barriers for undocumented communities. Um, I feel like there's a lot of barriers presented within the community, not only through the health insurance, the health coverage, but just in general to the, um, services that they're able to be provided.

So, like, I want to focus more around that community. Um, so that's where I want to somehow end up. Non profit organization or somewhere along the lines of that.

Ken:

Wow. Well, that sounds great. Um, Where did you grow up?

Kelly:

Uh, Peru.

Ken:

Oh, Peru. Yeah. And, when you were little, do you remember having ideas about what you wanted to be when you grew up? And what were the, what were some of the first ones?

Kelly:

Uh, the first one was very much, uh, doctor. I feel like, for me, uh, my parents dreams were very much my dreams. So, like, my dad was a dentist technician in Peru, and my mom was a nurse. That's how they met one another. Oh, wow. Um, And I knew that I liked the human body a lot since I was little.

Um, I was sick a lot in Peru. Um, I, I don't have any memories as to why, but my, my dad will basically like home teach, like homeschool me. Um, and during that time, he will tell me like the human anatomy and it's a weird thing to connect with a parent, but it was like my, I love doing that. Um, but I do remember that I had like a dreams of like doctor, architect, very like I don't know.

I don't know. Very high achieving dreams.

Ken:

Um. So you, so you, you remember being cared for. But then also part of that was like the details of what medical things were going on. Yeah. So that's a really interesting association. Feeling like. Because it's really, you know, you feel secure and you're being helped and, uh, but then also you're learning within that context.

Kelly:

Yes.

Ken:

Wow. So it's not, so obviously also architects, so you had other ideas.

Kelly:

I had other ideas.

Ken:

But this was one that goes all the way back to some of your earliest memories.

Kelly:

Yeah, I feel like. Uh, doctor just felt the most sense to me because like, um, our medical history, like my family history, like my dad's diabetic, um, my, my dad's, and there's like a lot of diabetics, lung cancer, like, so obviously I had to be in a lot of, in those spaces where like doctors had to tend to the patients, to my family members, and I always wish like, Like the idea of you have a doctor possessing the knowledge that could potentially save a life was very much of like, wow, like you, it was a wow factor for me and I wanted to do that for someone else if I had the capacity to, so like you were saying like it's a lot of like the spaces that I was in when I was young that Like, very much led to me being like, I can do that too, if I wanted to, yeah.

Ken:

Has there been a particular experience within the major, like um, was there like a research project idea, or um, I don't know, like anything, or a book that you read, or a conversation, something that, that stands out to you within your major, like oh, that was a really important moment or where I learned something that was really crucial.

Kelly:

Um, yes, so in my junior year I got to be part of a pilot program in the Department of Anthropology. Uh, they had a program called Research Mastered, which stood for Mentoring and Scholarship Training for Emerging Researchers. And they created this program, uh, to prioritize students with little to no prior research experience that had underrepresented backgrounds and we're first generation students usually as a first gen you do not know your resources that well or do not know how to approach research opportunities So this program was made in order for students to have easier accessibility To be in the research field and for me I was paired up with the graduate

research Madeline Baird, and in her project, uh, she was studying the trans immigration in Darien, uh, Panama.

And so her title of her project was called Studying Intrinsic Migration, Health, and Human Rights in the U. S. and Latin America. During this time I had a little, um, experience going through the literature research to cross reference any articles that might be related to what her final paper would be and Her work very much access like assess the emergence of border regions based on an increasing flow of migrant people the process of migrating to in that there in gap are very like risky and a lot of like community members like There's just a lot of issues that I can like list out, but she basically went with another, uh, person to study and interview people within the community to see how they're affected, how can other healthcare services be provided to them so that the trip is not as dangerous as is, as it is.

Um, basically studying the social, uh, issues currently in Panama. Um, and I feel like that experience very much set in tone. What I wanted to do. Um, as I mentioned before, I started from a sociology course and I thought that it was going to be very heavy on sociology. My major. I did not expect the anthropology to, like, kind of swoop me in, but Doing that research on top of doing medical anthropology Very much like opened up the possibilities of doing like a Master's of Public Health and Medical Anthropology During the medical anthropology course there was also like a book That she introduced, I'm blanking on the name, but basically detailing the experiences of what diabetic people Um, and the perspective of that book very much came from a place of love and like seeing the disease not as a disease that's taking over a human, but more of like how is a human accompanying the disease and like that switch of narrative was something I never seen before of how can a patient view the disease in a different light.

Um, so I think like those were my biggest that that my last semester of junior year was my. Biggest, like, impact of like, oh wow, this is like, I will never be introduced to this course or this opportunity if I didn't take the leap of doing an individualized major because I wouldn't have, like, chosen this class if I wasn't interested in it or if it wasn't, like, an elective or a requirement that I needed to do.

Ken:

Right, yeah, interesting. So, so it allows you to get all these different, different perspectives that you might not otherwise have gotten. So, so individualized majors. They're everything from like super science majors to like, you know, social sciences majors to humanities Folks to people in creative writing and film.

Kelly:

I personally because I'm very much just science Person, but also wanted to integrate social issues. That is my focus, but other people have like a different idea of how they can include music with

animation or sports management with nutrition. And like, I personally wouldn't have thought of those ideas.

So like, it's very interesting to see that process.

Ken:

Yeah. So even though you're all doing very different things, there might be some common thread that individualized majors share, which is what like doing it their own way?

Kelly:

I feel like we have. Our own path that we are trying to forge through. Um, it's not the, like, most organic way to go on about a college career, which I feel like that was the most scary part, taking a leap of, like, faith into, like, the unknown, which I was a scary for me to do, uh, not having, like, a plan of study already being made and created for me.

But then being detached from those, like, quote unquote, like, requirements made me be like, oh, I can potentially take something that I'm intrigued with but I don't know if I'm gonna like it and that's like what's really, really what like took me to be more confident with what I was studying and actually do more research as to like, okay, I'm interested in public health.

How can I apply that to my future? Um, and obviously like each student has their own path in college <https://otter.ai> Find themselves and find their own career. And even if they don't like, you know what you like and what you don't like with individualized major students, I feel like everybody has the elevator pitch because they had to like plan for that.

They had to like. Not fight for it, but they had to actually put in the work to like, do that, do everything themselves in order for them to be confident in this is what I want to do, this is what I want to study, I am gonna get this, and like, I feel like that sort of confidence you only get by like, taking that leap of faith that a lot of individualized major students like, have done, and like, I have a lot of retention of the courses that I took because I specifically chose them myself, like, nobody told me to take them, I was like, very much abdomen of like, I want to take, um, like, Science, medicine, race.

I want to take medical anthropology. I want to take health geography. Like, I can tell you the class that I took and the intention the professor had behind the course because I always apply it back to what the major I wanted to have is. So, like, I don't have, like

Ken:

Because you have the intention behind it.

Kelly:

Yeah.

Ken:

Well, thanks so much for coming in. This has been great.

Kelly:

Thank you for having me.

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