

INDIE MAJOR PODCAST

2/26/24 Christian Chlebowski

Individualized Major: Government, Policymaking, and Law

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.

I'm here in the studio with Christian Chlebowski. Hi, Christian.

Christian:

Hi Ken.

Ken:

Thanks for coming in.

Christian:

Thanks for having me.

Ken:

So, you are an individualized major. Could you tell us the title of your major?

Christian:

Yes, my major is called Government, Policymaking, and Law.

Ken:

Government, policy making, and law. Okay. So tell us what that involves.

Christian:

Yeah. So it's kind of funny, it evolved a little bit when it started and I was first ideating my major. It was going to be governmental policymaking and law, but in looking at different classes and what I was actually interested in, we kind of condensed it down to separating government from policymaking as my interests kind of differ there. But government really focusing on like history courses and trying to understand where our government comes from and what all its capabilities and functions are. Policymaking as really trying to get into political science and trying to understand, you know, where do laws come from? Where are policymakers coming from? How do elections work? Everything like that. And closing it out with law, particularly looking at constitutional law and trying to understand, okay, so we've got this institution, we've got Congress, and we've got policymakers, you know, writing bills, crafting legislation. What happens to those? What happens when they become law? So it's kind of like condensing the whole process of policymaking within the institution that is Congress.

Ken:

Wow. Now you're obviously taking classes in poli sci, in history.

Christian:

There's some economics in there.

Ken:

Econ. Okay. And then what else? Is there anything particular to law where you take classes that are offered over at the law school or something?

Christian:

I haven't taken any classes at the law school. More focusing in on the 3800 sequence in Poli Sci, which is kind of geared towards law in the constitution.

Ken:

And what is, what does 3,800 sequence mean?

Christian:

It's just the numbering system in Poli Sci has the 3800 classes are all the law themed courses.

Ken:

All right. So the catalog numbers. Okay, good. So, so political science kind of covers a lot of that for you.

Christian:

Yes.

Ken:

Interesting. So this sounds like the kind of major. First of all, we should back up. Now, you're also a double major?

Christian:

Yes.

Ken:

What's your other major?

Christian:

Accounting.

Ken:

Accounting. Now, when you think about your accounting major, even though that's a separate major, do you sort of think of this accounting major and your individualized major working together in a larger picture?

Christian:

Yeah. So it's kind of actually a funny story about how I came to have both an accounting major and an individualized major. It's also kind of a long and convoluted story, but I've always known I wanted to be an accountant. So as far as I can remember, I say forever. But really the first instance I have is fifth grade. I did accounting in fifth grade. Something stuck because when I got to high school I was like, I'm gonna be an accountant, that's the thing. And I started taking classes in accounting in high school. And then I came to

college and started taking courses. And I was like, this is it. This is what I want to do with my life.

Ken:

What was the fifth grade accounting? What kind of accounts?

Christian:

Oh yeah. I was in a program at my school. It was called Quest, but it was like a little elective where we did separate kind of studies and in depth projects. And in fifth grade, we ran a business. It was called Fun Squared. We sold toys on the playground at recess. And my role in that is I got to be the treasurer. So I was up there, you know, doing our books and saying, okay, we sold this much. Here's the cash that we got, here's how much our inventory cost, and doing all that and writing our financial statements and presenting to our President and our Vice President and everybody in the class about it. And I still have like those T accounts in the general journal and the general ledger and everything. And it's Accounting. And I look at it, I'm like wow. You know, I can't believe I got that wrong. That was such an easy, easy math calculation. What happened?

Ken:

You could perform an audit, I suppose now of those.

Christian:

Of those financial statements? It's not looking good.

Ken:

Okay. So you had that revelation and then now you're doing an accounting major, but you said, but then you're also doing this individualized and then they work together how?

Christian:

Yeah. So like I said, I knew I wanted to be an accountant. And then I started, I guess paying more attention to the news and saying, okay, there's actually things going on in the world which I don't know why. I just wasn't processing that for a long time, but I can remember this is a big revelation. I was like, wow, you know, Congress is a thing, there are laws going out right now. And during my tenth grade civics class, the big debate was over the tax cuts and Jobs Act, the big tax reform legislation of the 2010. And that was the first time where I was like, oh, there's accountants testifying before Congress and we're looking at economists projecting impacts on the national debt. Like maybe I can do something, like maybe my interest in accounting can be supplemented by everything I'm seeing going on in government and my desire to make an impact. To use my skills and leverage those to do something in the world. And so when I came to UConn and I was like, okay, I can be an accountant, but there's so many different kinds of accountants. I could be a tax accountant, which is kind of one everybody knows. I could be an auditor, I could be a forensic accountant. I could go work in private industry. But what if there's got to be some way to do what I want to do to make an impact with my skills. And so I started talking to the people in the individualized major program. They're like, yeah, you know, try it out, take a poli sci class, you know? So I was like, okay, I'll take constitutional law and take a public policy course. And I was like, okay, I'll take cases in public policy. And I was like, wait a second, there are connections here. You know, going back to that me in tenth grade, seeing the tax cuts and Jobs Act, seeing

those people testify. I was like, this could be me in the future. So let me get some more knowledge about how that works. Let me take some classes in this policy making process because there's accounting in there and I want to do that in the future. So let's figure it out now so that I'm not sitting there trying to piece it all together as an adult.

Ken:

So the accounting major sort of expanded your horizons about what that field even was. And then that led you to think about doing this interdisciplinary major on the other side. And now they're all sort of working together. So that's fascinating. And now another way in which these are all working together for you is you're doing a university scholar project here at UConn. Maybe you could tell us a little bit about what the University Scholar program is and then what you're doing, what kind of work you're doing with that.

Christian:

Yeah, I can certainly try to explain it. I mean, you're the director of the program, so. But the University Scholar program is essentially really, I view it as a three semester capstone, where you're taking some sort of seminal project that you want to work on that's interdisciplinary. It's connected to your fields of interest, your major, and you're really just exploring deeper. You're going as far as you can to create new knowledge and learn something about these fields that isn't known already. You're doing research or something of that sort to figure this out and say, okay, I'm interested in this, I've taken classes on this, how can I contribute to that literature? How can I contribute to this ongoing discussion? And so for me, that was kind of really attractive. I was like, okay, I found this kind of niche area that I want to work in. But how much is known about that? Not

that much really. So let me kind of dive in and try and figure out what's going on. So my project really combines my interest in space exploration, with accounting, with public policy, with other projects.

Ken:

Space exploration? We haven't touched on that yet. Where does this come from?

Christian:

So that's actually my whole life again. So my mom works for one of Nasa's contractors. And so every kind of day growing up, it was stories about, hey, this happened. And when I was younger, hearing stories about the space shuttle and now looking at the Artemis program, returned to the moon and the International Space Station. So I've just been engrossed in space history. I can remember my brother and I still talk about I must have been in first or second grade, I got to meet Dr. Flush who created the space toilet. And that was like incredible to me to be like, wow, You know, this man works with my mom and he created the space toilet. Like wow.

Ken:

Dr. Flush?

Christian:

Yeah, that's what he's called. Okay. That's not his real name.

Ken:

That would have been a bizarre coincidence.

Christian:

But so like, I've always just had kind of this innate knowledge about space because I've been surrounded by it. And so now, you know we're entering this new era of space exploration. And during an internship I did, that I figured we'd eventually get to, in this interview, I got to hear some testimony about the financial state of Nasa and everything like that. And so I was like, okay, there's connections here between everything that I like. Let's try and actually figure out what's going on across all these disciplines in this new emerging area of Right, going to the moon.

Ken:

Could you just give us a quick little overview of what it is that you're looking at in this project?

Christian:

Yeah, so really my project kind of came about because of the current efforts to return to the Moon for the first time in 50 years. Nasa is actively working to put human footprints back on the lunar surface, targeting 2024. Which is kind of crazy that, you know, late this year, that might happen more expecting a 2025, 2026 actual return. But my project looks at that and says, okay, where do the people, where do Americans believe we should be spending our money? Should we be spending our money on going to the moon or are there other pressing issues? What level of support exists? And trying to connect that and say, okay, so the American people feel this way about space exploration. How do their Congress people

feel? Are the Congress congressional representatives voting for this funding level? Or are they not supporting what the people want? And then using that further as kind of a proxy to understand, okay, how are we getting to the moon? Like what is this process? And it's tying it really back to looking at the 1960s, the last time we went to the moon, where it was just such an interesting lens in all the research that I've been reading in the literature I've been engrossed in, there just there wasn't public support for going to the moon in the '60s. Contrary to public belief, all of the literature says Americans didn't want to go to the moon. The only time they did was after Apollo 11 happened. And they're like, yes, we did it. And then support died back down again. And the fact that we still spend all this money on achieving this scientific goal and all of the economic impacts of that is really interesting to me. And so I wanted to say, hey, is this still the way we are? Are we still going to the moon because people want to? Or are we doing it because it's a foreign policy goal, where we're in a space race, again with say China, or Russia, or India, or any other country. And so now we're really pushing to get there because similar to the '60s when it was a foreign policy thing, or again, is it because hey, we actually really want to do this. And so that's kind of where this element of I want to understand the public's opinion. And that's where my individualized major focusing on policymaking really ties in. Because as part of policymaking, you'd like to think your legislators are saying, what do my citizens want? How am I supposed to vote on this bill when I'm representing you? You know, how do I know what you want, right?

Ken:

Yeah. That was my next question is how much does the perception of what the public desires, how much does that actually figure into what ends up being the fiscal priorities that go into projects like this?

Christian:

Yeah, so that's again, that ties back into the literature review that I'm actually working on right now for that project, but it's actually pretty mixed. So depending on where you're looking, it's funny. So in my freshman year here at UConn, I did a research project on responsiveness to see if senators were voting as their constituents wanted them to on a whole host of issues, on social issues, on foreign policy issues, on executive nominations, and on economic issues. And the result was actually at first, on first kind of blush, yes, senators were voting as their constituents wanted to on these major policy issues. When you start accounting for party, a lot of the statistical significance starts to go away and you're like, okay, maybe there's more of a party line situation going on here. That's overall. But the literature I've been in for my scholar project focuses on space policy. And that's where, again, we get mixed results where some scholars are finding it's actually opposite. When Americans want us to spend less on space exploration, we're spending more, Some are finding there's no correlation whatsoever, and it's completely mixed. Actually, one of the most interesting findings from a Steinberg paper from I think 2011 is he found, hey, Congress is trying to play both sides of it, and that they're giving Nasa more money every year, right? To the people who want to go to space. They're saying, yes, we're spending more money on our space program, but that amount of money is making up less of the budget. So they can kind of flip the coin and say, yeah, we're not spending 1% anymore, we're spending 0.8% like we're cutting down. So it's kind of an interesting sense of maybe they are, but maybe there's other other factors at play. And there's other literature that says, if you have a Nasa center in your state, yes, your senators or your representatives are going to

vote, right? So it depends. It varies. It's an interesting kind of kind of place to be.

Ken:

So you're planning to graduate, this May coming up and which leads me to ask, what do you see for the future? What do you think you're going to be doing beyond UConn and College here?

Christian:

Yeah, very exciting. So, the current plan is that I will be joining KPMG, an accounting firm, in their federal audit practice. So again, everything kind of comes full circle, ties together. I'll be working out of the Washington DC. Office to audit federal agencies and determine, you know, if they're spending their federally appropriated funds correctly or meeting all of the different requirements that they have to by law for expenditure of their funds. And I'm really excited about that. It's kind of what I've been building up to this whole time.

Ken:

Wow. So it sounds like internships were a big part of what you did.

Christian:

Yes. Oh, 100% looking for just different ways to get involved and try things out and see what I liked. You know, I did I did tax over the summer and I was initially I was like, gung ho, this is it, I'm gonna love doing taxes And then I got there and I was like, oh, I'm counting the number of spaces in a parking lot for a tax credit. This isn't my

dream. I don't want to know if I want to be doing this for a breakdown. Yeah, that's a great way to try things out.

Ken:

Yeah, right, exactly. That's great. So, so even an internship that turns out to be not the most exciting is a huge learning experience.

Christian:

Absolutely, Yeah. Yeah. And the people you meet, the connections that you make, especially your training, you know, I went to a national training and got to meet people from the Alaska office or, you know, the Rhode Island Office, the Texas Office. And really just understand, okay, what are you working on, like where do you come from, What's your educational background? It's such a fun way to learn about just everything about other people, about your area of expertise, your areas of interest opportunities. It's the way to go. Yeah.

Ken:

Well, this has been fascinating. I really appreciate you coming in and talking through all this stuff and we're really going to miss you. You've been a force here at UConn for sure. We wish you all the best. Thanks. Very exciting stuff. And thanks for coming in.

Christian:

Absolutely. Thanks for having me.

Ken:

Thanks for listening to Indie Major. If you'd like more information about individualized and interdisciplinary studies at the University of Connecticut, please visit our website at iisp.uconn.edu. That's iisp.uconn.edu. We'd also like to thank UConn Enrichment Programs and WHUS UConn Radio for their support of this show.