

INDIE MAJOR PODCAST

9/25/24 Sydney Seldon

Individualized Major: Sustainable Communities

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 Sydney Seldon. Hi, Sydney.

Sydney:

Hi, Ken.

Ken:

Thanks for coming in.

Sydney:

Thank you for letting me in.

Ken:

Oh, yeah. No problem. Let's see. Okay, so we are going to talk about the individualized major that you created here at UConn. So why don't you tell us what's the name of your major?

Sydney:

Yeah, my major's name is Sustainable Communities.

Ken:

Sustainable Communities. So what does that involve?

Sydney:

It kind of operates with this understanding that you can't have a sustainable planet without sustainable people, and you can't have sustainable people without sustainable communities. So that's looking at the word sustainability from not only the environmental perspective, but also the social perspective. Like, what does it mean to feel like you belong in the place that you are at?

Ken:

Now, are you also majoring in something else?

Sydney:

I'm also an environmental science major with a minor in sustainable community food systems.

Ken:

Wow. Okay, so now you must see connections between those two majors and that minor.

Sydney:

For sure. I feel like everything is a constant connection and inspired by one another constantly.

Ken:

So now, what started first? Were you doing environmental sciences, and then you had an idea that you wanted to expand out to do something else?

Sydney:

Yeah, I started with environmental science kind of thinking I wanted to do climate research. And then the spring semester of my freshman year, I took a course called leadership in Community Based Conservation, taught by doctor Loris Cisneros. And that course showed me this entirely different social and anthropological perspective to environmental science that just, like, gripped my attention, especially since it was community based. So sustainable communities was definitely birthed out of classes I took as an environmental science student.

Ken:

Okay. But why individualized or how did you find out that there was a way to create your own major here?

Sydney:

I feel like I'm a creative person, but not really artistically. I feel like I'm very creative in thought. So with the environmental science major, we can also do concentrations. So I did the sustainable systems concentration because that's the most kind of broad social perspective you can take. And as I was choosing the courses for that concentration, I was like, I feel like there's elements of culture and community that I want to learn more about

that just aren't designed for this major. So I explored anthropology, I explored political science to see if I wanted to get a dual degree. And then I heard of the individualized major program. I was like, No, that's what I want to do.

Ken:

Nice. So do you have anthropology courses in your major?

Sydney:

Yeah, few courses in anthropology.

Ken:

Okay. And are there political science courses too?

Sydney:

No. No poli sci courses.

Ken: Okay. All right. So what else? So anthropology, and what other kinds of classes?

Sydney:

Yeah, we're taking scientific communication. We're taking understanding your community, which is an URBN 4000 course. Hoping to take intercultural communication, but also global change local action and a geography of environmentalism. I feel like that course I was able to take it this past year is just a wonderful intersection between environmental science, slash geography, but also these social perspectives and how our environments fuel our

cultures and how we engage with one another. So definitely a few different things.

Ken:

So geography comes into it as well. Yeah. And that makes sense. Now, you said urban. Now, that's urban studies. We have an urban studies program at UConn, um and I'm wondering when you were thinking of environmental studies and then it's an interesting turn into urban studies, and how do those things kind of work together?

Sydney:

Yeah. They do. Yeah, absolutely. So even these urban versus rural communities, they all take place slash happen in an environmental context. So it's really interesting to see I was able to go to Uganda this past summer, and the capital of Uganda is Kampala, and it's very urban. Like there's not as many trees as there are in towns like Mbale, which is much more rural. But it's taking place in the same geography and the same climate. So it's super interesting to see how 100 or so miles in either direction. Of course, there's different people in both those places, but they're informed by the same general geography, right? You're still in Uganda. But how you kind of relate to your environment to me is the connection between urban and environment.

Ken:

We tend to try to separate those things out as if urban is one thing and rural is another thing. But I'm sure in your major, you're probably always looking at things a little bit more contextually.

Sydney:

100%. I feel like my major in just the professors and conversations I've got to have with people in class, has just forced us to kind of abandon kind of this binary thinking, where it's like, to your point, nothing happens in a vacuum. Everything is connected, and when we keep viewing things as binary, we don't really see environmental justice as also being social justice because they are so interconnected. So I find myself, especially with sustainable communities, kind of just constantly explaining that it's not just the environment. It's just not just these built systems, but it's also us as people. Like, you can't have a sustainable planet. You can't have a sustainable Earth. If the individuals in the communities that they're building, these built systems, right aren't also sustainable, so it has to be intersectional.

Ken:

Um, does economics come into it for you?

Sydney:

Absolutely. And I feel like the economics is like what flies the most over my head, cause I am so focused on, like the social and individual. And one of the majors that I was considering in designing a major was kind of an environmental economics kind of major focus. And then I realize I don't like as much as I thought I did. So I was like, Actually, let's go more people focused in sustainable communities.

Ken:

Right, Right. That makes sense. So let me just there's so many things I want to ask. So you mentioned that you were in Uganda?

Sydney:

I was.

Ken:

And that was last summer?

Sydney:

Last summer.

Ken:

And was that a UConn program?

Sydney:

It was not a UConn program. Were you just traveling there or Yeah. So I was actually out there with a group. It's a Christian group that I'm a part of calls the Navigators. And they have this Uganda group that's there doing all tons of stuff, whether in rural Mbale where they're working with community members. And they're doing stuff on university campuses there, too. So we were able to spend a month out there. And it feels like I've been able to go on a few mission trips, but that mission trip was the most centered on learning from the people and learning from the community and not just trying to, like, add to it. Where they demonstrated an entirely different way of being, which is centered around community versus what kind of I feel like I've grown up a lot in is this more centered

toward the individual. Like it feels like we're individuals in a community, versus Uganda, I was like, community is the focus of what they're doing.

Ken:

So this was, like, service work you were doing out there?

Sydney:

I even hesitate to call it service because we didn't do anything besides just, like, meet people, and we painted a house. But like, it was all focused on how can we learn from local Ugandans?

Ken:

Right, which feeds right into some of the things that you're thinking about in this major, right?

Sydney:

Exactly.

Ken:

Now, when you think about where you're heading with this, right, what do you imagine yourself doing out there in the world once you finish with your college degree?

Sydney:

Yeah, it's such an awesome question. I feel like recently, especially, I'm like a rising senior at UConn right. Throughout my

tenure, especially after designing this major. I've always kind of defined it as, like, I'll know it when it happens. Like, whatever opportunities like that feel like they're fueled by this passion in this calling, I'll know it. In this summer, actually, it's been a lot of more communities based work in the local food economy in Willimantic. So I'm interning at this place called Click, which is a commercially licensed cooperative kitchen. So that's That is a pathway to continue kind of in this very community focused food direction. But there's also this desiring me to there's an apprenticeship program in Atlanta called the Resilient Community Center, which is ten months. I'd have to fundraise for my salary for that. But it's talking about everything that sustainable community talks about that happened in Uganda where it's like, whoa, how do we create these communities of belonging centered around belonging, especially given it's sold as being in Atlanta, but it's actually in Clarkson, which is known as the most racially diverse square mile in the US. So you have all these refugees coming from all these countries due to whatever persecution, right? And they're just trying to learn this new cultural context in America, but also the Americans who are there are also trying to understand how to engage with these people who are coming into. So I also see myself going in that direction where they're both centering around: Okay, how do we utilize the people in the resources in the context that we're in and kind of move to this more unified version of either our town or the community, right? So all that to say, I don't really know. I feel like there's, like, lots of different directions to go in, but it's all centered around this desire of, like, creating communities of belonging?

Ken:

Sure. Sure. And when I hear you talking about the work you're doing in Willimantic, which is the town right next door here to

Mansfield. Yeah, food sustainability, right? Food, agriculture. That's a huge area where sustainability is a constant question, right? And constant how do we establish sustainable food systems where we're using resources correctly, where we're able to produce enough food for actual local communities, which is very different from the industrialized agriculture that we are all kind of implicated in in a place like the US. So that must be really fascinating work.

Sydney:

Absolutely. It's just like this perspective for the whole person. It's like holistic viewings of the community, including the economy, including our food systems, including social systems and all the things. So it's been awesome.

Ken:

So I'm a big fan of the Willimantic Food Coop, which is out there. Are they connected with this kitchen?

Sydney:

They are. So the Food Coop and Clack are both part of Slash partnership with the Wyndham Community Food Network. It's like this food network that connects not only the Coop and click, but also the farmers market, and there's events that happen like veggie stock. So it's definitely a hub for all these different food and social happenings. And Willimantic and honestly, Windham and Windham County.

Ken:

Right. Right. And the Covenant soup kitchen, also, which is right there. Are they involved in this, or is that are they sort of in a different network?

Sydney:

I feel like one of the tasks that I've been given since I'm interning with Click this summer is kind of describing their story via story map. And that's actually what we've been wrestling with, like, how do we actually describe this? We've been describing it as an ecosystem, right? Like a food hub, and all these different, like, branches off of it. So like the covenant soup kitchen, for example, they receive produce from different farms that glean in the area. They like, work with folks that click two for produce and stuff like that, but they're not under click, right? So they're definitely in relationship

Ken:

Right, good. Good. Wow. Where does all this come from? Like, when you were a kid, were you thinking about some of these issues or how did these really these big interests and passions develop?

Sydney:

I feel like that for me, that comes out of experiencing life in a community where I didn't belong or I felt like I didn't belong, and I didn't feel kind of immersed in the people that I was around or even the cultural context in which I was in. So I feel like those feelings of being outcasted was definitely related to this, but also that idea that no art is original, right? Like, all art is plagiarized from something slash inspired by something. So I feel like when I think of sustainable communities, and this is where my passion definitely

expresses itself, is that I can think of so many different conversations and so many even experiences growing up. I was like, I feel like there's something that can be done about this. I feel like there's these underlying ideas that I want to talk about, and I want to explore. I want to learn how to articulate, and they were definitely the breath into this degree.

Ken:

Mm hmm Because community, the way you talk about it, and the way it's kind of laid out in the major that you've created, to me, you know, sustainable communities, it's all about inclusion, right? And figuring out how community can be kind of an antidote to too much individual obsession or individuality. But at the same time, communities can also be exclusive. The structure of community can make people feel left out. So are those issues that you kind of have enable to think about in courses, or has that come up for you?

Sydney:

Yeah, I think it's come up most for me in daily life. And this is I kind of describe sustainable communities, it's not just my academic program, it's also just kind of a lifestyle. Like, it's an active cultivation of how do we, okay, how do I create a feeling of belonging in the space, whether it's a club or in class or whatever. And often it's like just looking people in the eye when you talk to them or actually, like, listening to what they say. And if you mentioned like, Oh, Ken, you did like a show at UConn here in like 2008, right? Like, what kind of show is in the next time we talk, like, actually remembering it. So I feel like it's an active just cultivation of how do we sustain this group of people or even this person? Like, I love viewing people and thinking of people as kind of like plants to

be nurtured, right? And not as like a kind of commanding gardener way, but it's like, if you're a flower, and I'm a flower, and then we're just like both existing in this ecosystem, like, what can I do to, make sure that you're as healthy as possible and that I'm as healthy as possible? So just contribute to the greater ecosystem. So yeah, I can't remember the original question.

Ken:

No, that's beautiful. You know, and we're all growing out of the same ground, right? Well, this has been amazing to talk about all this stuff that you're doing, not only in your coursework, but all these great experiences you're having. Thanks so much for coming in. This has been excellent.

Sydney:

Thank you, Ken. It's been awesome.

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.