

## **INDIE MAJOR PODCAST**

**10/2/24 Justin Guinta**

### **Individualized Major: Criminal Behavior**

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 with Justin Guinta. Hi, Justin.

Justin:

How are you?

Ken:

Good. How are you doing?

Justin:

Doing fantastic. Happy to be here.

Ken:

Yeah, great to have you. So you are an individualized major here at UConn. Why don't you tell us, what's the name of your individualized major?

Justin:

So my individualized major is named Criminal Behavior.

Ken:

Criminal behavior. Okay, so how would you describe that major?

Justin:

Yeah, so it's definitely a combination of a lot of different subjects, kind of analyzing behavior from a genetic standpoint, from a social standpoint, psychological standpoint, even just seeing how society influences behavior to ultimately lead to how people decide to commit crime, and then the repercussions of that and how they can then reintroduce themselves into society afterwards.

Ken:

So I would imagine that the term criminal behavior can be ambiguous, maybe sometimes in and of itself. For example, there could be psychological reasons why somebody commits acts that might not be according to societal norms or whatever, but at the same time, couldn't there be social circumstances that also set somebody up for criminal behavior?

Justin:

Precisely. So there's definitely a lot of psychological things. For example, I took this one class called abnormal psychology, and that class was more of what you started with about the psychological factors of, you know, people just doing things that are deviant from what is typical. And then outside of that as well, the societal factors are definitely there. You think of all these different things, like, for

example, the problem of a single mother stealing food for her child when they're going hungry. Like, is that considered a criminal? By law, yes, but socially, not necessarily. So that's why the societal factors then come into play and ultimately can influence someone to commit crime or not commit crime.

Ken:

Sounds like you're taking as part of your major psychology courses?

Justin:

Yes, it's a very it's about a third of my class.

Ken:

A third of your classes. Okay. And then any sociology classes?

Justin:

That's also about another third of my classes.

Ken:

Okay, what else?

Justin:

The remaining classes, it's a mix of a lot of different things. There's public administration, slash public policy in there. There's some history courses. There's even some molecular and cell biology courses to get like the genetic components of it. And on top of that, there's even some Spanish courses in there. And that's because I

did research projects in Spanish comparing Spanish prisons to American prisons and also Dominican and public prisons to American prisons, and how that then influences behavior.

Ken:

That covers sort of the disciplines that you're studying. And before we get to why you went down this path, where you got this interest, I also wanted to mention that you have not one other major, but two other majors, is that correct?

Justin:

Correct. Two other majors, and I'm also in a four plus one. So it's a lot of different work.

Ken:

Explain what a four plus one is.

Justin:

Yes. So I'm in a program where I'm completing my undergraduate degrees, and then after that, I'm in a one year grad program after that. So a lot of my classes count towards undergrad requirements, but then also those classes then count towards my graduate requirements. So I'm able to finish my master's in public administration in just one year after I graduate.

Ken:

Okay. So what are your other two majors?

Justin:

That would be psychological sciences with the behavioral neuroscience focus and sociology. There's some overlap between them. That was a big part of it. Even still my psych major has vastly different things than what my criminal behavior major covers. I'm doing a lot of research right now with behavioral neuroscience. My sociology major, I do a lot of well-being type work. I just had an internship that counted as a sociology requirement, and I'm joining a research lab this semester for health equity and sociology. So it's a little bit of everything. They have their different, like, niches more or less, but there's definitely a lot of overlap in the center when you combine all three.

Ken:

So health equity, Who runs that lab?

Justin:

That's doctor Ryan Talbert.

Ken:

Let me just project ahead then. Where are you going with all this? Like, in your mind, if you think about after you're done with your graduate degree, what do you imagine would be a great next step after that?

Justin:

So my ultimate dream career would be to work in management of law enforcement. I've seen a lot of things within it, both being in it

from an intern perspective, but then also from an outside perspective that I think my skills would contribute well to. And then on top of that, I think there's certain areas where I think that me being in a managerial position can help contribute to the equity of law enforcement and making sure that safety is equitable for everyone.

Ken:

Now, the career you described, where would you go to get that kind of work? Like, what kind of organizations would you be looking at?

Justin:

I know I'm definitely leaning on the federal side for law enforcement. I know I don't, I'm not necessarily looking for any type of local or state work. I had an internship this past summer with the Naval Criminal Investigative Service or NCIS, kind of just like the show. It wasn't really anything like the show in reality, of course. But it was a really great experience, and I really hope to go back one.

Ken:

You just completed this internship just recently, right?

Justin:

I finished on Friday.

Ken:

How was that?

Justin:

It was phenomenal. It was everything I'd hoped for and more. It was a 12 week internship experience where I was basically tagging along in every single thing that all of special agents, investigators, and analysts were all doing. I was able to see so many different things, and it was a really great first step in my career direction because this is the first time I've had anything in relation to law enforcement or military experience at all.

Ken:

Have there been other things that you've done kind of outside of the classroom during this majors that you want to talk about?

Justin:

Yeah, I mean, I've had a couple of different experiences in research labs. Like I said, I'm joining the health equity lab this coming semester in sociology. For that one, it's still pending approval and all that type of stuff, and I still have to start doing the actual research on it. But I plan on researching the correlation between extracurricular funding and then juvenile crime rates in cities. And trying to see if there's any link between seeing how if schools are underfunded in their education and their extracurricular funding, then does that lead to crime? So that's a big part of why I started researching there that then ties into health equity because there's a very clear line of well, we're not being equitable and giving these people enough money. So that's why they're then falling into crime, which then is a deterrent to their health. So that's one of the great experiences I've had in research. The other one has been in behavioral neuroscience. I'm in a lab that does CPP, which is conditions place preference. Basically, what that is is when you give

someone some type of substance that then you see how it affects their behavior in terms of, do they prefer one physical location over another because of that. So, for example, in my lab, you're able to see how people going to different virtual reality settings is then impacted by either a placebo or nicotine, and we're trying to then generalize this and then add it onto other substances as well.

Ken:

Okay, so where does this come from? How long have you sort of been thinking about these things? Does it go back to your childhood or or what?

Justin:

Yeah, I would say it's gone back years and years and years. I think the first time I've been interested in anything remotely related to this was seventh grade. I went to a STEM Academy for middle school, where it was very Tech Ed focused. And during my lunch period, I would sit in on the Tech Ed teacher's classroom where he taught eighth graders the basics of forensics. And I was in seventh grade. And I was, you know, listening and seeing what he was doing. I found it interesting right there on the spot, and I still had another year to go until I was actually in that part of the program. And it was just so fascinating to me that I was like, I can't wait to do this in the future. Then that time when it came to the next year when I was then in that class, basically what he did is he set up a mock crime scene and we had to try and solve it. You know, we were eighth graders. We didn't really know what we were doing, but it was a really fun time. Right. So after that, we then had to present our case and present the evidence to what was, quote-unquote, like, a jury, per se, of people that were, like, alumni, that were people that were in different classes, and we had to successfully argue to them and

convince them that, like, this is the crime that happened. This is why it happened. Here was the motive, et cetera. And I ended up doing that project with two people who weren't nearly as interested in as I was, so I ended up, like, kind of doing a very big portion of it, but we did very, very well on the project, and I absolutely loved it, and that's what sparked my interest in this field.

Ken:

So you were the one doing all the work in the group project.

Justin:

More or less. I mean, I knew what to expect from the year before, so that was a big part of it.

Ken:

Very good. Now, what are your thoughts on how criminal behavior is represented in pop culture or media? Because I think for a lot of people, that's kind of where they consume it, right? And TV or whatever?

Justin:

Definitely. I think it's really interesting. There's definitely a very big influence on pop culture on people's perspective on crime from both a law enforcement perspective, and then also a crime perspective. For law enforcement, it's like, if you look at the NCIS show, they're going traveling across the country, you go to solve a triple homicide every day, and that wasn't the case thankfully for me. A lot of the stuff I was doing was more, you know, surveillance work. It was a lot more. I did some behind the scenes, like plain

clothes operations, kind of, like undercover, if you will, but not really undercover? I did more, like protective operations, things like that that really contributed to a more specific goal than, you know, going and solving crime and like solving murders, versus, these TV shows, they'll dramatize it significantly so that it's appealing to viewers.

Ken:

Right. Right. Now, when you picture yourself doing this kind of work later on down the line in your career, do you see yourself being sort of out in the world doing investigative work? Do you see yourself on the research side, or I'm not sure how that looks. How do you imagine that?

Justin:

Yeah, so there's plenty of different positions. I can speak specifically to NCIS because that's the one I'm most aware of. There's special agents, investigators, and analysts. Investigators and special agents are very similar, but analysts do a lot more of like the background checks, pulling from the computer, et cetera. That type of work I'm very interested in, but special agent work as well has had a huge calling to me because that's what I got to experience firsthand this summer. And it's a lot more working with people and trying to help people in a better way.

Ken:

Now, you started, I think, as a psych major, is that right?

Justin:

Yeah, that was It was complicated. I originally came into UConn as a physics major.

Ken:

Oh, interesting. Yeah. Okay. With a whole different set of goals, even?

Justin:

I have this weird thing with my career path where my long term one has always been working in law enforcement management. But every, like, once in a while I'll have like a two-week phase where I really want to do something else. So when I applied to UConn I was in a phase where I wanted to be a physics teacher. That was a random fun fact for you. And then before I even got to school physically, I had already changed my major to Psych. But then at that point I was psych when I applied to the individualized major program.

Ken:

Right. So you get interested in a lot of stuff.

Justin:

Yeah, very, very easily.

Ken:

Right. All right. Now, how did you find out about the individualized major program?

Justin:

I was a tour guide for the summer after my freshman year. I didn't know the program existed before that, but then after hearing my friends talk about it and them saying, like, Oh, we have 115 plus majors, and the plus stands for the fact we have an individualized major program, and you can make your own major. I just thought it was so interesting and unique So then after that, I ended up having a meeting with you that summer and saying, Oh, here's my plan. Let me know if it's feasible. And then after that I went straight into the Gateway course. Absolutely loved it, got to work with some really great people to kind of, even though our different interests were so different, we still got to work together, kind of come up with our own plan, and kind of forge your own path, which I thought was really, really unique.

Ken:

Now, you mentioned the gateway course. And the gateway course for our listeners is a, it's a one credit half semester course where students who are interested in making their own major can come and sort of think about interdisciplinary, what that means, and then actually start to piece together the actual plan of study, your statement on what the major is, and so on and find faculty to help advise you and all that sort of stuff. Now, from what I understand, also, because our program is starting up a new mentor program for students who find us and might want to create their own major, and you're getting involved in that as well, right?

Justin:

Correct.

Ken:

So as a mentor, let me just ask you this. Do you have any advice for any students who might be thinking about creating their own majors?

Justin:

Definitely, don't limit yourself in terms of your classes. I know my department in sociology is a very interesting department in that a lot of the classes are offered like every random once in a while. So I kind of had to broaden my horizons and figure out, like, Oh, this class will give me this, but this class will give me parts of that that the first class had. But if the first class is not offered, I have a second class as an option. So I remember my A-list and my B-list were like, super super, super long. And everyone else in my class had like the exact like 12 classes we'll say that they wanted to take, whereas mine had probably like 30 or 40. So I came up with a huge list of classes, and I was like, just in cases when it's not offered, here's another one that will be just as interesting to me that I would also like to take. And that was a big part of it, too, and talking to my advisors, it was, I had three different advisors who all gave me very different advice, depending on the day. But they gave me huge lists and they're like, Oh, if you like this class, then you should look into this one, too, because it's going to have similar topics for you.

Ken:

Yeah, so each individualized major has to find advisors from different departments. And what was that like? Was that hard?

Justin:

Yeah, it was definitely a weird process. My original primary advisor that I had in mind was just the professor from abnormal psychology class. And he was great in helping me set up my classes and finding similar psych ones because that was the first semester to take up upper level psych class, and he knew exactly which ones I was looking for. But then outside of that, I more or less limited my perspective by then only choosing another psych advisor and then one sociology advisor. The sociology advisor actually ended up being my primary. Doctor Bradley Wright, he's been a phenomenal advisor. He's advised me through my internship as well. But outside of that, like, I wish I had chosen another advisor from a different department as well, even one I wasn't familiar with because, for example, if I chose political science or history, I could find out more about those specific programs. And now it's like I have to go out and reach out to different people who don't necessarily know me on a personal level. Whereas, if I had that advisor, I could just reach out to that specific person. So I guess that's my big piece of advice is don't be afraid to reach out. Don't be afraid to, you know, look into other things that you hadn't necessarily considered originally and kind of, like, expanding your horizon super far, so then you can narrow it down in the future.

Ken:

Makes a lot of sense. Very good. Alright. Well, on that inspiring note, thank you so much for coming in. It was great to talk to you.

Justin:

Of course, thank you so much 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](http://iisp.uconn.edu). That's [iisp.uconn.edu](http://iisp.uconn.edu). We'd also like to thank UConn Enrichment Programs and WHUS UConn Radio for their support of this show.