

INDIE MAJOR PODCAST

10/23/24 Krista Rogers

Individualized Major: Japanese Studies

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.

Ken:

I'm here with Krista Rogers. Hi, Krista.

Krista:

Hi. Thanks for having me today.

Ken:

So, you are an individualized major Alum. And remind us, what year did you graduate?

Krista:

I graduated in 2011.

Ken:

And what was your individualized major?

Krista:

The title was Japanese Studies.

Ken:

Japanese Studies. And what is exciting about this is that you and I work together in the same unit here at UConn.

Krista:

Indeed, in fact, it is great to see you in a place outside of the office. Right. I know that you do exist outside of the office.

Ken:

Right. Right. So, the whole unit is the Honors and Enrichment Programs. And you are part of the Enrichment Programs side, right? Why don't we start by describing what you're doing now?

Krista:

Sure. So my full-time position is the assistant director of pre-professional advising at UConn. And so I have a wonderful team of colleagues, and we work with mainly pre-medical, pre-dental, and pre-law students, and both provide resources for them, as well as support them through the application process to those schools.

Ken:

That's good. That's good. Because those pre dental, pre medical, pre laws, there's probably a lot of students who are feeling a lot of pressure, is that right?

Krista:

Indeed. It's a very long application process. And that's really what we've been doing for the last five months is having coaching sessions with a lot of them.

Ken:

Wow. Wow. So why don't we wind back the clock? And do you remember how you found out that there was an individualized major program and then why it was that that was attractive to you?

Krista:

Sure. So I did grow up locally to the UConn Storrs campus. And so I think I was always pretty attuned to what was going on at UConn. And just knowing I had this big interest in something, it made me, you know, first look to see if it was a potential major at UConn. And then when I found out it wasn't, somebody, at some point, just told me, you know, you might be able to make your own major. And so I did a little more exploring. And then, even though I laugh about it now, I was absolutely that student who is inside the individualized major office, my first week, a freshman year, saying, How do I do this?

Ken:

Interesting. So you knew you wanted to do Japanese studies or something like that.

Krista:

Yes, absolutely.

Ken:

Did you ever have a moment where you thought, well, I'll do a different major? Yes, so I actually came into the university as a linguistics philosophy major, I think, because I just had an interest in language in general, and had always excelled the most in foreign language growing up. But when I was 13 is when I really started becoming interested in Japanese specifically through J-pop, just Japanese pop music. And something about the sound of the language really appealed to me, and I started teaching myself, and it became more and more like a puzzle. Like, I just wanted to figure out what this grammatical ending meant and then, you know, apply it and find it in different lyrics. And as a senior in high school, I was able to actually take courses on the UConn campus. And at that point, I had already studied enough that I was able to jump into the intermediate level as a high school student. And so when I came to UConn, I had already exhausted all of the course offerings that UConn had in the language. And so just by exploring the IMJR, you know, I decided, this is the one thing that I'm really, really passionate about. And I did end up minoring in linguistics, too. But the IMJR program really allowed me the space to pursue what I was most passionate about.

Ken:

So you arrived to UConn having basically exhausted the actual Japanese language courses that Yukon offered. So by the time you started creating your major in Japanese studies, that part of it was sort of complete, right?

Krista:

The formal language offerings, yes. But that's where some independent studies and other things came into play.

Ken:

Okay. So then what other kinds of courses then did you round it out with when you did Japanese studies?

Krista:

I was very, very fortunate, and I'm not sure if I could have even done my IMJR if it weren't for the help of doctor Alexis Duddon from the history department. And she actually arrived at UConn the same semester I began my undergraduate studies. And so I was able to take modern Japan with her. And then she also teaches history 3863, war and diplomacy in East Asia, for all intents and purposes, modern Korea. And so her courses really became the backbone of my studies, and she eventually became my undergraduate honors thesis advisor, too. And we're still in touch on an almost weekly basis.

Ken:

So. So history courses became a big part of it. What else? Any other disciplines that you ended up diving into? I did incorporate some linguistics into it, as well as anthropology. To be perfectly honest,

you know, at the time, the course offerings on East Asian studies were so limited that I didn't have a lot of choice, and study abroad became a really important part of that, too. So I'm thankful now that there is an Asian and Asian American Studies institute that would probably provide a little more help to students.

Ken:

Yeah, Yeah, and we do have some current Asian and Asian American studies individualized majors still at the moment. So study abroad. So study abroad became part of what you did when you were doing your degree?

Krista:

Yes. And that was how I was able to take really Japan centric courses as well.

Ken:

Okay. So you went to Japan for one semester?

Krista:

Just one semester, actually.

Ken:

All right, what was that like?

Krista:

It was pretty amazing. It was my first time ever in the country, four months at Sophia University in Tokyo. And I, you know, took classes that both explore Japanese culture, society, literature, as well as just really got out and traveled for the first time ever, you know, by myself. And so

Ken:

Wow.

Krista:

That really sparked a whole interest to go back to Japan. And, you know, that's where my life has taken me since.

Ken:

Oh, really? Why don't we talk about that a little bit. So you graduated from UConn and then how long was it after you graduated that you ended up back in Japan?

Krista:

I actually went back to Japan right after graduating.

Ken:

Oh, wow.

Krista:

Which was a bit of a difficult year because 2011, if you recall, in March, there was a really big earthquake tsunami in Northeastern Japan.

Ken:

Right. Right.

Krista:

And that just happened to be the area where my best Japanese friend is. And so I had been accepted to the Japan Exchange and teaching program, the JET program. And when that happened, you know, all of us were a little unsure? Are we still going to be able to go? But I still was able to get over there in late July. And then I spent two years teaching English at a junior high school in Yamagata City, Japan, before returning State Side.

Ken:

Wow. So did your language skills change, I would imagine, just when you were just there? I mean, did you arrive feeling comfortable speaking Japanese since you'd exhausted all the language courses?

Krista:

I mean, what was that? Yeah, no, thank you for that question, because I always love telling my students now that actually, my language skills didn't really go up when I studied abroad initially. Rather, they went up when I came back to UConn as a senior and just immerse myself in a small friend group who spoke Japanese, where that was the default language.

Ken:

Oh, wow. And so that really forced me to actually use my language in real situations. And so I felt pretty comfortable going into the JET

program. And I had fellow people in my city who didn't speak any Japanese, and they managed to survive. But you know, certainly, just being in a work in school environment day in day out. That definitely improved my language skills and learning the language in context, especially.

Ken:

Okay, so you come back to America after two years in the Jet program. And then what about after that?

Krista:

Yes, so this is something also that I like to share with students is that I didn't have a clear career vision for myself when I graduated college. I knew what I wanted to do immediately after, and that was moved to and work in Japan. But, you know, I kind of had an interest in teaching, maybe that. I come from an education family. And so I decided to also use JET as a chance to test the waters, see if I liked being in a classroom. And let that determine my next steps. And so, eventually, I did decide that I wanted to go back to graduate school for teaching ESL. And so I enrolled in a TESOL teaching English to speakers of other languages program at the time Simmons College in Boston.

Ken:

S that's after you get back from Japan, you do this program. How long did that program last?

Krista:

That was a two year masters.

Ken:

Two year Masters.

Krista:

Yep.

Ken:

Alright. And then what?

Krista:

And then I thought for sure that I was going to be teaching ESL in a high school north of Boston where I had done my practicum, and things didn't work out kind of to the shock of everyone. And so I emailed back to my colleagues here at UConn, where I had actually worked for three years as an undergrad in the individualized major office, and I emailed Enrichment Programs. You know, asked if there was any possibility of working part time, because I was also going to be teaching part time at UCLE, the University of Connecticut, American English Language Institute, lot of acronyms.

Ken:

Yeah.

Krista:

And somehow is fortunate enough to just figure out both of those positions and start working in September 2015.

Ken:

Wow. Wow. Now, is it true that are you teaching Japanese at UConn currently, as well?

Krista:

I am. Yes. So let me rewind again one moment because so I came back to UConn 2015, had dual positions, both teaching ESL, as well as in Enrichment Programs and did that for about three years until a full time position opened up in enrichment programs. So I hadn't been teaching for a few years after that. But then in fall 2021, kind of, by chance, I became one of the instructors for the elementary Japanese courses on campus and have absolutely fallen in love with it.

Ken:

I bet.

Krista:

It's one of my favorite things. I'm just so passionate about it. I try to inject all the fun, the humor, things that the students taking these courses because they're intrinsically interested in them as well.

Ken:

Right.

Krista:

For 95% of my students, they're taking this course as an elective.

Ken:

Yeah. So what role does Japan play in your life now? You were there for two years after you graduated? I don't know. How do you have a vision for how your experience with Japanese studies or Japanese culture will continue to evolve?

Krista:

Yes, thank you for that, too, because I think it has evolved quite a lot over the last ten years, and it will continue to. Just one big example is I've become very involved in JET program alumni efforts. And so I actually partner very closely with the Japanese Consulate in Boston for several events throughout the year. Just last month, I co-facilitated an all day workshop in Boston for the jet participants who are about to leave. And so it's an annual event we do every year, kind of a crash course in some English teaching strategies as well as how to give a self introduction in Japanese, and then we have some Japanese volunteers on site, too. And I've also coordinated info sessions with the JET program among some other things. And so I see my role there continuing to kind of evolve. But I absolutely love mentoring UConn students, usually three or four that find their way to me every year, whether they were my own students or just other random ones by word of mouth. So there's that. I've also, ever since 2013, had a part-time translation job. So, this has been an awesome way for me to keep up with my language skills, keep, you know, in the know of current going ons in Japan. And my website focuses on more of the fun stuff, like, food, travel, pop culture, that kind of thing. But I found that's been a really meaningful thing to do as well.

Ken:

So what kinds of materials come through for translation, usually, any particular type of writing?

Krista:

It's usually meant to be very fun and kind of just sharing: okay, here's what's trending in Japan right now for an English language audience. So just as an example, this past weekend, I translated a piece about phenomenon known as Hiroshima skipping, which sounds strange, but basically, people in Hiroshima have been complaining that no big musical artists ever stop in Hiroshima. They just skip from Osaka down to Fukuoka. And so You know, they're saying, Come on, like, we want people to come here, too, and then I dove into all the data and other reasons why that's a thing.

Ken:

Huh. Huh. So I can't skip this. Now, you were an individualized major, but I also heard you say you were a student worker in the individualized major program, is that right?

Krista:

Yes. Best student job ever.

Ken:

Oh, good. So would you do that for a year or two years or?

Krista:

Three years, actually. Yeah. I signed on May right after my freshman year, and then actually worked through the end of the summer after I graduated.

Ken:

Wow. So there must have been some interesting insights or I guess my question is, what was it like being a student worker for the program? And do you remember anything in particular that stands out from that time?

Krista:

I absolutely loved seeing the different kinds of plans of studies that students came up with.

Ken:

Yeah.

Krista:

Because just like me, you know, these are also students who have a very particular passion or you know, want to combine several passions. And so just seeing some of the themes that they would come up with and then being able to, in my job capacity, process those plans for graduation, things like that. And I also really grew to like attending campus events, like outreach events and connecting with potential students, for instance. I think I was able to grow a lot just by doing that kind of thing.

Ken:

Yeah. Yeah. Well, this is so fascinating to hear your story, so thank you so much for coming in.

Krista:

Thank you so much. It was my pleasure. Thanks.

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.