

INDIE MAJOR PODCAST

12/11/24 Alexis Torres

Individualized Major: Marine Resources and Indigenous 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 with Alexis Torres. Hi, Alexis. How are you?

Alexis:

Hey, Ken. I'm great. How are you doing?

Ken:

I'm doing well. It's so great to see you. Alexis is an alum of the individualized major program, and we are actually doing our first remote interview. Explain to us where you are, Alexis.

Alexis:

I am reporting live from the town of Groton—Groton, Connecticut.

Ken:

Very good. And I'm here in the studio at WHUS. So, Alexis, you graduated, when again, remind me, that was December of...

Alexis:

Yeah, this past December 2023.

Ken:

And what was the name of your individualized major?

Alexis:

So the name of my major is Marine Resources and Indigenous Communities.

Ken:

What did that major involve?

Alexis:

So, I was able to take my two passions and combine them of environmental protection and helping environmental justice communities thrive.

Ken:

And so what kind of courses then? Was there, like, one main department that you kind of drew on and then brought in some other departments or what?

Alexis:

So I had Marine Science in there. And then I had Maritime Studies in there, which has a little bit to do with the history of kind of how the ocean laws go and anything along the coast went. And then also American Studies was in there, a kind of segment for indigenous cultures and communities. Marine resources and natural resources have always been very sacred to indigenous communities? So I wanted to kind of go back and dive forward into that how indigenous communities were connected to these resources and the importance and significance of them.

Ken:

Now, how did you decide to pursue a major like this?

Alexis:

Yes. So there's a couple of different things, but the main push pointers here were my internship for UConn CIRCA, the Connecticut Institute for Resilience and Climate Adaptation, which is based right there at Avery Point at the Marine Science campus. And there I did a bunch of work on translating documents about sea level rise from English to Spanish so that the Latino community within Connecticut could enhance their literary resources for topics that revolved around climate change. And then as far as academics went, I was very much interested in the marine world. However, science wasn't at my core front. For me, it was more so how the marine world and humans intersected. So that's why I was more interested in policy because I knew I could make a bigger change at a faster rate. The other aspect is a cultural thing, just coming from a Hispanic background and having indigenous roots as well is kind of what was more a little bit personal that I wanted to take that interest in. And for academics, having great professors. I took a marine environmental policy course with Syma Ebbin, and that really kind

of was one of my favorite classes because it kind of got to learn the foundations of governance in marine policy. And then most of my maritime studies courses with Matthew McKenzie, a professor that we have who also does American studies. And both of those being my advisors, too, was great support.

Ken:

Wow. So climate and environment and that sort of stuff was also a consideration in your major.

Alexis:

Absolutely. And that's a big reason why I had to do an interdisciplinary major because there's so many intersectionalities in the umbrella term of climate change, and then you get climate justice. So yeah, everything's governed differently on water than it is on land because it's a lot harder to do it out there.

Ken:

Sure.

Alexis:

Yeah. Yeah, but environmental protection is definitely a huge indicator in something that I have a core value on.

Ken:

Now, I also want to back up here because what we're talking about is you were mentioning Avery Point and stores. So we're talking about Yukon campuses. And Avery Point is one of the regional

campuses that UConn has several across the state. And that is where you did your entire individualized major in your entire undergrad program.

Alexis:

Yes.

Ken:

And Avery Point is located in Groton, right on the coast. And in fact, the kind of major that you did really needed to be done down there. Correct?

Alexis:

Yes.

Ken:

Because that's where a lot of the marine science and marine resources stuff is happening?

Alexis:

Absolutely. Yeah. The entire campus itself is marine science, but we also can get a maritime studies degree there.

Ken:

Yeah. But now, what about looking forward to the future? I understand that you are working in a field that's also connected to some of this work you did in your major. You want to talk about that?

Alexis:

Yeah, absolutely. So now I am working for the town of Groton as a sustainability and resilience specialist, and the town of Groton is coming out with a conservation plan, a conservation action plan, so I'll be involved in that. And we've got all different kinds of plans going on, so many projects going on, but a lot of it also revolves around equity and environmental justice because Groton is diverse in different ways. So we've got also education and youth projects that I'll be involved with, with a summit that we'll be having soon, and then kind of doing things like benchmarking the town's energy use. And then we've got a downtown Mystic plan going on. But a huge, like I said, environmental justice and equity is a lens that I've been using for a while and that we're doing here too. So, for example, redesigning some of the parks in certain areas that we could use a little bit of help and for environmental justice communities. So just to envision a beautiful town for everybody to enjoy and recreate in.

Ken:

Right. And it's another example of how environmental concerns, of course, are deeply connected with community concerns and how people live their lives. And so I see, yeah, it seems completely connected to the kind of issues that you were thinking about and writing about and researching while you were doing your major here.

Alexis:

Yes.

Ken:

And now, so when you were a kid, do you remember wanting to be something when you grew up, and was it related to the kind of stuff you're doing now, or was it totally like a totally different kind of thing?

Alexis:

Yeah, there were two big ones. I wanted to be a veterinarian.

Ken:

Alright.

Alexis:

That was number one. Which I got to work at a couple of veterinarian hospitals. So my 8-year-old self would be very proud. And then the other one was I wanted to do marine biology. Specifically, I wanted to be a cetologist, which is basically a scientist that studies whales.

Ken:

Right.

Alexis:

And that was where I had my heart set. And it was cool because later on in life, I ended up going to Sea World Camp when I was in middle school, and we actually got to sleep in the Beluga Whale exhibit.

Ken:

Wow.

Alexis:

So I kind of lived out that dream, too, but there's also Project O here in Groton, Project Oceanology. And that's on the Avery Point campus, which in seventh grade I went to, and that's when I knew I wanted to go to Avery Point.

Ken:

Wow. Wow.

Alexis:

Yeah. And actually, when my father had picked me up from that camp later on in the week, because it was a sleep over camp. They were pregnant with my sister, and they decided, they were figuring out what they should name my sister. And they actually were like, this place is so beautiful. We should name her Avery. And my little sister's name is Avery.

Ken:

Oh. Wow, so all the way back in seventh grade. That's really, that's really great. So you've had that connection really, all the way back.

Alexis:

And Avery Point's great, too, because they have a lot of waterfront activities, too. So there's other ways to get physically connected through an experiential route. So you could, I've joined in on sailing

a couple of times with Prescott there. And then also, I took a scuba diving course and got certified during my last round, and that was going, you know, right in the water and getting down. And one of the best experiences that I've had that is just kind of drilled into my memory is going, when we were learning how to scuba dive, we went to the bottom, and it wasn't that deep, but it feels a lot deeper. There were these little snails, and one of the instructors handed us a couple of them, and they just they were kind of all on top of each other and we just like, popped them off, and we were feeding the fish underwater. It was the coolest experience ever.

Ken:

Wow. Wow. So you're doing this great work for the Town of Groton, working on issues that have been at the center of your interests and concern for years. So when you look ahead, even further in the future. I mean, where do you imagine yourself? You Imagine yourself working at the Town of Groton for a long time, I'd imagine. Do you ever want to go back and study more deeply some of these issues that you ran into in your undergrad years?

Alexis:

Yeah. Well, my main thing was helping as many people as possible. And so I think the town of Groton is a really good place to be. And it's definitely, it hits home because it's right here in Connecticut. Before this, I was in Virginia at working at the aquarium as an educator. It was great in Virginia to work as an aquarium. But coming back home and know being able to know all the species of fish and stuff and knowing where I am really helped, and that also helps, a big part of my job is when we, from the beginning to learning all the different projects and what we're doing, I can say, Oh, I know where that is, right? Oh, I know. I'm familiar with this or that. So right, yeah, I'm

very happy here, and there's just so much work that has to be done, so I could see myself being here for a very long time.

Ken:

Now, let me just wind back a little bit here. So when you started at UConn, were you originally a Marine sciences major?

Alexis:

So, yeah, I started in Marine Science in the Marine Science Department. And as I said, I was more interested in policy, but we don't have marine policy at UConn. So that's why I had, kind of wanted to create that my major.

Ken:

So how did you find out that you could make your own major at UConn?

Alexis:

Oh, yeah. So my advisor, Claudia Koerting, she mentioned it to me. And from there, we kind of just took off and went through all the different routes that I had to take and then wrangling, everybody that I had, my three advisors, and it was really great just working with all of the advisors, and they were so knowledgeable and just always so willing to help. And I've done a couple of independent studies as well with a few of them. And so they were very amazing.

Ken:

That's so great. Yeah, Claudia Koerting is a force to be reckoned with. She directs the Marine Sciences program down at Avery Point.

Alexis:

Tiny, but mighty.

Ken:

And that is so great that she was there to listen to you, that you were getting something out of the Marine Sciences that was really important to you, but that you wanted to expand out and that somehow this interdisciplinary approach, you know, that was available, that she was able to get you plugged into that.

Alexis:

She is from the Marine Science Department. She's a professor as well. And then Matthew McKenzie was in the American Studies, but I've had him for maritime studies and the same with Syma Ebbin. And all three of them, she did maritime studies, and she did policy as well and she has a background in, she did some salmon tribal work in the West Coast. So she was great to kind of have on my side, and all three of them, like I said, we're my advisors at Avery Point.

Ken:

Wow. Well, this is so great. I think your major is so interesting and exciting and innovative and just so important, too, the different issues that you're tackling. And then the work you're doing now, likewise, just really important work that you're doing for the Town of Groton. So congratulations on all your success, and thank you so much for coming in to talk with us about it.

Alexis:

Thank you so much.

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.