

INDIE MAJOR PODCAST

2/19/25 Honor Neal

Individualized Major: Community and Environmental Health

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 Honor Neal. Hey, Honor.

Honor:

Hi.

Ken:

Thanks for coming in.

Honor:

Thanks for having me.

Ken:

So you are an individualized major here at UConn. Why don't you tell us what your major is and what that major involves?

Honor:

So my major is environmental and community health. I basically had this whole idea to bring in multiple aspects of public health and environmental science to kind of show how they are intertwined and cannot be separated from each other. And with that, I also decided to focus a lot in genetics to look at epigenetics, which is a new kind of emerging science, which looks at changeable genes, especially stressors like pollutants or economic stress and things like that, and how that can change actual DNA and then affect health outcomes.

Ken:

Wow, environmental and community health. And like you said, so you're actually studying some science, some genetics. Is that the molecular and cell biology area?

Honor:

For the most part, I've had a few classes that are like, right now, I'm taking an allied health class that's on cancer genetics, but for the most part, it is MCB.

Ken:

Okay, so there's that part of it. And then you're matching that with more social sciences?

Honor:

Lots of social sciences, and that is a lot more of the policy side of things. So like, my sociology classes like race science and medicine or my anthropology classes like global health and human rights.

Ken:

So anthropology, sociology, little allied health, molecular and cell biology. That's what four already. And then, anything else mixed up in there?

Honor:

That's, for the most part, some, like, evolutionary biology classes to kind of mix in with the MCB. But, yeah, that's most of it.

Ken:

Now, you mentioned you're studying environmental issues as well. Yes. Is that right? So what does that look like? What kind of courses have you taken around that?

Honor:

Yeah, so right now I'm in a it's NRE. I can't even remember the name, but it's a 4,000 level climate, human ecosystem interactions, basically just looking at the actual interactions between humans and how we shape the climate and how that in turn affects us, which is particularly interesting to me because I can look at things like pollution or warming and see how that affects, especially minority and lower income populations.

Ken:

Wow. So NRE is natural resources and the environment. Another department.

Honor:

Yeah, another.

Ken:

College of Agriculture, health and natural resources. So yeah, you really are mixing up a lot of disciplines, which sort of says something about the way that the issues that are central to your major are issues that cross over all kinds of ways of thinking, different types of approaches, right, whether it's individual health, the health of larger communities, health, either it's physical health, mental health. Are you studying psychology at all?

Honor:

Not specifically psychology, like any psychology classes, but it has been really interesting to see, like, in some of my sociology and anthropology classes when mental health is brought up, how I can kind of gear that towards my major, as well.

Ken:

Right, right. Now, you are working on a capstone research project for this major, as well. And in some ways, this brings all these issues together, but into a really specific subject. You want to talk for a second about what you're doing for that project?

Honor:

So my highly specific subject is the Connecticut bus system. I have basically been looking at the I mean, I've learned everything from, like, civil engineering to tax policies and how that's funding public transportation. But basically, everything that goes into making a bus

system and getting people from point A to point B and then all of the issues that come along with it from what's called time poverty in which a lot of people that have to be waiting for the buses are sacrificing their time in other things, like going to health appointments or cooking healthy food, but also how like, we can think about people that are late to work and get fired because of it because they don't have reliable transportation or people that can't make it to their healthcare appointments because there's not a bus stop at the health facility that they need to get to.

Ken:

And then buses are also places where accessibility issues come into play, too, right?

Honor:

Yes. So part of my essay that I've tried to do is, like, weave in these stories of things that I have actually seen as I've taken the bus. I one of these stories, I use it to introduce my topic on accessibility. And it's the story we were waiting like I had to wait about 2 hours for the bus to come here in Storrs just because on Fridays, it's really, really busy. So after waiting 2 hours outside, kind of in the cold, I get on the bus, and there is another girl there that's using a wheelchair. And all of these buses are equipped with accessibility features so that people with wheelchairs are able to get on the bus. But on this particular day, the bus driver could not figure out how to work this feature. And ultimately, he had to leave the girl behind in order to, like, get everyone moving and kind of just had to say, like, I'm sorry, take the next bus. And that, I mean, that I feel like I could have done something more in that situation, like, reported someone or made a bigger deal out of it. But I think it does just go to show you know, I think we can place blame in the bus driver in some way. Bus drivers

are required by Connecticut to, like, have this knowledge of how to use these systems. But at the same time, I think it just shows the problem of accessibility on the bus as a whole. And we could blame the driver, but we could also say, you know, these all of the equipment for accessibility needs to be better and needs to be more easily able to be used by drivers. I mean, accessibility is a huge thing in the bus system.

Ken:

Yeah, it's a fascinating and really complex topic that you've taken on for this paper, and it also feels really timely, right? These are issues that people are grappling with right now. And in some ways, do you see? I mean, the bus system ends up becoming a kind of metaphor or one example of the ways in which these larger issues in your major work themselves.

Honor:

Absolutely. I included this section on this paper by Henry Guia. It's called It's called Stormy Weather, Hurricane Katrina and the politics of disposability. And the author basically talks about the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and how it was a kind of perfect storm of racial injustice that culminated into thousands of Black bodies just being kind of left on the streets of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. He uses this framework of the politics of disposability, which I bring into my paper that kind of just says, especially Black and minority and lower income individuals have been left by the government and instead are made to, like, fend for themselves in a way. These individuals don't have the money or the resources to get private transportation, so they're doing what they can by taking the bus. But even so there are so many faults in this system that they're still being left behind, and there are still so many gaps which aren't

being met, especially in the means of public health, in their lack of ability to pay for things and all of that.

Ken:

Yeah. So in the individualized major program, we have a big group, probably the biggest group of students within our program who are pursuing majors that have something to do with the issue of health, right? And some students are studying health in different ways to expand their knowledge as part of their pre-med track. They want to become doctors. Others are thinking about going into public health or some kind of public policy or something around health. So for you, where do you see all this sort of moving toward? What are you thinking about after you graduate?

Honor:

Yeah, so I actually never expected myself to go into anything related to health. I came into UConn as an MCB major, and I really just wanted to learn about genes all day, and then I realized that I did not want to be in a lab. So I kind of started thinking about, like, okay, well, why do I actually care about this, like, whole genetics stuff? And I started thinking about what I really want to do, which is to work directly with people kind of at the root of it all. Um, so I'm considering so many things, but for the most part, I'm currently considering going into social work. I'll take a gap year or so and then possibly apply to social work programs. But I just got a job at a community health center and homeless shelter in Willimantic, where I'll kind of be going, like, head in to try to see if social work is right for me. I think it's really important to get that experience before applying to grad schools just because I need to know if This is actually right for me or if I'll be burnt out in the very beginning. But yeah, that's kind of my plan. I would like to eventually go and get my

master's in social work. And then from there, I really want to do a lot of hands on work and then maybe eventually go into more like academia or policy type things later in life with even higher education.

Ken:

Oh, well, that sounds like a great opportunity to do some really important work in Willimantic. Where exactly would that be?

Honor:

It is with the Holy Family shelter in Willimantic, just like before you get to downtown. Yeah, that happened on Thursday. So really excited.

Ken:

Oh wow.

Honor:

Yeah.

Ken:

Well, that's amazing because I mean, you're gonna bring this knowledge and these ideas that you've been thinking of to work like that.

Honor:

Yeah.

Ken:

So where do these interests come from? Is this something that goes way back or what?

Honor:

Um, definitely goes way back. Both of my parents have always, like, worked with people and worked for various non-profits. So that's kind of, like, always where I've seen myself. My oldest sister who currently lives in Houston has actually been a major, like, inspiration for me because she works in community organizing. And she's just, like, the smartest person I've ever met. And actually, I was, like, stuck on how to end my paper, and I just called her. I was like, hey, here's my topic. Here's what I want to do. But what do you think about all of this? And she was like, Oh, my goodness, you have to read this book. It's called Emergent Strategy.

Ken:

Wow.

Honor:

So she has shown me in just so many ways the importance of emergent strategies describes this process of, like, small ongoing steps that as individuals can make to eventually shape our communities. And the whole, culmination of my paper is basically saying, like, the only way to make all of these issues better, whether it's to mitigate climate change or to mitigate traffic problems or to make the bus system better is ultimately just to get on the bus and demand that the bus system gets better. I really believe in that, and I

think that's something I've always wanted to do. And I think it's important for me to be doing work that I am actually involved in. I think it would be really boring to do research on something that I'm not actively participating in. And if I like, Okay, actually, I'm about to get a car. And so this has caused this whole conundrum for me of saying, Well, I've made kind of my whole personality about advocating for the bus and saying, Well, oh my goodness. We should all be taking the bus. It's such a good thing, and then I'm about to get a car. So I've had to ask myself, Okay, when are you going to take your car versus when are you going to take the bus? And I really do think it is the act of taking the bus. It's not only sometimes very grueling and awful, but, like, most importantly, for me, engages you in the community. I like, you're face to face with all of the issues within the community, not only the people, but also infrastructure. And, yeah, that's definitely what I want to be doing. My whole life is not only working with those people, but being in it as well.

Ken:

You know, as you're speaking, I'm thinking it's a really interesting and maybe challenging time to be wanting to work with this concept of community because in general, it seems like there's so many ways in which human I don't know. Evolution is not the right word. Human technology or the way that people have been sort of convinced there's just been a lot of direction toward more isolation, right? More like, you know, after the pandemic, I think people are still kind of trying to reemerge after being isolated through the pandemic. Do you find that there are specific or particular challenges right now to just bringing people back to the idea of community?

Honor:

Yeah, especially, so when I moved here from Texas, I took this 1.5 mile walk from one side of campus to another. I had to go to CVS. And I remember walking, and not a single person made eye contact with me on my whole walk, and I -

Ken:

Wow.

Honor:

I am so just, like, hardwired to every single person I see. I'm going to make eye contact with them, and I'm going to smile at them. And I remember finally walking into that CVS and just thinking, Oh, my God, I'm not real. Because no one looked at me.

Ken:

Yeah.

Honor:

And so, just as I have tried to make my home in the Northeast and at UConn in particular, I've tried to find ways, especially to, like, interact with my community and engage in it, and I think one of the most important ways is to just, like, be in it, even when it is so grueling. But, yeah, I think community is so important. I think it's the only way that we can get anything done.

Ken:

Well, this has been really great to talk through all this stuff. It sounds like you came here with this interest in genetics, and that has persisted, but not in the way you thought.

Honor:

Right.

Ken:

Right. And so by finding this program, you somehow were able to put that into the perspective of these other issues that you wanted to bring together. So thank you so much for coming in and talking through all this stuff with us. It's been great.

Honor:

Thank you 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.