

INDIE MAJOR PODCAST

10/14/25 Gabby DiSalvo

Individualized Major: Disability Studies in Media and Food Culture

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 Gabby DiSalvo. Hey, Gabby.

Gabby:

Hi, everyone. Thanks for listening.

Ken:

Thanks for coming in. So you are an individualized major. Could you just tell us the name of your major and what it's all about?

Gabby:

Sure. So my major is Disability Studies in Media and Food Culture with a Personal Brand Entrepreneurship Minor.

Ken:

Okay. So the minor you feel like is connected to this major that you created.

Gabby:

Yes.

Ken:

Why don't you tell us sort of like what's the concept of your major and then maybe talk a little bit about how the minor works with it.

Gabby:

Basically, I am an aspiring chef and disability advocate. I run my own social media blog called Cooking on Wheels, where I post my own recipes and try to be an advocate for the disability community and share about my experiences as a disabled college student. And so basically coming into UConn, I knew that this was going to be part of my studies and I wanted to try and integrate Cooking on Wheels, which is my blog, into my major as much as possible. And so part of that is the major itself. And so I want to have my own cooking show, hopefully someday. And so all of those pieces combined turned into my major.

Ken:

Now, you want to have your own cooking show someday, but isn't it true that you're already doing your own cooking show?

Gabby:

Yes, that is sort of true. This is more of a kind of beginning stage of what kind of show I would like. So I have a show with UCTV Entertainment, also called Cooking on Wheels. And so basically we film in a classroom slash demo kitchen space that we've

transformed into a full kitchen for me to be able to cook and film and really have a show that can teach adaptive cooking techniques, show some disability representation in a field that really lacks it. And honestly, I just get to have fun and share my recipes with the world, which is what I love to do. So, yeah, I have my own show and I hope to turn it into a full-blown show someday, maybe on like Food Network or something like that. That is so great.

Ken:

OK, so we'll definitely put a link to the show in the show notes once this episode comes out. So it sounds like you've got – you bring – you brought kind of a long history of these interests, of what you wanted to do here at UConn, mixing the disability studies with this media and food culture. Now, did you know about the individualized major when you got here, before you came to UConn, or how did that all work?

Gabby:

So when I was looking into colleges just in general, one of my biggest things was finding a place that had a major that could fit all of my interests or if it meant combining a major and a minor or a bunch of different things. And then I had heard about UConn individualized major. And with more research, I started to see that a lot of schools really don't have that. And I just love the idea of what UConn had for it. And so, yeah, I kind of came in with the idea that I wanted to do individualized from the start.

Ken:

Yeah, because it had to be interdisciplinary, right, to mix up all these things. And now we – you know, there's a nutritional science major

at UConn. There's not a disability studies major at UConn, although I think there's a disability studies minor. Is that correct?

Gabby:

Yes, I believe so.

Ken:

So there are definitely courses that you can find in the catalog and put together. And then media, of course, there's different approaches to media courses, whether it's digital media and design or communications department has some media courses. And so there are, again, there are courses to take in these different departments, but then to put them all together to this one concept is what you were able to do.

Gabby:

And honestly, I'm not even sure if it exists anywhere in general. So to be able to combine all those things, it's a pretty unique thing.

Ken:

For sure. For sure. Yes. This is one of those majors that is entirely of your invention. But on the other hand, it makes so much sense together. You have courses in the English department offers some disability studies. I've noticed women's studies, gender, and sexuality studies offer some. I see some journalism courses here. Maybe we can talk a little bit about your experience in the classroom and what kind of classes have stood out for you.

Gabby:

So I remember I want to speak especially about the journalism classes. Because I remember when I was in my freshman year, my advisor at the time had suggested I take this intro to journalism class. It was mostly just to get my writing course out of the way early on when I was still like exploring different options. And so he was like, why don't you just take a W course, get it out of the way now. And that way you can like also explore some different topics. And so when I took this journalism class, I believe it was News Writing 1. I was not expecting the amount of advocacy work I was actually doing in the class. I had worked with the transportation services to help with all different accessibility with any kind of transportation for disabled students on campus, which also I should note, I am disabled. I am in a wheelchair. Just that is part of the interest of disability studies for me. So for the class, I was doing all these different advocacy efforts, basically. And I was actually making real change on campus, which I never in a million years would have thought that in a journalism class that that's what I would be doing. I thought it was just going to be, oh, reporting on stories and like the very generic thing like that. I never thought I would expand into things like that. And, yeah, so sometimes you got to take the – you need classes and, I don't know, take different routes for it.

Ken:

So you mentioned your own disability and your history with that, which is one of the things that you brought into this learning plan that you made, this plan of study, this really unique major. Can we talk a little bit about how you brought that personal experience into what became this whole set of interests that you're pursuing now?

Gabby:

So for me, I never knew that I liked to cook. I also always thought that the kitchen was really an inaccessible place for a wheelchair user or just wheelchair in general. You know, it's very narrow. A lot of counters are too tall, things like that. And so I never really thought it was a place for me. Then during COVID, I started cooking just past the time and kind of fell in love with it. And I started to really realize that, well, turns out everyone can cook if they want to. And it's kind of become like my motto with cooking on wheels that anyone can cook. And honestly, you can even replace cook with anything that you want to do. If it's you want to record a podcast, you may need help to set up the microphone or help with the editing. But hey, you can do a podcast. Why not? You know, regardless of disability or even the inaccessibility. Why not? Why wouldn't you be able to do it? As long as you have that passion, that's all that matters. That's kind of what inspired my passion for all of this. I wanted to show other people that this is something that they can do. And so I've kind of turned that into my major.

Ken:

And that's what's so great about it, I think, is that the ability to take those experiences and those ideas and those inspirations and then turn it into this academic program. And then spend your time piecing together the learning you're doing in different classes and working towards some kind of a culminating project, which I imagine is going to involve media and something to do with your show. All the individualized majors do some form of capstone project, which is basically, you know, it could be a thesis project or some culminating project that dives into some area of your major concept. Have you thought in advance about what kind of project you want to pursue for that?

Gabby:

So I'm not 100% sure, honestly. I know that I have done a lot of like smaller projects kind of like mixed in with a bunch of different things. So I don't know if I might just try and combine all of them. Some examples are so as part of an experiential learning thing that I had done, I was kind of like an unofficial TA for a cooking class that UConn has. It's their only cooking class. It's called You Can Cook. And it's just a kind of intro level class for any freshman or sophomore student who basically just wants to learn to cook. And, you know, it's the first time you're really on your own without parents and stuff. And if you just want some basic cooking skills and honestly, they're more than basic because they're they're pretty involved. But I took the class in my, I think it was my sophomore year, I had taken it. And then I asked Chef Rob to continue working with him basically to be a TA for the class. And I TA'd for two semesters. And sadly, I couldn't do it this semester, just because of my schedule. But yeah, I've loved my time with it. And so things like that, I have learned one, I've learned cooking skills. I've also learned how to be in more of like, kind of like that instructional mode, if that makes sense. Because part of having a cooking show someday, hopefully, is knowing how to teach a recipe to a group of people who may know nothing about cooking or who may know some things and just depends on the person. But, yeah, I was able to learn some of those skills for it.

Ken:

Yeah, yeah. Right. Because in a cooking show, you're explaining steps at the same time as you're actually demonstrating the steps. And then there's also this whole idea of like, how do we make sure that the visuals, you know, bring the audience in in a way where they can really truly understand what's going on? Right. So there's all

these different factors going. And it's got to be collaborative, too. Right. It's not a thing that you just do yourself.

Gabby:

Yes, absolutely. Yeah. For something like, I mean, in most fields, but especially in something like a cooking show or any kind of media thing, a lot of times it is working with other people. And so it's very collaborative. You know, you're collaborating on different ideas. Someone may see something from a different angle than you do, both literally and metaphorically. But also, you know, there may be ways that they could have an idea to be like, hey, Gabby, you explained this recipe this way. But I've always understood to do it this way and, you know, to try and collaborate on that idea and adjust it so that it's more understandable for the audience. Yeah.

Ken:

Yeah. It's so interesting talking about your major because I keep bouncing around from, you know, there's a disability studies portion. There's this sort of like food and food culture portion. But then there's this whole like media part of it as well. So, I mean, it all works together. But it also seems like a lot. Do you ever get overwhelmed by all the different elements of this? Or to you, do they just work together and that's just fine?

Gabby:

I kind of flip-flop between those two. Sometimes it's very overwhelming. And then sometimes I'm like, oh, I've got this. There's no problem here. This is awesome. It depends on the day, I think. But so when I'm feeling a little more overwhelmed with it, sometimes it's like there are so many different pieces to this major.

Am I making sure I'm getting enough of each of each part of it, basically? It definitely helps to have all the advisors. That's part of the individualized major that we do have like to have for each component, basically, of the major. So that definitely helps to know, like, OK, if I'm worried I don't have enough media stuff, I go talk to the media advisor. If I'm worried I don't have enough disability-related pieces, I go talk to my disability studies advisor. Like it's all different pieces like that. And then honestly, I've tried to just balance it out the best I can in like my plan of study. But I think having cooking on wheels also helps with that, especially for the food culture side, just because as much as there are nutritional science classes, those are – this is going to sound a little bit like cliché, but they're all science classes. And that's not necessarily the angle that I was looking for in terms of like food culture. So I did take a few of like the food studies classes. So like I took a sociology of food. So that was examining more like how we get our food basically. But it gives an appreciation for food and the ingredients we use in general. And then the other piece of it as well, I was able to kind of be like almost like creative with any class that I took. Even if it was just a regular English class or something like that, I've always tried to integrate partially my major but just cooking mobiles in general into every piece of – like pretty much every assignment I've done like at UConn in general. So that also helps with integrating all the pieces to balance that out.

Ken:

That's great to have that kind of freedom to gravitate toward that subject within whatever the structure is of the class that you're taking. So for next steps, where do you take this? It seems like there's this whole entrepreneurial part of this as well, if you really want to start some kind of a show that's your concept. And maybe this brings me back to the – you had mentioned a minor that you're

doing as well. So can you remind us what that was and how does that, again, figure into all of what you want to pursue in the future?

Gabby:

So my minor is personal brand entrepreneurship, and so it kind of integrates because it was almost like my way of directly tying cooking on wheels specifically like the blog itself not just the concept but the blog itself into my major um you know cooking on wheels although it is a blog it is a brand and it's it's my baby I always say because it kind of is um and so i have built it and am building it into the concept that i want it to be someday as a show. You know, I don't know if the show will actually be called Cooking on Wheels, but who knows, maybe. But yeah, so kind of the next steps, I think, at least is going to be somehow just continuing to grow that brand, and integrating all the, you know, the advocacy skills that I've learned the even the academic side of disability studies, the in a lot of the media classes that I've taken, it's all about, you know, social media and content strategy, digital media and design all different things like that where you're learning how to literally grow your brand and keep it going and develop it in general even so all of that combined it kind of all smooshes together into this big pile we'll call it this big pile that is cooking on wheels and cooking on wheels is my future that's the only way to say it honestly.

Ken:

Yeah yeah well that makes a lot of sense. So that piece, you learn a lot about that branding and the entrepreneurial side of things through that minor, which is the logical sort of fourth part of all this that you're doing. So I wish you the best of luck with all this work. And this has just been great. Thank you so much for coming in and sharing all these ideas with us.

Gabby:

Thank you so much for listening. And thank you for having me on the show and giving me the opportunity to share all of the many, many pieces of my major and all about cooking on wheels as well.

Ken:

Yeah, my pleasure.

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.