

INDIE MAJOR PODCAST

12/2/25 Alexis Cordone

Individualized Major: Religion

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 Cordone. Welcome, Alexis.

Alexis:

Thanks for having me.

Ken:

Thanks for being here. So you are a UConn alum. You graduated in 2014 with two degrees, as far as I understand, one in biological sciences and the other, an individualized major called Religion. Does that sound right?

Alexis:

It does.

Ken:

All right, very good. So why don't we start off, first of all, thank you for being here. It's just a real pleasure to have an alum on the show. And what we like to do is we like to start off, why don't you just tell

us about the concept of your major and how you sort of like would explain what the major was.

Alexis:

Sure. So the reason that I studied Religion was because I really wanted to have an opportunity to look at some of the different things that inform how we think about the world and what people believe, and how that interacts with how we get healthcare. And so it was very cool to put that together. So mostly I focused on Christianity, but a little bit of everything. And the religion major as an individualized major was really nice, because you can think about things like anthropology, sociology, you know, even things like evolution, right, I could take classes in biology and make that all part of it. So it was very, very neat opportunity to delve into things that I thought were important and can inform our worldview.

Ken:

So did you come into the university knowing that you were going to be pre-med?

Alexis:

Yes. So I was in the combined program in medicine, which is also an amazing, wonderful opportunity and was really, really important.

Ken:

So coming in pre-med, obviously biological sciences makes sense for the pre-med experience. How long did it take you? Did you have some idea of exploring the kinds of issues that you explored in your

individualized major from the start, or did this just sort of develop in the second, third year of your experience at UConn?

Alexis:

I would say that becoming an individualized major was somewhat of a formative experience. I don't think I went into college knowing that that's what I was going to do. I knew I was coming in to study biology and that I was going to be on the pre-med track, but the religion major kind of evolved on its own.

Ken:

You know, I should have sent you this ahead of time. I'm looking at your final plan of study, which is sort of handwritten in a form here. And yeah, you have a couple of English classes, literature and religion. There's some anthropology, world religions, culture and religion, a course in the Bible, which looks like it was an interdisciplinary course, Renaissance, evolution, as you said, as you mentioned, um, an anthropology course called the Vatican was like a, maybe a special topics. So, um, I don't know. So a lot of great courses that you were able to piece together for this religion major. Do any of those stand out to you in your memory?

Alexis:

Oh my goodness. Uh, a lot of them stand out to me in my memory, but to, to give you the punchline, I took a lot of classes in the English department, which I wasn't actually expecting. Um, and so I really, really enjoyed that. So I think where this really all came together for me was the second half of freshman year. I took a class called the Bible as Literature and Claire King'oo taught it. It was a wonderful class and she was a wonderful mentor. And so she kind of put the

idea in my head of, oh, you know, if you really want to study religion, this is how you can do it. And that's where it all took off. She became a mentor for me and really pushed me to think about what I wanted to study and what I wanted to learn. And she was very supportive of the fact that when I sat down and talked with her, hey, I want to be a doctor, but I also want to have this really nice holistic view of the world and understanding of how I can help patients not just through the science and the medicine, but just by being a nice person to them. And she was very, very helpful in acknowledging, hey, you can do all these really cool things and study all of this very interesting material in addition to what you've already set out to do. And so I thought that was a really great way to approach it. And she helped me figure out how I could do it in a way that still met my goals, but also really augmented the experience in a very meaningful, wonderful way.

Ken:

So Claire Costley King'oo, who is still, well, currently she's the department chair over at English. And yeah, a great mentor, a great thinker, and really, really student-focused. And in fact, she's the one who kind of connected us up to have this conversation, which I'm really grateful for. What was it specifically about religion, you think, that was, you know, the draw to sort of expand what it was that you wanted to have learned on your way to becoming a doctor?

Alexis:

That's a really great question. So I think for me, the questions that I was most interested in are, you know, the big life questions, right? Why do people suffer? How do we help people through their suffering? How do I, as a future doctor, meet people where they're at and, you know, not get overwhelmed by the fact that people are

suffering and sometimes I can't help them? And those are the things that I really wanted to think about. And I thought that that was really important preparatory work for me. I also had the benefit, I would say, of having been an EMT. So I was an emergency medical technician coming into this whole process. And so I had already kind of tasted a little bit how deeply people can suffer and not just because of medical illness. Right. But also at the hands of the medical system that we have, or I would even say lack of medical system. And maybe that's why some of the other students who do individualized majors think about things like public health and merging global affairs and medicine, things like that. And so for me, it was less about understanding the system, but more about understanding how people respond to it and how people process it and how people live through it. And that's religious people as well as people who are not religious, right? And so we all draw on different things that help us to cope with what we're experiencing. And so for some people, it's religion, but for other people, it's worldviews, it's family, it's very many different things. And so thinking through that, I think, was very, very formative for me.

Ken:

What about this Vatican course? I'm really curious about that. What was that like? Do you remember?

Alexis:

Yes. So what I did, that was kind of an individual, I don't remember what the terminology is for the way that the class was set up, but it was like an independent study class. And so what I did was when John Paul II and actually Pope John XXIII were canonized, I went to the Vatican for their canonization. And so I studied the canonization and some of the different things that they did in their life and

cyclicals and whatnot um you know and then how that led up to their sainthood and then I went to the Vatican and I got to see the canonization which was really neat

Ken:

Wow yeah that sounds like an amazing independent study!

Alexis:

That was really awesome and that was through the anthropology, that was through an anthropology course that I did so the anthropology faculty helped me put that together.

Ken:

Wow. Now also I'm seeing, in all of your various achievements here at UConn, you were accepted to the University Scholar Program. And the University Scholar Program, for our listeners, is known as the highest academic honor that you can achieve at UConn. And it requires that you put together your own sort of independent research project, which spans at least over three semesters. And you work with various faculty committee experts to assist you along the way. Can you talk for a second about what the project was that you did for that UScholar program?

Alexis:

Yes, so that was one of the reasons that I took the renaissance class we were talking about before at the graduate level. So my project was about the protestant and catholic literature during the reformation, the english reformation, and so as part of that I was particularly looking at depictions of the afterlife and how that varied

and then also some of the political climate around that and the geopolitics of the whole movement, and so that was what I did for my university scholar project.

Ken:

I'm trying to think, afterlife, is this like eschatology stuff you were looking into?

Alexis:

Yeah, just a lot of exploring hell and how Hell was depicted.

Ken:

Mainly hell? Not so much heaven?

Alexis:

Um, oh, interesting question. I was, I think I was more intrigued by hell, in all honesty.

Ken:

There's probably a lot more literature about hell as well. It's a really dramatic setting for good stories. Well, that sounds fascinating. Um, and so that project—the major that you created in religion—and then obviously you've gone on to become a medical doctor. You work in an emergency room setting, is that correct?

Alexis:

That is correct.

Ken:

All right. We've all had experiences with the emergency room, whether we ourselves are going there to be treated or we're bringing someone—a family member, a friend. But what is it like from the medical doctor's side?

Alexis:

Well, what do you want to know?

Ken:

I don't know. Just, like, what's a typical shift or day at the ER?

Alexis:

Oh, boy. OK. So I would say there's probably no typical day. My schedule varies—some days I work days, some days I work nights, sometimes it's evenings—and I just about never get out on time. I know what time I will show up for work; I don't know what time I will leave, because it depends on what's going on in the department and how safe it is for me to walk away. We have a great sign-out culture, meaning that my fellow ER doctors are prepared to take on whatever things are ensuing, and so we have a safe handoff process and things like that. But I think as an ER doctor you want to make sure you're doing a good job and seeing things through, and so it can be hard sometimes to walk away. And sometimes, you know, if you're truly in the thick of it, it's not safe to walk away. I don't always know what I'm going to have to work through for the day. We don't have scheduled appointments, so I don't know—am I going to be seeing heart attacks? Am I going to be seeing strokes? What are we doing today? I just don't know. So it's hard for me to say. But it's a

really great job. I love what I do, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to practice medicine. I think my favorite thing about my job is that I get to be with people. Sometimes it's a very routine day—sometimes people are coming to the ER because it's two in the morning and their child is sick and they just want to know what's going on, and that's a very routine thing. Other times it's the worst day of their life. Walking through that and being able to help in that environment is really meaningful. And that's where I draw on a lot of the things that I learned during my major—not just about my religion but about other people's religion, other people's culture, how people process what they're going through, religious or not. Because we were talking about something individualized, where I could explore things that are not religion—philosophy, anthropology, sociology, all of that. It's been a lot of things that can help inform what I do on a day-to-day basis, and I still draw from it every day. Here we are, you know, 15-ish years later from when I started college.

Ken:

I'm just curious: do you have a chance to teach new doctors coming into ER medicine?

Alexis:

Yes. So I'm pretty early in my career, and so I don't do as much teaching as some of the more senior faculty, but I do a fair bit of teaching.

Ken:

So that must give you an opportunity to mix the nuts-and-bolts, technical, how-do-we-get-things-done stuff with the reflective

advice on how to deal with the human beings that come in and out of the ER.

Alexis:

I would say that for the students I teach, they're very well prepared medically. They know how to manage patients having heart attacks and strokes and things like that. But dealing with traumas—oh my goodness, traumas—we see so much violence, or just senseless trauma: motor vehicle collisions, things like that. They're very prepared: OK, we're going to manage a pneumothorax; we're going to put in a chest tube. They know how to do that. They've learned that, we've done simulation, they're ready to do that.

But then—go and tell Mom that her 14-year-old child just died because of gun violence. My goodness. That's where it's really hard. And so those are the soft skills of medicine that I think are actually sometimes... it's hard to teach those skills. They're so individualized. You have to really gauge it to the patient, the family, and also your own self, and be authentic. Those are the hard things to teach because it's not something that's easy to write a multiple-choice question on or do. You have to really think in an individualized sort of way. And so that, I think, is where we have a lot of opportunity to keep learning and doing better.

Ken:

Yeah. Finally, I'll just ask you this: you obviously sound like you're very busy. You went through medical school, you've done all these residencies, you're working in the ER, you're raising a family. How do you unwind? Do you have any advice for folks getting into your kind of profession? What do you do if you have any off time, and does that help?

Alexis:

Yeah, that's a great question. So I think it depends. We're talking about my individualized major in religion—I like to pray. I find that helpful. I think it's a good opportunity to reflect. People say that prayer doesn't necessarily change anything, right? Even if you don't believe in God or prayer, I think just the act of reflecting and meditating on what you did and how you did it and how you could do it better actually does transform people in a very simple way. Sometimes I pray for my patients. And when I pray, I realize, Man, I could have done this better. And then the next time I take care of another patient with a similar situation—or something about it feels similar to me—maybe I do it a little bit better. So I think that's a meaningful exercise, the spiritual aspects aside. I like to run. I like to swim. And I live in New Hampshire, so a lot of the activities I do are weather-dependent. But I think just being outside and having the opportunity to enjoy the outdoors is really nice.

Ken:

Yeah, that all sounds good. And you know, the outdoors is certainly connected to spirituality and thinking about those larger issues—at least they are for me. So thank you so much for being with us, Alexis. We are super excited to count you among our alumni, not only in the Individualized Major Program but the University Scholar Program. It's been an absolute pleasure to speak with you today.

Alexis:

Thanks for having me, and good luck to any students that are on this path or pursuing this path. It's a really wonderful opportunity. UConn is a great place, and it's going to have lifelong implications for you. So make the most of it.

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.