What big question does your individualized major address?

My major in Social Interaction and New Media asks some big questions. How do social and organizational interaction change when a new medium, like the book, the radio, or the telephone, is introduced? How can technology be designed and built to best serve the needs of audiences that have adopted it as a regular facet of their lives?

Why did you choose the disciplines that appear on your plan of study?

I came into my major, from Computer Science, with a general understanding of the engineering side of the question. I had also done some work in history, comparative literature, and English that provided a basis in Media Studies. My plan of study includes both qualitative and quantitative research methods, a solid theoretical foundation in human behavior, and some design theory. I work primarily in Anthropology, Psychology, and Digital Media and Design, which all come together to establish a broader context for technology, while also putting humans at the forefront of innovation.

How have you been able to integrate these insights into a deeper understanding of the question?

Going into my major, I knew that I...
had big ideas about technology, but I didn’t have a way to rigorously challenge them. My course work allowed me to think about technology through many different lenses, and I started bringing my questions into the classroom. It’s become my job to take coursework that’s related to my question, and to coax that relationship to manifest more fully. My major provides a fuller picture of what’s going on in this weird relationship between human beings and technology.

Once everything starts pointing towards my question, it becomes a lot easier to see how an idea from anthropology frames technology as a social artifact, or how a model I learned about in systems engineering helps answer a problem in Writing Center theory. At a certain point, the lines between different schools of thought really start to blur, because my focus has shifted. I’m not interested in mastering a discipline, but in generating conversation around complex and fascinating questions.

Do you have any advice for aspiring individualized majors who are asking big, interdisciplinary questions?

Be confident. Your questions are better than you think, and it’s entirely possible that they haven’t been answered, or that they haven’t been answered in a way that you find appropriate. One of the most gratifying experiences I’ve ever had was wholeheartedly disagreeing with a scholar after listening to her TED Talk. I had this moment where I, an undergraduate from UConn, was systematically dissecting the arguments put forth by a juggernaut in the field of human-computer interaction (HCI). I realized that my interdisciplinary work had developed a nuanced voice that could contribute to the field of HCI, and I hadn’t even noticed it all coming together.

Sometimes the questions feel too big, or you might feel like you’re going into territory that’s a little too esoteric. Lean into it, though. Your voice is bigger than you think, and interdisciplinary thinkers have a lot to contribute to conversations. You might have to defend your major often, repeat the name frequently, and constantly revise your “elevator pitch” for it. But at the end of your college experience, it really is worth it. You’ll be well informed about a subject that really matters to you.

Religion

*Alexis Cordone*

Why did you create an individualized major in Religion?

My path to the individualized major began when I took Literature and Religion (ENGL 3617), otherwise known as The Bible as Literature. I really loved it, so I began to consider whether or not I would want to study religion through more coursework. After talking with the instructor, Professor King’oo, I decided to add an Individualized Major in Religion to my plan of study.

What big question does your individualized major address?

My decision to pursue a major in Religion resulted in part from an interest in life’s “big questions,” such as: do gods, spirits, angels, you-name-it, exist? Is there a meaning to life? Why do we exist? What is self-fulfillment? In addition to wanting to engage with these questions in an academic space, deciding to major in religion resulted from a heartfelt desire to help other human beings live better, healthier lives.

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Why did you choose the disciplines that appear on your plan of study?

Since there is not a “Department of Religion” at the University of Connecticut, I started by selecting courses in some of the more obvious places, such as Judaic Studies, anthropology, history, and sociology. Each of these courses offered a unique perspective on the study of religion. In anthropology, for example, I learned about human religious experience. In sociology, I learned about societal trends regarding religiosity. Each discipline helped me to understand part of the overall picture of religion.

How have you been able to integrate these insights into a deeper understanding of the question?

My thesis project is about religious martyrs in sixteenth-century England. In it, I argue that the depiction of the body is one way of reconstructing a sense of agency in written texts. My argument rests on ideas, such as genre and agency, that come from literary studies, but I also use ideas from philosophy, history, and political science.

Women’s studies is relevant to the project, as well, because the two figures I examine most thoroughly, Margery Kempe and Anne Askew, are women. Since I am studying the body, I would like to incorporate current understandings of gender construction without being anachronistic.

The complex nature of my thesis means that I must rely on several disciplines because each has a different scope or focus. My work on religion and biology has convinced me that most of our learning relies on interdisciplinary dialogue.

Do you have any advice for aspiring individualized majors who are asking big, interdisciplinary questions?

If anyone asked me for advice about setting up an interdisciplinary individualized major, I would suggest making friends with the course catalog. I would also suggest finding a few professors who are very knowledgeable about their fields, because they will know what sort of interdisciplinary work is being done within that field and might be able to direct you to other professors on campus who study the topic in which you are interested.

Alexis Cordone is a senior, double majoring in Biological Sciences and Religion. She plans to attend medical school in the fall.

“I would suggest making friends with the course catalog”

Cultural Influence on Youth Development
- Sarah Luft

What big question does your individualized major address?

My individualized major asks how cultural environment shapes, and is shaped, by the individual. How do societal norms influence individual outlook? In what ways does the cultural environment surrounding early life experiences interact with individual identity?

Why did you choose the disciplines that appear on your plan of study?

I’ve long had interest in the subject of English, and so last spring I took a class titled “Honors III: American Literature.” We analyzed the works of William Faulkner and Toni Morrison for the entirety of the semester. As we delved into the construction of charac-
ter identity, we took careful note of the cultural field in which the stories dwell—the deep South. Societal expectations of the southern belle, the hostilities and subtleties of race relations, and the tragedies of a black community, suddenly came alive in the novels. These environments all play such a crucial role in informing the personalities, accomplishments, and dreams of the characters immersed in them. I found myself more interested in this interaction than in the technical aspects of writing.

I was taking classes in human development and family studies (HDFS), sociology, and anthropology at the time, and I discovered parallel connections. I decided to expand my interest and attempt to create an interdisciplinary major, later incorporating psychology into the mix.

I chose the disciplines of HDFS, English, psychology, and sociology to form the foundation of my major after many trials. Tracing physical and social development throughout the lifespan, HDFS allows me to examine the developmental processes of youth. Alone, however, it lacks the qualitative nature present in the humanities.

The medium of literature remains an essential component of my studies, just as it is an integral foundation of culture across the globe. It will provide insight into the personal tribulations and triumphs of human life, perhaps more intimately than any other discipline is able.

Especially helpful was the IMJR department’s online preparation course. It helped me to understand the fine distinctions between similar social sciences, which informed my course selections.

How have you been able to integrate these insights into a deeper understanding of the question?

Studying abroad in Cape Town, South Africa, I have learned a great deal about the intersection of personal identity and race, class, and gender. They do not exist outside of culture, and one’s life experience cannot be understood by simply examining one aspect. For example, one cannot merely be a woman, nor a white woman for that matter, but perhaps a white, wealthy, educated, Jewish woman who is also a wife, mother, and sister. Experiencing a different culture, I am better able to see how closely environment and personal experience are intermeshed.

Though my experiences in Cape Town range more broadly than the focus of my major, I feel they are laying a conceptual foundation. I am more eager than ever to continue my studies on cultural influence on youth development, more keenly aware that neither culture nor the individual can exist in isolation. As the traditional Xhosa African term “Ubuntu” implies, “I am because we are.”

Do you have any advice for aspiring individualized majors who are asking big, interdisciplinary questions?

My best advice is to keep asking, to keep thinking, and to keep consulting with others. It can be frustrating. Initially, I struggled to focus my interests and I was unsure of how to translate my large questions into words. Thankfully, the IMJR staff was there to discuss the details of interdisciplinary connections and course selection. Dr. Monica van Beusekom and Dr. Michael Cunningham are both invaluable resources—don’t be afraid to chat. I think I drove my friends and family crazy listening to me sort through the formation of my major, but it has certainly paid off. Ask how you might better frame your own questions.