Individualized Major Alumni

This issue of the Individualized Major Program Newsletter includes articles by three recent alumni who describe their transition from student to professional. The articles by Sarah Oravecz (’12) and Vincent Pacileo (’11) focus on public health and health policy; the article by Nikki Narducci (’12) focuses on sport promotion. Through these accounts, they share how the interdisciplinary and self-directed process promoted by the Individualized Major Program allowed them to “own” their education and translate their knowledge and passion into enriching professional experiences.

Health Policy
- Vincent Pacileo, “Public Policy”

What Major to Pursue?
In the four years since I graduated from UConn I have been able to engage in policy issues that interest me in an exciting field, leaning on my education gained through the Individualized Major program.

As a freshman, I enrolled at UConn as a pre-pharmacy major yet soon realized that this career path was not for me; I couldn’t envision sitting at a laboratory bench or readying prescriptions behind the pharmacy counter. Armed with uncertain career ambitions but an intense interest in healthcare, I began to survey other majors at UConn.

Halfway through my sophomore year a moment of clarity arrived: how about approaching healthcare from the perspective of public policy? Health is incredibly personal to each and every one of us, yet most decisions that affect how, where, and at what cost we receive care ultimately began with a law or regulation promulgated by government. Government’s role takes on even greater significance when you realize that healthcare is one-sixth of our nation’s economy.

The Individualized Major
My mind made up, I set about pursuing this area of study and quickly discovered that UConn has a Department of Public Policy that offers several undergraduate courses but has no established major. This led me to consider the Individualized Major (IMJR) Program where everything seemed to fall into place: the chance to design my own program of study bringing together a blend of public policy, political science, and statistics. As part of my course of study, I enrolled in graduate-level courses offered by the Department of Public Policy through the Mas-
Life After UConn

Unsurprisingly, my next stop after UConn was our nation’s capital to work on health policy issues and further my studies. By day, my first job in Washington, DC was at Vertex Pharmaceuticals working on government affairs and public policy for the company; by night, I attended graduate school at The George Washington University to complete a Master of Public Policy with a concentration in healthcare.

After receiving my graduate degree, I was fortunate to land a job with a new non-profit, nonpartisan organization called West Health. The organization is focused on advancing policies to lower the cost of healthcare across the country. At West Health, I led a successful project to reform Medicare’s benefit design and often met with Congressional staff to discuss the policy issues of strategic interest to West Health.

Most recently, I began a new position with the American Psychiatric Association as Deputy Director, Legislative and Regulatory Policy. The organization is building a new policy function and I’m excited to help shape its direction. Key areas of focus for the division will be advancing the profession of psychiatry, supporting research, and advocating for the integration of mental and behavioral health policy into the evolving healthcare system.

At each step of the way the value of my IMJR cannot be understated. My undergraduate degree is much more than a talking point befitting a job interview; rather, my degree has sent a strong signal about my work ethic and level of professionalism. It has provided both focus to my daily tasks and a unique perspective on project teams. The disciplined, self-directed process of the Individualized Major Program has been an asset to my professional career.

Constructing the Major

One of the best professional decisions I made during my undergraduate career was following my passion to pursue an interdisciplinary plan of study exploring “The Socio-Medical Science of Population Health.” I began my undergraduate career with a major in biological sciences, but by my sophomore year I had identified a strong desire to understand how larger societal structures and cultural practices could impact biological manifestations in diverse populations.

My IMJR curriculum allowed me to study the interconnected continuum of health encompassing: primary prevention in the community, secondary prevention practices, and tertiary treatment approaches. The Individualized and Interdisciplinary Studies program provided me the opportunity to think beyond a mono-disciplinary approach to health by enabling me to draw connections across disciplines and develop a comprehensive understanding of complex health issues.

Graduate Studies

After graduating from UConn in May 2012, I continued my academic career by pursuing a Masters of Public Health at the Milk-en Institute School of Public Health at The George Washington University in Washington, DC. A concentration in maternal and child health, within the Department of Prevention and Community Health, al-
lowed me to dive deeper into assessing health care needs of select populations. I strengthened my skills specific to the planning, implementation, and evaluation of health services and research targeted toward women, children, and families.

In addition to my graduate studies, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to apply my skills working as a team advocate for ISCOPES, an interdisciplinary health service-learning program. In this position I acted as a liaison, facilitating the interprofessional collaborative practice of community oriented health prevention programs among students, faculty, and community partners in the DC metro area. Challenging teams to problem solve outside of their single discipline of study, by drawing on strengths and skills of those in the entire group, was a very rewarding and enriching experience. The interdisciplinary approach fostered by the IMJR program has tremendously impacted how I view, approach, and offer solutions to complex health issues.

Career Developments

Recently, I moved back to Connecticut after accepting a position as a Public Health Data Analyst with the Child Health and Development Institute at the UConn Health Center campus in Farmington. Our team works in collaboration with community health clinics, federally qualified health centers, and private practices across Connecticut in translating, implementing, and disseminating research into evidence-based clinical practices. Data analysis is an integral component of population health management as it transforms critical information into actionable insights addressing the health outcomes of children and their families.

I wish all the IMJR students an enthusiastic spirit of inquisitiveness as they enrich their academic experience in defining their academic path, and best of luck to all 2015 IMJR graduates as they continue their journey sharing their passion with others.

The interdisciplinary approach fostered by the IMJR program has tremendously impacted how I ... offer solutions to complex health issues.

Sport

- Nikki Narducci, “Sport Promotion”

The Major

In May 2012, I graduated from the University of Connecticut with two majors: Communication Sciences and Sport Promotion. The individualized major program allowed me to create my own path, ultimately building my degree beyond the traditional areas of study available at most universities. I was able to combine communication, sport management, and business administration to fit into an interdisciplinary major that best fit my interests. Taking courses from three different colleges allowed me to challenge and enhance my learning by providing points of view that are usually not available in a traditional major. This allowed me to become a well-rounded individual and guided me to my professional career.

The communication program allowed me to build the interpersonal, cross-cultural, and mass media skills needed in most careers. In the School of Business, I was able to enhance my marketing and promotion skills while learning more about business information systems and mediated communications. Sport management further enhanced my abilities, as it allowed me to see this area from an athletic viewpoint. This was especially important because my overall career objective was to work in the field of sport.

Life After UConn

Less than a week after commencement in Storrs, I had landed my first internship with the Connecticut Sports Management Group, where I assisted in planning, operations and promotion. I was the administrator in charge of the PONY League Softball Tournament and the Nutmeg State
Students who take part in an individualized major stand out when it comes to applying for jobs.

Games Women’s Basketball Tournament in New Britain, Conn.

After four months with this group, I was offered the Athletic Operations Assistant position at Texas A&M International University (TAMIU) in Laredo. In 2013, I was promoted to Assistant Sports Information Director, a position in which I provide support in the areas of operations, marketing, promotions, and graphic design. I also assist with in-game statistics and update each of TAMIU’s eleven varsity sports websites.

In addition to my role with TAMIU, I worked with the Laredo Lemurs, a professional baseball team, as an account executive and graphic designer during the 2013 and 2014 seasons. As a Lemurs member, I provided leadership in the areas of group sales, general ticket sales, and game day operations. I also oversaw the organization’s advertisements and documentation of sponsorship elements.

My Major, My Career

Through the individualized major program, I was able to take useful skills and integrate them into my professional development. My communication courses, prepared me for my role as media relations for TAMIU Athletics. Communication has also helped me to write press releases, compose social media campaigns, and manage a variety of social media outlets.

On the business side, I am now able to effectively manage and market athletics. In the past year, the TAMIU Athletic Department implemented a new logo, for which I assist with the branding and style supervision. Promoting this new logo was done through social media campaigns and endorsements on campus and throughout the South Texas community.

The skills that I developed in the sport management courses have helped me to facilitate sporting events and coordinate operations with other departments and organizations throughout the university.

Setting the Stage for Success

Students who take part in an individualized major program stand out when it comes to applying for jobs. When I tell people that I have an individualized major in Sport Promotion, they usually ask what it entailed. I explain how I used my interests and passions to create a major focused on my career goals. If someone knows that you are enthusiastic and determined enough to create your own curriculum in college, they will know that you will take that energy and utilize it in your job.