



INDIVIDUALIZED MAJOR PROGRAM

IISP Director:
Margaret Lamb

Academic Advisor:
Monica van Beusekom

IISP Administrator:
Anabel Perez

Program Staff:
Krista Rogers
Kamie Sylvester

STUDENT NEWSLETTER

FOCUS ON HEALTH & WELLBEING

Margaret Lamb
Director, Individualized Major Program



Greetings, at this time of the semester when spring is *almost* here!

If I've learned one thing as director of UConn's Individualized Major (IMJR) Program, it is this: many IMJRs study issues that are among the top concerns of policy-makers and citizens. Health is one top concern. In his Inauguration

Speech, President Obama told us that "... everywhere we look, there is work to be done," involving "action, bold and swift." Prominent on his agenda is "to raise health care's quality and lower its cost." Even part way through her studies, IMJRs like Valen Diaz (see p. 3) contribute to our collective ability to grapple with the complex challenges of improving our nation's health and wellbeing.

It is no coincidence that IMJRs gravitate to the interdisciplinary studies that also interest faculty. UConn's Academic Plan 2009-2014 highlights "health and human behavior" as one of its three "emerging areas of interdisciplinary excellence" (www.academicplan.uconn.edu). Professor Marysol Asencio (see p. 2) is one of many UConn faculty members who research and teach in the interdisciplinary health field. Along with faculty colleagues, she contributed to a panel discussion about the many ways that undergraduates could study and explore their interests in health and society as undergraduates (see below).

Health & Society Panel — December 4, 2008

On a December evening, IISP organized a Health & Society Panel. This panel was comprised of five faculty members representing different departments of the university. It was an excellent opportunity for students of all majors and years with an interest in health issues to learn more about the field and the opportunities available to undergraduates at the university. Many of the students were individualized

majors, which was not surprising given the large population of health related IMJRs in the program. Each of the panelists was given time to introduce themselves and their work, discuss any general topics pertaining to public health, and share information about experiential learning at UConn.

The first panelist was Marysol Asencio (HDFS & PRLS). She gave an introduction to the broad field of public health, and stressed its interdisciplinary nature. She emphasized the importance of students to follow their interests, but also to tailor their studies to the graduate schools that most interest them, as each school has different programs and researchers. She noted that graduate schools especially value work experience during college.

The next panelist was Susan Gregoire (AH). She talked about the new and expanding Allied Health Sciences program at UConn, which offers four possible majors that can prepare students for careers in public health. It is important for students to make connections through faculty members to find internships. Students should also consider a minor in gerontology, or other fields, such as international studies or multi-cultural studies, that could be useful to the health professional.

Rafael Pérez-Escamilla (NUSC) began his segment by stating that 11 million people die every year due to malnutrition, while industrialized countries are facing an obesity epidemic. Anything in public health relates to nutrition. His research is concerning the social components of health and in particular on improving the management of diabetes. Professor Pérez-Escamilla is the Director of the Connecticut Center for Eliminating Health Disparities among Latinos (www.cehdl.uconn.edu). This agency also facilitates internships each semester. He encouraged students to find the right faculty and course opportunities at UConn or abroad for their needs.

Michelle Pierce (NUSC & Department of Medicine, Farmington) helps coordinate the Husky Community Programs. These include Husky Reads (student volunteers read nutrition books with children in pediatric waiting rooms), Husky Nutrition (cooking classes with children), Husky Sport (physical activities with children in Hartford recreational centers), and the newest, Husky Bike. The Husky Programs are popular with UConn students, who may volunteer, earn work-study, or earn internship credit

INDIVIDUALIZED MAJOR PROGRAM

for participating in them. Professor Pierce stressed the importance of gaining experience in public health in the community, and of working with people from different cultures and backgrounds. Transportation to the sites is provided. Another benefit of the Husky Programs is that students get to know the staff well. Professor Pierce is also one of the organizers of a new Living Learning Community focused on Public Health & Public Service.

Kathryn Ratcliff, a Sociology faculty member, has been teaching two courses about health for 20 years: The Sociology of Health, and Women and Health. Professor Ratcliff encouraged those interested to consider an IMJR. She also described several examples of past student research and projects about affordable healthcare and other issues with organizations such as the Hispanic Health Council and Mansfield Rehabilitation and Nursing Home. In the case of two of her students, this experiential learning resulted in a job offer. Professor Ratcliff also mentioned that study abroad is a good chance to learn about global health. She said that study abroad experience changes you- it brings your classes alive, and makes you understand the real world.

The panel was a great place for students to learn about the field of public health and the opportunities available at UConn for interested students. Thank you to all the presenting faculty members and students who participated at the panel.

Interview with Marysol Asencio, HDFS/PRLS

Marysol Asencio is an Associate Professor of HDFS and Puerto Rican & Latino Studies, as well as the Director for the Latina/o Sexualities Research Project. She has worked with many IMJRs interested in health issues.

Q: In the December Panel, you noted the difference between community health and clinical health. Could you please elaborate on this?

Public Health is mostly concerned with the health of populations, looking for trends in mortality and morbidity, community health, and health disparities among groups of people. Programs are developed to increase the health of a population in general. Clinical health is mostly focused on an individual's health, by assisting an individual to reduce health risks, adopt healthier habits and provide screening and treatment for infections and diseases. Sometimes there is a fine line between these two approaches, and of course both are important in

dealing with health issues.

Q: What opportunities are there at UConn for undergraduates who are interested in studying issues of public health and Puerto Rican & Latino Studies?

Students can do individualized majors with health being a central focus of their work. There are several scholars at the University who could help guide their studies and help them tailor the course selections more to their particular interests and future goals. This can be combined with a minor in Puerto Rican and Latino Studies to support a better understanding of this population, which is one of the fastest growing racial/ethnic groups in the U.S. and will be a significant percentage of the U.S. population in the next 50 years. I teach a course on Latino Health and Health Care which combines both these interests.



There are also opportunities to do internships in Latino Health as well as independent studies.

Q: If you had to give advice to an individualized major about preparing for a future career in public health, what would you tell them to do?

I would ask them to take a wide range of courses from different perspectives. Also, experience matters in public health. Therefore, take advantage of opportunities to work or do internships in health care centers, community-based organizations and with researchers doing health-related projects. All this will help them. It is also good to be aware that professional skills are important. Therefore, taking basic management courses, budget development, statistical analysis and public speaking are useful.

Q: How much experience do you have working with individualized majors? Have any of your IMJR student advisees gone on to study public health or work in the field?

I have had a number of individualized majors. My experiences have been very positive with them. They are a committed group. Many of them have gone on to graduate programs in Public Health. Two of my most recent graduates are now at UConn's graduate school of public health and others applied to programs around the country. Choice of graduate school depends on what particular area of public health they want to concentrate on and, of course, what part of the country they want to live

INDIVIDUALIZED MAJOR PROGRAM

in. These choices involve many components, but faculty are here to help students sort out their priorities and needs.

Q: Please share any other comments you may have regarding public health in general or individualized majors.

I think public health is an exciting field and it may surprise students how varied the opportunities are and your ability to make the degree work for you in various settings. I think that since we do not have an undergraduate public health major, the individualized major allows students to create an exciting program for themselves based on their specific needs and interests.

A Conversation with Valen Diaz, IMJR



Valen Diaz is a 3rd semester IMJR. Her major is Sociomedical Sciences and Health Disparities, and she has already had lots of experience in the field of public health.

Q: What made you decide to apply for an individualized major?

It was a combination of factors that made me decide to apply for an individualized major. I just felt as if my interests were too broad to be satisfied by a very specific, traditional major. I really wanted to incorporate multiple disciplines in my plan of study and create a well-rounded approach to health. Also, I was attracted by the prospect of creating something that was my own, rather than following a pre-determined path. This independence has contributed to the feeling of ownership I have over my education, thus further enriching the experience and making me work that much harder.

Q: Are you planning to incorporate any research into your major?

I have not officially included academic research credit in my plan of study, but it is most certainly a component of my major (something I found with an individualized major is that it's so much more than just the courses on your plan of study, but rather the activities you engage in while

here at UConn, supplementing and complementing your coursework). Research is one of these supplemental activities. I currently work as a Research Assistant at the Center for Health Intervention and Prevention, which is the perfect place for students interested in public health! Our research looks at HIV-positive individuals and their level of engagement in health care, specifically looking for certain risk factors that affect engagement. It has been a fabulous experience so far and I have learned so much that I can apply to my coursework (especially my thesis) and to real-world situations. Also, I participated in the Clinical Summer Research Fellowship Program through the Department for Health Career Opportunities at the UConn Health Center the summer after my freshman year. I was able to work with the Center for Eliminating Health Disparities among Latinos at the Hispanic Health Council in Hartford, CT, researching pediatric care coordination, which was another enriching and educational experience. Actually, a large part of what I learned during this summer inspired me to create my major.

Q: How has the Honors Program enhanced your major? Any thoughts on a thesis yet?

The Honors Program has connected me with faculty and other students who share my interests and provide a strong support system. As for a thesis, I would like to work with the Center for Eliminating Health Disparities among Latinos again, but it hasn't gotten more specific than that yet!

Q: You spent the past summer in the Dominican Republic teaching health care issues to children. How has this experience affected your perspective at college?

I cannot even begin to explain the changes that I experienced during my study abroad and service learning experience in the Dominican, short of saying that it revolutionized my perspective at college. I believe it is something that every student should have the opportunity to experience. It instilled in me appreciation, reverence, and passion for working towards a better tomorrow. It was nothing short of inspiring. The Dominican also helped me to see the bigger picture and to realize that the real world extends far beyond UConn and is very different from what we are so used to.

Q: Any other comments or advice you would like to share with UConn students interested in the social aspects of health issues and possible graduate studies in public health?

Public health is all about looking at the big picture, so it is

INDIVIDUALIZED MAJOR PROGRAM

absolutely imperative to do the same with your undergraduate education! Every student should take advantage of every opportunity they have in order to enrich their undergraduate experience and engage in learning outside the classroom. It is these experiences that truly shape us and help us discover who we are....it would be a grave mistake to pass them up. Do not let yourself go through four years of college with the blinders on---open your eyes!

Campus, Community, and Study Abroad Opportunities

Campus

New for fall 2009, the Public Health/Public Service House Learning Community will be based in Alumni. It will house about 63 students of diverse majors interested in participating in community wellness and education activities. Read the full description online at http://www.lc.uconn.edu/PublicHealth_Opening_FA09.pdf.

Community

Volunteer programs are a great way to gain hands-on experience in an aspect of social health. Check out <http://www.iisp.uconn.edu/DOCS/healthopp.pdf> (scroll to the bottom) for a listing of some programs found at UConn and in the surrounding community.

Study Abroad

UConn offers several study abroad opportunities throughout the year with a public health focus. Consider taking part in any one of these programs to gain a different perspective of health issues around the world! See <http://www.iisp.uconn.edu/DOCS/healthopp.pdf>. Also consider taking part in an Alternative Break trip, which usually involve some health components.

Ever wonder what Health related majors your IMJR peers are pursuing? Check out some of these sample IMJRs!

- Human Health and Social Issues
- Health and Social Inequality
- Bioethics in Cross-Cultural Perspectives
- Global Health and Human Rights
- Health and Social Inequality
- Sociomedical Sciences and Health Disparities
- Cultural Diversity and Public Health
- Social, Scientific, and Business Studies for the Health Professional
- Cultural Diversity and International Health Issues
- Sociobiomedical Perspectives in Health

Attention to all students thinking about a career in Public Health!

The Connecticut AHEC Program (Area Health Education Center) publishes a guide called "Health Occupations & Technology: Careers in Connecticut." This guide is a wonderful resource for anyone interested in learning more about careers in Public Health and the requirements for each discipline. The 2008 edition of this guide may be found online at www.healthcareersinct.com.

The Association of Schools of Public Health has two helpful websites:

What is Public Health:
www.whatispublichealth.org
Pathways to Public Health:
pathwaystopublichealth.org



Upcoming Events

- **Fitness & Nutrition Fair** — March 18, 2009, Student Union, 5-8PM
- The **Center for Health, Intervention, and Prevention (CHIP)** hosts a **health-related lecture series**. See the full list of speakers at http://www.chip.uconn.edu/lec_overview.php?q=&date=&topic=&Submit=Search.
- The **Department of Nutritional Sciences** hosts a **nutrition-related seminar series**. See the full list of speakers and topics at <http://www.canr.uconn.edu/nutsci/nutsci/seminars.html>.

Individualized Major Program

860-486-3631 (phone)
860-486-4985 (fax)

Center for Undergraduate Education, Rm. 323
Monday-Friday 9am-5pm



Visit us on our website to find program information, proposed and final plans, and application forms.

www.iisp.uconn.edu

Email us at iisp@uconn.edu

***INDIVIDUALIZED AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES PROGRAM * UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT ***