

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY  
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION  
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First Generation College Student Oral History Project  
Interviewee, AR  
Interviewed by Allison Seyler  
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Johns Hopkins University  
Oral History Collection

**Summary:** “A.R.” is a member of the Johns Hopkins University graduating class of 2021. In this interview, she explains how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted her college experience and she talks about her life so far, education, and future endeavors.

**AS:** Allison Seyler

**AR:** Interviewee

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*AS:* All right, so just to start the interview, my name is Allison Seyler and I'm here with AR today on March 2, 2021. And we'd like to start this interview just by acknowledging the impact that COVID-19 has had on the Hopkins community. The questions in this interview were written before the 2020 coronavirus pandemic and therefore do not directly ask how the consequences of the public health crisis have impacted or changed the experiences of our students. However, we thought it was necessary to begin our interview with a couple of questions just related to the pandemic in order to recognize the particularly challenging experiences and changes that the student have faced. So, with that said, I'll start just by asking how do you feel the coronavirus pandemic has impacted your undergraduate experience and what are some challenges or changes that it's caused for you personally?

*AR:* I feel like COVID has definitely affected the amount of social interactions I've been able to have with a lot of my peers, mostly because as a transfer student, I only technically had one event authentic on campus experience, which was Fall of 2019, because come spring that year, everything was transitioned to online and even this year has been through Zoom or other virtual platforms. So, I didn't really get that full college experience where you would be able to meet up with your peers say after or before class, go out to eat with them after a certain event, or after some sort of club practice. So, I was a bit limited in the amount of interactions I had with other students.

*AS:* And then I think it would be so helpful just to understand your perspective on that if we kind of went back in time a little bit, because obviously you mentioned being a transfer student. So, we should provide kind of the context for how the pandemic has impacted you. I wonder if we could just start by you telling us a little bit about yourself, so where you were born, and maybe some more information about your family.

*AR:* Well, I grew up in New York City. I lived in Queens. And when I was roughly in tenth grade, we moved to Texas because at that time, my youngest sister, she was roughly a year old and my parents wanted a better environment for her to grow up in and the city wasn't really conducive to raising kids that well. So, my mom in particular wanted like a large open area where there was the option to go outside and be close to nature a bit more than what was available in the city. After I went – I moved to Texas, I graduated high school in Dallas. Then after that, I went to the local school there – well, the local university there, University of Texas – one of the University of Texas. And it was pretty great I would say, I had a really great freshman and sophomore year. And at the end of my sophomore year, that's when I transferred to Hopkins as a junior.

*AS:* Great, so could you tell me a little bit about your parents' educations and maybe like what they do or what their occupations are?

*AR:* Yeah, both of my parents went to college and university in Bangladesh where I guess post-secondary education is free, so they were able to do their bachelor's and master's there because it's like government provided, I guess. But when they came to America, I think up to your master's, its equivalent is a bachelors in the United States. So, for example, I think my dad did up to his masters in sociology or something like that, and it was converted to a bachelor's when we moved here. Before, when I was relatively young, my mom used to work for a nonprofit going around and working with village women. So, kind of teaching them some fundamental skills to I guess get by. So, some basic banking skills, reading, writing skills, maybe. I'm not 100 sure about the details.

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*AR:* And my dad was a college professor. Then when we moved to America, we all moved together, so it was kind of difficult for my dad because he had a whole family to support in America, which was a lot of responsibility. So, he took any jobs that were available to him. For example, in New York he worked in a bunch of different places, when we first moved, he started working at a grocery store. Then he worked his way up to becoming a manager at a tutorial center and that was very helpful because when I was in like middle and high school for example, because he used to work at that tutorial center, I would go be surrounded by a bunch of kids studying, sometimes work with the tutors, so that was very helpful in establishing I guess the fundamentals of my education very early on.

*AS:* Yeah, it's really interesting to me and I think speaks to some of the difficulties of like society, of the transferal of degrees like internationally

and how it prevents folks from being able to pursue the careers that they once had, so that's really interesting. So could you speak a little bit more, I know you touched on growing up in Queens or like your time in New York. Could you talk a little bit more about that environment and then maybe what high school was like for you? I know that probably – that transition maybe from New York to Texas was probably interesting, so maybe you can talk about that too.

*AR:* Yeah, so I went to high school at Stuyvesant which is one of the specialized high schools in New York City and there's a very competitive exam that you take to get in. So, I remember like all throughout middle school, that was the SHSAT, which I don't know what it stands for specifically. But especially in my community – so I lived nearby where there was a lot of Bangladeshi immigrants, so everybody knew of these special specialized high schools and the exam you take to get in. And Stuyvesant was like the cream of the crop because it was in Manhattan, it was known to be one of the best.

Starting even from elementary school, I would say, a lot of parents would put their kids in tutoring sessions just to study for the exam and my parents did that too because I think my dad knew right off the bat that the only way to kind of move up especially coming from another country was education – that was the equalizer above all – so he really pushed me to do the best I could. And fortunately, it all worked out because from elementary school, I was able to go to a gifted and talented middle school and then from middle school, I was fortunate enough to be accepted into Stuyvesant. I did my freshman year there and that was when my mom kind of started getting angsty and she didn't want to live in the city anymore, but one of the biggest factors of my dad not wanting to move was where I went to high school, because I had gotten the chance. He was very afraid to take it away from me because – I don't know. In their head, I had worked so hard to get there that leaving it all would be a really big mistake. But I think at the end of it, both my parents weighed the pros and cons and realized – well I don't know if my dad realized when I left Stuyvesant, but after we got to Plano, — he realized that schooling there was relatively similar, maybe not as good as Stuyvesant, but it was still a pretty good school district where I could get exactly what I needed.

*AS:* Yeah, that makes sense. So, when you all moved to Texas, I guess what did your parents – did they have to transition jobs too or how did that work?

*AR:* Yeah, so moving to Texas was very interesting because my parents always put education first, my mom and my two youngest sisters, we all moved to Texas in August before the school semester started there. And my dad, because he hadn't found a job in Texas or anything like that, he stayed

behind for almost like a year, because he still worked at the tutoring center. So that first year was really rough because again, my dad wasn't there, and we had moved to Texas with very little preparation. My mom I think maybe had like one cousin or some distant relative who were like our first point of contact in Texas.

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AR: After we kind of spoke to them, figured out a place to live, it was a bit smoother, but it was a lot easier when my dad ended up coming to live with us after he left his job. It was also hard for him because he had a very nice desk job at the tutoring center versus like a year later when my parents decided it was too much because sometimes, he would fly to see us, but for that year it was pretty difficult, so he just ended up moving to Texas and again, starting from the bottom and finding any job to kind of support us for the first couple of years.

AS: Yeah, that transition is really hard if you – like the job types don't transfer well. Like you kind of have to start over a little bit. So, I know you mentioned your dad's thoughts on education, and I assume, I guess – I don't know if you want to talk about your mom's thoughts. Like if she – what her thoughts were on you going to college, and I did also wonder if you felt sort of like being an outlier being the first person to go to college in the U.S. in your family.

AR: I would say my parents have very similar values, but my mom tends to prioritize just like characters, religion, and morals a bit over education. So, for example, one of the very pulling factors of Texas was that it had like a very strong Muslim population with a lot of very well-known scholars, like very, very highly educated scholars. So that's why she chose Texas of all places to move to. When we first moved for example, we got an apartment right across from the mosque, because I think when she saw the mosque she fell in love because it was big – it had like a gym for kids, they had a bunch of youth events, there was a very strong community there and that was something she never found in New York City because – although there are a lot of Muslims and Bangladeshis, the environment there is not the best because, I don't know, just being in a city, there's not enough space first of all to have like a large grandiose mosque, and the people who do come, they're – I don't know. It's not the same as it is in Texas, so my mom definitely loved being in the area we moved to.

She did obviously value my education so helped my whenever I needed to go any places. So, for example, when my dad wasn't here, in tenth-grade I did a lot of extracurriculars, I did debate for example, so she would be the one when I had debate competitions to get up Saturday morning and drive us to some far-off debate tournament. There's like a really funny story, for

one of my debate tournaments, I missed the bus. And my mom, not having driven a lot – she had her license, but she didn't drive in the city – she really had to step up when we moved to Texas. So, she was like a relatively shaky driver and on that day where we had to go to the debate tournament, we couldn't leave my two younger sisters so they all like piled up in the car. And we were on our way to the *[break in audio]* being planned. But I was such a bad navigator and kept messing up the GPS directions that she kept switching lanes and it was like a Saturday morning. So, while we were going, one of the police officers ended up pulling us over and asking my mom, "Ma'am, are you okay? Are you intoxicated from like the night before or anything like that?" And it was really funny because if you look at my mom, she like wears a hijab too and she wears an abaya, and she hasn't been near alcohol at all. So, I just found it really funny that because of my very bad navigation, she ended up being pulled over for possibly drunk driving.

AS: Wow, that's a story. *[Laughs]* Did you guys make it to the debate on time?

AR: Yeah, we made it on time.

AS: Good. Well, that's really interesting and I think community is a lot of what motivates people, so that makes sense that once she found that or she thought she could find that somewhere else.

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AS: So, you mentioned debate. I wonder if you want to talk about any other extracurriculars or things that you did in high school that sort of set you up for your future.

AR: In high school, I did do debate. I had a really great debate teacher, Ms. Potts, but unfortunately, I didn't continue. But it was definitely one of the things I was really interested in, so much so that when I was trying to decide on college majors, I was looking into political science because that time I did debate, I was so informed. I had like ten different news apps downloaded on my phone, would read news article before I would leave the house for example. But I don't know, my path kind of veered off from debate a bit and ultimately, I chose computer engineering when I was actually choosing my major. I think the reason why I chose engineering is because I wanted a very traditional route where I could get a job right away after graduating college. I liked math and physics from the time I was in high school, and engineering was one of those fields where you are pretty much guaranteed a job if you played your cards right. So, that was one of the main things that pushed me to do this.

AS: Yeah, I think it's – you probably learned lots of skills in debate that you can still use and potentially use for engineering, especially like writing and sort of the critical lens that debate offers, so that's really neat. So you did mention that you transferred to Hopkins, so the timeline for the next couple of questions might be slightly different. But I wonder if you could talk to us about how you decided to attend Hopkins and then maybe what your parents or your family's reaction was when you told them you wanted to move to Baltimore?

AR: Okay, so how I decided on Hopkins, well, to be honest, I really did like and admire my other school, University of Texas at Dallas. But I think I just felt some sort of disconnect where I felt like I wasn't getting the full college experience because it was ten minutes away from home. I could drive there all the time. Most of the kids I knew in UTD, they were people I knew in high school, so I didn't really get to venture out and meet a lot of new people. And it was a really large school because it's a state school, so class sizes, for example, had up to 50-60 people depending on the class. I kind of knew I wanted to transfer very early on, even I would say when I was applying to college, and the reason why – okay, let's back up a little bit.

When I was a senior in high school, I knew I wanted to kind of explore and go somewhere far away. But unfortunately, UTD was the one I chose because I got a full scholarship there with a stipend. UTD is very generous with their scholarships, so they have something called the Academic Excellence Scholarship where they cover all tuition and even give you a stipend for books and fees that you might have. So, when I had that acceptance, it was kind of like a no-brainer I would go. And my mom loved – my mom still to this day loves UTD because it's only like 15 minutes away – we had a family friend who teaches there, she basically loves UTD. And at that time, I didn't really know of any other good schools in Texas and UTD was the one that everybody in my community knew of, everybody went. My mom's friends' kids, they all also went to UTD, so that was *the name* university in our community. So, I definitely applied to that first off, and then after that, after I had that application in the bag, that's when I started looking at other places. But I don't know, I guess this is like one of the pitfalls of being a first generation, you don't really know a lot of the ins and outs of the college application process, so, for example, I knew UTD had a rolling admission, but I didn't know that the other UT school also had rolling admissions. So, for example, UT Austin – rolling admissions, it's basically like a first come first serve. So the earlier you apply, the better it is for you.

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*AR:* So, I knew of UT for example, but I didn't know they also had rolling admission. I think the day the applications close at 5:00, that's when I figured out "oh, UT has this option too." So, I ended up putting together a very last-minute application and sending it there. But that didn't work out, but fortunately, UTD did, so that's where I chose to attend and everybody was really happy because at that point, I don't think my family or I – we were ready to venture off far away. So, I guess going to UT was perfect for the first two years. But in the back of my head, I knew I wanted to go someplace far away, but I guess the timing wasn't right. So, two years later, when I got accepted to Hopkins, I brought it up to my parents and they were very surprised because I guess they never expected that. Maybe my dad kind of did, but my mom definitely did not. And did you want me to speak to my acceptance and kind of convincing them to go to Hopkins?

*AS:* Yeah, if you could talk about that and like was it – I guess I was also curious if you just applied without telling them or if you applied anywhere else too? Yeah, for sure, definitely tell me about trying to convince them.

*AR:* Okay, so I didn't explicitly tell them that I was applying to go to college far away. I think my dad maybe kind of knew because I would stay up pretty late on the computer in the living room typing out applications and my dad would stay up with me. But he never exactly what I was doing or where I was applying. I guess being the oldest, my parents kind of trust me to figure out and they're not very familiar with it, so whatever I say I'm doing, they just implicitly trust me I guess, to do a smart thing. So, my dad was definitely there, he would stay up with me when I filled out college applications, but I don't think he knew what applications specifically I was filling out. But I had very, very supportive friends. So, one of my best friends, Chloe, for example, when I was looking to fill out the transfer applications, I would send all essays to her, and she would revise them. I also had another friend, Ridaa, who is a very good writer. So, after Chloe would fix maybe some errors, Ridaa would also do another proofread.

I have very supportive friends who helped me through that. Fortunately, after sending out all the applications, I was – oh, after sending out all the applications, I kind of forgot about it because it takes a long time, I guess to transfer applications to come through because I think traditionally, they send all of the first-year acceptances and then you get transfer applications very late in the summer. So, for example, I applied at the beginning of my sophomore year and it was after sophomore year had ended, I was back at home for the summer, that I got the acceptance. Another funny story about the acceptance, so I receive my acceptance letter in maybe July. But I remember it because – oh, I don't know if Hopkins sent me an email or anything, but I kind of forgot I applied at all. So, it was late one night during Ramadan, so in Ramadan, we basically turn nocturnal. We go to the mosque and pray thoroughly until maybe 12:00 or 1:00 in the morning,



everybody stays up because you fast the day and then you kind of stay up during the night.

So, it was at nighttime when I think my dad and my siblings and I were coming back from the mosque and my dad checked the mailbox, and he saw a really big letter for me and gave it to me, I was like sitting in the passenger side, didn't know what to expect. I open it and it's the folder from Hopkins with "Congratulations, you are accepted!" And at one point, I was a bit taken back because I had completely forgotten I had applied. So, I told my dad, I was like hey, I got accepted, do you think I can go? He was like, "Ah, let me think about this. Where is Hopkins? When did you apply?" So that was pretty much it, I didn't think much of it, and after we got back home, we went to sleep. And that I guess morning, there's like a predawn meal that you eat called Suhoor. So that night, I got the acceptance at like midnight. We woke up as a family to eat at 3:00 before you would have to start your fast. He comes up to me – oh, I bring it up to my mom. It's like hey, got any acceptance letter from Hopkins and my dad pipes up like, "Yeah, I ended up googling the school after you mentioned it. It seems like a pretty good school. Do you want to go?" I was like, I kind of do want to go, but I had to get my mom's reaction.

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AR:

And I would say she was not that happy because she wanted me to stay at UTD. Up to this day, she still loves it, so she was like, "Oh, it's in Baltimore. You're going that far away? Why can't you just stay at UTD? You like it so far. You have good friends." The next couple of weeks after getting the acceptance, it was just convincing my mom that I should go. My dad was relatively – my dad was very easily won over when he learned about Hopkins and what a great school it is – so my dad had no probably going, but he couldn't say yes without my mom because if he said yes, I guess – you know like the dynamics between parents? If one parents says yes, you'll just take there's over it. So, he couldn't explicitly say yes, it was always, "ask your mom, ask you mom."

So that whole Ramadan, I'm pretty sure I spent it convincing my mom to let me go. Eventually, she was won over, but only after I mentioned the name to – oh, you know how she was won over? I think she was kind of hesitantly won over at the beginning because I think the timeline to accept your decision to apply was very soon. So, because my dad gave me a tentative yes and my mom didn't give me an explicit no, I just ended up accepting or something like that. But the other couple of weeks after doing the yes on the form was spent convincing my mom and at that point, she was still hesitant. I think she was finally won over after coming from the mosque. She was hanging out with a group of her friends, and she

mentioned, “Yeah, my daughter is going to some school in Baltimore, Johns Hopkins.” And everybody was very surprised, and they were like, “that's a very good school. Aren't you proud?” “And that's when my mom started learning a bit more about Hopkins and what a great school it is. So, I guess at that point, that was the turning point in her acceptance. And ultimately, she gave me her blessing and I'm here and she's happy I'm here.

*AS:* That's pretty amazing. That's such a cool story and it's so memorable too because it was something – it was sort of like wrapped in a family event and tradition that you guys have, so that's really cool. I'm really curious about what the transition was like for you. So, could you talk about the first few weeks of your experience at Hopkins and what the transition was like moving from Texas to Baltimore? That's a pretty big move and especially weather and those types of things, so maybe you could tell me more about that.

*AR:* Yeah, it was a very abrupt decision because I think after the acceptance, I only had a couple of weeks to get everything sorted. So, right after I had done my acceptance, I had a mini panic attack because I realized I would have to find housing off campus, by myself. So, I ended up going directly to the off-campus housing page. I think the stars aligned – everything worked out. Oh, this was another reason why my parents were very comfortable with me going, I think the stars aligned and I found one of the best roommates I could've asked for. Basically, she's an exact duplicate of me! She's a senior studying computer engineering with two younger sisters, her parents are also Bangladeshi. she's also Muslim, she lives very close by.

So, it was basically her family and the fact that she was going that made my parents feel very comfortable with the idea of my moving across the country. After we agreed to be roommates on the off-campus housing page, my – oh, we agreed to – this is another story. I don't know if this is relevant, but from the off-campus housing page, I just knew the basic facts about her, that she was also looking for a roommate with relatively the same personality as me, she was studying computer engineering, all of that, and I knew her name. So that summer, I was working at a research lab at Professor Khan's, lab, yeah, there's no other way to describe it, and he is also Bengali. My parents know him, so when he found out I wasn't doing much for the summer, he offered me a research assistant position in his lab.

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*AR:* So, I was working in his lab that summer and when he found out that I was – oh, because he was such a trusted family friend, my dad ended up

speaking to him about Hopkins and if I should go or not – ad he was like, “Yeah, it's a good school. Why wouldn't your daughter go?” So that's also another reason why my parents were a-okay with going. So, he has a lot of contracts with the Department of Defense, and I think the National Security Agency, so he came to Washington D.C. for some sort of conference or to give some sort of update. And while he was in Washington D.C., he had a friend who lived near my roommate, who was neighbors with my roommate’s parents. So, like Professor Khan, there's this great university in Bangladesh called BUET, which is like the MIT of Bangladesh, and Professor Khan went there. He graduated with his bachelor’s from that university, my roommate’s dad also graduated there and my roommate’s parents’ neighbors, they also graduated from the same school. So, while he was in Washington D.C., Professor Khan went to his friend’s house and he was telling his friends – they were like talking. He was like, “Yeah, one of my students is coming to this area, she's going to Hopkins.” And then his friend was like lo and behold, “my neighbor also has a daughter who's also going to Hopkins. Do you think they might know each other?”

So that’s when my roommate texted me and was like, “hey, are you also Bengali because there's this professor who knows my parents.” And that's when I confirmed and realized that there's some sort of family tie connection, and after I found that out, my dad ended up speaking to her dad and he was very impressed. Her family has been a very big blessing because they’ve helped with moving and all transitions that I've had here. So, I was *very* fortunate.

AS: That’s really incredible. I think a lot of times people call that Smalltimore although it doesn't really happen in Baltimore. I think it’s just this unexpected connection between people, which is really cool. So, I guess with that, related to that, have you met any other first-gen college students at Hopkins? And I guess maybe your roommate was possibly first-gen, so I'm just curious if that’s a thing that students identify as or if there’s a community that you found of first-gens at Hopkins.

AR: I don't think my roommate is first-gen because I know her dad did his PhD at A&M. So, I don't think she is, but I did meet some other students and it was only later that I found out they were first-gens. So, for example, a couple of girls I met the first time I went to some sort of social gathering to interact with other people my age, I became friends with a couple of girls, and I found out later on that one of them was also a first-gen because we were just talking about our family and she mentioned it. Then there was another person who I met in bio, I'm going hiking with her this weekend hopefully! I didn't even know she was first-gen, the only reason I found out was because I think the FLI poster or something, her name was there and I was like “oh, cool.” But I guess it's something people don't

really mention right off the bat unless you're at an event maybe related to it. You just find out later I guess after speaking to them about their upbringing or their family.

*AS:* Yeah, I think it's kind of this thing that maybe is just an unspoken connection and then if you do events through the FLI network, like you said you might meet them. So, I know you mentioned your major and I'm really curious if you could tell us more about what you're studying and maybe a bit more about why you chose it. I know you mentioned the possibility of building your career especially right after you graduate. So, what do you feel is also valuable about your choice to study engineering?

*AR:* This is just one of my characteristics, I'm very practical. I did not want to do something that would not guarantee a job after graduation. So, I knew when I was starting off, I might not want to go to grad school or some sort of postgraduate education. So like becoming a doctor for example, that was out of the question. I didn't want to be in school for like 12 years.

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*AR:* So, I wanted something that was a relatively short path that would guarantee me a very good job after graduation. And engineering, I knew I wanted to do some sort of engineering like my senior year, I didn't know what specifically. But I ended up taking computer science in high school, for example, I took all of the APs related to engineering, like physics – what else is there – math, calc, computer science, all of that. I liked it enough to where I was happy with going into engineering. I wasn't sure what specifically, so when I was applying to UTD, I just did like an eeny, meeny, miny, moe with the other engineering that were left. So, for example, it was like electrical engineering or mechanical engineering, I knew I didn't want to do biomedical for some odd reason, so it was just picking between them and I ultimately stuck to computer engineering and I've been happy with it ever since.

*AS:* Yeah, it seems like it's a really great program here at Hopkins. Did you have any memorable classes or professors in engineering or even in any of the other courses that you've taken?

*AR:* Any memorable professors? – I've had a lot of memorable professors, maybe not directly related to engineering. So, for example, one of the classes I've been taking, my goal before graduation is to be somewhat fluent in Arabic, so I took Arabic at UTD, I'm taking Arabic at Hopkins, and my Arabic teacher at UTD was very memorable because he was like a grandfather figure to me, he was very, very helpful. He wrote my letter of recommendation for Hopkins. So he was a very important professor in my life. At Hopkins, my Arabic teacher here, she's also really great. Any

particular professor? Oh, okay. My cloud computing professor was pretty great. I have her again this semester for networks, and I think the reason why I really like her class is because I already have a job lined up after graduation related to cloud computing and networks, so when I took cloud computing a year ago, that was right before my internship. So, learning about the basics of cloud computing really helped. Then this semester, I'm taking networks with her which is also I think going to be helpful because of the field that I'm going into. Do you want me to mention her name specifically? She's a pretty good professor.

*AS:* Sure, if you want to.

*AR:* Yeah, her name is Professor Ghorbani. She's pretty great.

*AS:* I wonder too, is that normal or have you experienced that more at Hopkins to have female professors in engineering? Is that common?

*AR:* I would say it's the same everywhere. I've noticed a lot more female professors. I don't know, I think it's pretty even, because I think I had like a female calc professor at my old school. Here, I've had an even ratio of men and women professors, it's not something I've noticed.

*AS:* Yeah, I just was curious about the STEM fields and I feel like that's something that Hopkins has tried to work on a bit is making sure there's good representation, that's helpful. Okay, so you did mention that you do off-campus housing. So, could you talk a little bit more about your apartment life and what that's like?

*AR:* I have a very comfortable apartment life, off-campus life I would say, because my junior year – because my family and roommate's family became relatively close. When it came to food for example, to make sure I had traditional Bengali cooking, we had – my roommate's mom for example would make enough food for the both of us and we would just have like Tupperwares of frozen beef curry or chicken curry in the freezer, and whenever we would be hungry, defrost it and eat it. So, food-wise, it was very easy. My roommate is very organized. Everything was pretty smooth sailing my fall semester. This semester, it's been pretty good so far, I had one other roommate, so there's two of us in this apartment.

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*AR:* Again, there's nothing to complain about, both of them are very nice, clean, supportive roommates and I'm very happy I'm rooming with them.

*AS:* What's your proximity like to campus? Do you guys have to drive or is it walkable for you?

*AR:* I live right across campus. I live at the Charles and last year I lived at the Blackstone. So that too, was right across campus.

*AS:* That's great to have it be so convenient and when you need to be there. Okay, so I guess I'm also curious about if you've joined any clubs or if there's particular activities that you've been drawn to on campus. And I know that is a difficult question just considering the fact that there's COVID. So, some things, especially in person events, have been postponed or made virtual, but I don't know if there's any particular groups that you've joined or things that you want to talk about like that.

*AR:* Yeah, I am part of a fraternity, Alpha Phi Omega, which is a coed service fraternity, I also do taekwondo. I haven't gone at all this semester, but hopefully it can start again. So, the way I chose to join specific organizations, my fall semester for example, I was very focused on academics. I was like, this is my junior year, I'm at Hopkins, I have to make the most out of it. So, I focused very heavily on academics and went to a couple of different club meetings, so went to like the SIF fair for example.<sup>1</sup> Nothing really stood out then. Then spring semester, I started to become more involved with the different organizations, I started attending meetings regularly. I'm one of those people who will try everything – so, my spring semester, I was in team handball, I was in rugby. That was another story, I had a sports injury from rugby, I was in taekwondo, I was in that fraternity, I was in MSA, I still am.

Yeah, anything you could think of that was – I was in the museum club group meet, the business analytics group. When I went to the SIF fair, I put my email down for everything. So, if I was available, I would just go. Spring semester was very nice in that at the very beginning, I was very active. After COVID hit, involvement obviously went down, but I'm trying to get back into the hang of it this semester. I have a couple of events planned with my fraternity that I'm going to go to. Some events, I got to with like MSA, which is the Muslim Student Association. Some events that I want to restart with, taekwondo, I feel really guilty because I just haven't started going to the practices, maybe I'll go this Saturday.

*AS:* It sounds like you are interested in a lot of things and so sometimes, it's probably about making sure you have time for everything, not to mention studying and doing homework and all of those things. So that's interesting, and I think I'm glad to hear that even with the pandemic, that there are still things going on for students. Could you tell me about internships or jobs that you've had while at Hopkins?

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<sup>1</sup> Student Involvement Fair.

*AR:* Yeah, while at Hopkins, I haven't worked fulltime, I've just had internships. So last summer, I had an internship. Can I reveal the company or is that –

*AS:* Yeah, that's fine. We can always take it out of the transcript if you decide you don't want it in there, but that's fine.

*AR:* Okay, so last summer, or this summer, I interned at Amazon, and it was really fun. And fortunately, after my last day with my internship, I was offered a fulltime return offer. So, it was a big relief hearing that I had a fulltime job lined up after graduation because especially at that point, right after summer, the economy was really bad. It was just a big stress reliever knowing I had something lined up and that also meant fall semester I wouldn't have to apply to a bunch of jobs, because I had one lined up. This is also another funny story, but I knew I had a fulltime offer from Amazon because the last day, my manager called me over and was like "we are thrilled to offer you this offer." So, I thought they were going to maybe email a letter. I didn't realize it was on the student portal where I originally applied.

*[0:45:01]*

*AR:* So I think it was, when was it? I think like November, I became very worried. I was like was he actually serious? Do I have an offer? I haven't received anything in the mail only to find out through a text message as a reminder, it's like "hey, you still haven't accepted your offer letter". That's when I found out that yes, this is actually true, I do have a job after graduation, I'm going to be fine. So – yeah.

*AS:* And I assume it's like a computer engineering type position. Could you tell me a little about the position?

*AR:* Yeah, it's related to computer engineering I would say – maybe not that much – it's with Amazon Web Services. So, they're a cloud provider, so they offer storage and networking services to companies like Netflix for example – all of Netflix's data, they store with AWS – so, that summer – there is some confidential information, so let me speak of it as vaguely as possible. So that summer, I basically worked to design a blueprint for possible solutions that companies could implement, and I think my fulltime job that I will step into is related to that, where I will work with possible customers and help them design a blueprint of how they could integrate AWS services into whatever problem that they're trying to solve.

*AS:* Yeah, that sound really neat and it sounds like you enjoy it. So at least that's something to look forward to. I was also curious about how you spend your time between semesters, so summer break and winter break.

Could you talk a little bit about that? And I guess part of that is probably work, right?

*AR:* Yeah, most summer breaks I definitely work fulltime. Winter break I don't really because the timing is so short, there's not enough time to get an actual job. So, winter break, I just spent the whole time with my family. If there's something maybe like one of our family friends needs, I will do that. So, for example, I think last winter break or the winter break before that, I didn't have a job specifically, but say we had family friends who had kids who needed help with a particular subject in school, they would come and I would explain things to them. But yeah, winter break is mostly spent with my family. And because I have two younger sisters, they only get I think two weeks off for winter break, so it's really just making the most of the time with my family. Summer break is working and also spending time with my family. This summer was very, very fun because I bought a kayak, and my dad became obsessed with fishing. So, pretty much any time he had off, he would just go fish. So this summer was spent partially working and partially just going to lakes with my parents and family.

*AS:* Now that's a hobby I can get behind, kayaking, that's awesome! [*laughs*] So speaking of your family, how would you describe your relationship with them since you've started at Hopkins? How would you describe them as your support system and what do you guys do to check in with one another?

*AR:* 100 percent, they are most definitely my support system. We have a very close relationship. What else? How do we check in with each other? So, one of the great things – I have a very young sister, she just turned eight in February – and she is, you know how kids, they're not afraid to tell you anything? So, whenever she feels like she's in the mood, she'll just Facetime me and we'll talk. Which is very fun because sometimes with my parents there's like a couple of topics that you automatically go through in your checklist, like how are you, have you eaten, what are you doing, how are your studies, versus her, she'll just call and like for example, she called this weekend and she was like, I found a necklace that she ended up cutting with a needle cutter, so she made jewelry for Payton, which is like her pet owl or something like that, so we ended up talking for half an hour about makeshift jewelry.

[0:50:00]

*AS:* Yeah, that's really great to have that regular check in or unexpected check in and I guess that distracts you a little bit from school too, that's probably helpful.



*AR:* Definitely.

*AS:* Okay, so your family is probably a support system for you while you've been in college. Are there any other support systems that you've found that you want to talk about?

*AR:* I have very good friends as a support system. I'm very particular – I make it a conscious effort to be friends with people who are genuinely nice and who want the best for you. So, all of my friends back in Texas for example, if I asked them for help with anything, they will be the first to offer whatever it is that I need. So yeah, they're very great. I have this one family friend/neighbor, I just texted her, she's also my support system because as the oldest, since I'm gone, my two younger sisters, they don't really have that older sibling figure. So, because she's my neighbor the same ages as me also in college, anything I want to do that I can't, I just text her about it. So, for example, I texted her two days ago. I was like, "Hey, my younger sister, you know what movie you guys should really go see? The Tom and Jerry Movie. And because I'm not there, if you have the time, I think you should go watch it with them. Or if you want to wait, we can all watch it when I get back." So, friends are definitely another very good source of support for me.

*AS:* That's really great. So, I'm also really curious if you've felt supported by Hopkins as a first-gen student and if there's any specific programs or initiatives or even events, I guess, that you've found were helpful for you? I know you mentioned off-campus housing, but that's not directly through the FLI program. Have you felt supported as a first-gen at Hopkins?

*AR:* To be one hundred percent honest, I really didn't know that I was like part of the FLI program because – I don't know, there's like no official letter or anything that says you are part of it. I just sometimes would get the emails and I thought they were like sent to everybody. So, I don't really have like a strong connection to the FLI program. I've gone to maybe some of their events, so like if they pop up, so if they had the event in the quad, and they were giving out t-shirts, I went, but that was pretty much most of my interaction with the FLI program. I would say I wasn't as supported and it might just be my fault because I don't know what the program is and I feel like a lot of their events are just geared towards freshmen and sophomores. So, they have a lot of events programmed for freshmen for example, making sure that they're acclimated into the environment here, but because I had already had that experience at UTD, I didn't really have a need for it. A lot of their events are great, but I just have never gone or experienced it.

*AS:* Yeah, I think it's interesting, the difference of experience between freshmen and transfer students. I think more generally it's useful to know

that there are resources for first-gens, but it's about making sure those resources are accessible and talked about, yeah, so there's some work to be done there.

*AR:* Yeah, with the FLI program, I don't know, I felt like none of it applied to me directly, so I just never went. That was pretty much my biggest obstacle with being involved with FLI, I just felt like they're events or the things they had planned were not targeted specifically for me or it didn't apply, so I just never went.

*AS:* Yeah, I guess another way to think about the question would be like if you felt supported generally as a first-gen by the university. So, I don't know, in terms of funding or from professors and things like that. Do you have any thoughts on that?

[0:55:00]

*AR:* Yeah, I feel like Hopkins in general does a really great job supporting first-gen students. Maybe not – I want to change my answer – I definitely feel the university does a lot to support first-gen students in terms of funding because of the amount of money that they invest in first-gen students, so I'm really happy with that.

*AS:* Yeah, I think it's just the difference of the programming versus funding support. So, maybe there's some tweaks that could be done to make the programming and stuff better. I guess you did touch on your apartment life, but I'm really curious about your life in general in Baltimore and in Maryland. Do you want to talk about what that's been like and what it's like to live here?

*AR:* Yeah, Baltimore is a very interesting city and my goal this semester is to explore the neighborhoods more. Last weekend, we went to Towson. But that is one of the – I guess the most common place college students visit – so my goal is to kind of figure out like the hidden gems of the location I'm in. This weekend for example – oh okay, this is also another goal for this semester – because who know when I'll be back in Baltimore again after I graduate, so this semester, one of my goals is to explore Baltimore. So, this weekend, I am planning to just walk down Greenmount Avenue and see what stores there are. I also need like some basic fundamentals for my apartment. I need like a couple of like bowls, maybe some cups, so I'll just go walking and see what I find because last year when I was walking, I saw a lot of locally owned stores. They're not really easy to find online, you have to physically go there to see what they have and what you would maybe want to buy, so I want to do that this semester, just walk and see what I find.

AS: Baltimore is definitely a city to do that. You can feel free to email me if you need any recommendations. So, if you could talk a little bit more about life after Hopkins? I know you're planning on your new job and that's fantastic, but maybe you could just tell me what other plans you have for the future. Like are you planning on staying in Baltimore a little longer or moving back home? Will you be doing virtually?

AR: I have a very set plan after graduation. So, it's graduate, I have a break until mid-July when I start my job, but because I was supposed to have this six-months training period in New Jersey, but because of the pandemic it's all virtual. So, I'll be doing that training from home, which is going to be from Texas. After that, you get placed in your fulltime location. As of right now, I requested Dallas, I don't know if I will get it, but I'm hopeful. So, after graduating from Baltimore, I just see myself back in Texas.

AS: Yeah, I think it'll be a good homecoming. So overall, do you think that you would recommend Hopkins to other first-gens, and do you have any advice that you would give them?

AR: I would *absolutely* recommend Hopkins for first-gen students. Advice I can give them? I would say – I have very cliché advice – it's like, do good in school, focus on your studies, get involved, but that's the particular advice I have. Anything specific? I don't really have anything as of right now, but just the basic ones where you're focused on your studies, get involved. I think those are the two main things because even if you don't I guess go to graduate school or anything like that, your studies are definitely very important, so I would say work hard, make sure you establish that connection with your professors, and then get involved because being involved on campus is the way to build your circle and have a community that really supports you.

[1:00:00]

AS: I think that's really, really great advice and helpful just to put things in perspective especially when you feel like there's a lot of moving parts to college and it's hard to keep track of everything. So, those are important places to focus on. I also like to give our interviewees an opportunity to sort of summarize their time at Hopkins or to kind of reflect on their experience after being here. So, after the past couple of years, how would you sort of summarize your time at Hopkins?

AR: I have loved my time at Hopkins so far. The only thing I would change is if I had more time here because I missed out on a lot of the, I would say "more traditional" aspects of living on campus or being involved with the community here. But yeah, I had a really great time. I have pretty good

friends. I just wish that maybe I had stayed a bit longer or had the full couple of semesters where I was actually on campus with other students.

*AS:* Yeah, I think that's a good reflection of wanting to have spent more time here, so thank you. That brings us to the conclusion of our questions for you. I just want to thank you for interviewing with us. I really appreciate your time. Is there anything else you'd like to add to your interview that we didn't cover or any things that came up as you were kind of reflecting on this that you want to share?

*AR:* I would say to students who are maybe looking to Hopkins is that if you have the opportunity, come here. It's a really great opportunity. Baltimore is fun, the community here is great, and Hopkins does do a lot to support most of their students. So, if you're fortunate enough to be accepted, take the chance! Come here, you'll like it.

*AS:* Wonderful. Thank you very much.

*[End of Audio]*