“IB”

Interviewed by Kristen Diehl

March 8, 2019
Johns Hopkins University
Oral History Collection

Interviewee: “IB”

Interviewer: Kristen Diehl (KD)

Date: March 8, 2019

KD: Okay. So, this is Kristen Diehl, here with “IB” on March 8th, 2019, at the Eisenhower Library for the first-generation college student oral histories. So, welcome. My first question is if you would tell me perhaps where you were born and maybe a little bit about your family?

IB: Yeah, sure. So, I was born in Boca, Raton, Florida. That's a place a little bit north of Miami, maybe about an hour and 45 minutes away. Or you can say 45 minutes away from Palm Beach. It's right in the middle. And the general gist of the area is that it's described as a sort of retirement haven for Jews. So I grew up around a lot of old people. Actually I was one of three children in my entire neighborhood. And it was – I guess my childhood, my reality, what I learned, all revolved around that: being surrounded by lots of elderly. And I learned it was not the norm when I came to Hopkins. But we could talk about that later.

KD: And perhaps could you tell me a little bit more about your parents' or your guardians' education?

IB: Yeah. Let's see. Let's start with my mother. So, my mother is Colombian. She was born and raised there. She went to high school. And then after high school I believe she received some training in architecture. But eventually went to the United States just for seeking opportunity, where she met my father. And eventually she started working for a company in the field of kitchen design. And ever since then she's kind of maintained that and kept working there. She's very happy with what she does. She excels in what she does as well. And she's very fulfilled.

So I guess she doesn't have a college education in the US. So that is a big limiting factor in many regards. And language barrier's another thing that is a limitation as well. But she has been improving her English ever since she got here, thanks to my father, and just being immersed as well. Still she might deal with some comments on her accent maybe. So that's my mother.
My father, on the other hand, was born and raised in – actually, no, he was born in Roanoke, Virginia, and raised in Richmond, Virginia. He went to school around the area through middle school and then high school, and then in high school, I believe sophomore year, he dropped out and pursued a career in music, and just never looked back pretty much. He's very happy with performing as a musician, and just traveling, touring and all that. But as music became more and more just a bigger industry in the United States, less live bands, more electronic, more recorded, more distribution through CDs and then electronic distribution, Spotify, iTunes, I guess the demand sort of went down. So that was an unfortunate result that has made him realize the importance of education I guess and the limitations as well.

But unfortunately he keeps going with his music. He's still able to make a living and give back to the family and all that. He really enjoys what he does. But, again, there's a huge limitation in not having the formal education. I mean, he does learn things and he does emphasize – "I have the street smarts," he might say. But at the same time it's tougher for him to get a job without that high school diploma, without any college education as well. So, yeah, that's their education levels and I guess their occupations.

KD: 
Cool. Thank you. I was also wondering if you could – you kind of spoke about this a little bit. But more about the town and the place you grew up in, if there's anything else to add.

IB:
Oh yeah. So, Boca Raton is stereotyped as, like I said, the retirement haven. It's full of a lot of a lot of wealthy people. It's very wealthy. So my dad kind of got there as it was getting built and stuff. So he got this really good deal on this one house, random, on the outskirts. Recently actually we relocated to a more affordable area, downsizing I guess. Great decision. But, yeah, Boca's full of a lot of wealthy people. And all throughout the education system I went through, I was surrounded by lots of wealthy kids. And that actually made it much easier for me to integrate into Hopkins. I'll talk about that more later. But I realized class division at a very early age as a result. Sort of people saying, "Hey, I have this; I have that," and saying, "Wait, I don't have this; I don't have that, and my friends don't have this, or some of my friends do; others don't."

[0:05:00]
But what we would end up doing – you know, you go to the rich kid's house and play with his toys basically. You go home and then afterwards you think, "Wait a second. Why don't we have that? Why can't we afford to go to Europe? Why can't we go to all these different things?" But as I grew up in that environment, I think that it kind of set in the idea that some people are just in these I guess more favorable circumstances that they're born into while other people are I guess born into less favorable circumstances. But at the end of the day we're all humans still and we all have the potential to move around depending on how much effort we put in. But at the same time, our circumstances play a huge factor in our mobility.

KD: Definitely. Could you speak a little bit more about what high school was like? Any sort of extracurriculars you participated in, or maybe college preparation activities, things like that?

IB: Yeah, sure. So, I went to Boca Raton Community High School. I'm very proud of my high school. I love the environment. And I was very active, first and foremost, in the bands. My father was a musician so he encouraged me to play the piano. To his disappointment, I did not want to play the piano because my room in the house is right next to his practice room [laughs]. So lots and lots of piano went through the wall. There was no soundproofing. But that's okay because I picked up the trumpet instead. I was inspired by Louis Armstrong and all these – just the idea of the trumpet player being right under the spotlight playing that, blasting his horn, tooting it all he wants and stuff, kind of uncontrollably, but at the same time with control within a certain track. And mostly inspired by jazz.

So, anyway, I picked up the trumpet, started in middle school, continued on into high school, sort of found my social circle around music in the music programs. I wasn't in any symphonic bands in high school. I played in the jazz band all four years. Very grateful for that opportunity. And I was also in the marching band as well. So the thing is – let's see, what do I say here? – about the bands: it was always good because when people are doing things in high school, they stay out of other things, if you know what I mean. So I wasn't exposed to drinking, drugs, partying. Because we were band kids. We were band nerds. We were the marching kids. We had these really ugly uniforms that we would wear and perform at football games while the whole school would see us. So it was very humbling as well.
But I feel like just staying active in something in high school was a good thing because it kept me out of the bad things. So, other things I was involved in besides a whole assortment of random honor societies and those types of things – I was involved in Greek Club. That was a Greek and French Club, two different culture clubs. Because I hadn't really been able to travel that much, just because of I guess financials for the most part. I went to Colombia twice, which is where most of my family lives actually. But that's pretty much the extent of it. But that still wasn't going to stop me from exploring other places. So I was able to explore it through clubs.

So, Greek Club was actually ran by a brother and a sister who were very Greek, very proud of their Greek culture. And we would go – they would just discuss Greek things. We would eat Greek food [laughs]. Maybe that's why it was so popular: because they would always bring – their parents ran a Greek restaurant so they'd bring in lots of souvlaki and baklava and all sorts of delicious foods. And French Club also – that was just kind of an extension of my French studies, which were continued from middle school. Again, the main point here is: I'm staying busy with all sorts of different sort of things.

And then the final big thing I was active in in high school was Science Olympiad. This was where I could nerd out with a bunch of other nerds and not feel sort of attacked by – the stereotypical thing you have in high school: you have the athletes and the jocks and the popular crowd, and you have the nerds in the corner. Our school was a weird dynamic because the nerds were cool because we were I guess the smart kids. And it was kind of like that polarization between us and then them. So we would stay there after school for hours and hours, till the sun went down, just working on our projects, studying for our competitions.

I participated in protein modeling, which was: you study all sorts of protein science and then you also model – you prepare this display where you're given a protein and you have to sort of represent its structure but then also try to represent its function in a very creative way. So that what we would end up doing is getting some sort of wire setup that's colorful, arranging it using a 3D-modeling system on our computer to make it very exact and to try to represent its function. It was like a binding protein.
So we tried to emphasize the exact amino acids that participated in that. Because something about proteins is that they're huge noodles but only a few little spots on the noodles actually exert the effect, which is really interesting. Because one thing you might hear about on the news is: "Oh, you have this mutation, you have this disease." We all have so many mutations and they're just silent; they don't do anything. Because they're part of the noodle, not the active part.

So, yeah, that was Science Olympiad. I also studied entomology as part of Science Olympiad. Basically Science Olympiad was this huge exposure to science. We had no idea what science was. There's no research – there's no easy way to get involved in research or even know what research is where I was from because there's no major – there's no Harvard; there's no state university around. There's Florida Atlantic University but it was just unheard of. We didn't know what research was. It didn't ever cross our mind. But how the science people got involved was Science Olympiad. And there were summer internship programs elsewhere that, through Science Olympiad, it was encouraged. They would kind of tell each other, "Hey, there's this program here. Apply to this. Let's apply to that."

So, I got my first taste of research through that actually, recommended by one of the Science Olympiad-affiliated professors, a chemistry professor. And he said, "Hey, guys, sign up for this." And it was at the University of Florida. So I thought, "Wait, what am I going to do this summer? I'll just sit here or volunteer as usual or I could be over there and who knows what I'll be doing?" So I applied, I got accepted, got a scholarship. Very grateful for that because they threw me into a lab where I was studying red ants [laughs].

But the important thing was not necessarily the subject of the research. Because I was busy – I wanted to study the brain already. I wanted to be a big-boy researcher. But this was very humbling. They were saying, "Start low." I was like washing beakers and literally collecting ants outside and bringing them in to study. Kind of at the lowest level possible. But exposure into what a research setting was, all that, thanks to this external program. And that'll be a trend – external programs – that I'll talk about a little bit more later, during college specifically. But yeah, overall, band, you have the culture clubs, and then you have Science Olympiad.

KD: Great. Thank you so much for sharing that. My next question is if you could talk about maybe your parents' and family's thoughts on
education, and how perhaps it maybe sort of felt being the first to go to college?

IB: Yeah, sure. So, through my father – my father said, "Do anything you want. Don't be a musician." That was the only thing. And he would also not only talk about how important it'd be for me to go into college – since I was born, he was putting money into a college fund through the state of Florida that gives us discount I guess on state education. But he would also say, "You don't want to end up like me." That's his biggest fear. That's his biggest fear in life. But he would also say, "IB, you got to get through your degrees," and whatnot. So kind of grew up in that setting. My mom also – she just wanted me to get educated, succeed. They both value education, essentially. Because they see it from I guess their level and they see people with degrees and they say, "They seem pretty well-off. I want my kid to be like that."

And it just seemed like the norm: you send your kids to college in America. My mom wasn't really used to that but she saw her friends who were also immigrants as well with kids that were one or two years older than me sort of seeing them go through a certain path. So she said, "Okay." They'd say, "He's working on his college apps right now," and she'd get all these ideas and come to me and be: "IB, are you working on college apps?" Like, "No, Mom, I'm doing that in two years." A big thing was kind of explaining and going through this whole process with them. It was a group effort: learning how to college, essentially. So, yeah, their views on education are very positive.

Something else that you might hear, not from my parents specifically, but from similar situations with parents who don't have college degrees, is: "Oh, you don't need a college degree to be successful in the world." My personal view is that you don't but it's not only about the degree, about college, that makes you successful, that encourages you to become more successful. It's about what you learn in college, the whole experience, everything about it: social scenarios, working and networking with people, those group projects. You learn a lot, you know? You learn a lot about yourself and about progress, making progress and getting things done.

So, to summarize, a little recap: both my parents are supportive towards education, don't completely understand how it works in the United States because of their educations.
But they were very happy that I was kind of actively pursuing education.

KD: Thank you. My next question is: how did you decide to attend Hopkins?

IB: Oh, that was easy [laughs]. When I was a wee young lad, IB wanted to be a doctor. Because South Florida: lots of old people. Lots and lots and lots and lots of doctors to take care of those old people. My parents were both working a lot. So I would be with my grandparents a lot. And my grandpa would always – our favorite activity was: "Take me to doctor's appointments." So I would be exposed to all these physicians all around and stuff. And I was a little tiny boy but I saw this guy who knew all about the human body and I thought the human body was the coolest thing. So many different things inside of us. I was like, "Wow. This is ridiculous." I had a million books I'd look through, just picture books with words. I'd ignore the words, just look at the pictures. Like, "Oh, that's the stomach. Okay. Ooh, that's the liver."

But one thing I was set on is: "I want to be a doctor one day. I've got to go to med school." So I would literally ask all these grandpa doctors, "Hey, I want to go to med school." Just imagine a tiny ten-year-old boy asking these doctors, "What am I supposed to do to go to med school?" And for some reason the only thing I remembered that stuck with me was Johns Hopkins. So I said, "You know what? I want to go to Johns Hopkins." I didn't know what Johns Hopkins was. I wanted to go there though. So that kind of sat in the back burner of my mind as I kind of progressed through middle school and whatnot.

And then I realized that they were talking about Johns Hopkins Medical School, not specifically the undergrad. But still the undergrad was in very close proximity to the medical school. There's all these connections with the physicians there, med students, many opportunities to get involved. And it was a beautiful campus in a place where there were four seasons. Like: looking outside right now we see snowflakes. You don't see that in South Florida.

KD: No [laughs].

IB: The leaves are always brown or green over there, kind of like the sun kind of roasts them. But, yeah: it's beautiful here. And that was kind of my two cents on Hopkins before I applied. It was very
limited I find. Because if you have parents that went through college then they would say, "Look for this. See if you like this or this or this." My parents were just like – actually, hold on. I'll get to that in a sec. I was just thinking: "Johns Hopkins. That sounds like a good place to study and it's in a cool place. All right. I'm going to apply there." And that sort of thinking motivated applying to here. Also applied to some other areas. But Hopkins was definitely in my top three choices for that.

So, going onto what my parents thought about the application, they were horrified when I wanted to apply to Hopkins and Ivy Leagues. Because they had been saving for in-state tuition for the other schools. So they were thinking, "How are we supposed to pay for this?" and whatnot. And to sort of answer them I would say, "Hey, I'll just apply to scholarships. I could write an essay I think." But we found out later that IB is not the best essay writer yet [laughs]. But I did get some.

But what was important was the federal student aid. That hit so hard, got almost a full ride. Good enough. It was cheaper than state school. My parents were happy. IB was happy. I couldn't believe I even got in. Ridiculous. So, yeah. After like a week in awe, I realized, "I'm going to Hopkins." And about every two weeks I have the same epiphany. I'm like, "Wait a second. I'm at Hopkins right now." Kind of living the dream. And I think it's really easy to forget that here. It's really easy to forget that.

KD: So, generally both yourself and your family's reaction was one of excitement.

IB: I was excited because I got in. But my parents – their first thought was: "How are we going to pay for this?" So that was the very first reaction. And then after we got the financial aid letter, that's when they got excited and I got even more excited. So that was that pretty much.

KD: Great. Could you describe the first few weeks of your undergraduate experience, sort of the transition that a lot of us go through from home to campus life? But then also a different city in a different state.

IB: So, first I want to make clear that before undergrad started I was a part of program called Hop-In. And what Hop-In is: it's a bridge program that's specifically meant to link first-gen, underrepresented students, low socioeconomic status, to integrate them into college life, to basically help us with that change. And I
was very grateful for that because it made that first week much much easier. I was already very knowledgeable about campus, almost to a cocky degree. Because during this program I was basically able to figure out how to navigate Hopkins, learn about living in a dorm, being away from family and stuff, and getting a taste of the rigor.

[0:20:00]

So we'll get into that a little bit more later, the academic rigor at Hopkins. But what I noticed during the first couple weeks which are different than over the summer is that you have all these different people coming from everywhere. Overwhelming. I had to remember everybody's names. I had to develop a system to remember names, which I should use more often [laughs]. But it was really good, really fun, really exciting.

But I think if I didn't have that bridge program to do that, then it would've been a little bit more difficult and sort of frightening to just be thrust into this area. Especially Hopkins, where a lot of the students here come from families who've had college education and whose parents are saying, "Hey, you're going to go into orientation week. Don't forget to wear a condom or something when you're doing this stuff." But my parents had no idea what I was in for. It was kind of cool because they were basically – like I said before, a group effort. They were basically coming in with me into the first week and I would tell them all about it and they were basically living college life through my anecdotes and stuff.

So, in conclusion – I like these summaries. I like doing these.

KD: Yeah. They're great [laughs].

IB: I was prepared because of the Hop-In program. If I didn't have the Hop-In program, I would've probably not have been as prepared and I wouldn't have been able to hit the ground running academically as well. And, yeah. I think that's it.

KD: Awesome. Thank you. And so through that program you're also able to meet other first-generation college students.

IB: Yeah. That was another thing: I was able to meet other first gens and other ethnicities actually. I think I was the only Colombian there. I met Cubans. I met lots of Nigerians. I met – one of my good friends from Mali. I still talk to him all the time. Basically all these people I've never met before. So I mentioned – at the very
beginning when I mentioned Boca Raton – it's old, retired Jews. I don't know if I said Jews specifically.

KD: Yeah.

IB: But it's very white down there. And even in high school there was like one Asian guy. Everybody was white. Maybe there was a couple black kids. I was friends with basically all the Hispanics, which is like less than ten maybe. So this was incredible opportunity to realize that the world is much more diverse I guess. I was hoping. When Hopkins started, I realized that that was an incorrect sample size. It was a small sample size. But that was okay.

KD: Cool. Thank you. My next question kind of moves onto academics. Could you discuss perhaps your program of study and how you chose it and what you feel like you've really gotten out of it?

IB: Yeah, sure. It's all we do here anyway: academics. I'm currently a pre-med neuroscience and French double major. I started out kind of knowing what I wanted to do. I applied to this school knowing I wanted to go into neuroscience. Let's go back to high school for a sec. So, I was volunteering at the hospital, the Boca Raton Community Hospital where I was born. Very proud of that. And they constructed a new neuroscience wing around September 2013.

And as a volunteer for two years there, I reached out to the director and I said, "Hey, can I volunteer in this wing? I kind of like brains." The only thing I had at that point was: "How do humans work? Why are we like this?" So she said, "Yeah," somehow. I ended up being the receptionist at this institute, kind of getting a little bit of exposure to the doctors there, just the ongoing – the types of patients that walk through the front door. I was the first face so I'd see people with movement disorders, worried family members coming to visit their family members who are patients there. Eventually I got promoted, I guess quote/unquote "promoted," and started working on the neuro ICU with the nurses, kind of just folding bedsheets and whatnot. But actually I was the only Spanish speaker there so I also served as a translator, which is pretty cool.

But this whole time I was saying, "Wow, neuroscience is cooler than I thought. I want to study this. Wow. It just so happens that I'm applying to Hopkins and they're a really good neuroscience program." So that was a given. That was really easy.
Next was French. So I had continued French studies since middle school. I did not at all think I would continue it in college. But freshman year I took a class. I took just intermediate. Came to just check it out, collegiate-level language study. And it took my interest. So I said, "Okay, I'll take intermediate 2." Actually at that point I was moving onto advanced. I'll say, "Okay, I'll take advanced." I went to advanced and what ended up happening is that the French program here is not just teaching the language.

[0:25:00]

It's not just: "We're going to teach you how to speak French." They were speaking to us in French, teaching all sorts of stuff: philosophy, history, culture, all sorts of stuff, arts. And that is what attracted me. I said, "You know what? I think I want to minor in this." And then I looked at the minor requirements and the major requirements, and I said, "You know what? I'm going to major in this." So I decided to major in French as well as neuroscience. Pre-med – we kind of went over: I really wanted to be a doctor as well. So that was already on my mind. So, yeah, that's how I ended up being the neuro/French double major.

Zero regrets at all. It's been a very great conglomeration of random distant subjects. The neuroscience provides with I guess the life sciences from the molecular up to the systems level, which is really cool. We're learning about signaling. Well, for example, one of my favorite ways to sort of talk about the different levels is through this thing called synaptic plasticity, which is how certain circuits in your human body, in your central nervous system, peripheral nervous system, become stronger. Kind of like working at a muscle. This can happen at the molecular level where, for example, neurotransmitters, which are how your nerve cells communicate – there are receptors for them.

So, one way is that your neurons will add more receptors into the ends of them and therefore there will be stronger effects when neurotransmitter are released, and therefore that circuit gets stronger. But at another level, at the systems level for example, you could have sprouting of a neuron – it could have more connections with the branches, branch-wise. So this is really cool. I don't know how I got into this but –

**KD:** I'm learning something [laughs].

**IB:** Yeah. Oh, I guess that was another thing why I enjoy neuroscience. Those classes are amazing. When I get kind of tired of the
 sciences, I just go to my next class, which is a French class. And next thing I know, I'm discussing and criticizing a poem, a Baudelaire poem or a Balzac prose or something, in French. Everything was French. Very immersive the French program was. The professors were extremely caring, not to throw any shade on any other departments that I was a part of. But they were very caring, supportive, and helped me grow as a writer specifically. So my writing skills shot up. Very confident now in terms of writing skills as well. Critical arguments.

Got some introduction to philosophy, critique of art, analysis of all sorts of different formats. I spent about two weeks working on a dissertation on a ballet [laughs], which I've never thought I would've been doing or able to do. Yesterday for an exam for one of my French courses I wrote this little tiny analysis on this one Baudelaire poem. I used to be afraid of poetry. I still kind of am but [laughs] less sensitive I guess. Also music. I know he's not French, but Tchaikovsky, analyzing his Romeo and Juliet piece in French, writing a nice little paper on it. But at the same time another thing I would be doing with the French is – for example, I wrote this huge dissertation on criticizing the pre-med system here and how it's kind of narrow. But those were some views that I kind of just grew to accept: that's how Hopkins does it. And things have changed since then. That was around junior fall, maybe sophomore spring.

And then pre-med classes. Initially it was like: "Okay, this is just the bullet that I gotta bite. I just gotta do these. Everybody does it."

It's kind of like hazing, if you want to liken it to that. Everyone goes through it: physics, organic chemistry, biochemistry. But changing the mindset throughout the years of college, you realize this is extremely cool. And here I am in physics, something that I despised freshman year. I actually pushed it off until this senior year because I was afraid of it. And I'm actually enjoying it and having a good – not a good time. I'm not going to say that. That's a lie [laughs]. I'm actually enjoying learning about it. And it's one of those things where it's more fun in retrospect after you finish that exam and you say, "Wait a second. This is how charges interact. This is what a capacitor is. Now I can kind of talk to engineers and they will not laugh at me." They'll still laugh at me though [laughs].

I guess those were the majors.

KD: My next question is: throughout your courses in your different programs, have you had any specifically memorable professors or
faculty members who sort of helped you along the way? Or different classes?

[Crosstalk]

IB: Oh, baby. Got to start with the first one. The first college professor I've ever had at Hopkins. His name is Dr. Stewart Hendry. If you've interviewed any other kids who are neuroscience majors, they've probably mentioned this guy as well. He is a very good educator. He's a very efficient educator as well. If he wants you to learn something, he will try to teach you it, give it his all. He puts a lot of effort in. You can tell. He makes sure all of his notes are up to date. And then he just sort of radiates this positive pressure which encourages us to sort of mirror his effort that he puts into the class. So he has a very – not everybody loves the guy but everybody respects him for what he does and how he teaches. His exams are extremely difficult. Everybody studies very hard for them. And if you can pull off an A on those exams, you'll feel extremely satisfied, more than ever. But that's just in class. You go to his office after class, you'll talk about all sorts of things. He'll give you life advice. He'll talk about career stuff. This guy is pretty down to earth, kind of cynical, very good character, very funny. Very funny guy. Very loveable guy. Unfortunately I think he's moving closer to his family I think next year, so that's kind of sad. But this guy is very awesome.

And over that bridge program I actually took – the one class I took was intro to neuroscience with this guy. So he was my first Hopkins professor. And that was like: Wow. These guys are really talented. I guess unfortunately they didn't all measure up to the big shoes he left to fill. But very influential guy, especially in terms of the life aspect. So one of those examples was – so, where I wasn't able to turn to my parents for specific things, I would turn to this guy, for example. One day I came in and said, "How do you read so much?" Because I guess my parents don't really read that much and that's not something that people do normally. And this guy, on the other hand, is just always going at it, writing all sorts of things. He just says – and he taught me basically how to read.

So he told me that you just basically gotta train it and it's like a muscle, and when you're super tired and you can't look at another word, you gotta just keep pushing ahead. And I took that to heart. I was taking notes furiously on my iPhone. Over the summer I tried
to implement that. He also taught me how to read a research paper. So I was trying to play with those skills. And I killed a bunch of books that summer break. And actually I entered a book-reading contest and won [laughs], using what he taught me. So, very grateful to the guy for all those things.

Other professors – they touch you in small ways. But you remember them. For example, one of my professors, Dr. Mohamed Farah – he's a researcher over at the med campus actually who actually commutes over here just to teach his classes and then goes back over there. Big sacrifice there. He's a researcher in the peripheral nervous system. And that's what the class is about. But this guy – the first day he says, "All right, guys, you're going to write a lot." Next class, half the class is gone [laughs]. The limit – for writing intensive there's a minimum of writing pages that you have to do. This guy exceeded that so much.

But this guy – I would submit my writing by e-mail before it was due and say, "Hey, any feedback?" He'd give you so much feedback. He just wanted us to be good scientists one day. So that guy basically taught me how to write and read scientific papers, which is a whole skill in itself that I'm still not really perfect with yet but I'm working on it. And actually inspired me to keep going with the scientific writing. I'm taking another scientific writing class right now. I don't need it though but I'm taking it 'cause it's fun. With another professor. So that guy puts a lot of feedback.

So basically I'm valuing in these professors how much effort they're putting in. And that's visible I guess. In different ways. Another way is: all along the French department, people giving you tons of feedback on your essays, putting in a lot of work. But also trying to make things fun. Like I'll never forget: one of my professors, Dr. Kristin Cook-Gailloud – famous within French majors for her just personality and optimism and positivity.

One day we're just talking about some really fancy French words and she has a little French bulldog and another dog, and they just start sniffing on our – they were in the classroom the whole time sleeping I guess. But they just emerged from under the table and they just started clawing and interacting with us. And she took some time to introduce them. All in French of course. But those little moments remind us that they're human too [laughs].

KD: Definitely. Transitioning from academics, could you talk about your sort of overall dorm or living situations that you've had at Hopkins?
IB: Oh yeah. Here we go. Wolman Hall was my first dorm. It was really cool. It was like: "Oh, this is my first home away from home. I get to be here." It was a suite style. I had three other roommates and we had a little kitchenette that we didn't use because we all had meal plans. And it was really cool because we had, for the first time, the ability to – I guess we did that at our normal home anyway.

[0:35:00]

But we were able to personalize our rooms a little bit: posters and little statue figure things everywhere. And also decorate it with dirty clothes everywhere. You know, it's college [laughs]. And had some good times in the outside common space talking to all sorts of random people we would meet. And those late nights when everyone's coming back from parties and everyone's just sitting there not worrying about waking up the next morning to study yet [laughs].

But sophomore year. Here we go. McCoy Hall. It's Wolman but worse [laughs]. I was appalled at having to spend that semester there. Actually that year. McCoy Hall is definitely – just the dorm itself was probably the worst part of Hopkins that I've experienced. Because it was a downgrade. You look out the window, you see a wall. Wolman Hall was much better, and that was a freshman dorm. All of my friends in other colleges – they did not have to live on campus. They were able to choose other options. I was not able to cook yet because we didn't have a kitchen. I actually had a smaller kitchenette than in Wolman. And it was very limiting as well.

And when I talk to underclassmen now about housing, they ask me, "What are the merits of certain dorms?" I just still can't think of any for McCoy other than I guess it's equidistant from Charles Commons – it's not even – the proximity's not even that much of a factor. Yeah, that was that dorm. It was a dorm. That's it.

And then afterwards I found a house off campus for junior and senior year. Two different houses. One thing that struck me is that there's a lot of apartments around here and that seemed to be where everyone was living. But because I was involved in a fraternity around here, I know that people lived in houses too. And, surprisingly, the rent at the houses are extremely cheap, much cheaper than the apartments. The only thing is you have to deal with living in a house, and it's kind of dirtier and there might be
more rats around outside the house. But if you can suck all that up – and I was totally fine with that – then you're paying like $500.00 a month, $520.00, and that's very cheap in the United States for just rent. So I did not hesitate at all for that housing option.

And the cool thing about financial aid is that they give you – some of the financial aid goes toward your housing, and it includes off-campus housing. So I get assistance with that. So that's housing I guess. I don't regret anything. I love – actually McCoy Hall. Besides McCoy, I don't regret anything. Yeah. And I've loved little moments involving the house and stuff.

KD: Cool. You mentioned a fraternity. Could you talk about your participation in any clubs or activities that you did while at Hopkins?

IB: Oh, yeah, sure. So, first off, first club I joined was ultimate frisbee. That was something I did for fun during high school. And the guys are pretty similar. So it's kind of like: "Oh, I'm kind of familiar with these tropes." Everybody just gathering and bonding over frisbee. But the training and all the practices took up so much time. Because not only were the practices two hours, but you would have to go home after and shower, and then go to the library of course. And you have got to eat in the middle somewhere. So I started out with that. I ended up dropping out after the second year to focus more on academics and other clubs such as the radio.

So, I was involved in radio starting around the spring of my freshman year through one of my friends' radio show. She was a senior actually. And she was graduating. And she said, "Yeah, you should get involved in this. You have a good radio voice." I didn't know what a radio voice was [laughs]. I didn't know anything about radio actually, other than I used to listen to NPR with my father as we'd drive, and all sorts of jazz. And there's Car Talk I guess, where people talk about cars.

So there's a lot of flexibility with radio. So I thought, "What could I talk about? What do I want my radio show to be?" And I thought, "What interests me? What am I not getting elsewhere in the university?" And I looked around and I thought, "Oh, you know what's cool? Diversity and culture." Diversity of culture specifically and diversity of music. So those are the two main core pillars of my radio show, which ended up becoming – it was called Rice and Beans. I was Beans and my cohost was Rice. He was Chinese and I'm Columbian Jewish white or whatever.
So what we would do is, for the first half, we would play music trying to find selections that are diverse in sound, in topic, in feel, overall kind of using my music education background from back home. That's how I was able to channel that. It was really fun that way. And then the second half we would have a guest. So they would come in; we would interview them about their upbringing and their cultural – any way that culture permeated into their lives.

And, importantly, we didn't just seek out people who just got from Vietnam. We found people who just got from Vietnam but also people from New Jersey. Just random white people or anyone, just anyone had their own story to share about certain cultures. Like I didn't know there was a pizza rivalry between New Jersey and New York. And that's something you learn from there. But then also you're learning about specific customs and traditions of Nigerian people, of Ethiopians. There's Ethiopian New Year, which is really a huge celebration. Differences in Korea. Korea has this K-pop scene, which actually goes down to the cultural belief of groups, the collective over the individual. So you'll see the K-pop group versus a breakout pop star like Psy, Gangnam Style guy. And that was really interesting. And then there's also the culture of Korean gaming.

So after about two years of Rice and Beans in that format, there was this intermediate period of WJHU Radio where our streaming system was just outdated and it just stopped working. So, to circumvent that, I took it to YouTube. So I made a YouTube page. Just met with people. I could meet them on campus and record from my laptop. Got into podcasting instead. And that's how that radio show – that is one of the things I'm involved with that I had a lot of – I was able to control a lot of aspects of it, especially when my cohost graduated last year. I was able to really take the wheel sort of and guide it in whatever direction I wanted to. And it's been really fun learning about all sorts of different kinds of cultures, take a break from studying a little bit, talk about China, go back to studying. That's another thing I'm involved in.

Something else is study consulting. So, study consulting is offered by the Office of Academic Support. And the purpose of study consulting is basically a tutor and it's free. But what? For science? No. For math? No. For study skills. So it's more general in that regards. But people are going to learn time management, how to be more efficient when studying, exam prep, all sort of those type of skills in one-on-one meetings every single week. You get paired up
with a study consultant of your choosing. And that's something I'm really involved with. Not only have I been a study consultant for a couple years now but I'm also involved on the consultant advisory board where we meet every two weeks with the director, Dr. Sharleen [Argamaso]. And her last name is very hard to pronounce.

But it's a very good way to give back to the community at Hopkins and work with all sorts of different people. So I've worked with people on the LGBTQ+ spectrum. I've worked with people from all sorts of cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic backgrounds, majors. And have experienced lots of challenges that way. I think I've grown as an educator as a result, have learned some hard truths about being an educator as well. But that's really fun. I really enjoy it. I do that every single week at the same time as Rice and Beans. Not at the same exact time, but a weekly basis.

Let's see. Some other things I'm involved with. So, AEPi. That's my fraternity. It's the Jewish fraternity.

KD: Can you say what the letters stand for?

IB: Alpha Epsilon Pi. The Psi chapter on Johns Hopkins campus. So [laughs], this was a decision I made around freshman year. And I was thinking, "Okay, when else will I be able to join a fraternity?" So that kind of made me interested in Greek life. So I was kind of exploring around. And I went to a AEPi event and I noticed that it's not just all Jews. So I'm half-Jewish on my dad's side but my mom also converted. So I was like, "Okay, you guys are Jewish. I'm very familiar with a lot of things. We have a lot in common." But the thing was: there were Colombian Jews there too. I'm Colombian Jew. I found my family there. I was like, "Wow, you guys are very much like me."

We bonded over all sorts of things: video games, rap music, hip hop, lots of things. So I decided, "You know what? I want to join this organization." But keeping in mind that being in a fraternity will eventually result in a GPA tank. So I was asking about that: "Hey, is this going to affect my GPA?" They said, "Oh, it might. But we've had people have 4.0s and stuff." So I said, "Okay, I'm going to join this fraternity but I don't want it to affect my grades. So I'm going to have to work harder as a result."

So, as a result of that, from AEPi I've been able to definitely increase my social skills, public speaking specifically, maintaining
my connection to Jewish culture and heritage. I served several leadership positions early on.

[0:45:00]

Because what AEPi does is we encourage the younger students to hold leadership positions and we're able to sort of guide them, having our experience, as they do that. So it's kind of like: put them in the captain's chair, provide the support. So they were supporting me as I was serving as the Community Service and Philanthropy Chair. So one thing we're known for around here – pretty famous – is the Challah for Humanity sale where we make challah bread, which is egg bread – delicious, that we make – and we have all sorts of different beneficiaries?

KD: Benefactors?

IB: Aren't we the benefactors?

KD: Okay. I think so [laughs].

IB: The people who benefit from our sales. Different charities, all sorts of different things. Something else I served at – actually something that I championed for starting sophomore year was the inclusion of a Diversity Chair which focused on, during rush, to make sure that the incoming classes were not just Jewish white males. Because that was a big thing that attracted me to this fraternity specifically. I wanted to propagate that and continue it going on. And to this day we still have a huge diversity in AEPi, in our chapter of AEPi, which is pretty interesting. Because they get exposed to Jewish culture, we get exposed to their backgrounds, and we all kind of coexist together. It's kind of interesting that way.

And, finally, I served as the Israeli Engagement Chair, which was a nationals – so the nationals kind of wanted us to have this position, probably politically motivated. But I took it and tried to remove the politics from it. I just wanted it to be me sharing and trying to talk about topics associated with Israeli culture and Israel in general. So, for example, we would talk about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They would send me materials regarding what to talk about. But I would take that as a springboard and try to reduce the bias as much as possible, consider both sides equally, the faults of either, just to make sure it's as unbiased as possible. Because especially when you're kind of motivated to talk about these things by the Jewish organization, the information that they give to you is
going to have some sort of bias. So that was a big thing that I did in terms of exploring Jewish culture.

Because also I've never been to Israel yet. We get birthright but I haven't done that yet. So that was kind of like an intro-to-Israel type of thing. It was very exciting.

So, yeah, those are some of the organizations I'm involved with on campus. Oh, and finally, I forgot to mention that, for WJHU Radio, I decided to join the executive board as well. So I served as the on-campus programming director, which is just basically organizing the DJs around their slots and ensuring that they know how to work everything and being the first person of contact for them. And we had all sorts of challenges including when the server just broke down, and basically trying to have on-campus events. And we've had all sorts of – many more failures than successes but the failures are what motivate the successes, or just make the subsequent successes able to happen.

KD: Definitely. Okay. So, next I was wondering if you could tell me about internships or jobs that you've had while a student at Hopkins.

IB: Sure. Yeah. So, during this bridge program, I found out about how to find a job on the Hopkins campus or affiliated with Hopkins. So I was already applying to jobs before I even got here, before the semester started. So I interviewed beforehand and got this nice job over at the med campus. It was a 30-minute commute both ways. In the laboratory of Dr. David Linden, who's a researcher over there. And I was working on a project that was looking at serotonin regeneration following a stab injury in mice, in mouse brains. And I was kind of like an entry-level researcher. I wasn't given as much responsibility as I would get later.

But it was really good exposure to Hopkins work ethic. And that was the biggest thing I took from that. Because I took that, applied it everywhere. People worked hard over there. I wanted to work hard like them. So I would sit there, so focused, working on tracing – so I would take this 3D image and basically try to trace the axonal regeneration in three dimensions. Much harder than it sounds. But that was something I was able to do and I was really glad for the opportunity, and especially I was able to get paid. So that would kind of offset the cost that I would have to pay that weren't included in my scholarship as well. But also it was like having a job, like: "Wow, I have money now." So that was a good feeling.
So that was my first job there. Very very grateful for that opportunity. But I was working 20 hours a week. It was kind of leaking into my academics and my grades were kind of faltering as a result. So after the project ended, and my services were no longer needed I guess, I moved on to a different lab which was – it wasn't necessarily a lab, it was more of a study that I worked for.

[0:50:00]

I worked in data entry. And that was basically me digitizing forms. It was extremely boring but it was a job. Another job that I had intermittently for a month or so – I worked as a recycling assistant, which is a student trash man. I did not like that job so I sought out other jobs.

And my current job that I've been working for a while is with Johns Hopkins KIT-CATS, which is the AV tech services. I've been working as a multimedia technician now for about one and a half years. It's been a great job. It's been a great team to work with as well. Lots of problem solving around campus. We'll get a call that says, "Hey, my projector is not working correctly." So I'll go over there, try to figure out what's going on, whether the problem's with the projector, with the connection, with the computer. All sorts of different levels. And whether or not I can solve it – if I don't solve it, then: oh no. I'll call up I guess the big guys, the adults we call them, and they come over and they check it out. If they can't solve it, then, oh well, they'll have to take a better look at it later or something.

Otherwise if you figure out the problem it feels good. And at Hopkins you take every win you can get. During the job, coming back from a success is kind of like a celebration, a victory lab sort of, going back to the office. Very great group of people. Very open atmosphere in the office as well. It's pretty lively during times where we're not that busy. When we're busy everything changes. Everybody's going everywhere and everything's kind of organized as well. So, very grateful for that job. And it's on campus too, which is huge. And that was actually one of the factors that motivated me from going from the old job to the new job because I could work more hours not having to worry about the commute and I could actually eat here. I wasn't able to eat over there.

Let's see. I think that's – oh, and study consulting is a paid job as well. But I work extra – not work – I don't get paid for a lot of the stuff I do. For example, the consultant – actually I do get paid for
some of that. I try to put in a little bit more than I would get paid to do over there, just because I'm really behind their message and what they're trying to do. And that goes back to being a first-gen student. Because I didn't know what we're trying to teach.

Actually this is a whole little digression. I'll just go into that briefly. So, I came here, didn't know how to study pretty much. At this level. Hopkins is very difficult. And actually with that first professor I got kind of an exposure. One day I went to his office and asked him, "How do I study? How do I get good grades?" And what he basically said: "Kind of look at the material every day. Blah blah blah." And he kind of taught me some of the tools of the trade. Over the semesters I tried to try new methods. Some didn't work; some worked. And around junior fall, that's when basically my methods were perfect. Like they worked well. I got the results I wanted to. And study consulting provided a platform to share those results with other students.

And that was something that was huge for me. Because you can be a freshman and then I could help you learn all the things that took me several semesters to learn but so that you would be able to start kind of getting where you want to go early. So I try to do that through study consulting. I'm actually taking a gap year after graduation, two gap years, to be specific, and I'm purposely seeking positions at Hopkins so I can maintain involvement with study consulting and some of the other groups that I'm involved with. So I guess those are my jobs.

KD: Great. Can you talk about how you spent breaks while at Hopkins or your summers?

IB: Yes. I will. Breaks are more time to do things. So, as a neuroscience major who's a premed, you have to take this one class which is like the organic chemistry of neuroscience, in terms of difficulty. And what ends up happening is that if you don't take the summer to take one of those two classes, organic chemistry or this class, then you're taking both at the same time and your life will be miserable. And that's just a fact. It's known. So I sought out ways to take organic chemistry over the summer. And the good news was that some of the money my parents had been saving in Florida would apply for me to take the class in Florida. So I would go home for the summer. The bad news was, as opposed to here, you take orgo in one summer, I had to go there twice. They did not tell me this until it was all set.
So two summers I spent in Florida taking organic chemistry. And then, as I talked about earlier, very limited opportunities over there in terms of research and science. So kind of just doing what I can, working with physicians, hospital volunteering, all sorts of fun stuff. But in a kind of more relaxed manner than I would be here. Like reading lots of books also, just trying to learn on the side, just trying to use the work ethic and skills I learned at Hopkins in a casual – just a day-to-day setting.

[0:55:00]

Around junior fall, I was finally free from having to take orgo in Florida. So, said, "Okay, I want to do a summer program." So I started over Thanksgiving – I was in New York with my friend celebrating turkey day. And I started planning and preparing to apply to summer programs. So I applied to ten of them all across the US at different institutions that seemed interesting to me that had researchers that were doing cool things that I liked. And I got accepted to five of them. Very grateful for that. It was kind of like a practice med school application type of thing. You know, your personal statement, recommendation letter, and all sorts of different things.

But the one I chose to do was actually working at a neuroscience lab in Paris. So, the neuroscience/French double major was in Paris studying neuroscience. That's a whole other meeting and interview. And that was paid. It was a stipend.

KD: Wow.

IB: Lots and lots of stuff was learned over there that actually helped in both fields that I'm studying right now. So, I guess if a first-gen person's listening to this, use your summers wisely and don't just sit around.

KD: That's awesome. Thank you. Could you talk about your support system that you kind of developed on campus while you were in college?

IB: Oh, that's so important. It's very important. So, my first support system was composed of the friends I made during the summer bridge program. Another reason why that Hop-In program is incredibly important. So that was just: you have a bad day, you just go over to my friend's dorm and you just sit there and rant for a couple hours and then realize how much time went by and then rush over to the library. But as time went on, you sort of realize
there are friends that you can make outside of the people you're already kind of pressured to be with, to hang out with. So I started reaching out, exploring around with different people. Through some of the organizations I was a part of I met some people – clicked more than others. So I started building my little group of friends, my circle I guess. That became like my primary support system.

And one of the big parts was actually my fraternity – they became a huge support system also. Because something about the Alpha Epsilon Pi at Johns Hopkins is that at a certain time after classes in the evening, there will always be at least two people in a house just chilling or something. So I would be able to go over there or I would rant for ten minutes or so and then we would just watch sports or something. I don't even watch sports. I just wanted to hang out with them or something. Or listen to music. You know, something just to relax afterwards. And I guess that was my social support.

Aside from the friends, there's the professors. So, like I said earlier, I would go over to this neuroscience professor's office and try to just ask him all these really basic questions – it seems like they're basic – about what would be stressing me or something. Once I went and asked: "I'm worried about these summer programs. How do I differentiate myself?" And he would say, "Calm down. You're worrying too much about this. You're fine." And sometimes you just need someone to tell you that.

So, let's see. There's the professors and there's the friends. And then one thing about Hopkins that separates, in my opinion, the people who thrive here versus the people who deal with things here is becoming your own support system and becoming your own therapist and devising these skills to figure out yourself and how to take care of stress in a way that works best for you. So I like going to the gym. That's one way I get rid of stress. Another way is I like listening to music a lot. So I'll just go really try to focus in on the music and try to think about it, get my mind off and go back to work afterwards. And that works pretty well with the stress also.

KD: You mentioned music a few times throughout this. It sounds like it's a big part of your life.

IB: Oh yeah. Like I said, right next to my dad's practice room. He was with all sorts of bands, jazz bands. There was once where he did a Spanish country band: Spanish but American country. He did all sorts of different stuff. And I was really involved in music as a
musician myself. And also my parents were huge believers in the Baby Beethoven type of thing where they'd play Beethoven when I was a child. And then somehow – I don't know if it's genetic or just environment or both, but I have – I don't want to say, "Oh, I'm so special." But my ears – I could ear music – I have this high musical memory to where there's a truck backing up out there and that's a note to me. And that has a certain frequency. And then also there's just certain things in music that I will hear and I'll be like – I'll talk to friends, be like, "Hey, how do you like that?"

[1:00:00]

They're like, "What?" Like, "That, behind this, in front of this, down there." They're like, "What? What do you mean? That one symbol?" "Yeah, that one symbol." That effect or something like that. Basically being able to analyze this music. But probably from the musical upbringing I think had a lot to do with it.

KD: And how was your relationship – how has your relationship with your family been while you've been at Hopkins?

IB: Oh, that's good. It's been pretty good. My mom is always super sad when I leave home. She misses me a lot. I miss them a lot also. We can call each other. We can FaceTime. All sorts of things like that. It's been pretty good. But that's because I think I was not only an only child, but also because my parents were always working, I was kind of used to that independence. So, for me versus other students, it was kind of easier to get used to that. But still that would be one of the tough things to get through when going into college I think.

KD: Definitely. My next question is: what would you say in general about your life in sort of the city of Baltimore and the state of Maryland? And were there any sort of major historical events or any big things that happened in the city during your time here as a student that have affected you or you'd like to talk about?

IB: Yeah, sure. As I was coming in as a freshman, there was the Baltimore riots that happened around 2015 I believe, 2016. I'm not too sure. So the giant sentiment was: "Oh God, you're going to Baltimore? Oh, be careful. It's going to be so dangerous." So I was kind of like, "I don't know. I don't know about that." So when I got here I made sure to ask all the upperclassmen. They said, "What? You mean that thing that was inflated by the media?" So it turns out that was a big thing about Baltimore is that it just seems like a much more violent place than the media portrays it to be. But the
same time, there is this pressure to kind of remain around Charles Village area and the Inner Harbor and just not go into these other areas because they're a little bit more dangerous.

In terms of cataclysmic events of some sort, I don't think I've been a part of them specifically. But there's been a few Baltimore moments where I've driven by and I've seen some people exchanging some envelope of something and just looking around or something. That could be sandwiches. It could be something else. Also going out into different neighborhoods – actually, going over to the Bayview campus at Hopkins, you drive through East Baltimore, the definition of the media image of Baltimore, which are all these dilapidated houses, people walking on the streets with a crutch or something, very sickly. But I think the most important point here is that our exposure to real Baltimore is very limited here. And that's up to the individual as to how deep they want to get involved and how deep they can get involved, with all the other stuff that's going on around here.

KD: Were there any parts of the city that you enjoyed to go spend time at or specific restaurants or anything like that? Different events?

IB: I enjoy the Station North area. That's where the Maryland School of Art is, the Maryland Institute College of Art. Sorry. So there's a theater over there. There's all sorts of different weird artsy events that occur, which are always fun to go to. For example, there's I guess 4 Hours of Funk that occurs. I think the third Friday of every month you go there and you dance to funk disco, all sorts of different things. There's this one event – I forgot the exact name of it, but it has a bunch of people who produce beats, instrumental beats, and a buncha people go there and they rap there too it. So they rap over to the beats. And something that I haven't mentioned yet is that I actually rap as a hobby.

KD: Cool.

IB: Freestyle only though. So that's a fun thing. I haven't really been to many of those and I don't really – I'm pretty shy sometimes. But that's another interesting thing that happens around there with that artsy area, and that's a part of Baltimore culture that I do enjoy: the expression part.

Other parts of Baltimore that I enjoy – I guess the harbor every now and then. But it's really easy to get sick of it because it's just kind of the very touristy area of Baltimore. And I love the med campus. It's so inspiring. You see the dome. You see all the big
buildings. You see all the researchers walking around in their coats and in their just regular clothes and their name tags, and you see all sorts of different people, different diversity, or different ethnicities just going in and out, going on with their days. And it's just really cool. And if you've ever been in these buildings, they're all interconnected somehow, whether it's underground or through the bridges. It's just a really cool area and it's just – every time I go there I just marvel at I guess the symbolism of the Hopkins dome which is connected to that med campus that initially lured me out as a child.

[1:05:00]

KD: Yeah [laughs]. It did. You've talked about taking a gap year, so after graduation. Would you be willing to elaborate on your plans for after Hopkins?

IB: Yeah. Sure. So, right now I'm looking for clinical research positions. And I've sent out at least 25 applications so far. Still waiting to hear back on a couple interviews and hoping that people just haven't been looking for research associates yet because it's been kind of stressful, honestly. But that's what I'm planning on doing for the gap year. I plan to take my MCAT over the summer. And staying involved with certain organizations. For example, study consulting – I want to maintain that. I want to get more involved with some of the Baltimore organizations when I have more time.

For example, through one of the clubs I'm involved with, Lambda Epsilon Mu, which is the Latino Pre-Health Honor Society – we have some connections with a lot of groups around Baltimore, volunteer groups, that focus on – or nonprofits, sorry, that focus on Latin populations. And that's a huge part of me. And that's somewhere I would be able to use my Spanish. And that's something I want to get involved with more over the gap year. I also want to teach myself the bass guitar. Just because I know in advance – I know myself. I know I'm going to see my friends going into med school or applying and all that, and I'm doing two gap years, so I'll be behind. I know I'm going to feel a little bit gloomy about that.

That was one of the toughest points when making the decision to take two gap years: that I guess I would be behind my peers. But at the end of the day, age stops being a factor after freshman year I think. So we're all on our different paths as well. But I just know that if I'm focusing also on the bass guitar, not only will I be I
guess – I will have a different outlet and a different way to spend my time, but I'll also eventually be a physician who can play the bass guitar and rap.

KD: That's awesome [laughs]. That's a great way of looking at it. Overall, would you recommend Hopkins to other first-generation students? Or what advice would you give them?

IB: So, I think it takes – especially with first-generation students, it takes a very specific type of first-generation student to have a great time here, to thrive. I say "thrive," but it's a specific sense of the word "thrive." Because of multiple factors. So, first off, there's the shock of the academic rigor that might just really be something that the person struggles with, that they're not used to, whether they're ready to sort of adapt to it without any advice from their parents or anything. They have to be sort of motivated to reach out to other people to sort of fill that hole in their understanding. They have got to really want to come to Hopkins specifically because Hopkins is a very difficult school with lots and lots of work and lots and lots of psychological pressure for lots of different things.

For example, I'm a double major but a lot of people are double majors here. Sometimes there's this pressure that everyone's a double major; "I need to be at least a double major or I'm not as good as my peers." And this happens across all majors, all sorts of majors. And even I've seen people having a conversation and one will say, "Yeah, I'm an AMS major," and then they'll scoff. Like someone else will scoff, like, "What? Just an AMS major?"

KD: What's AMS?

IB: I believe it's applied math and statistics. And it has a stereotype of being a common double major addition to engineering majors. So that's I guess one pressure that the first-generation student would have to deal with. Another one is the fact that a lot of students here come from pretty affluent backgrounds. And this is actually one of the big points that I wanted to make at this interview: the power of comparison is a huge pressure. It's a huge negative factor as a first-generation student. Because you see everyone around here – they have all sorts of fancy clothes. They have the latest gadgets. They have those AirPods, for example. And you think, "Oh, I don't have those." And that's fine. You haven't really had those.

But some people come from neighborhoods where everyone's kind of collected in the same socioeconomic status. And then you're here in Hopkins now where you're basically the one poor guy in
the middle of all these super-rich, hyper-rich people. Apparently there's like royalty here at some point. And you realize, "Wait a second. I'm not that high up in the world. My background's not that high up in the world to begin with." And that's something that's like – it hits you or it doesn't hit you.

So, for example, I was kind of used to it. Because that's how it was in Boca Raton for me: everyone was rich and I was just kind of not as rich. But that was fine for me. But that's something that someone might struggle with immensely.

Another way that would affect one of the first-generation students is making friends. So, here's the situation. You have a group of friends you're with and they say, "Hey, let's all go to the club," or, "Let's go to a bar." Or, "Let's go to this restaurant. Let's get some bubble tea."

What do all those things have in common? They cost money. So, at that point, you would say, "I don't know if I can afford that" or something. Or even if you go with them and just don't buy anything, they'll be like, "IB, why aren't you buying anything?" or something like that. And if you don't go, you kind of have to awkwardly explain, "Hey, I don't have that much money. I've been saving." And that's something that I've been able to do much easier with practice I guess: saying, "Oh, hey, I just paid my monthly rent and it's not in my budget right now." But it's very hard. It's very hard to admit that, to say, "I don't have enough money for that."

Because for a lot of people around here, they don't yet understand what money is, what it's like to kind of be scared about whether you can make it to the next month. That's something that people will never really learn around here. And that's also something that will bring the people from similar backgrounds together: that fear, I guess. But, yeah, just the power of comparison. Every now and then still I'll think to myself, "God, aren't these people working a job? How can they work all these research positions for free?"

And even still the other day I was talking with a professor of neuroscience who was saying, "Oh, I don't write rec letters for these summer programs because they're meant for people who come from these sort of backgrounds," she said. "Why would they even want to work for money anyway when they can just work for credit?" And I pulled my earphones out. I was in the kitchen, preparing my food. And I said, "Because some people actually
need the money and they can't afford to just stay here over the summer basically paying to work."

So that's another thing, especially if you're more on the more competitive side: you see your peers – who I guess are your standards of comparison for how much work you're putting in, where you are, especially in the premed rat race – you see them doing all these sorts of things. "I'm a research assistant in three labs. We're working on all these different studies." But they don't have to work a job. They're able to go into the lab in different labs and just work for free also. When I'm searching for research, I have to find one that pays me. And that's kind of difficult I guess. If you e-mail any lab you want and say, "Hey, you don't have to pay me," then they'll say, "Oh, free labor." And they just take you and you'll be their slave for a little bit. So that's another big one.

And this is actually something that one of my friends who runs a blog – she actually posted a huge post about this specifically: how not having money will actually influence your professional progress and how you see yourself compared to your peers as a result.

So, with all those pressures, that's something that the first gen will have to deal with I think, especially if they come from I guess on the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum. But at the same time, bringing their perspective to universities is extremely important, especially since they have those – sort of knowing the value of money, for example. I know that I've discussed with a lot of my affluent friends: "This is how you start investing." Because I kind of have to start now. And they're like, "Oh, cool." And now they're on Robinhood and purchasing stocks and seeing pretty good results I guess.

Also I would go to my friends' and play video games growing up and stuff. But at the same time, you would learn how to entertain yourself without having these material things as well. So, for example, still, I don't really watch TV at all. And instead we would do – one day I was with some of my friends in McCoy Hall and we were just throwing balls into shoes [laughs]. We were bored and that was just something that I used to do back in the day. And bringing that perspective is also important because they realize that not everybody in the world is super rich. And I think it's very important for the students here to work with other students who kind of know that. And they can kind of learn about their perspective in kind of indirect ways.
Not necessarily – I don't sit there and lecture my friends, like, "All right, this is why I can't go out tonight and this is why it sucks. This is why it feels bad." It's just they kind of see me – they're like, "Oh, yeah, IB hasn't been out with us for the past couple times. Maybe he's saving for something big or something." But even still, that's changing how they're thinking about things, and I think that's extremely important.

KD: Definitely. So, after all of this, after all this time at Hopkins, is there kind of a brief way that you would summarize your time here? Or is that even possible [laughing]?

IB: I'll try. Because in science I think the best writing is concise. And that's something I've been working on myself recently. Let's see. My time at Hopkins? A lotta people will say, "Work hard, play hard."

[1:15:00]

But I like to say that hard work pays off. And that just goes in every dimension, whether that's social dimension – you know, you work hard, and, boom, you're making friends. Or you work hard in academics; you're getting those grades that you wanted. Or work hard at your job; you're getting a raise. Or work hard and you learn how to cook that certain spaghetti recipe that's not from the box. Like you're making your own pasta. Yeah. So that's I guess the one thing – if I had to say anything to anyone coming here, I would just say, "Hard work pays off." Because it's really hard to remember that when you're in the moment at Hopkins. And also: don't forget where you are.

KD: Yeah. Definitely. Well, that was most of my questions. Thank you so much for taking time to talk to me today and to interview with us. Is there anything else that we might not have covered that you'd like to talk about?

IB: I think that's a pretty good slice.

KD: Awesome. Thank you.

IB: Yeah, no problem.

[End of Audio]