“CS”

Interviewed by Kristen Diehl

March 4, 2020
Okay. So, this is Kristen Diehl here with CS on March 4th, 2020 at the Eisenhower Library for the first-generation college student oral histories. Thanks for joining me today.

Thank you for having me.

Sure. My first question for you is if you could tell me where you were born and maybe tell me a little bit about your family.

Okay. I was born in Cuba. In 1998 I came at one and a half, 1999. And then we, it was just me and my mom and we’ve been in Miami ever since.

Cool. Could you tell me maybe a little bit more about your mom’s education?

My mom was a neurologist in Cuba, and then here she came back and then she had to take care of me so she couldn’t revalidate all the way to neurologist, so she did to neurophysiology being a technician.

Okay. And that's what she does now?

Awesome. Could you speak a little bit about the town and places you grew up in?

Well, I grew up in Miami, specifically Hialeah, which is a predominantly Cuban area. So, I've been around, I guess my people all my life. This is my first experience not being around other people like me. Yeah.

1 The University Archives wants to acknowledge that the interviews conducted with first-generation college students in March 2020 took place just before JHU campuses closed due to a growing, worldwide pandemic (COVID-19). These interviews represent students’ reflections on their time at JHU prior to facing many adjustments, including completing their last semester of college online.
KD: Thanks. What was high school like for you?

CS: It was fantastic. I went to a charter high school. It was just the thing of the, the mindset, the Cuban mindset is very blasé about education. The average Cuban is not educated. Let’s just say that. Not saying not educated, it’s just not like a – even though there are a lot of doctors and a lot of things, since so much people were forced to get an education, it seems a lot of parents don’t really see the value in it ‘cause they were kinda just forced.

So, a lot of kids, the mindset was like, just finish high school. I don't know. It was just a general mindset of like, not in my school, like, every other high school around us, ‘cause my school was specifically, like, 2008 “gay,” like, in that sense of not cool, like, “Oh it's gay. Mater was gay. Mater is gay. Everyone that went to Mater is gay in the sense of like, you care about your school. You want to go to college. You want to do all these things instead of just get a 9:00 to 5:00, what’s wrong with you?”

KD: Sure. At your school, did you participate in any extracurriculars or were there any particular courses that you really enjoyed?

CS: I did a lot. In hindsight, compared to other first-generation kids or other kids from other areas, I’m just comparable to your average white kid in the sense of everyone around me was me. I wasn’t really fighting the system. I wasn’t doing anything radical. Whatever I asked for happened. I was the president of three clubs. I started two honors societies. I was like, “I want this AP class” and they’re like, “Okay.”

The school obviously had, they got their benefits because, look at this AP level you teach. Look at this honor society that you have. So, it was a mutual thing, but that being said, it was very simple. All I had to do was ask and it was given to me, everything. Everything under the sun was given to me as long as you asked for it. But I think it was also because not only were there the same ethnic background as me, so it made it a lot simpler in terms of now thinking about Hopkins, but it was just how it was.

Everyone always really fostered the whole entire, “Do something. You wanna do something? You wanna be annoying in the sense of you wanna do ten classes? We’ll give you ten classes. You wanna take eight APs in one semester? Take eight APs. We’re not gonna tell you no.” They would just be very down for whatever you wanted.
**KD:** Great. What clubs were you the president of?

**CS:** Oh, I was the president of the Latin Club, Ro Kappa the social studies honor society, and then I founded the National Technical Honor Society there in the school, the chapter.

**KD:** And what was your mom's thoughts on education? And you kind of mentioned maybe your school kind of being an outlier in the community. So how was education perceived in your community as well?

**CS:** My mom and my dad is a lawyer, but they had just had different backgrounds in terms of my mom was anti-communism. My dad was pro-communism. So they have different attitude towards the same field of education, but they both value education heavily. It was a thing that, it was always expected to me to go to college. I even asked my mom ending of junior year, beginning of sophomore year.

By this time, let's say 2016, I was, “So mom, hypothetically if I would have not gotten a full ride to Hopkins, what would've happened?” And she’s like, “I don't know.” ‘Cause it was always expected for me to figure it out. She had no doubt in her mind that I was going to go to college and neither did I. It was always an expected thing, ‘cause she always said that college is the best time.

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College is a time for you to like, that's how it was always painted. college is a time to learn stuff. It's going to be such a beautiful experience. There's no other experience like it. You're going to be able to just learn what you like. It's just the beauty of learning. So that's what I always envisioned for college and that's why I feel I had a good time here, contrary to most people.

**KD:** What do you mean by that?

**CS:** I just feel the average person in Hopkins doesn't have like a, like they're not happy to say they came to Hopkins ‘cause I think it's very, I think just the institution as a whole does this whole entire thing of making you feel like you're not good enough. So, then I could see why that affects a lot of people that always thought they were the best. But in my school, even though I had all these things,
I still wasn't. Even though I did everything, I wasn't like the, “Oh, he does everything perfect.”

I was the kid that did everything the other kids did, but then they're like, “Oh, but you don't.” It wasn't that big of a deal in the sense of they still let me do everything. If anything was better in terms of, I had all the privileges with none of the responsibilities. It was very that. I wasn't a model student.

I was the one that would get in trouble because I was the one that would open my mouth and be like, “No, I'm not going to listen to you just because you're an authority figure. If you're saying something wrong or saying something racist, saying something just completely problematic, I'm going to say, and this was back in 2016 when it first started, 2014, 2015, 2016, that's when it first started, like the big at least mainstream of being “woke.” It started then, and so obviously the older generation was completely out of the loop, so they're just continued saying stuff, but I'm just like, “Oh, this is not appropriate.” But it was fun.

KD: Nice. Thank you. And how did you decide to attend Hopkins? If you could talk about your college search and what, how you narrowed it down to Hopkins.

CS: I got the, I applied to Hopkins out on a whim because I was in my mind, I thought I was going to get into Harvard, Yale, and every other place over Hopkins because I had the QuestBridge scholarship. But then I had the QuestBridge Scholarship out of luck because, again, even though people, no one believed in me necessarily, they let me do stuff. No one believed in me.

So, it was one of those things, my counselor never finished the application for QuestBridge, so it just wasn't finished. So, in my mind I was like, I'm not going to get, get QuestBridge. Thus, I've just got to apply to these schools like Hopkins and other places that aren't QuestBridge schools just because she didn't finish the application. Then in January I get a notification that I did get, no, I get the notification that I – just kidding. They ask you to sign a paper. You know the early decision form?

But in a sense, again, it was not done. I was like, why am I going to sign a piece of paper that doesn't – you know I got rejected. It's not a complete profile. So thus, there's no point in signing this paper. But then I actually got it. But since I hadn't signed any of the early agreement deadlines, I was able to apply to all the schools, regular decision.
But then the second I got into Hopkins, I kind of was like, I really went gung-ho about it because I really want to go to Hopkins. I got into USC and I got into Colorado College and I went to Colorado College. It was nice, but I got altitude sickness. It was very nice, but it was just, I can't. If it wouldn't have happened, I probably would have been fine realistically and I would have gone there. Would have been nice.

*KD:* That’s a lot.

*CS:* But it was just too much for me, especially from Florida to there it just a lot. So, then I decided to stay here too, ‘cause the University of Southern California is in the West Coast and I have a herniated disc and it hurts to travel a lot. So then going all the way from Miami all the way to the West Coast, and obviously my mom was trying to not want to see me every couple months or something like that.

Like this is the longest time I haven't seen her. She's been mentioning a lot of times, “Oh, you're not going to come. You're not gonna come down. That's really strange. You're going to wait all the way until May to come? You’re gonna be five months without coming?” I’m like, “Yeah, I guess I don't know what to tell you.” So yeah, it's just one of those, I think Hopkins was not only more like, it was just perfect in the sense like I had a good time here in the discovery days.

I saw myself here. I didn’t care. I just knew that it didn't matter where I went as long as – I was confident in myself. I just knew I could do it. It was just very – I solidly knew that I could do it no matter where I was, and I didn’t even know it was pass/fail first semester. I didn't care about that. None of those decisions affected me. I just, like once they said it, I was, oh, even better, but I didn't care. I just knew, this is it. I want to leave Miami.

I want to truly go get an education, get a real education, even if it's hard, even if I suffer. Yeah. I could've stayed back at home, because I already had an associate's\(^2\) and I would have been two more years I would’ve been done. So, it's a huge difference. It's two more years here, but I'm like, these two years here are completely worth it. I think that I learned so much more. Me as only a bachelor's has more to talk about than people that have masters that stayed back home.

\(^{2}\) CS refers to an “associate’s,” which is shorthand for an associate’s degree.
KD: At that time before you got here, did you have a sense of what you might want to study or were you interested in any particular majors?

CS: I think you end up copying your parents. I was going to do neurology, psychology, and I stayed with the psychology portion of it, cause the neurology portion I think was a little bit too STEM-y in my personal opinion in terms of what I was interested in answering was like, why do people behave this way?

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I think neurology is just too reductivistic its viewpoint. Which is fine, but again, if the house is burning, I don't care about the chemical properties of the paint. I'm not that interested. I wanna – help me with the fire. We could talk about the pain later. Maybe that was the cause of the fire, but tell me about the fire first.

KD: That's an interesting perspective. What was your family's reaction when you did get into Hopkins and decided to come here?

CS: It was just, I don't know. She was very, it was very happy. It was a fantastic day. Everyone's proud and supportive 'cause it was also a thing that my school fostered that every time you got accepted to a school you got a paper, you got a little picture of you and the school. I mean I personally applied to a lot of places 'cause I got 13 posters, 'cause it was a thing.

You would be decorated on the wall and then every other little kid would see you and be like, “Oh wow.” That was the environment they foster, like get into college, get accepted, apply to everywhere, get accepted into every single school you apply to. Why not? At this point, why not? So, it was just a lot of like I applied everywhere. Why not?

KD: Thank you. Could you talk about your first few weeks here at Hopkins and that kind of transition period from being at home in Miami to being here in Baltimore and just adjusting to life as a college student?

CS: I did the Hop-in program summer, so do I talk about that?

KD: Sure.

CS: Yeah, so that was my first, I did the Hop-in program and it was just, I'm grateful for the program because it really, I mean, I met a
lot of great people in the program, but I think the program itself was my worst experience ever in terms of I'm not a little kid. Even at 16, people never treated me like that. I just don’t like being told what to do. It was very that. I don’t like being told what to do.

So, the program was the worst experience for me. I got addicted to cigarettes and everything 'cause I was so stressed out. I just don’t like being told what to do. I’m a big boy. I didn't make it here by myself. I don’t want to be babied. I knew that I don’t like being told you have to study from 8:00 PM to 12:00. No. I get that we’re supposed to foster this whole entire thing, but joke’s on them, they didn’t foster anything.

The second I was out I was ready to do me, and that’s why I feel like freshman fall was fantastic ‘cause I had all the freedom in the world. Imagine you’ve never been grounded all your life and you were grounded all of summer for the first time in your whole entire life, and you finally got ungrounded. That’s how I felt. Like, you’re telling me now I’m finally free? Like I don’t have to do this, “Can I go to the bathroom? Can I go downstairs to get pizza? Can I go do that?”

It was for any little thing, “I have to go pee. May I go pee?” I’m like, what is this, jail? It was very annoying, so that’s why I had a bad time, but after that, I had a fantastic time.

KD: And did you move into AMR³?

CS: AMR III, yeah.

KD: And how did you choose a roommate? Were you just randomly assigned or did you find each other online?

CS: I knew him, so when the Hopkins thing, like you know, we all got accepted, I made a group chat. It was like 200 kids in it, ‘cause you know there’s many group meetings, so one of them, I was like, let’s go. Again, this is because my school fostered this kind of environment of, “Get ready to go, ‘cause you’re leaving.” It was just that.

All my other friends did the same thing. They all started a group chat with like the whole entire class as big as possible to just like people feel each other out. Outside of that, I met 10, 13 people that we thought were going to go to Hopkins, only two or three went, but I decided to stay with one of them.

³ AMR stands for Alumni Memorial Residence, a residence hall on the Homewood Campus.
**KD:** Nice. So, you mentioned participating in Hop-in, and I assume there you met other first-generation college students.

**CS:** Yeah.

**KD:** Could you speak about I guess throughout your time here, have you met several first-generation students, and have you felt any sort of difference between the college experience for first-generation students versus kids whose parents have maybe gone to Hopkins and come from a background where there’s this kind of legacy of college and how that was?

**CS:** As I was telling you, I think I’m in this very special in-between that I see both sides of the conversation. The thing that I think is the biggest hindrance in not having a parent that went to a collegiate school system in America is just the fact that after you’re done with bachelor, like it’s hard enough to get into college, but we all did that, so it’s a given. Let’s just say that we did it.

You’re smart enough to do it by yourself without anyone, but after that, the whole entire PhD thing is something that you’re not even taught at all. I had a lot of troubles with that, and thank god there’s, like, programs out there, like Yale did a diversity program that just came out last year. It was the _____ _____ camp. He was the first I think African American that went to Yale, so it was in his honor. Then he got a PhD at Yale, and they actually taught you the whole entire process.

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If it wasn’t for that program, I wouldn’t be confident in telling you, “Oh, I for sure want a PhD” ‘cause I didn’t have anyone to talk to. Mom had enough experience to tell me, which is a blessing, “Oh, CS, of course you’re gonna get a C. CS, of course you’re gonna have a bad semester. CS, of course you’re gonna be stressed.” Every single bad thing that happened she’s like, “Of course, I’ve been there. It’s fine. Don’t stress it.”

But I think if you don’t have a parent, in comparison to my friends that are also first-gen and the ones here whose parents don’t have just college in general as a mindset, they just kind of see it as I think their child essentially not wasting time, but for all intents and purposes wasting time as in you could be making money. What are you doing over there? My best friend back home, I don’t think she gets the amount of kudos she deserves because it’s just like, “Oh,
you’re going to go to college, but work a job,” but yeah but, like, she is working a job, which is a lot, but it’s one of those things where I don’t think anyone realizes that it’s a lot. Even if you go to the dumbest, simplest institution in the world, like they give you A’s for just showing up, you still need to show up and that’s still a lot. I think people, if you don’t have the concept of what college is like, you take it for granted and then you start seeing like, oh, why doesn’t my son get an A? “What do you mean you didn’t get an A?”

It’s a lot of that, like, “What do you mean you’re not getting A’s? What do you mean this? What do you mean you’re sad? What do you mean you’re stressed? You don’t know about bills. You don’t know about this.” It’s like, well yeah, I don’t know about any of these things. None of us do, but at the same exact time, we are going to and we don’t wanna be in your situation because not only do we have to care about our own bills, we have to care about your bills too because you’ve been in bankruptcy since the beginning.

It’s things like that I think the parents forget, if they’re the ones saying, “We have no money. We have nothing this. We can’t do anything. We’re poor, we’re poor, we’re broke, we’re broke.” Obviously as a kid, even if you’re like, they’re lying, and you’re like, they had a secret savings this whole entire time, they’re still making it seem that you are the end all be all of the family. If you don’t succeed then it’s all over, and on top of that, it seems like they’re not appreciating you because god forbid they’re not getting $100.00 right now instead of $1,000.00 later down the year. So, it’s a lot of that, I think.

**KD:** Thank you. On to academics. So what is your program of study and how did you choose it and what do you feel is valuable about it? You talked a little bit about psychology versus neuroscience and how you made decisions there.

**CS:** So right now, I’m a triple major with a minor. Psychology, romance languages, Spanish-Italian, and then a separate Spanish major, and then a minor in women’s gender and sexualities. I chose the Spanish-Italian major ‘cause I was like, I wanna learn Italian, and I know Spanish, so I might as well use my – it was one of those things that, again, I was able to see how beneficial it is to have a parent here, ‘cause my mom is a woman that reads three books a day like every single day.

So, it was one of those things like, “Ma, look, can you please help me with this? What does this mean? What does that?” That’s when
I first realized how it felt like to have a parent literally help you. This is my college work. All my friends are able to send your drafts to your parents, ‘cause they’re lawyers, so obviously the minimum they know is the grammar at the very least. So, things like that I was able to appreciate. That’s why I also took the major, I think, because I wanted the experience of my mom helping me.

I wanted to see how it felt like, and the same with the Spanish major. I just took enough Spanish classes just for the sake of like – it was fun. It was fun to be like, “Mama, look, I’m doing this project. I’m gonna write about this. What do you think?” She’s like, “Well, actually remember that the book said this.” I was like, “Oh, you’re right, but I’m gonna frame it this way.” She’s like, “Oh, I see how you’re doing it.”

It was those conversations I’ve never been able to have with her because it’s always been an English assignment so it would be a waste for me to tell her, like, it’s just one extra step that I don’t really need her. I don’t need her help, it’s just I’ve never had the ability to have her help, so it was just nice to have it. Yeah, and then women’s gender and sexuality just because I think it’s an important part of psychology, undeniably.

KD: Do you have any memorable professors that come to mind that you’ve enjoyed having or any particular classes that really stuck out to you?

CS: I have a lot of great memories with professors. My favorite professor, there’s a solid tie. There’s not a tie. I love him way too much, so there’s no tie. He’s too fantastic. Eduardo Gonzales is by far the best professor. He’s Cuban, so I have a lot of bias towards that, but he’s fantastic. I love him beyond a shadow of a doubt. He’s been my professor for two or three years, literally every semester.

KD: Which major?

CS: Spanish major. I’ve been able to have a lot of classes with him. Another professor also in the Spanish major is Professor Egginton, William Egginton, Bill. Fantastic. Another fantastic person. Super nice, always down to – I just appreciate people that are intelligent and they’re able to articulate their thoughts very well, and I feel like they’re both people that are able to articulate their thoughts well.

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Eduardo is more like, with him I like him even more just because he does such a roundabout way to get to the point, and I feel like I do that too. I don’t know if it’s a cultural thing or maybe it’s mild ADHD, but it’s just a thing of going around the circle. Like you’re answering one question and you go around and hit every other bullet point until you hit the actual bullet point you meant to answer. So, I appreciated that and other, I don’t know, just random professors I had freshman year, and Elizabeth Brodsky. She’s been fantastic. I told her she taught me how to write. She really was the person who taught me how to write in an academic sense, so I always appreciate her for that. Every time I see her in the hallways, I give her a hug and a kiss. Who else? I forgot his name right now because I’m slipping.⁴

If I see him, he taught me about Montagne in a one-credit course. This is a one-credit course but like, fantastic professor. A great time. I’ve been blessed to have a lot of great professors, I think, and even if they’re not great, they’re always – I never had a bad professor, to be honest. I could just honestly say that. I’ve never had a professor that’s been rude or anything. They’ve been for sure condescending, but after that, though, no actual complaints.

Maybe if I was a different type of person, I was a little bit more sensitive, maybe I would have some complaints, but it’s fine. I get it. It’s an age thing. It’s a difference thing, like some things. Maybe when it comes to that, I forgive. I get it. clearly, you’re not mad at me, or at this point, you can’t be mad at me. I didn’t do anything. Clearly this is something has to do with you, and you’re just projecting at this point, so I’m not gonna have a conversation about it. I’m not gonna be mad.

That’s the only memories I can think of like, bad memories. It’s just professors I think projecting their issues on me and I’ve just been like, whoa, like very left field, whoa, “Dude, I’m sorry like, relax. I don’t know what to tell you other than I’m sorry like, I’m sorry dude. I’ll turn in the paper, sir. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. It takes time.” That’s it. It’s been like, “Where’s the paper? CS, where’s the paper?” I’m like, “Professor, I swear to god I’ll turn in the paper. Relax. Give me time.” That’s the baddest thing I could think of here. That’s it.

KD: Okay. Could you talk about overall dorm living or apartment living, different housing that you’ve had while you’ve been here?

⁴ The instructor CS refers to is Johns Hopkins Graduate Student Benjamin Peak.
CS: I did dorm for the first two years, and then right now I live off-campus with roommates. I think off-campus is far better, obviously. I don’t like being controlled. I don’t like being told what to do in terms of, “Turn down the music. You can’t do this, can’t do that.” The second I got my own place I was like, finally I’m free again, so it got even better. I just don’t like being controlled. I think that’s the whole entire consensus of this whole entire conversation.

KD: Did you live in Charles Village? I get the sense that’s where most -

CS: Oh, I did. I lived in 3209 North Calvert, oh yeah, so North Calvert and then sophomore year I lived in Charles Commons.

KD: Okay. Did you join any clubs or activities while you’ve been at Hopkins?

CS: Yeah. The first club I joined was Baila, which is the dancing bachata.

KD: What does that acronym stand for?

CS: Just dance.

KD: Right, baila. Thank you.

CS: Yeah. I don’t think it’s an acronym. I think it’s just Baila.

KD: Okay.

CS: So yeah, that was the first club I joined for a while until it got a little bit too serious, and then I was like, okay, I’m not a dancer, I’m a student. It was just one of those. And then other clubs, I’ve been in MOCHA… I’ve been in Men of Color Hopkins Association. I’m forgetting my whole entire résumé. Recently, my friend Campbell founded the Spanish Honor Society, so I’m her vice president for that. I joined the Psi Chi, the psychology honor society. What else? I think that’s it. And then CAUSA, the Cuban American Undergraduate Student Association.

KD: What about internships or jobs?

CS: Internships I have none, or jobs, nothing, because every single summer all I do is go back home and just focus on my health in terms of trying to actually do exercise in order to reduce the pain of the herniated disc, ‘cause I fell sophomore year and my GPA
went down. I cried a lot. I had to go to the counseling center. I had to go get two medicines, pain management. It was super dramatic. It was a whole entire big down on my journey in the college.

*KD:* Did you find those resources to be helpful on campus?

*CS:* I think I was just personally blessed with people just going out of their way to take care of me. I don’t know how it is for the average person, and the only reason I’m saying this because there were people that went above and beyond their call. I worked in the Dean’s Office and Wendy Geist, she literally went above and beyond to not only schedule my appointments to get my epidural and stuff.

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She literally would take me to the epidurals and bring me back, ’cause I would literally get panic attacks after the epidural, things like that. The lady that’s in charge of insurance, all she’s supposed to tell you is – I don’t know what her job is, but I don’t think it’s scheduling an appointment for me, going out of her way to find the best reviewed pain management place, calling different places, comparing prices.

She did everything for me. Katie Olive in the Health and Wellness Center, she literally like, basically adopted me freshman year and has always seen me every single time, and she keeps a record. She knows more about everything I’ve been through like any other random doctor that I’ve had. She’s scheduled. She’s written it all down from beginning to end, so like, medications and everything.

*KD:* So, did you have any jobs?

*CS:* Oh no, only the Dean.

*KD:* The Dean’s Office. Cool.

*CS:* But that’s a work study, so not any formal outside of Hopkins.

*KD:* Cool. I just wanted to make sure I didn’t miss any, and you mentioned going home during the summer. Could you talk about how you spent longer and various breaks?

*CS:* Yeah. I always go home. I always try to go home as much as I can.
KD: Okay. How was your relationship with your family during Hopkins? You do mention going home and seeing them.

CS: Fantastic. Me and my mom talk every day, so yeah.

KD: Nice. Did you find a support system here on campus?

CS: Yeah, very early on I feel, more adults, which is weird to say. I’m not saying I don’t have any friends here. I just have very quality friends back at home. It is what it is, it’s just one of those things, if you’re not missing out, why – you’re not necessarily looking for anything if you have it already. So it’s just one of those, I’m not saying that other people – I love all my friends here and they’re all like, fantastic, but in terms of that level, someone that I’ve known since eighth, like my best friend, I’ve known her since eighth grade.

She is my support system. I’ve always kind of saw it as I don’t need anyone else, but I do have support here. I just don’t necessarily care even if I didn’t. I have a lot of great friends that literally have done a lot of things for me and will do anything for me if I literally ask them to. I just haven’t had the need to ask them to do anything.

KD: Okay. Specifically, as a first-generation student, you mentioned the Hop-In program. How do you think the university could increase support for first-generation students, and maybe what ways do you see that they already are doing that?

CS: Well, I think again, the PhD program would be the best thing, to explain how to get into a PhD. What is a masters? What is a PhD? I think that’s something that’s taken for granted as to what exactly it is, but just a quick one-two. Do it sophomore year or something when you’re thinking about it. It has to be blasted in the sense of, or just a little, it doesn’t even have to be in-person, just a live little Power Point or something that you could go online from the comfort of your bed and do it, just to learn for five seconds what are the difference between these things.

The Hop-In program, it’s honestly just a book loan program at this point. That’s based on my opinion, not only my opinion, but based on everyone in my cohort of 2020. They just all see it that – ‘cause we got promised a lot of things, and I think I didn’t get roped into the promises ‘cause I knew it was all lies from the beginning.

KD: Like what kind of things?
Like promises of, “Oh, we’re gonna be here for you forever. We’re gonna have your back. It’s gonna be us against the world, oh my god.” And I was like, “Oh, for sure.” And then the second they got a better job opportunity, they obviously left. We have five directors for the program. I’ve had five different advisors. Again, thank god I don’t care enough about any of them or I don’t feel any type of way about having their help, because if god forbid I did need their help I would’ve been screwed over five times.

Imagine five times you tell your story to someone. Five times they leave you. It’s a lot, so that’s why a lot of these kids are like, “I don’t care.” I dropped the Hop-In program immediately. I was like, I don’t have anything to do with this anymore. It gave me what it gave me. I appreciate the five credits. I appreciate the experience. But after that I knew that it wasn’t my, like, it just wasn’t my thing because I think Hop-in is more for kids that I think need the help in the sense of like, oh, talking to your professors.

What do you mean talking to your professors? I’ll talk to my professor and call them ugly. I just never cared. With my professors I’ve talked to them like that like we’re in the streets, and that’s why I feel like they find me entertaining just because I do it so nonchalantly, ‘cause I don’t care. What are you gonna do? Worst case scenario you tell me, “Get out of my class. Leave. Never come again.” “All right, sir.” What am I gonna do? You’re right. Damn, at least I’m writing that down as an excuse. You told me to get out. I didn’t withdraw. You told me “Get out.” That’s the worst thing that can happen like, I don’t really see what the worst—and looking stupid? Okay. Bro, we all look like—I don’t care if I’m the dumbest person here.

[0:30:00]

Doesn’t that say something if I’m the dumbest person in the whole entire world and that I still made it to the room? I’m in the room. If I’m in the table, I’m in the table. I could be the dumbest one there, but I’m still in the table. So that’s how I feel about it. I never cared about anything of that. All the whole entire like, needing help or feeling like you’re less than, never. You made it here. I just don’t understand how you would forget that.

Even if you are less than, just go by the fact that, wow, I’m less-than and I still made it here. I got a 17—an 1810 on my SAT, an 1810, and the kids here on the lacrosse team that are the stupid kids allegedly got a 2300 and stuff like that. So instead of feeling like,
oh, I’m stupid, I was just like, damn, I really must have, I really made it. I really made it to a school somehow, and look, I’m graduating with a triple major. I’m graduating above a 3.5.

I’m doing everything fine, so it all worked out in the end. I just needed to assume like, their decision was right. This is not a simple decision. People get admitted for a reason, so I just trusted that I was meant to be here and I was meant to move forward and prosper on my own because I felt like I was enough, always.

*KD:* Could you talk about living in Baltimore and outside of campus, what has it been like living in Baltimore? Are there any particular neighborhoods that you enjoy being in? Are there any particular – this is kind of an interesting question, but just anything that’s happened nationally or even locally in history while you’ve been in college and how has that affected your college experience?

*CS:* I personally don’t identify as a Baltimore resident in the sense of, I don’t think—like, what have I done here? I don’t leave the Hopkins bubble. I don’t wanna leave the Hopkins bubble. I came here to study. I didn’t come here to live in Baltimore. It was just very that. That’s how I see it. I don’t care what happens anywhere outside of Hopkins. All I care about is the little Hopkins bubble. After that, I care about what happens back home and this and that.

Again, I’m not going into the city. I’m not doing anything with anyone from Baltimore. The only people I talk to from Baltimore are the security guards and that’s it. And the few kids that come here, not the few, there’s a good amount of kids that come here that live in Maryland and things like that, but after that, I don’t necessarily care.

Again, it’s not my home. I just identify Miami and that’s my home, and here, it could literally all get sunken in for all I care, honestly. It’s just as long as Hopkins stays and I’m able to get my degree and then leave and then continue on my path. Again, it’s just steps I think towards my ultimate goal.

*KD:* Means to an end.

*CS:* Yeah, yeah. I don’t really care. All I care about is learning and I learned, so I’m fine. I don’t really care what happens. I feel like if I cared, I would just be disappointed in terms of it’s clearly going downhill each and every year apparently, in terms of fun. It’s just better to have the mindset I’m coming here to learn, point blank
period, ‘cause any other mindset is just gonna get you very depressed for a valid reason, ‘cause you’re just studying.

As long as you paint yourself like I’m gonna go and learn and I’m gonna get this degree. I’m not gonna get this degree just because my mom told me to and my dad. I’m gonna get this degree because I myself want to get this degree because I am interested in studying this one thing clearly, very well. Not to the point like, not some half-assed like I know a little bit. I’m gonna invest my time and energy into learning this one thing. ‘Cause it’s cute in the beginning, maybe the first year one, year two.

By year three, year four, you’re not talking about little simple things. You’re talking about real in-depth things in your major. So, it is what it is. At that point either you hate it and you need to get out because you’re just gonna continue getting harder and harder. The people that really like it, yeah, they acknowledge that it’s hard, but at least they have something pushing them forward. I think that’s the whole entire thing.

KD: You mentioned things going downhill. Do you mean in terms of like, crime or in what sense do you mean that?

CS: Oh no, I meant like, more like, the Hopkins fun, I guess. If there’s a way to quantify fun, let’s say that when I was a freshman the seniors told me, “Y’all are getting it so bad. This used to be so much better.” And then now as a senior I look at the freshmen, I’m like, oh wow, trust me, and we barely had anything. I’m telling you, I think we were like, if this is the mountain of fun let’s say and we were let’s say a piece of paper right there, that was what we had, but they have nothing at least. They have nothing at all.

It’s just one of those things. I don’t know if you’re a freshman here you have fun. I already have my friends that I drink with and do all my things with. It’s fine. But I did that because of freshman year in order to find your group of guys and like, oh, my boys, these are my girls, these are people I click with based off these things. I just don’t see where the space is to do that.

KD: That seems to be a continuous refrain. What do you think is tangible that makes it less fun? What do you think might be the cause of that?

[0:35:00]
CS: I think it’s just more restrictions on fraternities and sorority life. I understand the toxicity of fraternity and sorority life, I really do. I get it, but that being said, for example, literally SAE was underground and all these things and got kicked off, rightfully so.

That being said, the kids that were in it, it was the most Hispanic and diverse group in the whole entire school, in terms there was more queer students, there was more Latinos, and there was more blacks than any other fraternity. Which is ironic ‘cause nationally you know that’s not the case, but in this one microcosm of the nation at Hopkins, it was the most diverse fraternity on campus for a solid while it was happening, so it was one of those things, even after the fact. If you see your people, you’re gonna go there, and you’re gonna be like, oh, so it obviously continues up to a certain extent.

KD: Great. Would you mind speaking about your plans for the future? You mentioned Hopkins along your path. What do you plan to do after Hopkins?

CS: I would like to get a PhD in clinical psychology, preferably. Yeah and that’s it. After that, let’s see where the wind takes me. I just really want to learn. Get the PhD and after that, if I wanna learn more I will; if not, then I’ll just be in academia or private practice. Whatever happens, happens. I just know I haven’t learned enough.

KD: PhD in psychology?

CS: Yeah, clinical, yeah.

KD: How is the application process for that? Have you already applied places?

CS: I applied a couple days ago to a post-grad program at Yale in order to do psych research in order to then apply to clinical psychology PhDs. I don’t have any research experience ‘cause I was really taking care of my health in the summers instead of working.

KD: Would you recommend Hopkins to other first-generation students or have any advice for other first-gen students?

CS: I feel like if you have a very supportive, supportive family that really understands what you’re gonna go through and they won’t judge you when you go back home for a semester, because a lot of my friends have gone back home for a semester out of a mental
health reason. Coming from my background, these are people that graduated from my high school, so same exact people.

In any other world, I would’ve taken a semester off. I just refuse to. I just didn’t like the idea of even spending one more semester here when I don’t have to. I was like, I need to get my thing. I need to get this. I don’t care if my back is broken and I’m crying every night. I need to finish this. I just felt like I needed to do it.

No matter how bad it got, I never thought I’m gonna take a semester off. I refused. That never came across my mind, but the people that did take a semester off, at least they had parents that were supportive because I feel like a lot of kids would feel very, like how I felt, not like a failure, but – a failure, to be honest, in the sense of damn, I can’t believe, ‘cause your parents are gonna be like, “Oh, back in Cuba…”

My mom always says that. Even my mom, bro, she always does that whole, “Back in Cuba, this.” I was like, “Well, back in Cuba?” I’m like, “Mom, I’ve done more than you at less than your age, so that’s it. I already won. There’s no arguing here.” That was the whole entire competition we always have of who can do more. That was the whole entire like, “Oh, I can do more than you, Mom. I can learn more. I can work harder” and all these things.

I already won. But imagine a parent that doesn’t have that context. She’s saying it jokingly obviously like, “Oh, yeah, you’re complaining about a two-hour airplane. I had to do an eight-hour bus ride. I had to hike in the middle of nowhere.” Things like that. Of course, I’m complaining about little things, but imagine a parent doesn’t have any concept of this, so they just see it as a whiny little brat.

I’m paying this much, ‘cause they’re paying pennies. Bro, come on. It’s a lot because it’s a lot for them, I understand that, but for the grand scheme of it, it’s not a lot. You just forget the fact that your kid just won a quarter of a million dollars and you’re paying at most $20,000.00, at most $10,000.00, come on, instead of paying $270,000.00 because of your kid’s big brain.

You’re just taking that for granted. I think it’s just a thing of like, your kid’s big brain, no matter how smart he or she is or they are, after a while you’re fried. It’s a hard environment. It’s very easy to get overwhelmed and feel like you have no one, ‘cause if your parents are not 1,000 percent there for you, it doesn’t matter how many friends you have.
It doesn’t matter ‘cause you need your parents’ help. I think that’s the biggest factor of being a first-gen kid. You have to make sure that your parents know beyond the shadow, you know that your parents know beyond the shadow of a doubt like, “Mom, Dad, this is gonna be hard. This is not high school. I’m not gonna have a 4.0 GPA like I did in high school. I’m not gonna get a perfect score on every single assignment.”

[0:40:00]

Like yeah, you might hear me saying that I went out this week and I drank and god forbid I failed a test on Monday. Yeah, but that’s college, and that’s college for people that know what college is like, but if you have no concept of that, it seems like you’re just wasting your time. “What are you doing over there? Go get a job. Go do this.”

It’s all very dependent on the family. And after that, if they made it here, that’s it, you made it. You shouldn’t doubt your abilities. You shouldn’t doubt anything. You have the intelligence to do it. After that, it’s plain and simple as like you can do it, but it is hard to do, and everyone needs a helping hand. I think it’s very, very, very, very difficult. It’s still possible to do it, but very, very, very difficult to do it without at least the help of your parents, at least someone there.

All your friends could be there with you, but they’re not gonna be the ones giving you the money. Actually, there are a lot of people here that I do know that, so even then you can find a good friend that’s able to do that to you. It’s all possible. I just feel like it’s better to come at least with the help of your parents at the very least.

KD: Yeah, that support. This question is kind of hard, but we ask it of everyone. How would you summarize your time at Hopkins? I know this whole interview has been you doing that, but just kind of as a one- or two-shot, how would you describe it?

CS: Well, I think that as I was saying, I had a very blessed experience specifically because I just met a lot of great people that geared me towards the right direction, and just based off coincidence of just meeting people, a lot of nonsense talk. Just me talking nonsense most of the time has gotten me to meet people that like me after the fact ‘cause they’re just like, “Oh, this kid is talking nonsense.” A
lot of kids don’t say anything, so even talking nonsense it’s slightly entertaining.

My professor was telling me, “Are you a grad student?” “No, I’m a sophomore. No, I’m a junior. No, I’m a senior. Why?” “You carry yourself like a grad student.” That just means that I talk. That’s just all it simply means. I’m not scared to refer to you and be like, “Oh, how’s your kid? Like, how is your kid?” It’s just a conversation. Do I care how your kid is? No, but I know you have a kid, so I should at least ask how’s your kid, things like that, little simple comments I feel like a lot of kids take for granted.

So yeah, I’ve been myself and I’ve had a fantastic time, but if I wasn’t me, I would’ve had probably a horrible time. That’s it. If it’s based off what I was given and not what I’ve earned, you know, with my personality, I would’ve been very, very, very sad, like oh, damn, this is it. This is all the help I get. If I hadn’t gone out of my way, I would’ve been very disappointed at my experience here.

KD: So those are all my questions. Thank you so much for speaking to me and having us interview you.

CS: Thank you.

KD: Is there anything else that maybe we didn’t touch on that you would like to add before we end? Any questions we didn’t cover? It’s okay.

CS: No. First generation; I’ll say one more thing I think does play a role is how willing you are to hang out with white people, if you’re a first-generation of color, because I feel like there’s a lot – I understand it because I feel like you wanna, especially with a lot of Hopkins kids that’s what I know. I feel like since they were the minority in their school, they thought they were gonna come to college and finally be among and not feel like a minority, but then you realize you’re in fact still a minority.

So, it’s one of those things. I didn’t care because again, if you ask me, “Are you part of the minority?” I’d be like, “Oh, I forgot.” Yes, I in fact am, you’re right. My mindset is not that. It’s not, “I have to look for my people. I have to look for other Cubans. I have to look for people that speak Spanish.” I don’t care. I go back home, I speak Spanish. I go back home; I’m surrounded by Cubans. I don’t need to find anyone or find anything.
So, I feel like if you have that mindset that you wanna find your people, then I don’t think Hopkins is the right place because it doesn’t really foster that. It’s just, the numbers are not high enough to foster that kind of environment of like, oh, look, I found my people. I’ve been the one black kid in the white school all my life and look, now I’m finally here and it’s completely different.

No, you’re gonna be here, and yeah, you might be one of three black kids. Congratulations. At least you’ll have two other people, but you’ll never be in a room full of people like you, and if you are it’s just specifically for very specific events but not in the day-to-day like, oh, you walk into a room. I know for a fact that I was in the wrong room once just because of race, ethnicities.

[0:45:00]

‘Cause I walked into a room and I was like, hmm. I sat down like, there’s a little bit too much diversity going on here. I must not be in the right class, ‘cause I know my classes are predominantly white. I am 90 percent of the time the darkest kid in the room, and I’m not even that dark. It’s just one of those things that the second I saw someone darker than me I’m like, hmm, I don’t think I’m in the right class. This doesn’t make sense.

KD: Statistically.

CS: Statistically I wasn’t in the right class. The class was supposed to be a Michelangelo class, an art history class. I know, come on, let’s just be honest, it’s a very white major. Undeniably art history is a white major. I’m just taking this one class for the Italian portion, but even that, Italian is also a white major. The only major I think that has a lot of – I think Spanish has more black people than any other language, but it wasn’t Spanish class. It was just one of those, like you know.

It’s very noticeable where people are and you just have to not have that idea that you’re gonna be able to find your people and have this whole entire cultural awakening. You might be able to, I just feel like for that, go to somewhere, go to a state school that you for sure have your, like here are your people. For sure in a state school there’s enough of every single ethnic group. You’ve always been that one black kid, you’ve always been the one Latino, you’ve always been the one Chinese kid. Here, go off.

I guess here—but like, even then, you’re international, it’s not really the same. You have completely different cultures. Even if
you’re that one Chinese American first-gen, it’s not the same thing as a Chinese from China, a Chinese kid from China. It’s not the same thing. It’s completely different. So, it’s one of those things.

As long as you’re not trying to find your “people,” I feel like you’re all good, as long as you accept the fact that you are yourself and you have to be very open to the idea of, that’s it, I’m gonna be one of two. If someone else in the room knows Spanish, perfect. That’s a win for the culture. That’s enough. Two is enough out of 30. It is what it is.

You have to be content with that and you have to be able to move on, ‘cause if not then you’re just gonna be upset. I think a lot of people, it hit them hard, ‘cause I think they thought they were gonna be in more positions of power. They really thought it was gonna be different. Then they realized, oh, it’s exactly the same. I never had hope for it to be different. I feel like you. You didn’t go to college thinking, “I’m gonna find my people.”

It’s just continuation of life. I’ve always been around people like me. I’m gonna continue being around people like me. That’s what my whole mentality was. I wanna be around people like me. I guess the difference is that they’re white American instead of white Cuban. That’s it. I just felt like these are my people essentially, so I never felt that whole entire thing to find anyone ‘cause I felt fine. I think that’s the lesson that I’d have to add.

KD: Thank you. That’s really interesting. Again, thank you so much for taking the time to speak to me.

CS: Thank you.

[End of Audio]