

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION
MS.0404

First-Generation College Student Oral History Project

Interviewee, "AC"

Interviewed by Kristen Diehl

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Johns Hopkins University
Oral History Collection

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

KD: Kristen Diehl
AC: Interviewee

[0:00:00]

KD: Okay. This is Kristen Diehl here with AC on March 5th, 2021 over Zoom for the first-generation college student oral histories. We would like to start this interview by acknowledging the impact of COVID-19 on the Hopkins community. The questions in this interview were written before the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic and therefore do not directly ask how the consequences of this public health crisis change the experiences of our students.

However, we thought it was necessary to begin our interview with a couple of questions related to the pandemic in order to recognize the particularly challenging experiences and changes these students faced. So our first question is, how do you feel the Coronavirus pandemic has impacted your undergraduate experience? What are some challenges or changes it caused for you personally?

AC: Yeah. So in....sorry. I'm just a little confused. So I'm really introverted. So I'm actually – I tend to be happy just staying at home all the time and Zooming in with people. But definitely, though, I did start missing friends. And I think social life has been the biggest thing that's been impacted. Walking around campus. Just like getting exercise too. But it's been interestingly helpful in a way because there's no need to commute. So it's a lot easier to actually get into class if there's like trouble with scheduling and things like that. What else was in the question?

KD: What are some challenges or changes it caused for you personally? So have you been on campus or in Baltimore the whole time, or were you at home for a period? Or maybe have you could speak about the transition into a lot of online courses.

AC: Yeah. Okay. So I was in Baltimore for an entire year, starting my junior year of college. And that was when we transitioned from in person to online. And around that time, it was kind of like unknown what would happen. So people were like strangely excited, actually, about what would happen when we went online. Some people were like actually looking for

it. Like, they were seeing it as a way to get a break. But then, the pass/fail system that happened made things more convenient for everyone in my opinion. Although personally for me, though, I would've preferred being able to like improve my GPA for – yeah, for getting grades.

KD: Has the pass/fail system been in place since last Spring? Is it still in place now?

AC: It's still in place now, and it's been in place last semester and the semester before that too. Yeah.

KD: Great. So moving backwards in time *[laughs]* far prior to the pandemic, could you tell us where you were born and maybe a little bit about your family?

AC: Yeah. So I was born in San Francisco. I'm first-generation, of course. My mom was born in Southern China; specifically Taishan. And my dad was born in Laos. I think due to some things with the Cold War and Vietnam and France, he moved to Taiwan for college. And then, he was able to go to Paris as a refugee. And then, he came to San Francisco where he met my mom.

KD: And do you have any brothers or sisters, or are you an only child?

AC: I have one older brother. He's five years older.

KD: Okay. Could you tell me a little bit more about your parents' and guardians' educations? You touched on your father's education a little bit overseas.

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AC: Yeah. So my dad, he did like civil engineering, I think, in the '70s. 'Cause he was born in '55. And he went to adult school here in America to learn English. My mom had some opportunities in China to go to college, but she only did high school. And she went to adult school here when she came to America.

KD: Do you mind maybe sharing why your mom came to the States from China?

AC: Yeah. Sure. It had to do with opportunities, I think. So she's the youngest of five siblings. And the age gap between the youngest and the oldest is like – it's a really big age gap. Like possibly in the decades. Yeah. For example, I have a cousin that has kids already. And those kids are actually older than me. They've actually graduated from high school – I mean,

college. So that's a sense of the age gap. But she was the youngest. And her parents, my grandparents, were retired already. So they came here for...yeah, for opportunities with my mom alone.

And eventually, my mom was able to make enough money to get plane tickets for the rest of her four siblings to come to America. I believe...I'm a little bit fuzzy on this, but I believe that my grandpa on my mom's side is – he was like an educator during Communist China. And because of that, he was like not treated well, and he was in prison. I guess part of my family was disenfranchised from – yeah, due to like Communist China I think.

KD: Wow. Thank you for sharing that; that background. So what do your parents – you mentioned your dad studying civil engineering and your mom coming to the states and working. So what do they do? What have they done before, and what do they do now?

AC: Mm-hmm. So my dad in – so he didn't really...he tells me that he didn't really use his civil engineering degree. But I'm sure the education was helpful in some way. When he was in Paris, he worked at his sister's restaurant to – yeah. So he like learned a lot of ways to cook things. He actually...this is a funny story. He actually commonly buys baguettes and drinks wine and like feeds me blue cheese. And so, yeah. That's kind of funny. What else?

KD: So what did they – what do they do now?

AC: Oh, right. Right. Right.

KD: Or what do they do – what have they done since coming to the states?

AC: Right. Right. So my dad kind of took over his dad's trade, which was auto repair; auto mechanic stuff. So basically, my dad's an auto mechanic. But he has the hobby...he had the hobby of photography where he – yeah. He would just like take portraits of people. And that's where my mom comes into it, because my mom is a wedding planner. So they've actually been able to work together. Like, my dad's the photographer for the wedding planning stuff. My mom, she's done a lot of different odd jobs before this. So maybe like accounting or something in San Francisco; in downtown San Francisco. But right now, she kind of has this one-stop shop for like weddings. Like photography, floristry – or flowers. Like tuxedo rentals and like wedding dresses. Things like that.

KD: Wow. That's really cool. *[Laughs]* Sounds like a really interesting career. So you mentioned San Francisco quite a bit. Could you speak more about where you've grown up? Have you always lived in San Francisco? And

any particular neighborhoods in San Francisco that you've lived in or anything like that?

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AC: Mm-hmm. Yeah. I've always – I grew up in San Francisco until like college, basically, when I came to Hopkins. And growing up, I didn't really know what San Francisco really was. I didn't know what kind of reputation it had in the world, basically. It was just like a really long word to me. But I knew it was my home. So around high school was where I started understanding that San Francisco and like Silicon Valley had all this like important tech stuff and finance going on. But I lived in Daly City specifically, which is just south of San Francisco. So San Francisco is on a peninsula. And the only way to get to the peninsula on land is by going through Daly City. Yeah. So it's like a suburb basically.

And my experience in San Francisco relating to race is that, like, I've always been surrounded by Chinese people, basically; the schools I went to were...in middle school, for example, it was like 95-percent Chinese people. It was a private school. But then when I went to high school, it was around like 20-percent Asian. Also a private school. But I know that – like Lowell, for example, is one of the...is one of the famous schools there. Which is like 50-percent Chinese I think.

KD: So did you have a strong sense of Chinese community growing up?

AC: Yeah. It was like...it felt like it was normal, I guess. I hear about students here that have grown up in the Midwest, for example, where it's predominantly white. And they felt like an outsider, I guess. I never had that feeling, but there was still this like cultural conflict between like the younger generation and older generations. So me, my brother versus my parents. It's like harshly linguistic where I grew up learning like English a lot better than Chinese, and my parents speak mainly Chinese; like Cantonese to be specific.

Yeah. I'm probably forgetting some of the things. But at the same time, I did feel separated because I was always put in private school too. So I felt very sheltered, and I didn't know a lot about...yeah, actually like exploring the city and what's going on like in the world. So I think in some sense, I might be – I want to say the word "white-washed," but not really. It's a little bit derogatory. It's just that I'm not as immersed into being Asian or being Chinese as I am like being American. Yeah.

KD: Of course. Yeah. Thank you for sharing that. You've talked about high school a little bit. What was high school like for you? Were there any

particular courses or subjects that you were really interested in at the time or any extra-curriculars that you participated in?

AC: Yeah. So it was an all-boys school, actually. Catholic. That might be funny if, like, someone figured that out. But whatever. *[Laughs]* being in an all-boys high school, it didn't seem like it was all that different from just regular high school, from how I understand it. It's just maybe like – I do know that – I do think that if girls were around, competition would kind of be higher because...I'm not sure, actually. Yeah.

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But that's kind of the impression that I got. I'm not sure exactly why I think that. High school, I was really into – like, I just generally performed well in everything; not to sound conceited. But I was mainly interested in English. Like around junior year, I took AP language – AP English language. And that's when I felt like, "Oh, I really understand like why I want to read books and write things." I was like really proud of my skill as a writer. So then, I did...and then, fun things I did in high school was arts. I really loved doing art.

And another cool class I took was AP environmental science. It was just a nice way to like integrate a lot of different concepts into like understanding the world and trying to improve the world in a cool way. So my teacher would not just talk about like chemistry or biology or physics. He would actually bring in like Robert Frost, for example, who wrote about environmental things sometimes.

So that idea of combining a lot of different perspectives into one thing, that really wanted...that's really something that I was interested in. And that's what I – like, that's what I tried to do when I applied to college. So right now, I'm a cognitive science major, which is very much combining like linguistics, computer science, philosophy, psychology and neuroscience. And it's all about, yeah, combining all these different perspectives.

KD: Awesome. Yeah. It does sound really interdisciplinary. So that's exciting. You mentioned going to a Catholic high school. Was your family religious particularly?

AC: So my family definitely had like spiritual inclinations. Like some superstitions about death, for example. Or we would have shrines for like my grandpa. And like during holidays, we would have to I guess pay our respects to our ancestors. We would have to like...sometimes we would go to the cemetery to pay our respects as well. So it was definitely more Asian. I don't know exactly where it stems from; whether it was

Confucianism or Buddhism. But just this general like spirituality; that there wasn't any strict doctrines or anything.

But I had a cousin who was really into Christianity. And he wanted me and my brother to really grow up with that. So maybe my parents don't care that much about Christianity. But their motives – and my cousin's motives...again, he's way older than me. They kind of combined into like the concept of just like private school where my parents wanted what was best for my education; my cousin wanted me to be Christian.

So I grew up in a Lutheran setting. And that's definitely where I learned a lot about the Bible, where I learned a lot about like morality and – although morality isn't just a religious thing. But, yeah, it's where I would get all these Bible stories and Sunday School. Yeah. And that's where I got interested in like philosophy too. Like the theological concepts and the meaning of life. Things like that. And then in high school – well, it's funny. Because when you're Lutheran, you're taught about how bad the Catholics are.

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But then, I went to Catholic school. So, I mean, it's not like everyone hates each other. At the moment. It's just a history of people hating each other that we're taught about. But I guess I was less religious in high school. Like, we had to attend mass. We had to take religion classes. That involved world religions too. So we learned about like all kinds of religions. We learned about life issues. And we learned about like the Old Testament, the New Testament and church history.

KD: Great.

AC: Yeah.

KD: Thank you. You mentioned kind of how you ended up at this Catholic school and your parents wanting the best for your education. So my next question is just, what are your parents' – or extended family members' – thoughts on education? You know, how did that affect your life, and do you feel sort of like an outlier being the first to go to college?

AC: Yeah. So education is like really important for my parents. And my extended family on my mom's side – there's a lot of us in the Bay area. So education. Yeah. It's just the path to success and the path to like stability for my parents. Because they did not have stable lives growing up. Like for example. My mom – this is heartbreaking to hear. But she says that, like, "Don't do what I do," basically. "Don't go into my business," is what my mom told me. "It's just too hard. You probably should get something

that's easier. More stable. More lucrative. And to do that, it is through education." That's always been – like, it's not a fact of life, but it feels like it. Yeah.

KD: Yeah. I think that that's a pretty...I hear that sentiment a lot. So moving on. From high school to college, how did you decide to attend Hopkins? How did you hear about it, and what were – you know, what as your college application process like?

AC: Yeah. I wasn't a very motivated person in high school. So I was especially cynical about this whole system of like, "Oh, why do I have to go to college? Why do I have to get a job? Why is life like this?" You know, teenager stuff. But I guess I did it just because, like, I just didn't know what else to do. And it just seems like the most normal thing to do. It just seemed like the next step in life. That's why I applied to college. Like in addition to the attitudes that my family had, of course. I have those similar attitudes as well. I learned about Hopkins basically just through my parents. My mom, apparently she actually really likes Hopkins. Like, she told me she had a dream that she would go to Hopkins, but she didn't.

But I did instead. Which was interesting. And how I decided to go to Hopkins was, my parents – the summer after junior year of...the summer, yeah, after junior year of high school. So before I applied, my mom and my aunt took me on a college tour trip, and we visited like eight East Coast colleges. It started with Cornell, and then we like went down to some of the Ivy's all the way down to Hopkins. And Hopkins was the last one I visited. And so, the two most memorable ones were Cornell and Hopkins because they were the first and last. Those were my – those were my top choices. And I guess I was attached to like Hopkins's literary magazine. That's what I pushed when I applied to Hopkins.

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I wanted to be an English major coming in 'cause I wasn't – I didn't actually know about writing seminars. Yeah. I actually like regret not being in a writing seminar as a major, because I want to be a writer. But my decision was partly because I got the Bloomberg scholarship. So just financially, it was very good. And it was just like the best school that I got into. If I didn't go to Hopkins, I would go to some UC schools; like UC San Diego, for example.

KD: Great. Thank you. So I know your mom and your aunt went on his tour with you. What was your family's reaction when you were accepted into Hopkins?

AC: My mom was extremely happy. Actually, she knew the date when the decisions would come out. But I didn't believe her. I thought it was the next day. So she was more on top of it than I was. And she was just very happy. And I'm pretty sure my family...I'm pretty sure my mom has like bragged about it to all the other family members. Like just to be a little bit conceited, again, to compare some people in my family have gone to UC Berkeley or UCLA. Those are probably like the better schools that people in my family have gone to. In my extended family. And then, I went to Hopkins. I'm like kind of the only one that left California. And I wanted to do that because I kind of just wanted to get away from family and just see what happens, explore the world.

KD: So speaking of leaving California, *[laughs]* can you tell me about the transition from your hometown to Baltimore and to campus, describing the first few weeks of your undergrad experience?

AC: Yeah. So I'm the kind of person that goes online a lot. So somehow, I found this group chat for the Class of 2021 that a lot of people were in. And I was very active in that group chat. So my first experience with the Hopkins community was talking to like a bunch of pre-Freshmen like me and getting to know them online. So I came in with expectations that I would meet them and I would be friends with them. I ended up more so being friends with my roommates and their extended friends; their circle of friends.

I didn't have any trouble transitioning, I feel like. Like, not too much. I didn't get homesick, for example. I knew how to do laundry. Like, apparently some people come into college not knowing how to do laundry or cooking. I knew those things. I had a decent idea of what I wanted to do. And I signed up for the classes that were most interesting to me. And I believe it worked out. Yeah. I can probably say more. It's just not coming to mind right now.

KD: Sure. I am curious. I like to ask students about the transition to Hopkins in terms of academics. Would you say that went pretty smoothly for you? You know, adjusting to perhaps the course load and learning how to study most effectively? Things like that.

AC: Yeah. It started very well. I made the Dean's list in my first semester. Part of that was because I just think that the classes were just mostly interesting. I just based things purely on interest, and that motivated me the best. And then, there was this trend going from freshman year to junior year where my GPA would basically be like going down, down, down. And my mental health would be going down, down, down; for all kinds of reasons. Like, I've had depression since I was ten.

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And it kind of went like wild, I guess, in college. And part of it was because I actually wanted to be a computer science major too, and I fell out of love with being in computer science. So I was stuck in these classes that I didn't want to do that were really hard. Math was especially hard for me. I didn't get such – I wasn't so...I didn't get very much background in math in high school. I was more focused on like literary stuff. But I still love computation and stuff and the idea of technology and things like that. It's just kind of not for me. Yeah. So Hopkins – like the culture...the thing that people say about Hopkins is that it's really hard, or it could be cutthroat, or professors are like tough on you; things like that. I find the professors to be pretty kind, actually. But there is this like workaholic culture that does exist at Hopkins. Yeah.

KD: So while we're speaking about academics, you mentioned that you're a cognitive science major. And you talked about kind of the journey – figuring out, you know, what you want to do. So why did you land on computational science, and what do you feel is valuable about it?

AC: Mm-hmm. So Hopkins was actually one of the last schools I applied to. So why that matters is because I was applying to a bunch of other schools beforehand, and I was like trying to come up with reasons for like doing majors or finding majors to like be interested in. So along the way, I came across cognitive science applying to UC schools. And it's just the name of it...just sounded interested to me. Just by the very name. And I looked into it, and I read about it on like the Hopkins website. And it just seemed very interesting. The intro course for cognitive science back then – in my freshman year – was called Cognition.

It no longer exists because it's a little bit redundant compared to other later classes. But that was like a sampler for everything that I would meet along my major. So yeah. Yeah. Part of it is, it's just purely interest and coincidence that I saw the name Cognitive Science. 'Cause I wanted to do something to do with psychology because I was interested in mental health. But at the same time, I was more interested in how people thought instead of how people behave. So there's that. Yeah.

KD: Yeah. And do you have any memorable professors or classes?

AC: Yeah. The most memorable class I took as a cognitive science major was Foundations of Cognitive Science. It is considered kind of to be the capstone course. So the idea is, as an undergrad – freshman, sophomore, maybe junior – you spread out and you take different classes in neuroscience and computer science and linguistics; just like give you samples of everything in the multidisciplinary world.

And then in that class, Foundations of Cognitive Science, you get to kind of combine everything and integrate everything and see perspectives like from a philosophical perspective and see how everything fits together; see how like your research, for example, might add to like bigger conversations in cognitive science. It was a tough class, though, because there were really tough readings every week. Yeah. And it was a writing-intensive course too. You had to like diagram – yeah. You had to make diagrams to explain the readings sometimes. Yeah.

KD: Oh.

AC: That's a phone.

KD: Oh. That's okay. How about memorable faculty members? Anyone in particular?

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AC: Yeah. So for Foundations of Cognitive Science. It was Professor Smolensky. And he's just – I don't know why, but I want to describe him as adorable or cute. He's just wholesome. And he's just like very supportive, and he's...yeah. And I hear about Professor Wilson, Colin Wilson. I've never actually had him, but I hear good things about him. But I also took a class called Sensation and Perception. It's in the psychological and brain sciences department.

And I think the professor was Professor Fischer; Jason Fischer, I believe. He was just a really good lecturer. And the class was pure memorization. It was pure tests; pure multiple-choice tests. And at that time, that was what I really liked for some reason. And it's like a core in cognitive science. Like, "How do we perceive things? How do we see? How do we hear," and all that. "How do we feel things?" So that is what got me thinking a lot too.

KD: Great. Pivoting a bit from academics. Have you ever met any other first-generation college students while at Hopkins?

AC: Yeah. Most of my friends are first-generation college students. My first two roommates were first-generation. Actually, to be honest I have a hard time thinking of people that aren't first-generation. Yeah. Yeah, actually. Are there more questions about that?

KD: Yeah. I wonder. How do you think being a first-generation student...do you think that's – how do you, if at all, think that's played into your Hopkins experience?

AC: Okay. So I've learned the history of like Asian-Americans in the United States. And I believe it's around the '80s when a lot of people from China came to the US. And they were allowed to come because they were experts in their fields. So basically, it's like a self...so the immigrant pool is like self-selecting. And the immigrants who came were the ones that took risks and were able to handle the risks. So they were – so that partially explains why Asian-Americans have like the highest income, for example.

Even though there's a really – there's still a widespread....there's still like Asians in poverty, of course. So I got this feeling, though – like knowing that I got this feeling that a lot of my Asian-American first-generation friends were stemming from that. But my mom – right, my mom and my dad – they were not really experts in their fields. My mom just came because of opportunities. She's a wedding planner. And my dad, he came to help with like the car mechanics stuff.

So I felt – this was very internalized, but I felt like I was doomed from the start compared to everyone around. They're set up to be more successful; they have – like, a lot of my friends have parents who are professors or engineers or doctors or lawyers. And I felt insecure about that, basically. 'Cause my parents are definitely not that. But I ended up appreciating that my parents are super cool in what they do and very unique. And I wouldn't give that up, actually, at all. Yeah. And I'm smart enough, I guess. *[Laughs]* I don't know.

KD: Definitely. Could you talk about your overall dorm or apartment life at Hopkins?

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AC: Yeah. Is it safe to say where I lived?

KD: Sure. Yeah. Folks say generally, you know, what residence halls they lived in; whether they live on or off campus now. Maybe something about the neighborhood that you currently live in.

AC: Okay. Yeah. I lived in Wolman Hall. So that was the conception. So back to this group chat thing pre-freshman times, we were all talking to each other about, "Oh, which halls are good? Which places were – which dormitories were good?" So it seems like the two most popular ones were AMR II and Wolman. So I and two other people aimed for a triple in Wolman, and we got it. And dorm life, it was nice to have a little kitchenette thing.

But of course, we had meal plans. I got along well with my roommates in my room. But there was a suite mate that lived in a single in the same apartment or the same unit, and we did not get along well with him. I actually think he has like OCD or something or bipolar. Something like that. We did not get along well with him. But overall, I don't have any horror stories, though, that other people might have had. Yeah.

And then, sophomore year I lived in McCoy. Junior year, I moved off campus. Generally, though, I stayed inside the Hopkins bubble. So I was always – I'm always like five minutes away from campus. And like regarding Baltimore, I felt like I didn't really get to explore Baltimore too much. Yeah. I was kind of stuck in this bubble like socially and physically, I guess; geographically. Although, I have explored since like the past year I would say. Just like walked around. There's a really nice river going by somewhere like behind campus.

KD: All right. *[Laughs]* Yeah.

AC: Yeah. Somewhere. Yeah.

KD: Yeah. I was wondering. Something kind of different from the past year is, do you think that the pandemic has impacted your ability to, you know, get out and explore Baltimore a little bit more?

AC: Yeah. There's definitely like fewer reasons to explore. So my junior year Spring, I took this improv class, actually. It's one of the best classes I've taken. It's really fun. It's actually pretty therapeutic too. But one of our assignments was to actually go to this place called the Baltimore Improv Group and actually just watch some shows. And they were free shows. And, like, I 100-percent intended to go to a bunch of them and take my friends there. But that ended up not really happening because of COVID. So that's just one example of like some lost opportunities. But otherwise, it's still okay to wear a mask and walk around alone outside. And that's just what I tend to do. Like for exercise and stuff. So it hasn't impacted me too much, but I do suspect that it has impacted a lot of other people differently. Yeah.

KD: Sure. Earlier on, you mentioned your interest in writing and in art. Have you pursued those interests while at Hopkins, maybe through any clubs or activities? Or just personally too.

AC: Yeah. So I still remember the first class – my first set of classes in freshman year.

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It was the intro Cognitive Science class, the intro Computer Science class, the intro Writing Seminars class and...actually, I forgot what the last thing was. But basically, those are the three important ones. So I've actually just been taking a bunch of Writing Sems¹ classes like on my own without being the major. I've taken like five fiction classes, including like IFP1 and IFP2². I guess I'm in the long work right now with Professor Jean McGarry. And I guess I would consider this to be like the capstone or the thesis class for Writing Sems. It's just very interesting, and it's a lot of like constant writing. And it's a lot of like sophisticated talk on storytelling. Yeah. When it comes to arts, I've just been doing photography on my own. Like in my room, around campus. One of the first things I did when I got to campus was, I took pictures of trees and stuff. And I'm in a club that combines volunteering with art therapy. And I entered that freshman year too. So I've just been committed to that these four years.

KD: Wow, what is that club called?

AC: It's called Believe In Art. Yeah. Like, I don't have a lot of extra-curriculars. But this is like the one thing that I just happened to chance upon. And everyone is like so – it's one of the most wholesome clubs that exists in my opinion. Because, yeah, it's just about like helping each other out. It's just about having fun and doing art. If there is a stereotype about Hopkins being like cutthroat or whatever, you wouldn't see it in that club.

KD: That sounds really calming. *[Laughs]*

AC: Yeah. It's, exactly, calming.

KD: How about internships or jobs at Hopkins?

AC: So the story that I would tell about that is a similar story with like me applying to college. I haven't been too motivated to go out and look for opportunities like that. Although, I would get like tons and tons of emails from like the Computer Science emailing list or the Cognitive Science emailing list. I would see these opportunities, and there's definitely opportunities out there. And of course, it's Hopkins. So there's plenty of research opportunities that exist. I just personally have not been motivated to go out and get those things. Although, I did research for a year, though – like some psychology research.

KD: Was that with a faculty member at Hopkins?

AC: Yeah. it was with Professor Justin Halberda in the Vision Lab in the Brain and Psychological Sciences Department, I think.

¹ “Writing Sems” is short for Writing Seminars, an academic department at Johns Hopkins University.

² “IFP” stands for Introduction to Fiction and Poetry.

KD: Wow.

AC: Yeah.

KD: And can you talk about how you spent your summers or breaks? And I'm sure...you mentioned you've been in Baltimore for quite a while now during COVID but maybe prior and leading up to that.

AC: Yeah. So generally, the plan was to go home for the summer, sometimes for the winter. So the summer after freshman year, I was at home in San Francisco. And I took Calc II at the city college there to supplement like my math stuff. But that's mainly what I did. Again, didn't feel motivated to like look for a job or anything. But I just relaxed. And then, the summer after that I believe I went home as well. Yes. But I didn't really do anything. Yeah. And then, the summer after that, that was – I was here during COVID.

KD: Nice.

AC: And I just did a lot of like self-help stuff just to get myself mentally better during this time. Like, rates for depression are going higher because of COVID.

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So it was a lot about working on myself for that summer. And then, I think that's the last summer that there's been. Right?

KD: Mm-hmm. Have you had, you know, roommates or friends around during these off times?

AC: So whenever I went home, I usually talk to people that I'm physically near. So when I went home, I was kind of isolated. And then when I would go back to school, I would get this like excitement about seeing my friends again, 'cause I haven't seen them in a long time or talked to them in a long time. So there was this sense of like losing my connection with people and then like regaining them or like re-learning them. But COVID has changed that because, like, it's almost essential to be online now. And especially because I was in Baltimore when COVID started, that I actually interestingly had more contact with my friends over the summer than I would've had in previous summers. But like safely, of course.

KD: Sure. And how has your relationship with your family been during your time at Hopkins?

AC: It's improved. It wasn't so great when I was in high school or when I was in middle school. Like, I didn't view my family as that great. Like, traumatic things with family fighting and stuff like that – parents fighting – has happened. So I've always had like a negative view of my family. Also, one thing is my mom, she had hypothyroidism. So her mood would get – she would swing all over the place. And that was really bad for like me growing up. But then, she got surgery for that, and she's like since calmed down a lot. So that was around 8th grade. But of course – so I've had to come to terms with like forgiving; being a forgiving person. And so, my relationship with my family has improved since COVID because everyone is really scared to like die, basically. And yeah.

KD: And aside – we generally ask, "You know, what has your support system been while you've been in college?" You know, whether that's friends, your family, a combination of both or other resources on campus.

AC: Yeah. So my family just calls from time to time. But that's kind of like a minimal support. It's mainly my friends. And my friends, I would meet just by living with them, or I would make friends in class. And I would have like – so the social life at Hopkins, it feels like you have to have an excuse to be friends with someone almost. Like, hanging out just for the sake of hanging out does not seem common to me.

Like, instead you would be in study groups with people, and you would have a reason to be together. And there's like a double friendship versus – friendship-and-classmate kind of relationship that I've seen happen. And this is anecdotal, but I've had a lot of like BME friends. And because they have this track of courses that they're doing, they tend to group up together because they just take similar classes. So I've noticed that especially happening with like BME some other engineering people.

KD: So you mean like Biomedical Engineering?

AC: Yes. Yes. Yeah.

KD: Okay.

[0:55:00]

AC: I've also made use of the Counseling Center. So the way I view the counseling center is that they're really good for people who have like momentary issues; kind of more like superficial things. It's kind of like – the counseling center is kind of like the Band-aid of mental health at Hopkins, I guess, where you can get in really quickly, you'll get out really quickly. But if more serious things are happening, then they prefer to refer you to someone in the community. Which is how I found a therapist. And

I think just generally, colleges are struggling with like providing mental health resources for people. Yeah. But that's a resource I made use of. So my support network are friends, Counseling Center...but yeah. I tend to spend a lot of time alone, though.

KD: Okay. Thank you. And I'm glad that, you know, the counseling center was able to connect you with a longer-term therapist. Specifically, have you felt supported by Hopkins as a first-generation college student? And were there any specific programs or initiatives that you found helpful? And then, how do you think the university could increase support for first-generation students?

AC: Yeah. So I would hear things about like first-generation...I would get E-mails about like first-generation – I guess I don't really know what to call them; like activities or programs.

KD: Mm-hmm.

AC: But personally, I didn't really pay a lot of attention to them because I never felt like I needed to compensate for anything just because I was a minority or something. I didn't feel like a minority here. So yeah. I just didn't pay attention to it, I guess. I know some people do find it very important. Like, I have a friend who – I know someone who's like very interested in promoting who's from Bangladesh, for example, and promoting that stuff. I have some Jewish friends who are really into like...not anti-Semitism but fighting anti-Semitism. Things like that.

KD: Do you think there's any way the university could increase support for first-generation students?

AC: I wonder if the university is already helping people through financial aid. I'm not sure. I don't know how it works. But I got some really nice like financial aid. Or, it's technically a scholarship – that might have been because...that might have been some kind of balancing act for first-generation students. As for how to help or support first-generation students, it is a tough question. I will have to think about this. Could we like come back to it later?

KD: Sure. Definitely. We talked a little bit about where you've lived [*laughs*] at Hopkins. What would you say about your life in general in Baltimore – or, in Maryland? And I know with you coming from the West Coast the differences maybe that you've perceived between East and West Coast living.

AC: So coming here, I have developed a different sense of my identity. Like, before coming here I was a Californian. Coming here, though, I'm like part

Californian, part-Marylandian I would say. Like, if I see Maryland on the news I'd be like, "Oh, hey. That is actually relevant to me," for example. But if I see Nebraska, I'm not that interested. Yeah. *[Laughs]*

[1:00:00]

And there is this culture of like – Maryland is famous for crabs and seafood and Old Bay and that kind of stuff. And people pronounce Baltimore as “Baldimore” and things like that. And I just picked up things just from being here. Which is pretty nice, actually. I like that my identity can change. I'm not set as one thing. Yeah. Yeah.

KD: This kind of leads into speaking on your plans or for life after Hopkins. And this can be academic or professional or personal or otherwise. You know, specifically if you – do you think you'll stay in Baltimore, or does that factor into your plans at all?

AC: So I because I've been here for four years, I am more comfortable being here. Especially because I've been able to handle like living alone and like finding...I've become comfortable, for example, with selling my stuff or finding places to live through Facebook or otherwise online. And I would be comfortable staying around here or just in the like Greater DC area. But my goals are that I want to get into publishing. I want to be a writer. So that might mean I would have to move. I'm just chasing internships right now, and I would just go to wherever the internships are.

KD: Sure. Are those generally at publishing-

AC: Yeah. Yeah.

KD: Great. The next question is, overall would you recommend Hopkins to other first-generation students or any advice you would give to them?

AC: Yeah. So applying to college, again, there was this issue that comes up about like affirmative action and like who can get into where based on their race. Like, it's on the news sometimes about Harvard or Yale or some of the other Ivy's limiting well-performing Asians from going in. I mean, it is controversial. And I'm not saying I know all the facts. But it's very clear to me that Hopkins does not do that because Asians have the plurality here, I think. Yeah. So I can only speak for Asian-Americans or maybe only Chinese-Americans.

But if you're a first-generation, I think you'll be well supported here. There's a lot of other first-generations here as well. And the idea that the relatability of being first-generation is what's most important, I think; that you can be with other first-generation people. I think that's more important than actually like having...well, this is tough to say. But it's just about as

important as actually having like systemic support for first-generation Americans. Yeah.

KD: Yeah. The sense of community is important. And so, after all of this – all of your time at Hopkins...and I always say that you've been doing that your entire interview. But how would you succinctly summarize your time at Hopkins?

AC: So this'll take a minute.

KD: Take your time.

[1:05:00]

AC: Yeah. It was – when I was applying to college, again, I had this metaphor of like, "I'm a bird who wants to break out of my shell," because I felt sheltered. And I think coming to Hopkins was the best way to do that. And I had this analogy that you have to...when you learn to fly, you have to jump off, and you have to get it. You have to figure it out then and there, or else who knows what'll happen? Right? So that was my attitude coming in here. I wasn't sure what was going to happen, but I ended up learning a lot about myself. Yeah.

KD: Great. You know, that's all of my questions. We can circle back to the question of how the university could increase support for first-generation students if you'd like to. But otherwise, I just wanted to say thank you so much for your time today. I know all of you are so busy. And just wanted to know if there's anything else you would like to add before the interview is over that maybe I didn't ask, or we didn't get a chance to talk about.

AC: Again. This'll take a minute 'cause I do think there's a lot of important things to say. I'm not really sure. Yeah.

KD: Okay.

AC: And I'm still not sure about that question from before.

KD: Okay. That's totally fine. And, again, thank you for all of the insights you have shared. It's been really great learning about your experience. So thank you.

AC: Yeah. Thanks for having me.

KD: Sure.

[End of Audio]