First Generation College Student Oral History Project

YR
Interviewed by Allison Seyler
March 18, 2022

Johns Hopkins University
Oral History Collection
YR: YR
AS: Allison Seyler (AS)
Subject: The experiences and education of YR as a first generation college student at Johns Hopkins University.

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AS: Okay. So I’ll get started today by just saying this is Allison Seyler and I’m here with YR on March 18, 2022. We’re meeting on Zoom actually for the First-Generation College Student Oral History Project.

So I wanted to start the interview by acknowledging the impact of COVID-19 on the Hopkins community. The questions in this interview were written before the coronavirus pandemic, and therefore do not directly ask how the consequences of this public health crisis changed 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 the changes that the students faced.

So I’ll kick it off with our first question for you. How do you feel the coronavirus pandemic has impacted your undergraduate experience? And what are some challenges or changes that it caused for you personally?

YR: I would say that compared to other people, I feel that it didn’t impact me as much. I guess I’ll divide this into two different areas, one being academic, I don’t feel that academically it impacted me too much. My classes were – as a humanities student – a lot of my classes could be done virtually with almost no downside, because when we were in person it was sort of the same thing. It was coming to a class, you had to have already done your readings, and then while in the class, you talked to the professor about the reading, you talked to each other about it.

It was sort of the same thing online. You already had to do the readings beforehand. Then you would go into the Zoom lecture and the professor would facilitate group discussion, so we would do it that way. I didn’t feel like I lost too much.

We did lose the sort of interpersonal aspect of it. It wasn’t – at least at the beginning, when none of us were used to doing things virtually, we did lose the – it was a bit awkward I would say,
where you weren’t really sure who was supposed to start talking. 
You weren’t really sure – were you supposed to raise your hand? 
Were you supposed to wait for the professor?

You also had awkward moments where connections were kind of 
bad and you would be talking, and someone else started talking 
because they didn’t realize you started talking, or you would start 
talking because of your computer you didn’t see that another 
person started talking at the same time because of the sort of 
delayed feedback.

It was interesting I would say, but overall, I didn’t think I lost 
much in terms of educational value. The professors, at least my 
professors, were all still very engaged. They had office hours as 
well, it actually made office hours better, I would say, because by 
signing up to the office hours, it felt more like it was one-on-one.

Even though I had that before, all the other times in person, when I 
would drop into office hours, it was like me and then there were 
like three more students lining up at the door, and you always had 
in the back of your mind, “There’s other people waiting. I can’t 
take too long.” Sometimes you couldn’t really have an in-depth 
discussion with a professor and really get to know them. That was 
a bit different online, so I guess that was one benefit.

The biggest impact it did have on me, I would say, is sort of 
socially. In all honesty, my friend group rapidly shrank from 
possibly I think like fifteen people all the way down to like four. It 
was partly my fault, I’m not the type of person that’s very good at 
reaching out. I can be very social and I’m very good at networking 
and talking to people, but I tend to be very comfortable just being 
by myself.

Sometimes I consider myself a social introvert, but I’ve taken 
psychology classes and that’s why I realize my logic is so wrong. 
But yeah, that would be the biggest impact, and it’s mainly what 
ended up happening is I basically filtered out from my immediate 
friend group the people that I didn’t really consider – well, not that 
I didn’t consider – the people that weren’t as close to me or I 
wasn’t as close to them, like the people I didn’t talk to on a regular 
basis.

I got closer to my roommate though, because we lived together and 
basically the only sort of social contact, interpersonal social 
contact we had was each other for a long time, and we couldn’t 
even go anywhere because everything was closed.
Except like hiking, sometimes we would go on hikes. So I got really close to him.

Then other than that, there were some other friends that I had that I did actively message on a regular basis, but my other social groups from clubs and things like that, that was very – it was a bit strained because I was mainly used to interacting with them when we were in these scenarios, where we were there for a club meeting. I mean specifically, the people I was really close to were my dance group.

We were really good friends. We would see each other around campus, but I would mainly interact with them in those scenarios, when we were there, were a dance group or when there were specifically group events, parties; things like that is when I would interact more with them.

I didn’t have the sort of rapport where we would text – you know, we would still text each other through group chats, but I didn’t have a group rapport. It was like one-on-one, like, “Hey, let’s meet up,” with just like a small group. I didn’t have a niche – what’s it called? – like a clique. I think that’s the word they used in high school.

I didn’t have like a clique within that group, but I was sort of just floating around, which I was fine with when we were in person, but once it transitioned to online, not having that initial contact and being the type of person – you know, I’m not very good at communication with text. It’s one of those things where I would say the pandemic did help me grow, because it made me more comfortable with the awareness that I should not just wait for you to reach out to me, I should also reach out to people.

But before then, when it first happened, that wasn’t the type of person that I was. I was more of an in-person type of person. I enjoyed interpersonal communication, not really online things. I’m not active on social media or anything. So it was bad because I lost social contact, but it was also a bit of a reprieve because I had a legitimate excuse to say to a bunch of parties and to not go to anything.

I could be like, “Yes, finally. Everybody leaves me alone and I can just stay home,” and have a legitimate excuse not to walk out without being called a hermit.
So it’s a mix, but I would say that, particularly for me, I didn’t find that it as challenging as some other people did. Thankfully, all my family was safe, still is safe. We were all very careful. So I also, thankfully, didn’t have that side of things where I had to – well, I was worried about my family – but at the same time it wasn’t one of those things where my family was reckless and therefore I had to worry even more.

Thankfully, it didn’t come down to a situation where I had lost somebody, which I know a lot of people did. So at least I’m thankful for that and that sort of mix of things made the pandemic a bit bearable for me, but I definitely know not everybody was in the same circumstance.

AS: Yeah. It’s incredibly isolating in some ways, but also, I feel like we all learned a lot about ourselves through the pandemic.

I would love to know more about who you are today and why you are who you are today. So I wonder if you could tell me a little bit more about your early life, where you were born, and could you tell me a bit about your family?

YR: Yeah, definitely. Right off the bat, I would say I’m an immigrant. I was born in Cuba, lived in Cuba until I was ten in this little, small town called Ceiba del Agua, which is – I don't know. It’s not that far away from Havana. It’s like the outskirts of it, like 30 miles away, so a good 45 minutes by car. But at the same time, it felt like you were in the middle of nowhere. There weren’t really all that many people. You basically just saw everybody, you could walk from one end of the town to the other in 30 minutes.

People just kind of kept to their neighborhoods – not exactly, but most of the – everybody always walked around, but it was a lot of old people, or at least I was young back then, so everybody looked kind of old. So I might have been calling 20-something-year-olds old, because to me they looked old. But there were not many people around my age, and everybody that was around my age were close to each other because everybody was young. It was interesting.

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It’s just like a small-town feel. It was neat because if you were missing something you could ask your neighbor, it was one of
those friendly atmospheres that everybody sort of knew each other, especially on the same street. So it was nice about that regard.

But it was still a small place. I didn’t feel it too much because I left when I was ten to come to the US, but a lot of other people that stayed there, like older cousins that I have there and things like that, they really kind of struggle, because eventually you run out of interesting things and all you can do is stay home and watch movies or just go to work. It becomes a bit monotonous.

I feel like a bunch of other people that have lived in or that come from small towns might feel that. The only interesting thing to do would be weekends where you would go to the bar or the club or something like that.

In Cuba, I had a relatively large family. I was closer to my dad’s side of the family than my mom’s side, but it was relatively big. My mom’s side lived a bit further away from us. They had a farm, things like that. My dad’s side of the family came from a bunch of different places, half of it was in Havana.

But in my small town, the people I grew up with, it was me, obviously my parents and my sister at the start in one house. Then, in the house next-door was my – I call her my aunt, but in reality she’s actually my dad’s aunt – but I just call her my aunt, she’d be more like my godmother. Then I had my cousin, which in reality would be my second cousin because he’s actually my dad’s cousin, it gets weird, all this family tree stuff. But yeah, I lived with them and then we were next to each other eventually.

I remember they were like, “Why do we have to keep walking through the front door?” because we were constantly at each other’s houses and it got kind of tedious because you had to walk through your front door, and then walk a little bit off in the street to go into their door. We were like, “Why are we doing that?” Then they just like made a door in one of the walls, and now we could just like open a door in the house and get to the other house.

Then on the same street, towards the end of the street, lived my grandma and my grandpa in their house. So was at least my immediate family there for a while. One of my uncles lived there, and then he moved away to Havana. One of my aunts from my mom’s side also lived like three blocks away, but then she also moved away when she got divorced, so there was a bit of come and go.
But most of my childhood just revolved around me, just watching TV and playing outside with friends and things like that, and going to school. When I was five – as I said, I came to the US when I was ten and I did, but we came to the US through the Visa Lottery program.

My parents sent an application in I think 1990-something, ’95 or ’98, before I was born, to be honest. They sent in an application and in 2005 we got notification that we were accepted for the program. Unfortunately at that time, because of my mom’s work – she was a nurse and she worked for the state, by state I mean the country, the government – she needed to get permission to be able to leave the country, and then that permission didn’t come until five years later.

So in 2005, because we didn’t want to – I’m not exactly sure because I was only five back then, but I think it was because they couldn’t delay it and to start it off. So my dad and my sister, who at that time was 18, went to the US first, sort of with the mindset of paving the path forward.

So then for around five years, a little bit over five years, I was raised by my mom alone and my aunt on the other side. So it was mainly just like my mom and cousins, and my grandparents who lived on the other end of the street. Then another five years later, she finally got permission from the government to leave the country, and we reunited with my dad and my sister in the US.

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So I think that is a bit of my childhood.

Once we were here in the US, we basically had been living in Miami the entire time, in different parts of Miami, but generally just the Miami metropolitan area. That’s where I lived until high school, went on to high school until I started Hopkins, and then I moved to Baltimore.

AS: Yeah, that’s a helpful picture to have. I wonder if you could tell me a little bit more about what your parents – what their education was like in Cuba, and then also what they ended up doing for professions. I know you said your mom worked for the government, but if you could just talk about what they did. Then also, maybe if those things transferred over once you guys came to the US, I’m very curious about that, too.
Definitely. Let’s start with my dad because it’s a bit more simple. From what I know, supposedly he went to high school in Cuba, which is called a preparatory. Education in Cuba is a little bit different, high school is a mix between traditional high school here in the US and also vocational school.

So there are certain careers where by the time you’re done with high school you can start that career, because it’s seen as like a vocation versus – while some other ones you do have to go to university. But my dad, I think he finished high school, I’m not terribly sure. To be honest, I think he might have actually done just like a few years of it, because in Cuba he was a bus driver. He drove buses and he worked a bit as a mechanic as well, but mainly driving buses.

I think he did finish high school, but he didn’t do any of the vocational classes, which is why I think he might have just dropped out and just drove buses. I’m not quite sure about it, to be honest.

My mom, I do know a bit more. She was a nurse, but she wasn’t – unlike the US, where you have to do another certification of a nursing program – she became a nurse because that’s what she went to high school to study. Right off the bat, once she was done with high school, she was able to already start working as a nurse, probably under some apprenticeships first, things like that, like internships almost. Then she eventually transitioned to working as a nurse full-time.

I believe when she met my dad she was working. I think she was herself teaching some classes in high school in Cuba. Possibly that’s part of whatever clinical program. Then the clinic in my hometown or where she lived. It was all just sort of in the same little province, but that’s what she did. In Cuba, that’s a big government job.

My dad didn’t do any of that, like I said before, I’m not sure why. Possibly because when they grew up times were a bit rough, you know, the fall of the Soviet Union, that kind of thing. The economy wasn’t really the best. It could be my mom enjoyed her job, but I think my dad just wanted money and it didn’t make sense for – you know, you could make as much money just selling avocados on the side of the street as being a teacher or a nurse. So he was probably like, “Why would I bother going to school and doing all these things, when I can just drive buses and make the same amount of money as somebody that spent a bunch more time...
just studying?” So I believed that’s the path he took. My mom enjoyed what she was doing.

In the US, my dad still keeps driving around. He’s a delivery driver. So I guess, like me, he found his niche of what he liked. My mom, sort of kind of similar, neither of them are really good with English, English never stuck. My dad tries, but he makes more made-up words than real ones when he tries to speak English.

Then my mom doesn’t even attempt it. That’s why she couldn’t recertify herself as a nurse again, but she went to something similar, she’s doing home health care. She’s a caregiver for old people, things like that, so she sort of did something similar with it.

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Other than that, let’s see. What else do they do? Actually, yeah, back in Cuba as well they – I think part of the reason my dad also didn’t do any vocational stuff is because he had a little home business. Him and a friend of his sort of pirated shows because not many people had satellite to get shows, but they managed to somehow get a dish satellite, like one of those dish AT&T satellites that very few people had. They managed to get one somehow and it actually ended up working, so they could sort of steal satellite TV that would usually be playing in the US, and they managed to actually make it play in Cuba. They would record those shows and sell them and sell the movies. They were making a decent amount of money, but then somebody snitched on them and then the government came in and took away everything.

If I remember right, that’s the main motivation with my dad. My mom was the one that wanted them to enroll in the Visa lottery program, but my dad didn’t because at that time – a bit before that time they were living it up a little bit; they had everything they needed, they didn’t have a problem with food.

They didn’t really have much problem with money, but at the same time, even if you had money you couldn’t really buy anything. You couldn’t buy flat screen TVs or anything like that. In the 1990s, that wasn’t a thing either, yet. So there wasn’t much they could buy, but they were living comfortably, at least relatively compared to a bunch of other people. So my dad didn’t want to leave. He’s like, “I don't want to leave the life. Why are we going leave?” He also didn’t want to leave his family and this and that.
At least from the story that my mom tells me, the reason he went through with putting in for the Visa lottery thing was because a little bit before then was when the government came in and busted – took everything away, took all the stuff away. So he was really pissed and he said, “I want to leave. All the years I’ve spent building this up, getting connections, doing things, all that, it’s just gone down the drain.” So I guess that’s a little bit about their backgrounds.

AS:

Yeah, it sounds like he was an entrepreneur, but just didn’t always follow the rules. I can only imagine. It’s so interesting to hear you talk about Cuba and what it was like there for your parents.

I know you also mentioned spending time, when you moved, when you immigrated to Miami. So I wonder if you could tell me about the places that you grew up in Miami, and just a little bit more about maybe what that transition was like to the US.

YR:

Yeah. The transition at the beginning was a bit rough with English. I was thrown into – when we moved here, we moved here with my dad. My sister, she’s a disappointment of my parents, falling in love with a man and moved away instead of studying and doing something with her life.

Basically, my dad was there, taking care of us, my sister lives pretty close by, but still on her own with her boyfriend at the time, now husband. So I grew up with them. At the beginning, obviously I didn’t know anything that was going on, but at least my dad sort of figured it out. My mom also didn’t know anything.

But my dad figured it out. He knew he had to take me to an elementary school and enroll me. So we did that I think the first week we got here. Other than that, I was very shy because my parents – I wasn’t exactly the most well-behaved kid when we were in Cuba – and when we came here my parents tried to put fear into me by basically lying.

They would tell me if I didn’t listen to them, the government would come in and take me away from them. In Cuba, I would spend most of my time outside playing with friends, and sometimes it would be a bit of a struggle to find me. We were all just kids, we just went to wherever we went, and when it was time for dinner they had to basically figure out where we were. So there were a bunch of adults just walking around the town trying to figure out where all the kids were.
They didn’t want me to do that again. So then they would tell me that there were a bunch of kidnappers everywhere, that if I stepped outside – /[laughs]/ – that if I played outside someone would come and take me away and kidnap me.

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It’s funny now, but back then I was a little kid and I didn’t know any better, so it was a bit traumatizing.

That basically turned into me being a – I guess that was the start of me being an introvert. The second day after coming to the US, my dad pulled in money and got me an Xbox and some games. So I basically just spent most of my time inside.

I was friends with a neighborhood kid, with one of my neighbors, but he was a bit older than me and he already had a bunch of his group of friends, which I got to know as well. But at the same time, it took me a while to integrate with the group. So it was interesting. I spent most of my time just playing video games, to be honest.

In elementary school, which is the level I was at, I would say one benefit of being in Miami was that most people knew Spanish. So at least I wasn’t thrown into deep waters. So most of my teachers in elementary school spoke Spanish and could help me out, most of the kids I was with knew Spanish. So, that one teacher I had, my science teacher that did not speak an ounce of Spanish, I could not understand anything she said ever. At least the kids that were sitting next to me were actually kind enough to translate for me. They would tell me, “This is what she wants us to do. This is the assignment.” Because I would just stare, because I had no idea what she was saying. I wasn’t put in a specifically different class. She was the only science teacher for that grade.

Then after school I had to stay a couple hours, learning through ESOL programs. I think they changed it now. Now it’s ESL or something, back then it was called ESOL, at least in Florida, I’m not sure about everywhere else.

So I spent a bit of time learning. I was a little bit behind on certain other things because education, at least math education in Cuba is not exactly divided into algebra and this and that. It’s sort of done year by year and you do a little bit of everything every year, like with higher levels. So I do remember getting to elementary school
and not knowing what the hell percents were or how they were calculated.

And for some weird reason, my gym teacher decided he wasn’t going have us do gym. He was going have us do – before we went off to do gym, he was going have us do a review of percents. I guess everybody else also forgot what percents were. But some of the kids were answering the questions and I was like, “I’ve never seen this symbol before in my life. What is it?” In my mind, I literally thought that math in the US was just done differently, because I was like, “I have never heard of this thing or seen it. So I guess it must be a different math system or something.”

I also had problems with certain words. I would do literal translations in my head, I didn’t know how to put two words together. So I would see signs for like drug-free campus and I would turn to my friends and be like, “Why are they giving out free drugs?” those kinds of things.

I used to have, obviously, a very heavy accent and I would have problems pronouncing some words or people would laugh. I couldn’t say like, “machine.” I would say “ma-shine,” because I thought that’s how it was said and no one bothered correcting me. I would just say the words, everybody around me would laugh, but no one would be like, “That’s not how you say it.” They would just laugh, they wouldn’t tell me anything because they wanted me to keep saying it that way because they could just keep laughing.

Eventually people were like, “No, no, that’s not how you say it.” Then I had a lot of trouble with the S-H’s and C-H’s as well. Instead of saying “chair,” I would say “share.” Then obviously like, “Can I sit in that share?”

So it was a bit interesting. I think other people that learn a second language, especially English, can kind of relate to those kinds of things, but that was basically elementary school in a bit of a nutshell for me.

I did get some friends. One time one of my friends convinced me to join baseball, which for the life of me I have no idea why I did, because I never liked baseball. I found it to be very boring, but I just did it. I do remember my parents criticized me. They would be like, “Why do you never run after the ball?” Then I would be like, “Why do you expect me to go after the ball when they always put me in the back field?”
Most of the games, I just spent them looking at the sky. It’s little kids, but they made us play in like adult-sized baseball fields, so the balls never got to me.

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So the times that we were practicing and the ball did get to me, I wasn’t expecting it. I was still staring at the sky and the ball would like roll next to me. I do remember – like every other kid, I do remember getting hit in the face a couple times with balls, because they would throw it and I couldn’t catch it properly. Just fun memories I guess.

I would say in Miami it was typical childhood stuff. Specifically in Miami, I lived in a place called Hialeah, which now that I’m older we just call it a Cuban ghetto. It was the cheapest place. Back in the day it was just factories and things like that. Then it was just converted to low-income housing, so that was basically where we lived for a while.

Eventually we moved away to somewhere that was closer to my high school. Now we’re living even a bit further away, more like a residential area is where – like in an actual house, for example. It was interesting, it was a bit of a progress.

I guess one thing would be I learned English within like three years, at least good enough. But even before then, when I was still in my phase, because my parents didn’t know English at all I did have to do quite a bit of translating for them, especially after I properly learned English. I had to help them pay bills, for example, and do things like that, stuff that I would say typically a child doesn’t have to do or worry about.

I didn’t have to actually worry about where the money came from or things, but I did have to do certain things. I’d have to go with my parents to some office. I would have to go with my parents to an office to help them translate a form so they could fill it out, that kind of thing, or trying to figure out how to pay a bill online because they didn’t know how to use a computer.

Eventually my mom learned how to use a computer. My dad still doesn’t know how to do it. So it’s one of those things where because I was younger, I knew English, I knew technology, something that they weren’t accustomed to in Cuba. I did have to take a bit more responsibility. Also, my mom can be forgetful sometimes. She really stresses out about things that aren’t
necessary, like it’s a day after – she forgets to pay a bill, and it’s the day after and she’s like freaking out. Then because she’s freaking out, she’ll freak me out.

It’s one of those things where now that I’m older it’s just funny. She still does it. It’s not like she’s changed. She still does it, but now that I’m older I just kind of laugh at it versus when I was a kid. I would be like, “Oh my god. What just happened? You’re a day late to pay rent. Are we getting kicked out? What is going on?”

So it was a bit stressful then childhood-wise. When I was a kid, my parents would argue a lot. Cubans can be quite loud and they weren’t very – they weren’t conscientious of me, like it’s not like we have a little kid. They were just like full-on yelling. Sometimes I would be like, “Hey, I’m doing homework. Can you keep it down?” So that was a stressful time when I was younger. It’s never fun to hear your parents argue, especially when you hear them yell and argue about money.

And like I mentioned before, my dad originally signed up to come to the US out of spite. I mean, now, he never would, but his favorite thing to say would be like, “I’m going back to Cuba.” It’s hilarious. When I was a kid – it’s like you’ve already spent – by the time we got here, he had already spent five years in the US. There was no way he was actually going go back to Cuba, but he would still say it just to say it.

My mom knew he wasn’t going do it. She was like, “Yeah, do it. Go. I’ll go now and buy you the flight.” So it’s one of those things that it’s funny as an adult, but as a kid it was a little bit traumatizing.

On a more serious note, I was closer to my mom probably for the five years it took. It took a long time and conscientious effort on my part to start getting closer to my dad. We were close, but I was always very independent, probably stemming from Cuba.

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My mom used to work as a nurse a lot. Sometimes she wouldn’t be able to come home till really late at night. A lot of the time it was my aunt taking care of me. I was also very independent because most of the time I was outside by myself, with just people around my age and friends.
I mean that helped me overall also when I was in the US. I had to mature a bit fast, all the buildings, helping them translate stuff. Also, it was sort of driven in my head that my sister failed; therefore, I could not fail. They didn’t explicitly tell me that, but it was more of like cues that you get when your parents would argue about your sister for “wasting her youth” when she was 18 that she could have studied.

But a lot of times it was funny because she was like, “She could have found a rich husband. Why did she go with somebody that was poor as well?” So it was a mix of between serious things and playful things. But in my head, I did start developing the notion that I was the pillar of my family. I couldn’t fail, I had to succeed. I mean that kicked in more so during middle school. I was a bit more mature, I started understanding more of the educational system in the US, what it entailed to graduate, that education actually mattered, different paths to help succeed. I was also tired of hearing my parents argue about money and things like that. I don’t want them to do that.

Eventually, once I traveled a bit more, I started being like they sacrificed so much for me, they worked so much for me. My dad works from like 9:00 AM to 11:00 PM, more than 12 hours a day. So we have these things, but they never enjoy it because they basically work and they don’t enjoy it, and I’m here enjoying it, not them.

So as I matured more, the realization that they’re working for me, they did all these things, they sacrificed so much for me. Eventually it just turned into like I have to succeed for my family. I have to succeed to help them out as well. Eventually, once I can become the financial backbone of the family, I want them to also enjoy the time off, I want them to enjoy the travel, going to restaurants, this and that.

So it’s a bit of things, but I ended up maturing faster, I would say, than a lot of people my age at that time from a mixture of experiences, I couldn’t really pinpoint any specifically, but that was my childhood in a nutshell. I believe I probably missed certain things, but I think that was generally it.

**AS:** Yeah. I think that’s a great summary, and I really appreciate your explanations of taking on responsibilities as a kid and not fully understanding everything, I think that’s really indicative of the immigrant experience.
And also, I remember in college, even I had friends – and this was like in the mid-2000s, where their parents – I had one friend in particular who was from Romania, and her parents refused to learn English, and she was translating everything for her brother’s high school experience. She had a little bit of resentment about it, so I just commend you on sort of the evolution of your thought process on that.

I’d love to hear more about your high school experience and getting ready for college. Then I want to also ask you – so if you can think about that, what you want to say there. But I want to also ask about what your parents thought about education, so you hinted at that a little bit in terms of them wanting your sister to go to school and her not going to school. I assume that that was something that they always wanted for you or that you kind of felt was mandatory. So if you could just talk a little bit about their thoughts on what education was or could get you that would be great too.

YR: Yeah. I will start with my parents’ thoughts on education first, because that’s linked to all the other stuff I said before.

[0:40:00]

When I said that my sister – that they wanted my sister to study – they didn’t necessarily mean like college study or anything else like that. They just felt that she was 18, she could have done something. They were mainly thinking about some sort of certification, for example, she had a nail certification to do nails. She eventually passed the realtor exam. She didn’t do anything with that, so it’s just she enjoys being a housewife. I mean that’s just her thing, but my parents were a bit disappointed on that.

They felt like – it’s also one of those generational things – when they were 18, they were already working. They were doing a bunch of other things, they had so much responsibility. They were like forward-looking. They were like, “How come you’re 18, but you don’t have that drive that we did, have that attitude of working hard?” especially with my mom because she’s always been more of a working woman.

Even in Cuba, she refused to just let my dad work, even when they had the business of the CDs, she just refused to stay home even though they had enough money for her to do that. So she was also a bit upset that my sister didn’t have that same drive, so it’s mainly that. It’s not necessarily about education or getting a GED or going
to a community college, it’s more of like they just wanted her to do something.

I think also, part of it was that they were like, “You’re in a country that has so much freedom. You have so many possibilities of doing things. Yet this is what you do. You do nothing.” I think that’s also what they were a bit upset about.

They sort of heard things from people. My dad, for example, he did an electrician course, and at the end, he couldn’t do anything with it. He did it in like 2008, right out of the recession, so he couldn’t get hired afterwards, and then by the time he would be able to get hired it had already been so many years since he was done with that course, he didn’t really have any connections or anything.

He also has vertigo problems, and that got worse as he got older. He couldn’t do stuff that other electricians might, that beginner electricians might be doing, like go in skyscrapers or get on a tall ladder or stuff because he would get vertigo problems. So there was also a health risk in that regard, he couldn’t do any of that.

Overall, in terms of outlook and education, they don’t understand it and still don’t quite understand it. Especially at the beginning, they didn’t really – because all they grew up with was the way that things were in Cuba – the idea that you can just finish high school and get a career sort of job. You can be an accountant, you can be a nurse, that sort of thing, versus here, and it was very different.

I struggled a lot to explain to them why college was not the end, why I had to do something else after college, or also to explain to them – because I went to college with the idea of doing engineering, but I also have to explain to them even if I do engineering I also have to get a certification – they didn’t understand that, those kinds of things either.

So they may have just had an idea that in the US, if you studied – they had the idea that a path was successful studying. That was their general understanding, which is why they pushed education, but they didn’t push education in terms of like actual education. They pushed education mainly as the idea that this is a path for you to succeed in the future, and they weren’t really aware of anything else.

They weren’t aware of possible things like entrepreneurship or specifically vocational school, they just thought you could just do a
job. So that’s their general understanding of education. I’ll explain a little bit more in the future in terms of how they also viewed me getting into Hopkins specifically, but I want to go back to the high school question. In terms of high school, my entire path –

of education while in the US, it’s a bit interesting because given that my parents didn’t know English, ever since elementary school – I mean I think elementary school was the only time when my mom or any of my parents could help me with my homework or with school stuff, because it was mainly pasting pictures together and putting it on a board. And it was me telling them, “Hey, I want you to put this picture on this board,” and them taking me to Office Depot to get stuff.

But as education got more complex, basically I had to do everything myself because they didn’t understand anything, even the math. My mom loves saying like, “Oh, I love math. That was my favorite subject in school.” Then as it gets more complicated than basic arithmetic, she just starts breaking down. She doesn’t understand.

It’s one of those things where it’s like how do you say you like math, but you didn’t get to any of the complex stuff. So once I passed that arithmetic, I couldn’t receive help for any subject, whether English, science, anything.

They also didn’t quite understand – they knew that it was elementary school, then middle school, then high school – but they didn’t understand any of the complexities in there. They didn’t know they could check my grade book and my grades. I had never had anybody – my parents never ever checked my grades because they didn’t know they could.

The only time they asked for my report card, now that I remember, was one time where I didn’t get a good grade in a class for that period of time and one of the teachers called my parents. They said, “Check your kid’s report card,” and I was like, “Here it is.”

They didn’t have any exaggerated response to it. It wasn’t like, “Oh my god. You should be doing better,” this and that. It was sort of muted. They knew I was an intelligent kid, but they also didn’t really understand, they also didn’t understand the importance of grades, they just knew that like – also, in their education, things
were done in percents, not in letter grades. So they also didn’t quite understand the significance of a letter grade.

I would get a C in a class and I was like, “This is a bit over 70 percent,” and they would be like, “Oh, that seems like an alright score.” Versus a C in the US, it’s like, “Oh, my god. You’re borderline failing this,” that sort of thing.

So they didn’t quite understand the significance of grades or anything. They also didn’t know how to use technology, so they couldn’t go online to check grades or do anything. They never went to parent-teacher conferences, they never went to any of that stuff because they couldn’t even speak to anybody.

One time in high school I managed to convince them to go with me, because at the beginning of every year they did this thing where – before classes started – where you could go to your classes with your parents to see where your classes were, and also to introduce yourself and your parents to the teachers. It was just the teacher just talking to the kids and the parents.

I managed to convince my parents to go to it once. I think that was tenth grade, and then my mom told me that she was never ever going do that again because it was a waste of time. She just sat in the back and did not understand anything at all of what was happening. So she was just like, “I’m not going to waste another two to three hours of my life again.”

Actually, funny enough, we left early. It was supposed to be a couple hours long. After the first few classes that we went to, she’s like, “I’m not understanding anything.” So she just left – I mean we left. At that time, I was also getting tired. The reason I went was because I heard of other kids doing it, and it was one of those things like, “Oh, the other kids are doing it. I kind of want to do it too, to see what it’s like.” But then by the end it didn’t work out. So in terms of education, that’s their idea.

Generally, educational levels are still the same in Cuba, so they could reflect on that. They basically tried to do translation, so they understood elementary school, middle school, and high school. They understood the translation of a Bachelor’s to the system. In Cuba there was also Master’s and Doctorates, so they also understood that.
They understood the terms and their translations in Cuba, but it didn’t translate into the same significance. They didn’t understand the significance of things. That’s basically the best I would put it.

High school for me was – now that I have a look back and I’ve talked to people that have gone to different high schools, I realize my high school was not all that good. It was a bit of more like a low-income high school. The majority of the kids there were also Hispanic or minority. There might have been one or two percent that were white – by white, I mean they didn’t understand Spanish. Back then, that was my definition of white. I didn’t realize that there were other people that were not white that didn’t understand Spanish.

So it was very low-income. It was a relatively big high school, 3,000 kids. My class alone had a couple hundred, I think 500 or 600, something like that. It was divided, I mean a typical high school. It had its normal students and eventually had the sort of honors, APs, and more advanced classes.

When I started high school – my middle school was like a MAST academy.¹ They were trying to be fancy, and they did this thing where they expected everybody to be smart, therefore, their regular was technically their honors and they delayed everybody back quite a bit. Yeah, they delayed everybody back like a year because they artificially made classes harder.

By delayed back, I mean people that traditionally, in a normal high school, might have been able to skip some of those intro-level math, for example, or sciences and get to the important stuff. We were not able to do it. For example, a lot of my friends in high school were already – by the end of high school were able to take Calculus BC, whereas I was a year delayed and I could only get to AB.

I attribute that to my middle school, because from conversations with them, that’s sort of when they were able to skip levels, during those introductory, you know, elementary and middle school. If a teacher saw that you were good enough, you could sort of skip grades. But I wasn’t able to do that, partly because of English, it took me a while to figure that out, then once I went to middle school it was different.

¹ A MAST academy was a school that placed emphasis on “Mathematics, Arts, Science, and Technology.” They allow students to take advanced placement coursework/exams and help prepare students for college.
In high school, they didn’t quite process through the differences in the program. So they started me off in high school doing just regular classes instead of honors or more advanced classes. That was very frustrating for me, I’m not going to lie.

I was in a room full of normal people, like literally normal people. It was just normal people, but to me they felt dumb, but I didn’t realize I was the outlier, not them. It was very frustrating, because it was one of those things where it’s like everything was just so simple, the teacher would just say something and I’m like, “Okay, got it. No problem whatsoever. Come on, let’s do this.”

Then I would have to sit through the teacher repeating the same thing like four or five times. Instead of going through two or three examples and I would be good, I would have to do sheets and sheets of examples and things. It just got monotonous and very boring, it was tedious, that’s what I would say.

Then eventually, my grades got better and then they moved me to more advanced classes and things like that. Eventually I started doing advanced placements, we had a thing called the AICE Cambridge thing, a different weird certification. It was all right.

The thing is there weren’t a lot of support networks either. There was a school nurse for physical, there was no mental health person. I mean technically there was, but no one ever used it.

Mental health wasn’t really like – I mean especially among minorities and Hispanics, mental health is not one of those things that you really talked too much about or got taken to or you had to see.

But at the same time, I also feel like nowadays mental health has taken more of a forefront, but if you think about just ten years ago, it wasn’t really talked about all that much either. It’s also just simply the times as well, I would say.

Other than that, the counselors were kind of terrible, to be honest, I only saw that woman twice. Actually, I saw her four times, but it was literally just once a year, when I would just sit in front of her and I would be like, “These are the classes I want,” and that was basically it. They had one counselor per year, so it’s like one woman in charge of 500 kids. You didn’t have a person you could talk to there.
When I got to senior year of high school, the career counselor, I mean she was a nice lady, but she had a tendency to create cliques around her. She wasn’t necessarily all that accessible to kids. When she would get details about scholarships and things like that, she would keep it on the down low and only tell the people that she liked, they weren’t published for everybody.

The school was also very – they were also bad in terms of a lot of the opportunities, they kept it also on the down low and reserved it to the smart people. A lot of scholarships, they told the people that were in the advanced classes, but they wouldn’t tell people in the regular classes. So it was sort of like they themselves were kind of weeding out a competition and trying to give us more of the benefit, which – I mean it’s terrible – and I don't think it was necessarily that much of a benefit.

Like you would think, oh, that means you must have gotten an advantage, but in reality it wasn’t, because when you’re already – when you’re competing for really bad resources already, it doesn’t quite matter. For example, I didn’t really understand – only when I got to college – did I understand the significance of a Master’s and a Doctorate. I thought once I got to college, I’d finish college and I can be done, and to some extent, that’s possible.

Another thing is I didn’t understand – I did a lot of extracurriculars in high school, because I was told I needed to do them for college applications – I thought that once I got to university I could stop doing it, that I could just do the things I liked. And to a certain extent that’s also kind of true, but there’s caveats and I didn’t understand those, I was never informed or understood those caveats.

Essentially, my high school prepared you for a path where the majority of people either just didn’t go to college and university or you went to a community college, that’s basically it. Then once you’re out of the high school, it’s not their problem anymore.

One thing they did that was to our benefit is that they paid for AP classes for you and exams. That’s something that I’ve heard from other people that they had to do themselves, they had to pay for it. So that was one benefit that actually I’m glad about, because if they didn’t – most of the people there were low-income – no one would have had the money to pay for these exams, so I am thankful in that regard.
But everything else just kind of sucked, to be honest. There wasn’t a lot of school spirit at all, we didn’t have football games and stuff, there wasn’t any movie high school experiences, it was just kind of drab and boring.

The school was very prone to punish people for perceived bad behavior and real bad behavior, but I think it’s mainly because rather than it being – back then I was like, “Oh my god. This school sucks,” but it’s more of from experiences from other people doing things they were not supposed to, they changed policies and they were like, “Now we need to be more strict because you kids were being dumbasses, and now you’ve forced us to do this.”

I was told that at a certain point in the past there weren’t any uniforms. Then people would basically smuggle their friends in. Literally kids that didn’t go to our school at all, their friends would just take them into the school just to like chill or during lunchtime and things like that, and that became a problem.

During lunch time there used to be – because we were next to like a little shopping center, there was like a Taco Bell and a Wal-Mart and some other food places around there – before, they used to let kids go out during the lunchtime and they had to be back by the time your next period started. Then, obviously, kids started abusing it, they would just not show back up again, it became more of a problem.

I think the real reason why they changed that is because two kids got into a car accident or something. Somebody got shot as well. Like I said before, we lived kind of in the Hispanic and Cuban ghetto of Miami. So it seemed that to me things were fine, but in hindsight it was like, “Oh,” you know.

So there were problems and they started being more strict. Eventually they took away – they started implementing like a lunch system. The school had like four floors and they would send people off to lunch based on floor, because kids would get into food fights and they would be dumbasses. So they were like, “You know what? Fine. If you’re going be dumbasses, we’re going be more strict.”

I mean it’s understandable. It was a fine place. I would have enjoyed having more resources. I never learned about internships. I
had friends in college that would – my freshman year roommate told me during his 11th and 12th grade summers, he interned at a lab. I was like, “What? You can do that?” I thought internships were like a college thing, I didn’t even realize you could do those things.

I didn’t even know about summer programs, to be honest, like the learning program. I though summer school was just where they sent dumb kids, because to me, summer school was like you’re failing your classes, therefore, you need to go to summer school to make up for it. That’s basically what I thought summer school was. I didn’t know there were camps for engineering or learning, to get ahead and learn more.

I basically just spent my summers actually doing – yeah, because there was nothing I could do during the summers – I took to the habit of, my parents would just send me back to Cuba during the summers. I would just stay for a month or two in the summer, just hanging out with my family there and visiting them.

It’s not like now in the summer where you can be like, “Yeah, I’m just going to go with my friends and have fun with my friends.” Back then it was like you couldn’t really do that. I didn’t have a car. No one could take me. Both my parents worked all the damn time. I didn’t have anybody that could take me places. I didn’t live close to my friends. So it was either sending me to Cuba to at least have some fun and meet people or staying home playing video games.

I would say, however, that my high school prepared me a bit for Hopkins. By that I mean in terms of atmosphere. I feel like a lot of people say Hopkins doesn’t have that much of a school spirit, and things can be oftentimes a bit drab and boring. I would say because my high school was like that, to me Hopkins felt totally normal, it was just like a continuation.

It’s not like my roommate, who constantly complains because his high school was so fun, all the football games and this and that. And he has friends that went to other community colleges and other universities that are more upbeat and have more spirit. For a while he was like, “I should have gone to those places, man, instead of being here, struggling at Hopkins.”

_HA:_ Yeah. I think it’s so fascinating that – I mean it’s just really interesting how your high school experience can influence your
college experience. You don’t realize what you’re missing at one until you see the options and things that you have at another.

So I’m really excited to learn more about how you decided to go to Hopkins, especially since you didn’t necessarily have the resources of counseling or extensive career counseling type things. So how did you decide to attend Hopkins? And what happened; how did your family react when you got accepted and you told them this is where you want to go?

YR:

Firstly, this ties to the high school thing, I did not know anything about college applications. I knew I had to apply, I was told about different ways of applying, like, “This is how you apply,” but I didn’t know about how to put a resume together. The only resource I had was the College Board assigned this helper/mentor thing, which at the beginning I thought it was a scam because no one else in my high school had gotten it.

I showed it to administrators and they were like, “This is kind of weird. I’ve never seen this before.” But it turned out to be real and that was – I at least had a person that talked to me.

The thing is I don’t think she realized how many gaps in my knowledge I had, and I didn’t realize to ask her about those things because I didn’t realize they were important. So most of the help she provided me was simply like looking over and editing essays and talking me through brainstorming ideas of what were right for them.

I tried doing that with my career counselor, I gave it to her. Then she asked me to send it through e-mail. I sent it through e-mail, two months, after college applications were done, she said, “Oh, sorry. I saw this too late.” I was like, “Really?”

So at least I’m thankful for that, but I didn’t really know the importance of it. I didn’t know about options. Back then, I thought I wanted to do engineering, some sort of biomolecular engineering.

I basically just looked up online, like what are some of the best schools for this? Then Hopkins came first, obviously with a BME program and then some other tech ones. I was like, “Oh, engineers
go to MIT,” so I’m like, “I guess I’m going send an application out to MIT and Georgia Tech.”

But I also wasn’t aware of deadlines. For example, I didn’t realize that – I learned about the due date of the Georgia Tech deadline that same day that it was due that day. I was like, “What!” I had to rush home – obviously, they didn’t accept me.

One of the things that I realized afterwards was that literally one of the questions was, “Why do you want to attend Georgia Tech? And say something different than engineering,” because of the academic programs, like just one of those.

I also rushed the application, I didn’t even realize under afterwards that I literally just wrote exactly what they told me not to write. Only later did I realize that. I was like, “Oh, whatever.” I wasn’t aware. I think those were like the only three places outside of Florida that I applied to. I was like, engineering, you apply to these places. I didn’t think of applying to Harvard or Brown, I didn’t know what the hell an Ivy League was.

To me, I also wasn’t – it’s kind of stupid, but I also – one, I was worried about the cost, because I was always told – I had the mentality that the better the school was, the more it was going cost, and I couldn’t really afford it and my parents couldn’t. I thought college was like credit card debt, where you had to pay it on a monthly basis.

I didn’t realize it was like you take the loan. Yeah, it’s backed by your parents, but you have like six months after you graduate to pay it, I didn’t realize those things. I thought it was like, oh my god, if I take out a $50,000.00 loan, my parents are going have to pay like $1,000.00... That’s more than they make a year. How are they going pay this? They’re not going be able to do monthly payments for this. That’s basically what I thought.

[1:10:00]

I knew that, so I didn’t apply too much else. I was also under the impression that out of state tuition is even going cost a bit more money. I kind of foolishly didn’t realize that just because a school was not specialized in engineering didn’t mean that they were bad at it or one of those kinds of things.

For some weird reason, I always I always associate – like I associated MIT with engineering – I didn’t realize that they had
any – I didn’t realize they had humanities and things like that. To me, I kind of thought of universities almost as vocational schools, where you go there to do engineering, and you go there to do this thing. I thought Harvard is for medicine and political stuff.

I didn’t even know Hopkins did medicine when I first got to Hopkins. I just looked up based on like engineering, and that’s what I applied for and thought the only thing they did was engineering. Everything else was just kind of like an afterthought. I didn’t realize, oh my god, they’re a medical program. Oh my god, there’s an international studies program, I didn’t realize any of that. I didn’t even know to research schools.

The most research I ever did was just like put in Google, “What are the best schools for engineering?” and go through US News and look at the list, that was basically it. I was not aware of anything else afterwards. My roommate told me about how much research he did and I was like, “What?”

He told me about Reddits that he went to. I didn’t learn about Reddit until like a year ago. I didn’t know about forums or things, I didn’t know you could ask and talk to people that went to those schools, I didn’t know any of that.

So honestly, it’s just kind of a miracle that everything worked out, not a lie. It just kind of did. Most of the places I applied to were in Florida, a community college nearby, the Florida International University, which is the university nearby. I applied to UF and things like that because it was like they told me UF is a great and it’s in-state tuition.

So those were mainly my thoughts. I was not really aware of what I was doing. I just applied to things. Similarly with scholarships, I don’t remember how I ran into them, some of them were told to me. Other ones just kind of showed up out of nowhere, after I signed up to the College Board I would just get e-mails.

So for standardized tests in high school, it was basically just like you buy a book and take practice tests, that sort of thing. You sort of practice, do things with your friends and just repeat it basically. If you fail it, you do it again. I was also knew vaguely, the better the SAT, the better the college, but obviously at the same time there was also the money thing.

Actually, in the hindsight, one of the reasons I actually decided to apply to out-of-state schools was that one kid came back to see one
of my math teachers, and he had gotten into MIT. Not that he got into MIT, he already went, he was at MIT and he just went back to visit some high school teachers and that’s when he told me that actually just because a school is better doesn’t mean you’re going pay more, because that actually means they have more resources and can give you better financial aid, which I didn’t know what the hell financial aid was.

I thought it was literally just like you either had the money or you got scholarships or you took out loans, that’s basically it. I think that’s the main reason I did end up applying to out-of-state schools, because I was like, “Oh, I guess it doesn’t mean I’m going end up paying more.” And at the same time, even I apply and I get accepted, it doesn’t mean I have to commit, I might as well apply.

But I was also very singular track-minded. I was like engineering, so I’m only going to apply to places that do engineering. Why would I apply anywhere else?” That’s essentially how I chose; I was very underprepared or unprepared from my high school for college applications that I would say was a big, like, “oof.”

Hopkins, specifically the reason I chose Hopkins, obviously every other place rejected me. And by every other place, Georgia Tech and MIT.

[1:15:00]

MIT kind of scared me a bit. I applied and I went to an interview, but after I was done with the interview I was like I don’t even know if I want to go to this place.

The dude was gave me like a mythical version of MIT, and it was kind of hilarious because he himself went there. So it’s like how do you give me a –? He was like telling me about extracurriculars and things like that.

Then he would be like, “Oh, yeah, you have people and …” He made it seem like only super-geniuses went there. He said, “Oh, yeah, when people are doing archery they’re calculating the wind velocity in their head.” He told me about how they had this thing about where people put like a car or something like that up on top of a statue.

It just made it seem like I wouldn’t fit. To me, I was just like a normal dude, I’m like I’m not thinking these things at all. He just made it seem like this out of this world experience that just
intimidated me. So when I got rejected by MIT, I was actually kind of glad, I was like, “Whew, I’m glad.”

For Georgia Tech, I mean I was already expecting them to deny me. I rushed that application completely. Hopkins accepted me, clearly. Some other places accepted me as well, University of Miami accepted me, but it was just insane, they barely gave me any money at all for aid, it was just very drastic.

Then there was a community college nearby. I couldn’t even say they accepted me because literally they accept anybody. All you have to do is just fill out the application, immediately after you’re done with the application, it pops up a message saying, “Congrats! You’re in.” That was literally it.

Then the other one, the Florida International University, they also accepted me, but it’s one of – ultimately, I guess my decision for Hopkins came down to – I think Hopkins was the last school that reached out to me, out of the ones that I remember. By the time they reached out to me, I already sort of knew money-wise where all these other schools stood, so I got the acceptance from Hopkins and it was very impactful, to be honest.

They didn’t accept me to the BME program, but I had also read about their ChemBE program. I don't know why I said “their”, our ChemBE program. Honestly, I didn’t quite care if I got into the BME program because I was like ChemBE sounds like exactly what I wanted to do either way. So I just applied to the BME program, just because.

In all honesty, I kind of cried because I was like, “Oh my god. This is my first choice.” It felt kind of validating. Also, there was a section where it was this box and it was like, “Click here to see how much you would be paying.” Then I clicked it and it was like “zero.” I said, “Something must be wrong here.”

Literally I was like, “No, this has to be wrong,” or I must be misunderstanding what it means, what this paragraph means, it might mean something else. Then I called the school, “Yeah, blah, blah, blah. You’re getting in through …” I got a Bloomberg Scholarship, so it’ll cover full tuition.

I also didn’t understand then about cost of living. So I didn’t realize the cost-of-living piece. To me, it was just the school price. I didn’t think I needed to – I’d never paid rent before that – I didn’t
think I needed to go somewhere and pay rent and utilities and stuff. So that wasn’t in my thoughts.

But it was very validating, I cried. Everywhere else was already a lot of money and I kind of felt resigned that I was going have to go to my community college to save a bit more money and whatnot. So it was impactful.

I basically accepted. Immediately when I got it, I accepted. By the time I went to SOHOP they were like, “Would you like to commit now?” I was like, “I’ve already committed, like the day you sent me the letter.” Which I didn’t realize college visits were a thing.

I didn’t realize that people usually went to visit a college before they even applied or before they accepted. I just accepted because I didn’t know I could visit. There were a lot of things I didn’t know and it just kind of lined up well for me.

In terms of my parents’ reaction, my family’s reaction, they were hyper-focused on the fact that I was going to be leaving. My sister even tried to sit down with me. She was just like, “How about you go to community college for two years, and then you try to go out of state afterwards?” and this and that.

I kind of got mad and I told her, “I don’t want to hear this from you because you were the first one that abandoned our parents. So I don't want you telling me that I should …” Her argument was basically like, “No, don’t leave so soon. Don’t just leave our parents alone. Spend some more time with them. Stay for two more years with them. Then once you’re more mature and they’re ready, go ahead.”

I was like, “No, you literally – you were the first one that up and left, and now you’re telling me?” It’s like you can’t give contradictory messages from your own actions, especially when I was younger. It’s one of those hindsight things where like well maybe – like listen to your elders because they made the mistakes already and they’re trying to help you.

I said, “You don’t understand anything. You don’t understand the significance of all this. You don’t understand anything at all. Basically, you just want our parents not to be sad for a little bit because I left.” To me, it felt kind of like – it rubbed me the wrong way because it felt like everything I had done, all the work that I’d
put in, and now you're telling me to give that up, and you're telling me essentially to do what she should have done in the first place. I don't know, it didn't sit right with me at that time.

My mom was more understanding. She's always been more pragmatic. She was like, "If this is what you have to do to get the best future and achieve the best you can do, then go for it. Just don't worry about us. Just do it." She was very understanding.

In terms of Hopkins specifically, they didn't understand really the significance of it. They still don't, to be honest. The best way I can describe it is by putting it in terms of numbers, like I would be, "It's one of the best for this," and they were like, "Okay." But they also didn't understand – they understood there were many universities, but they didn't understand like rankings. They just knew it's really good.

When they finally started getting it was when I was – I started getting the – what's the thing? Once, I was already at Hopkins, I started getting those e-mails from the school being like, "Finally, this year we've moved up one in the world rankings. We're now 12. We're now 11. We're now 10." I would say I was finally like, yes, this is the way I can explain it to my parents how big of a deal it is.

Then I'm like, "Okay, parents, mom, dad, this is – if you want to understand the significance of my school, think about how many universities there are in the world, and know that Hopkins is number nine." Then they were like, "Oh, wow."

That was basically the extent of their reactions, like, "Oh, wow." It's not like jumping for joy or anything, they didn't quite understand the – they didn't understand what it really meant clearly in terms of the future or practically.

Like I said, they still don't. They really don't, they also don't understand – like for a long time, when I was in the process of changing majors, figuring out what I wanted to do and I was going through an existential crisis with it – they didn't make it better because they were like – every time I would be on a call with them, they would be like, "Okay, so what are you doing? What can you do with that?" and this and that.

I was like, "I don't know either. Why are you asking?" Or like when I went to do International Studies and they were like, "What can you do with it?" I'm like, "I don't know. I just got in here. I
just thought about it. How am I supposed to know what I can do with this? I haven’t even talked to anybody.” Then they would be like – because at first it went from being ChemBE, then to undecided –

[1:25:00]

and then I briefly was like maybe psychology, then maybe med school, because everybody had a craze about – everybody was wanting to do med school, like freshmen year thinking or just the med school bandwagon. So I thought, well, maybe med school.

Eventually, I said, “No, I don’t like that.” Then I settled on international studies. Oh, I guess I’m getting ahead of myself.

They didn’t understand me. Also, every time I changed they were like, “It’s the second time you changed. It’s the third time.” They didn’t understand. To them, it’s just like you pick one thing and you go through with it. They didn’t understand the concept that you could change things, that you could change careers.

They were also like, “Why do you have to study for so many years?” Because to them, it was just like by the end of high school you could just go off and do things. They were like, “Why do you have to go to university? Why is it so many years?”

Then afterwards, when I was talking to them about going to a professional school, they were like, “What? There’s more years after that?” Especially my mom, because she was a nurse, she worked with doctors. I was telling my mom, “You have all of high school, 12 years of beginner education, and four years of university. Then afterwards you might have up to eight years before you’re actually able to practice as a doctor.”

She found that completely bonkers. She was very shocked, specifically her, because she worked with doctors and stuff before. She couldn’t understand the concept that you had to study that long just to go through – like she understood having to study the medical knowledge to be a doctor, but she was like, “Why do you have to do all this other extra stuff?”

To her, it seemed very unnecessary. To me, it seems unnecessary. I’m not going lie. Not necessarily for med school, honestly, because med school you do have to do some stuff, like pre-med school to get ready for it.
But my plans to do to law school, she finds the entire four years of university before going to law school completely, utterly useless, and I agree with her. It just feels like why are you doing this when you’re not going use any of it? I mean, I don’t find it completely useless, I do see the things, so it’s fine. So they didn’t really understand the significance of Hopkins.

I was also at the beginning of it iffy on it as well. I’m like, okay, it’s my highest choice and it’s high on the ranks, therefore, it must be good. Essentially, my go-to thing back then, even now is essentially pick things based on how many more doors is it going open for me in the future, or at least my perceived notion of how many doors would it open. How many new possibilities or how many possibilities will it keep open for me?

That’s sort of the way I went through with decisions. That’s also the reason I went for international studies, because it felt like the broadest thing that would allow me to sort of generally do. By then I was trying to figure out – I didn’t know a career, but I was trying to figure out what I enjoyed in work/life and day-to-day and what I found motivated me.

And international studies kept so many doors open that I said, “Fine. If I’m going to make a decision because I have to announce my major, I’m going sort of stick to this because it keeps open the most doors. I’ll make a decision in the future. I’ll figure things out.”

But yeah, that was basically their concept of university, and also mine at the beginning. But I wasn’t the only one and it wasn’t necessarily out of lack of knowledge, because even my current roommate, he’s doing engineering. Now that he’s doing a job search, he feels like it was a bit overrated.

He also came in with this idea that, because it was so highly ranked, that means leaving the school and basically employers would go after you. Employers would come after you and they would fight over you to get hired.

[1:30:00]

I kind of blame Hopkins itself, because when you’re applying to Hopkins and in the starting years, like freshman year of Hopkins, that’s sort of – and not just Hopkins – I think that’s what every university at Hopkins level kind of portrays themselves as, as, “We’re so good you will have this many employers. You’re going
be so sought after. You’re going have to beat employers off with a stick. You’re going have your pick of your career choice,” and whatever.

It’s something like there are nuances and there are definitely people that can do that, but at least me and him, we consider ourselves just normal Hopkins students, and that’s not an experience that just normal Hopkins students have, so it’s a big mix between things.

AS:

Yeah. I think it’s interesting because it’s like there’s a perception of Hopkins that the larger world has or employers have or whatever. I just think it’s fascinating that your parents, even now that you’ve almost finished your degree at Hopkins, it still hasn’t clicked for them the reputation that Hopkins has or maybe it’s just been slow going.

I think you’re right, too, that that’s the way that universities work now, too. They have to be marketable for students and have to have some incentive for students to want to go there, and one of those incentives can be you’re more marketable to employers by having a degree from our university. But whether or not that’s true, I’m not entirely sure.

YR:

Actually, I would say one thing that did help my parents click a bit more was COVID, because Hopkins showed up so much in the news during COVID. Essentially, it wasn’t enough for me to tell them how important it was, they needed to hear it from other people basically.

For example, if I had told them Harvard, they would have understood because they’ve seen Harvard pop up in shows and things like that. Whereas Hopkins doesn’t show up in any – you’re not watching telenovela and all of a sudden somebody mentions Hopkins, that’s just not something that happens.

So Hopkins has a name within people who understand more about higher education, but not – for them, it was just whether a TV show mentions it or whether their friends talk about it. So they started getting a bit more notions when people they were talking to told them, “Oh, yeah, my brother has a cousin who has a daughter that went to Hopkins,” like that sort of thing. Then they were like, “Oh, well it looks like the name …” Once they started seeing that it has some name recognition, outside of just me telling them, that’s when it started clicking, especially, like I said, COVID because Hopkins started showing up so much on the news.
AS: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. I think people don’t always understand the relationship between the university and School of Medicine and School of Public Health, to realize it’s one big, large entity is actually fascinating.

I know you touched a bit on your academics, and I want to get back to that in a second. But I’m really curious if you could tell me more about what it was like to move to Baltimore and the transition to campus. Did you live in an apartment? What was that experience like for you?

YR: I would say one of the benefits of being sort of more independent as I was growing up was that I kind of had a more general – I was fine. I didn’t feel like I was very dependent on my parents, I didn’t struggle that much with the move.

I’m also not that good at reminiscing. I’m not the type of person that is just randomly thinking like, “Oh my god, the people I left, my parents.” I didn’t get a lot of those moments where I would get sad about what I left behind, because I just wasn’t really thinking about it much, which helped.

The first few weeks I lived in – well, for my freshman year I lived in Wolman, you know, back then. Then you were supposed to live your first two years on campus, not like now where Hopkins is like, “Well, actually you can just live wherever you want because of COVID.” But back then you were supposed to live on campus and I lived in Wolman.

It was weird. I’m not very good at meeting people. I meet them, but I’m not – I don’t know. I’m not extroverted in that regard. I also don’t like throwing myself into groups of people. Back then I didn’t realize that because nobody knew each other, it was fine for you to just fit yourself into a group because nobody else knew each other either.

Those were things I didn’t really recognize, because you’re coming from high school and everybody already has their groups of people. It felt wrong to put myself into another group of people, even though that group of people literally just became a group of people less than five minutes ago and everybody else was still trying to figure out where they would fit in.
So most of it was just – at the beginning, I guess I hung out a bit more with my roommate. At that time, the roommate – not my current one, but my freshman year roommate, because we lived – which I still don’t know how you can humanely justify putting two people in one room. It’s just such a bizarre thing for me, how any college can justify putting two people in one room, in terms of privacy and everything else.

The person just basically lived in my room with me. He was a lot more extroverted in that regard, so I just fit in. The first few times I would just – sometimes I would just run into him. I remember one time I ran into him when they were doing orientation, when there was something on campus.

He just pulled me. He was like, “Let’s go.” I was like, “Where are we going?” He said, “We’re going to a party.” I was like, “Oh, okay, I guess. I guess that’s fine.” It was just like him and two other dudes that were following behind him, and I was like, “Okay, fine.” So that happened, so it was mainly that.

Then afterwards, my current roommate, he was sort of my suitemate. So he was in the room next to me, but we’re still all in the same suite in Wolman. It became more regular, where it would be like me and him going to a cafeteria and eating, and me and him hanging out.

So I would say for both me and him, because he’s told me that was very helpful, because at least we had somebody already that we could kind of like latch on, it wasn’t just you by yourself. So that was enjoyable.

I wasn’t very good at managing my money, so I ran through my dining dollars exceedingly quickly because I didn’t understand the idea – we have an inordinate amount of food at my house in Miami – I didn’t understand the idea of food costs. Well, I knew food cost money, but I thought like eating out in places costs money. I didn’t really comprehend going and eating.

Basically, I was also kind of lazy. So a lot of the time instead of going and walking to the FFC, I would go to the Char Mar, the Charles Street Market, because it was right next to Wolman, and I would – the thing is I didn’t like their dining, their meals – the meals that you can eat with your meal pass and not spend money, I didn’t like them, they looked kind of sad to me.
Also, because back then, all of them had vegetables and I did not know how to eat vegetables. Before then, I’d never – to me, vegetables were just leafy things and I just felt weird, I felt like it was eating grass. I didn’t understand there were other vegetables. I didn’t know about broccoli and carrots and all of them. Like I knew about them, but it’s not something that my family put in their diet.

Before I got to Hopkins, I could count the amount of times I ate vegetables with my two hands, which people tell me they don’t know how I’m alive. I say probably because every food has vitamin fortifications, so I’m not lacking in vitamins by not eating vegetables, I guess that’s basically the answer.

So yeah, I didn’t enjoy those foods and I basically just bought out food from the crepe place that was there and the sandwich place that was there –

[1:40:00]

before I realized that I ran out of dining dollars and it was only less than halfway through the semester. I think it was like a month and a half in of school. It was very bizarre. At that moment I was forced to start walking to the cafeteria.

I don't know, it’s kind of weird. It’s very difficult to remember that far back, at least specific day-to-day things.

I mean I do remember getting my first grade for chemistry back. I got like a B on the test, I think, which I was fine with. I’ve never been one of those people that – I mean all throughout middle school I would get Bs and Cs. The only times I got As in middle school was because my parents told me they were going give me a hundred dollars if I gave them a report card with all As. I was like, “Challenge accepted,” and I gave them a report card with all As because I had an incentive.

In high school I did a lot better because I understood the importance of college. I was like, “Oh, shoot. I need to …” I understood that my GPA matters and I needed to get good grades. But in reality, I never cared about – [audio warbles and fades] – Bs and Cs.

AS: I think you froze.

[Crosstalk]
**AS:** Are you still there? You froze slightly. I think maybe if you turn your video off that could help. Can you hear me?

**YR:** It seems to be frozen. Wait.

[Pause]

**AS:** Let’s try it without your video. Can you hear me okay? 

[Off-topic comments about audio/video connection]

**AS:** I think the last thing you were mentioning was just about your grades in college and getting that first B in chemistry.

**YR:** Yeah, it’s just I didn’t actually care about As and Bs and things like that. To me, the actual letter didn’t have any significance. The significance was more sort of like the GPA or I need to get good grades to accomplish this, but I didn’t actually care about the actual – you know, I never freaked out about an actual grade.

So it was kind of interesting to see a bunch of other people that also got either Bs or – people that got less than an A essentially on the test emotionally breaking down all around me. I just found that so bizarre. It’s just people that their entire life have gotten straight As or something. I don’t know, I don’t understand personally. I can’t relate, but that was also an interesting experience the first few weeks.

In terms of campus, I kind of felt Hopkins was very small. Other places that I’ve gone, like the local universities and stuff like that, were a lot bigger, to me, Hopkins felt very small.

I also felt very tied down because I didn’t have my car. In senior year of high school, having my car became such a big part of my experience, because it finally signified that I had freedom to move around without requesting my parents to take me places and do things. Funnily enough, I kind of missed that more than my parents and my family, just the fact that I didn’t have my car.

I was also a bit scared of Baltimore. It’s just like a new city, from Miami I understood the concept of there are places that are safe to be and there are places that are not safe to be. That’s kind of generally true across the entire world and per city, and I still wasn’t sure where those places were in Baltimore.

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2 Adding a note to demarcate internet connectivity issues since we conducted the interview over Zoom.
People would just tell me a bunch of crazy things about Baltimore and safety stuff. Those were kinds of things that I didn’t tell my parents about. I tried making them focus on the school and how great the school was. Thankfully, because they never watched like The Wire or they never watched the news here, just like local news, they weren’t aware of how unsafe the city was.

[1:45:00]

That’s something I also didn’t purposely mention to them. I was like, you know, best they be blissfully unaware.

So that was something that at the beginning had me a little bit concerned. Before that, every time I went somewhere that I did things, I always did things with people. I was independent, but I was independent in terms of housing, maturity, and things like that, but I wasn’t used to doing things alone.

I wasn’t used to going to a food place alone, like to a restaurant or visiting places alone. That’s something that I’ve actually got to work on all throughout college. I basically spent my first two years at Hopkins not seeing any of Baltimore, just basically at Hopkins.

Halfway through sophomore year COVID ruined it for me. But before then, there were scheduling conflicts with my roommate, who was a person that I hung out and did things with. Just because of a variety of reasons, I never had somebody that I could just pull along with me to go and do things. So I stayed without doing those things.

It was a mixed bag. I didn’t feel like I particularly struggled too much. I know a lot of people had problems with like imposter syndrome. I didn’t have it myself because in the culture that I was raised, I was raised to take advantage of every opportunity.

For example, a lot of people that I talked to felt like they just didn’t belong there. Everybody else was much smarter and they didn’t belong, it was a mistake for them to have been admitted. A lot of minority students that I also talked to felt that they were admitted out of pity, they just needed to fill the numbers, that kind of thing.

In my case I was like, well, even if true, I don’t care. I’m already in here. You’re not going get rid of me. So that was sort of my mentality.
A lot of people, essentially they felt like their impostor syndrome originated from a place where they felt they didn’t deserve where they were at, versus because I was culturally raised to take advantage of every opportunity, even if I was somewhere out of nepotism or because I had connections or I didn’t get somewhere out of merit, it didn’t bother me because I was raised to take advantage of those things.

It was just like even if you got somewhere and it’s not out of merit, you’re there. You couldn’t just break down. I needed to take advantage of it. So something that did help me along was also that sort of cultural upbringing, because a lot of people when they’re alone for the first time and didn’t have their parents, didn’t have the traditional sort of circle, kind of broke down a bit because of those reasons. At least I didn’t go through those thoughts or feelings that I didn’t belong, so that helped out.

Generally, some other things that shocked me – probably not things that are appropriate for interviews – but just people’s behaviors at parties, just to keep it general, things like that. It was very shocking to me, just the way that people behave when they weren’t being monitored.

My parents were never the type that were like super on top of me for things and controlled my every move. So I didn’t realize that for people that did have those parents, like how much they could lash out for finally tasting that. So that was also shocking to see other people’s behavior.

Other than that, I would say apart from Hopkins giving me the Bloomberg, I also benefitted from – I ended up getting another outside scholarship that covered living expenses and housing and all that.

So both when I was in Wolman, but then also when I was – afterwards, when I had to live – when I lived off in the city, in an apartment building, it also helped me that I didn’t have to worry too much about the financial piece.

My time living alone, it was just figuring things out, especially money management, how to do things alone, especially sophomore year because we lived in Homewood and I didn’t have a meal plan. We had a full kitchen. I was figuring out – it was kind of nice, because it was almost like a step-by-step introduction to adulthood,
but at the same time, you didn’t have to go through the entire hit all at once. At Wolman, everything was taken care of by Hopkins. You got your food or whatever. You got that experience of being away from your parents.

Then Homewood for me was, alright, you still don’t have to worry about paying rent and whatnot, but I didn’t have a meal plan. I could have, but I didn’t because I have a kitchen. I get more money from my scholarship if I reject the meal plan, because that money was given to me manage versus a meal plan was going take off like $2,000.00.

From past experiences living at Wolman, I barely went to the FFC. I didn’t make use of the meal plan that much. I realized when I was in Homewood that I was even further away from the FFC and there was even less chances that I was going go there, so it didn’t make sense for me to get that meal plan. It would be a lot of wasted money.

I actually even did the math – [audio warbles and fades] – literally going out and going to the FFC. I was like, you know what, fine, because at the FFC it ended up being like $15.00 or something per swipe, based on the overall cost, even though the cost covers the workers and all the other stuff and cleaning and those things. But it was like $15.00 per swipe, and I was like I can eat around here for less than $15.00. So I would even be saving money on that. But it was nice in terms of that introduced me to sort of take care of your food yourself, and I still didn’t have to worry about utilities.

Then finally, when I moved away, I already had both the independent piece plus the food piece more figured out. Then now it was just more about actually living off-campus and taking care of utilities and interacting with a landlord, those sorts of things.

AS: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense that it’s transitional. That’s really helpful I think as a college student.

You mentioned other students and your conversations about impostor syndrome, but I wonder if you could just comment on meeting other first-gen students at Hopkins. Did you find those students? I don't know. Sometimes people don’t self-identify as first-gen or FLI, so I just wonder what your experience was there.

YR: Yeah. Honestly, I have run into a few of them, but I don't think there’s any first-gen students among my friends circle, even when I was in my dance group. It wasn’t one of those things where people,
like you were saying, necessarily self-identify. Most of them I met was through the FLI network, but I kind of missed the FLI e-mail during orientation.

So it was only later that I got involved with it. For example, they assigned mentors to the FLI people. I missed those e-mails, so I was never given a mentor until later on.

But I didn’t run into them that much. I felt like there weren’t all that many – I don't know. At least from personal experience, not just numbers-wise – it didn’t feel like there were that many. I would see them at some events, when they had the FLI shirt on as well.

[1:55:00]

I guess, at least personally, I always found that sort of tacky. I don't know. I didn’t like purposefully singling myself out like that. Not out of a sense of shame or anything, just simply – I don't know. I didn’t feel a need or the desire to walk around wearing a shirt that just self-identified me as something.

Possibly kind of the same reason why I don’t really like walking around with shirts with big brands on them, where I’m like I am not your billboard, you cannot advertise on me. So it’s kind of that. I don’t really enjoy wearing things with big names of stuff, so the FLI shirt kind of ticked me off a bit on that.

That was kind of the main way I identified other FLI people though, by seeing them with the FLI merchandise. In hindsight, if I had gotten over that, if I had just done that, maybe just not the shirt, but something on my laptop or something, that might have attracted more FLI people to approach me. At least I didn’t feel like the identity of a first-gen necessarily tied us together into a coherent group.

People still had their other friend groups, and we didn’t just gather together and huddle together just because we were all first-gen. I think everybody has a different experience of being first-gen and everybody interprets it differently. Eventually people develop their groups and their cliques and who they’re going be with.

It wasn’t the sort of thing that just because the other person was first-gen you would develop like a mystical connection. I had that experience more often with a few Cubans at Hopkins and with other Latinos at Hopkins.
I think it deals more with what you – essentially what you feel a part of is more important in your personality – not personality, but in the upbringing. I didn’t feel like first-gen was that special, because most people that I went to high school with were first-gen. So I didn’t feel like being a first-gen was too distinctive, so it never became like a core part of my personality.

The same way that I was struggling with school and didn’t know stuff, everybody else was kind of in the same shoes as me as well. The same way I also had to deal with translating stuff for my parents in English, a bunch of other people also had to deal with that. So there were certain things that were shared in my high school and the people I was with was shared in terms of being first-gen and immigrant. It didn’t distinguish me, so it didn’t become a big part of me, my personality, versus – which translated to Hopkins, me not feeling like making a big deal out of being first-gen.

It’s definitely an integral part of me, but it’s not the first thing that pops up. If someone asks me about myself, it’s not the first thing I say, basically. Not because it’s not important, but because it doesn’t feel unique because of where I was brought up.

Now certain things change with – at Hopkins, for example, I have my identity of being Cuban – I felt more distinct because I could distinctly feel that there weren’t that many of us, so every time we met, it was more impactful.

The same way, a bit more than the first-gen, the same way with other immigrants. It felt like there was a bit more of a bond there because it was more easily identifiable, that you were different than everybody else around you. Versus I feel like first-gens can sort of blend in until people start talking about their parents, basically.

For a good while, actually, interestingly, I didn’t even – for a good while I kept going to Hopkins almost with the thought that everybody else was still first-gen, because I never processed the fact that people had parents that had also gone to university. It felt so normal from high school. We never really talked about our parents in high school. It’s sort of, yeah, your dad does this, that. Your parents do that, but it wasn’t anything crazy, it still felt normal.
So it was only in college when people started talking about – not necessarily talking, but where you started getting hints of people talking about college or their upbringing that things started clicking in a bit more for me, like someone talking about their parent that worked at the CIA, or someone mentioning how their uncle owns a couple of hospitals or their parents did this.

My roommate, his dad works at the IRS. So it’s one of those things where only until you get to that moment that you start realizing, “Oh, wait, I am once again the – I am a bit of an outlier here.”

But at the same time, at Hopkins it was never perceived badly. If I told people, “My mom’s a caregiver and my dad’s a delivery driver,” they weren’t like, “Oh, eww.” It was still more like, “Oh, wow.” To them, it felt exotic and it felt different as well, but not different in necessarily a bad way. Some other people would also be like, “Oh, damn, despite all that, look what you’ve accomplished. Wow,” and they would be impressed.

So usually, I never got like really bad responses, possibly because of the people I was with as well. A lot of my friend group ended up being also people that were in minority backgrounds or people that were very chill, and we were all more like fun types of people. So I wasn’t in a friend group that – it wasn’t out of the ordinary.

Even the person whose uncle owned a couple of hospitals or whatever, it’s not like she lived in that sort of elite environment where she’s never heard of people that – it’s one of those things where, at least because of my friend group, it didn’t feel alienating, but at the same time, it was not something you necessarily brought up all the time – so it didn’t feel weird.

I think Hopkins kind of helped a bit. In maybe the first-gen and also the economic piece, Hopkins helped out a bit in that everybody kind of – you couldn’t immediately tell somebody’s upbringing based on how they looked or how they were.

Here in Miami it was a bit different because a lot of people drive and you could immediately pick up somebody’s socioeconomic status, because they’d just park next to you in the college parking lot with a Ferrari, that sort of thing. A lot of people like to show off here, probably because of the culture. They wear extravagant things and clear brands of stuff like Versace and Gucci and all that.
That’s also not something I really encounter at Hopkins as long as we didn’t have cars. There’s no designated student parking lot, so you couldn’t have people bring their fancy cars in. A lot of the times in freshman and sophomore year, people just went to classes in their pajamas. You can’t really tell how rich somebody is in pajamas. I’m not going be getting close to them and touching the fabric and being like, “Oh my god. This is some kind of exotic thread from India,” or something like that, there wasn’t that stuff there, so that also helped a bit.

Then a lot of other people were pretty chill. I think everybody was kind of generally chill about things. So you couldn’t really identify first-gens all that often. And the ones that I would talk to, when we would talk we weren’t talking about like, “Oh my god. I’m first-gen,” or, “You’re first-gen too. Let’s wallow in our pity, how hard our parents …” It wasn’t that. It was kind of similar conversations –

[2:05:00]

that I would have with other students that were not first-gen. Oh, what classes are you taking? What are your plans for your major? Whatever. Unless the conversation turned to parents, it wasn’t clearly evident like we’re all first-gen.

At least personally, the most impactful thing was essentially just people – like at the beginning of freshman year or sophomore year, when some people already had – people understood new things that I didn’t because of their upbringing, like salary renegotiations or negotiations, the importance of starting salary, just actual workplace behavior and more professional things, the applications for professional schools. It was in those scenarios where I realized – in the scenarios where it was like all these people know more than me about something, and not about some obscure thing, but they know something I should know but I didn’t.

It was in those scenarios where I was like, “Oh, whoa. It would have been good.” Sometimes it was a mix between it was my high school that failed me, because they didn’t teach me that, and other ones were like I didn’t know that because of my parents. Usually the parent piece ended up being more along the lines of I didn’t have any connections or networks that I could tap into through my parents, and a lot of other people around me did.

If somebody wanted to go to med school, their parents knew at least a couple people that were doctors or had done something like
that and they could connect the with. So it was in that regard where it was more evident, but that wasn’t happening – not much of that happened until later on in my undergrad career, when people were like, “Oh, boy. We’re about to graduate and we need to start being a bit more forward-looking. How do we decide what we’re going do?” this and that.

At least personally I guess, because of COVID and, like I said, because my friend circle kind of shrunk down gradually, I also didn’t get much of that, because by the time people were doing those things, where they were trying to like re-figure out, I was already – my friend circle was already so small that most of the people I heard that from were the people that were around me.

AS:

Yeah, I think one of the things you mentioned earlier, too, was the idea about internships and how you didn’t know that was a thing that you could potentially do in high school. I think that for me is something that I experienced as a first-gen also, but also the fact of FAFSA and my parents didn’t know how to fill out the financial aid stuff.

I know there were other students, my friends that their parents had done that for older siblings or they already knew that was something they needed to do. But explaining that to your parents and being like, “I need you to fill this form out,” was like a big deal. So there’s definitely just little things like that where you can connect with other first-gens about, but I do think Hopkins makes it kind of like this artificial group that isn’t always necessary because I think you gravitate, like you said, to people that you want to spend time with and that you get along with, you know, just generally or that you have similar interests.

So I really want to ask you a few more questions, if you’re willing to stay on for a little bit longer. I wanted to ask you – I know that you mentioned your program of study starting and then sort of shifting your major. So I wonder if you can talk about that.

Then I also really want you to talk about your extracurriculars and this dance group that you mentioned. So maybe if you want to talk about academic stuff and then extracurriculars while you’re at Hopkins, I’ll put those questions out there now.

YR:

Yeah. I’ll try to be brief because I tend to ramble on. I just realized now –

AS:

I want to be mindful of your time.
Yeah, it looks like we have quite a bit to go. In all honesty, if you do want to – if you also have to leave and you want to continue this another day, I’m also fine to schedule another time.

I have time this afternoon if you want to keep talking.

Yeah. I can keep talking. I mean I don't know if we’re going get through all the questions, but I will try to be more brief about things.

So in terms of major –

I’m a bit ambivalent about it. I feel like it’s too broad. My major is international studies, it’s too broad. If I wasn’t going to law school, I honestly wouldn’t know what the hell to do with it. It’s kind of so open-ended that it might as well not even be there.

It also didn’t give me like a niche. [AS mentions becoming president inaudibly] Ah, I’m not US-born, remember? Maybe some position that’s not in that line of procession. It is very broad. Even then, I’m exaggerating, I did sort of know what I could do if I wasn’t going to law school and I was fine doing those things.

My main reason for choosing it is I figure that I like the interpersonal touch of things. I like problem solving, dealing with people, and I felt like international studies would put me in a position where I could do a career that dealt with people.

Also, back then I had this naïve thought of helping people, to better the world, that sort of thing. That kind of carried through from high school because in high school I had to do a lot of community service and a lot of the people that were around me in my friend group from back then, and also people that I met through those community service clubs ended up doing those things.

Eventually you sort of get tied into this group mentality of help people and this and that. You kind of repeat something so many times you start believing it. It’s not that I don’t agree with helping people, but the extent of what I was thinking was definitely a bit naïve. Now that I’m outside of that environment my thoughts have definitely changed a bit, and the ways I can help people have also changed.
I’m no longer thinking like, “oh my god, I’m going build some machine that’s going revolutionize the world, cure cancer.” Now it’s none of those thoughts, it’s more like I’ll help the people that show up. As long as I’m helping a couple of people that’s fine, by doing things.

Part of that wanting to work with people is also part of the reason why I at first thought of psychology, but psychology ended up being a bit different than I thought. I learned it mainly dealt with working with people with mental disabilities a lot of the time, unless you’re going the counselor or advisor route, that sort of thing.

I knew that I was not good at dealing with – like I wasn’t good at dealing with normal people much less like people with mental disabilities. I knew that about myself, so I was like, okay, it doesn’t seem like it’s that branch.

Also, for a long time I had conflicts between what career do I do where I can actually can put to use, but I also need to make some money, I can’t just be living on minimum wage. I can’t spend this much time doing this, it’s not just me, I have people that are depending on me.

Some of the internships I took, I saw people, for example, went to law school and then worked like public service afterwards. Every time I talked to them, generally what echoed in their story was they already had parents that were making quite a decent amount of money. They didn’t need them to take care of them whatsoever, so basically it’s just like they just have to worry about themselves, whereas that’s not an experience that reflects me. I have quite a bit of people that are depending on me emotionally, but also financially and everything else. I needed to keep that in mind.

Part of reason I kind of got into an argument with one of my advisors was because she was like, “Oh, what if you –?” She was suggesting sociology, history. It was that sort of advisor mentality where it was like, “Just find something that you like and do it.” I was like, “No. I need to think about what I can do with this. I’m not going tie myself,” especially because up until this time my approach was do things that will open up more and more doors for you and more opportunities. I’m not going tie myself into a dead-end.
So it thoughtful. If the world was perfect and I didn’t have to worry about all this stuff, yeah, sure, I would have gone and done zoology and I could pet animals all day and things like that, but that’s just not how reality is. It just kind of fit.

I wanted to learn more about the world. I enjoyed history, I enjoyed political science, I did enjoy economics. It just sort of tied pretty well together into international studies. So rather than picking international studies and then figuring it out, I sort of went – and the pros were I was trying to figure out what I liked, and then I was trying to see what major fit the most boxes, and it just so happened that international studies ticked most of them for me.

So I was like, you know what, that probably means that this is the way to go. And I agree with it, it actually gave me a lot of freedom to choose my classes. I’ve been able to take classes that I find very, very interesting and that I enjoy, rather than having to be forced to take some classes that might not be – that I had to take just because.

In terms of extracurriculars, the first advice I got going to college was don’t sign up to too many things, you’re going to get overwhelmed. I took that and I took it to the extreme, to the point that I signed up for so little things that afterwards I – now I’m like I should have signed up for more things.

Part of it was I didn’t find things interesting, and I was bit burned out from doing BS stuff during high school just for the sake of doing it. I really didn’t want to do that again. So the only stuff that I signed up for was stuff that I genuinely felt had my interest.

A problem with that was I still didn’t know what I was going to do, and I didn’t want to just start signing up to a bunch of random things. A lot of the things I signed up for were just like cultural clubs, like my dance club, my Latin club, that stuff. What I did was I signed up for the Cuban-American Undergraduate Students Association, that’s the full name of it.

So I did those two things. For a brief time, when I thought maybe consulting was the way to go, I signed up for a consulting club and I hated it. I got out of it. I do enjoy the idea of it, the problem-solving aspect of it, but it also had a bunch of other things that I didn’t enjoy.
Something I found out about myself is I like being in charge of the results of my actions, so things like think tanks or consulting or research papers, those kinds of things. Academia I didn’t enjoy because I wanted to be in charge of the effect of my actions, and I didn’t want to do a lot of work just to have somebody be like, “Nah, we’re not doing this.” That didn’t sit right with me.

So essentially just things that I figured out over time. Eventually I settled on the idea of, yes, I would do international studies. I would do law school. I became part of the judiciary, the SGA. So I did a few things, but I didn’t do as much as I could have and stuff that now, looking back, might have actually been interesting, but I was judging that entire club and their activities on perceived notions and one-liners.

There were also a lot more clubs than just showed up at the career fair. Hopkins also didn’t help with that because – not Hopkins – COVID didn’t help with that because of the whole career fair thing.

Eventually, because of law school I needed to focus a lot on keeping up my GPA and increasing my GPA, because my GPA took a little bit of a hit with my fall classes, with chemistry and calculus, which at the end ended up being useless because they had nothing to do with my actual major and graduating and law school, but it still affected my GPA.

Back then, I was still at that stage where I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do. Because I didn’t have a concrete goal, my motivation was sort of fragile, I’m a very goal-driven person, so if I don’t have a concrete goal or I’m not doing something for a reason, I tend to be very unmotivated. When that happened because of my changing majors and not knowing what to do – I kind of didn’t pay as much attention to my classes. I didn’t quite care as much about my grade because, like I mentioned before, actual grades didn’t really mean much to me.

I didn’t actually care. To me, there’s not much of a difference between a C and an A. Both are fine as long as I’m getting to where I want to get, and because I didn’t have that goal.

So after I did the law school, I felt like I couldn’t expand and do more things for clubs or get leadership positions in stuff, because it would eat away from my time that I needed to study to increase my
I thought I needed a better GPA to eventually get into a better law school. But now, I think it would have been nice to sign up for more things like Model UN and other things.

Not journals, I think college journals are useless. I don't know. It’s just like no one has – I mean I’ve had professors that were like, “Okay. We’re writing papers and you need to have peer-reviewed sources.” I would bring in some sort of college journal. I didn’t realize what a college journal is. I was like a journal at Georgetown or something like that. They’d be like, “No. That’s not a valid source.”

So if professors are telling me that college journals are not a valid source for research, to write in my research papers, that means why would I join a Hopkins journal when that’s probably not even going be …? So, it goes along the lines of why do something when it’s not going be useful or impactful?

I should have done stuff just to learn more, and I should have done stuff to do it just for fun. But the for fun stuff, in my head, ended up being a bit mixed with – because of the high school experience with taking BS clubs – it ended up being mixed and instead of just being like, “I’m doing something for fun,” it was, “Ugh, why am I doing this?” I’m not going do it just to do it.

I do wish I did more community service, but I feel like I had such burnout from high school that I had a really hard time doing it. Community service at Hopkins is a bit different, where a lot of times it was very focused, like you had a project and you did it for a semester or longer.

That’s good, honestly. It’s good to do it that way, especially when your project deals with interacting with people. You need to be build a rapport. Back in high school, it was more like we just jumped around to places that needed it, sometimes we’d do beach cleanups, sometimes we’d do parks, sometimes we’d do runs and walks.

I kind of had that perception, that that’s what things would be. I actually found that interesting, because it kept things a bit exciting and changed things up. You met different types of people all the time and I found that fun, versus the idea of just sticking to one thing and doing it for the entire semester as community service. That’s not the type of community service I thought I would enjoy. I might have actually enjoyed it, but I didn’t think I would.
I wish I could have at least tried it for a bit and, worst case, just leave it, versus I didn’t even try. So that’s one of those things that club-wise I wish I would have done more, at least just tried things, and if I didn’t like it I always had the opportunity of just backing out.

*AS:* It is really hard to know what is going be a time suck, too. I think that is one thing you learn in college is time management and what’s going be really overwhelming. It’s good that you found some things that you enjoy, but it’s also good that you didn’t overcommit.

I would love for you to tell me a little bit more about maybe memorable professors or classes that you had. I know you mentioned earlier, I’ll just throw this in, too, internships or things that you might have done over the summer breaks, in between semesters. So if you could touch on those two things that would be great.

*YR:* Yeah. Professors, I would say – let me start thinking in terms of by year. Freshman year I took quite a bit of classes with – I forgot what her first name was, but her last name was Hindmarch-Watson. She’s a history professor, she focused on Europe, Great Britain, that area. Very fascinating. She’s a great lecturer. I loved her, she’s very knowledgeable and she’s cool. I feel like she was very memorable for me because I took a couple classes with her.

[2:25:00]

Afterwards, some other professors that were memorable – let me see. Later on, when I started to focus my concentration on international studies, on sort of refugee and migration, I took quite a few classes with Ilil Benjamin. She’s still one of my advisors, a very amazing person, a very amazing professor.

A lot of people say Emily Zackin for constitutional law, like American constitutional law. The sweetest woman I’ve met, an amazing person, as well a great lecturer, very knowledgeable. I really enjoyed classes with her.

If you give me a second – [pause]. I took a class with Professor Applebaum on the Soviet Union. I think she’s part of the Agora Institute. Yes, I took a class with her, very memorable. She was intense. That was one of the semesters that – before that semester I took 18 credits. I was cruising by, I was still fine.
That semester with 12 credits I was dying. Not to say that class was the cause of that, it just so fascinating and so interesting that I was fine with such a heavy workload. She was teaching at a graduate school level, because she’s only ever taught graduate students and didn’t have much experience being a professor. She had a Pulitzer Prize and everything.

It’s one of those things where she was so used to being at such a high intellectual level that she wasn’t accustomed to teaching people at undergrad, and she expected them to perform at a higher level. The people that stuck with her class ended up performing at that level because we were just sort of forced to get to that level. It was very energy, time-draining as well, but it was worth it. I really enjoyed that class.

Professor – I have a list that I kept myself actually – Professor Brendese. I took a class with him. He was actually a great lecturer as well, very passionate.

I took a class on disinformation with Peter Pomerantsev. Also a great professor I would say, a very cool guy. The class was interesting because he had guest speakers come in and stuff. He was very knowledgeable, but also apparently very well known within his field, because the guest lecturers would come in and be like, “Peter’s job is one of the reasons that inspired me to do this or write this.” I was like, “Whoa.”

So it’s a kind of cool mix between just professors being – it’s where you feel like a professor is not just this person, but where they have actually real-life impact, it was kind of cool to see that.

The other one – let me see. I’m trying to find the – there was one more, but for the life of me I cannot remember her name.

AS: Do you remember what class she taught? We can probably add it after this.

YR: Yeah. She taught a class called – the recent one she taught me was called “Power,” a class on basically just like power. She’s a great professor. She’s also very memorable because I had another class with her, which I didn’t realize it before. I had a class with her, it was my introductory level IS, international studies class. I think it was called “Global Studies” or something like that. And she almost failed me! Which is probably why it was so memorable. In the final she wanted us to use peer reviewed sources, and I thought I had used peer reviewed sources.
Apparently I didn’t. Some of them were, but enough. It didn’t get to the criteria of the amount.

I was very salty about that because the TA was like, “This would have been an A level paper, but because you failed to meet the requirements it’s a C.” So I literally got a C on my final paper for that class just because of this.

Only later, when I took this class with her, I was like, “This is very familiar.” I typed her name into my e-mail to be like, okay, where is she from? That’s when e-mails from that time showed up. I was like, “Oh, she was the teacher for this class.”

There we go. I found her name. Renée Marlin-Bennett. But overall, once it was like one-on-one and it wasn’t like a big lecture, she was a very sweet person. She was very amazing as well. All those professors I’ve said were my favorites from my time at Hopkins. She was memorable partly because of that.

What was your second question?

AS: The other was about internships or what you did over summer break.

YR: Oh, internships, yes. I was considering doing – part of the reason I decided on law school is because in freshman summer I took an internship at my local congresswoman’s office. I wish I would had known I could apply for Hopkins grants to do it back then and I wouldn’t have been so poor that summer, but I didn’t so I was poor.

But yeah, I took an internship with her just to see more of the political science aspect of it. Then there was an in-house attorney there, and I had a lot of communications with her. I talked to her very often. I would just show up to her office and talk to her about what she did, that’s probably that’s part of one of the reasons it started interesting me, the legal aspect of it, sort of the day-to-day aspect in talking to her.

That was the first internship I did, because back then I thought I wanted to do more in the political science aspect. But while working at the office, because it was in Miami, a lot of the time we had immigration issues. So a lot of the work I did, because I was
the only Spanish speaker in the office - I find that very bizarre
given that it’s an office in Miami - but I was the only fluent
Spanish speaker, so they had me do a lot of translation work just
between clients and them.

Because a lot of people came with immigration issues, we helped
them. I was involved with a lot of immigration work for them
because of my experience with immigration and being an
immigrant. I went that sort of cliché route where it was like maybe
I want to work in immigration and help with that. Maybe this is the
way I want to help people.

Then my sophomore year summer, I worked at a migrant workers’
rights organization, partly because I was a little bit tight on that
because of COVID. There weren’t that many place that were able
to transition to remote, so I had to take what I could.

The other one, because I wanted to continue that sort of
immigration trend before that, also from talking to people in law
school and that had gone to law school, I was informed that it did
not look good if I jumped around too much in what I was doing. It
looked better for applications if I had a focus and I could talk on
that focus, which is part of another reason why I decided to stick to
the sort of immigration path aspect, not just with internships, but
also with my focus areas for international studies, because it all
just tied into a nice narrative for my applications.

[2:35:00]

Like I said, I take advantage of things as I can. I was like if this is
my background and I already did these things, the only thing I
need to do to sort of milk it is get a concentration on this or do an
internship on this, it’s not like I’m only doing it because of this,
I’m doing it partly because I’m interested. So I kept it up with that.

That summer it was a bit weird because everything was virtual. I
wasn’t used to working virtually. It also helped me to realize that I
do like to work directly with people and mostly in person, having
to talk to people and clients, especially because it was mainly
migrant workers from Mexico and talking to people from Mexico
and stuff, it felt very disembodied.

Eventually I became a bit desensitized and really didn’t feel – not
desensitized, but I became a bit more uncaring – not uncaring
towards my work, but more of like that internal aspect of sympathy
of wanting to help people, was a bit damaged because of the fact
that the people I’m helping are these disembodied voices through the phone. It didn’t feel real in that aspect.

So I guess the impact of COVID, for the first question you asked. So I didn’t want to – it always worried me with working with humanitarian things, especially immigration, the humanitarian and civil rights. It always worried me that I would become desensitized to my work and I would become uncaring, and I didn’t want that to do.

That was also a part of like it was driving me a bit away from working in that space. I don't know. It's one of those things where they say if you love something don’t do it all the time, because then you’re going either start hating it or you’re just going become ambivalent to it, and I didn’t want that to happen to me.

Because of that summer, it made that fear even more prevalent because I was becoming ambivalent. I wasn’t seeing these people as like actual humans. They were just these voices and it didn’t feel that real, it helped me understand that I like working with people in person or at least meeting them every once in a while in person, not just completely online.

Also, talking to those attorneys working there and stuff, it also informed me more about specifically legal work in the immigration space. I decided it wasn’t really for me, the main reason being what I said before, that I like to be in charge of the results of something, and I like my actions to have an impact.

A lot of frustration, at least specifically within the immigration field, is that you don’t really have much of an impact on what happens, because you could spend – I mean I had attorneys telling me that they spent six, seven years doing something, like a project and then all of a sudden, just because the administration changes some law, all of a sudden five or six years of work comes crashing down.

One of my advisors that before had worked to promote DACA, she helped present and convince Obama’s administration to continue with DACA. When stuff started happening with Trump and DACA program, because she was actively out there convincing people to sign up for the DACA program, convincing immigrants, and undocumented people.
Now all of a sudden she was depressed. She was like, “Because of my actions, now all of these people are going be deported. They’re going to be suffering.” She had it rough for a bit.

I mean even if it’s just not that impactful, other people have told me that within that space they’d been working there for years and years, and they would tell me, “You see this case that we’re getting. Even ten years ago, I was getting similar cases. It’s been ten years and nothing has changed. It’s still the same, generally, of people having the same problems and it hasn’t changed.”

I mean there is change that can happen, but it’s a field that could be frustrating and I realized that, and I didn’t want to put myself through that.

Then junior to senior year of college, I basically spent most of it having to study for the LSAT, for the law school admissions test. But for a brief period of time I did this “internship.” It was called an internship, through a connection, I managed to get into a Kirkland & Ellis internship. Kirkland & Ellis is one of those mega firms, mega law firms.

I would say this was my first taste of that elite life. I could not believe that – it was a program that was two weeks long, only three hours every day and I could not believe that essentially for that little amount of hours – for two weeks, three hours every day, Monday through Friday, I got paid $1,500.00.

I had to work my butt off the previous summer just to make essentially like $2,000.00, like full-time for ten weeks. I worked so damn hard. Then these people were just giving me this, almost like a free – they even sent me gifts – they sent me like a Yeti mug, like a thermos. I looked it up and it was like 50 bucks online. I was like, “What?”

I did that. It was through a connection. One of my mentors knew somebody at Kirkland & Ellis that was in the hiring department. She was told through them that they were doing this program for people interested in law school, in a legal career, and I sort of managed to sneak my way in there.

So that’s what I did, but mainly just studying. I did that because I wanted to have – I saw so much of the public service aspect, at least the immigration public service, I wanted to know what the
private sphere looked like, especially these big firms, because I was told that’s where the money is at. These are the people that your starting salary is $200,000.00. So I’m like, okay, I want to see sort of what the structure is like and things, just to expand my selection and see things, actually make informed choices this time around I would say.

*AS:* Yeah, it’s good to have a sneak behind the curtain or whatever, kind of a glimpse of what the potential options are for when you get your law degree. I just have a couple more questions for you. Since we’re kind of talking about trajectory here, would you might telling me a little bit more about what life after Hopkins looks like? So you’re thinking of going to law school. Are you going stay in Baltimore? What does that plan look like?

*YR:* After Hopkins, so essentially in August I’ll be matriculating and starting Yale Law School. So, I’ll be moving to –

*AS:* Congratulations!

*YR:* Thank you. So yeah, I’ll be moving to New Haven for the next three years. Once again, it was one of those experiences like Hopkins, it’s very validating. It feels like all the work, not just through Hopkins, but even before then, is being rewarded, so that’s my plan.

Baltimore specifically, honestly, something I found out about myself, sometimes I don’t like to be tied down to one place too much. Even here, I love Miami, I love the city, but after a while I kind of just want to leave. I want to see new things, I want to do new things.

Baltimore is kind of the same thing. Going from Miami to Baltimore, I find the city utterly boring. One of my friends went up there to visit me and D.C. and stuff. We were like, okay, we’re going take an entire day just to explore Baltimore. I even had my roommate’s car and everything just to do it.

We were going spend a day to visit Baltimore. Four hours later we were done with everything there was to do in Baltimore. We were like, “What are we doing?” We just went back to my apartment to watch movies and binged on movies because there was nothing to do.

The Towson, it’s just the Towson mall and not everybody is a mall person. The aquarium, a bit too expensive. So there wasn’t really
all that much to do. I also find nightlife in Baltimore to be a bit boring.

AS:

When you come from Miami, Baltimore nightlife can be boring.

YR:

I don't know. I’ve gone to Fells Point and things like that. It’s sort of nice to do every once in a while. But one, it can get a bit expensive because you do it with Ubers if you’re not in a bigger group.

[2:45:00]

Then also, it’s more of a sitting down culture and I do enjoy being able to stand up and dance, not every place is like that.

I didn’t quite like Baltimore. Also, there’s just the health concerns. I live two blocks from Greenmount. For a period of time, either last semester or a couple months ago, literally in my block, in my street and a couple of streets next to me, that’s where in the span of three weeks like four car-jackings took place.

My roommate got pushed against a wall by like a homeless person who basically extorted him out of money. Literally one of those Hopkins security guards, the ones that are standing by every corner, was right there and did not do anything about it. We just don’t feel safe essentially, I don’t feel safe.

I could walk out in Miami, depending on neighborhoods obviously, but I could walk down the street at 3:00 AM in the morning and I would probably still be fine, not worried. In Baltimore, it’s just like I – even near campus, I just don’t feel safe.

Also, Hopkins’ response to things are a bit sketchy, because they only tell you about stuff that happens to affiliates or sort of big things. We used this app called the Citizen app, where it’s directly tied to like police radars, and you actually do get a picture of everything that’s happening around, and a lot more stuff happens that you’re not told about from the security e-mails from Hopkins. There’s muggings that happen on St. Paul in front of literally places where people are just there to eat food and shop.

I remember that incident where the two people got robbed at gunpoint when they were walking next to the BMA, like that path to go into Hopkins from the BMA. Then after that, that thing was closed for like a couple months. I don't know. It’s generally that.

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3 The BMA is the Baltimore Museum of Art, which is right next to the Homewood campus.
Maryland at large, I’ve been Annapolis and I’ve been to Severna Park. Those were not bad places. They’re nice places to visit. I wouldn’t say live in. I didn’t spend much time there, but they’re nice places.

I also enjoyed that I was near D.C., but most of the stuff I was doing in D.C. was just like day trip kinds of things and not really live there. But at least Baltimore itself, I wouldn’t. In the future, if I have to visit it, I will, for alumni weekend and things like that, but I wouldn’t go out of my way to go there.

**AS:** Yeah, that makes sense, that’s a good reflection. The question that I have, I’m actually going just merge. So I was wondering if you felt supported, and you touched on this a little bit. You felt supported as a first-gen student. From your point of view, are there other ways that the university can increase support for first-gens? Also, would you recommend Hopkins to other first-gens?

**YR:** I would say the people at Hopkins are amazing, I would say. But in terms of administration-wise, it can feel very cold sometimes, like very impersonal. The thing is, for example, like I’ve met and talked to President Daniels before, he’s a very chill, kind of shy dude. He struck me as like – he was very interesting, and you’re like, “Is this the same person that was making these what seem like horrible decisions at the university?”

But then obviously you realize it’s not him necessarily. You have the board of directors. You have other people with power. He’s just a face in the – and when doo-doo hits the fan, he’s the one that gets blamed, but he’s not the only decision maker.

Sometimes Hopkins is run like a business. There’s also other aspects of Hopkins, all its other branches that might be more profitable for Hopkins, the med school and those sort of things. Hopkins as an entity, it’s a lot more profitable for those and the undergrad sometimes feels a bit neglected, at least from the administration side of things.

[2:50:00]

I worked at the Career Center for example, and I could get an inward view of people’s frustrations as well, generally with administration and wanting to do things, but also not having the budget, trying to bring employers and this and that.
Administrationally, that’s the thing, I understand it could be better, but I also understand why it happens.

People wise – I would say the people are great, at least the people I gravitated towards – I can be pretty good at networking. I would say it’s one of things I’ve picked up, both from my background and being a first-gen that I needed. Because I didn’t have a network I could rely on, I had to build my own. So I surrounded myself with very supportive people and mentors and things like that, but I basically had to find those people myself and taking the initiative to navigate resources and go around and find things because it was never offered to me. Or if it was, it was just mentioned in an e-mail somewhere sometimes, I kind of forgot those sort of things.

I only learned about some assistance programs that Hopkins had, like for example, Hopkins can give you a loan, when you’re struggling financially, they can give you a loan, and I didn’t learn that until for some reason financial aid decided they wanted to screw up everything, and I was already three weeks into the semester and I still had not gotten any of my refund money back, money that I was relying on for food and for everything else. They decided, “No. It’s going to take long. It’s going to delay.”

After it was processed, then it was like, “Well, when is it going be issued?” They said, “Well, it’s issued the 15th of every month,” or something like that. Not every month, like every 15 days or something the office goes through and issues refunds. I was just like, “Whoa. But I need that. I need the money now. What are you talking about?”

Then that’s when I was introduced to, well, you have the loans. I forget the amount, but I took out one of the loans. It’s one of those interest-free loans, essentially. At least thankfully for me, the way it worked out it was just money in advance, because they charge it directly to your student account. But because my student account had money there that they were supposed to give me back, essentially I took out like $500.00 from money that was already going to be given to me, and they just basically took out their $500.00 from that amount and I just got $500.00 less than the overall amount, so it was more of a forward payment.

I know some people sometimes, like when you do need that money, I was also not aware you can get free meal passes for the FFC. When this was happening, it was my sophomore year when I didn’t have a meal plan. I didn’t have anything like – you know.
For a little time I expected the money to come in, and the only thing I had in that summer – I didn’t get any money because I was working at the congresswoman’s job. I didn’t know I could apply for that. At the end of last summer I only had like $100.00 in my savings account.

After I began college, I kind of refused to ask my parents for money because I didn’t want to burden them anymore. So I just went to Hopkins with my parents not knowing anything. I went to Hopkins with like $100.00, I was expecting the refund money to come in any day.

It was my first real apartment, so I needed to buy stuff, especially because we had a two-bedroom, two-bathroom. So I had to buy a shower curtain, I had to buy some bathroom necessities. I split with my roommate stuff for the kitchen, like kitchen appliances, things like that.

[2:55:00]

Even though I split, eventually my money started decreases. That’s the first time I realized how expensive a bathroom rug was. Before that, I was like it’s a bathroom rug. Even now, I’m like it’s, what, $4.00 or $5.00, something like that. Back then, I was like, “Oh my god. A bathroom rug is $5.00. What? Why is it so expensive?” For a bit I would like just throw a shirt on the ground and I’d just step on that. That’s one of the moments when Hopkins failed me. I started living off of 7-Eleven food, because there’s a 7-Eleven right next to Homewood. I started living off of 7-Eleven, like that $1.00 pizza.

It was interesting. Eventually I learned about those meal passes and I actually got some FFC meal passes, but the only way I learned that was through essentially me telling my – because by then I had somebody in the counseling center that I was seeing – that’s the person that also became my FLI mentor.

It was essentially me telling her, “I’m goddamn hungry,” and telling her what I was going through. She was like, “Whoa, whoa. Hold on, hold on.” She said it was like Student Life – either Student Life or it was a religious center had the meal passes.

So there are resources at Hopkins, but Hopkins doesn’t always do a very good job, it’s not very connected. It’s very departmentalized. Each department sort of handles their own thing, and unless you
have the drive and the ability to yourself navigate and find those resources, nothing is just ever handed to you.

So that’s the one thing I definitely think Hopkins could do better, even just the departments talking to each other, that’s something I think could be done better.

But the people themselves were amazing. Like I said, the person in the counseling center. I’ve had other mentors, but not everybody has that same experience. I mean my roommate refused to go to the counseling center because the first person he got was a bitch, according to his words. He’s like, “This person, she doesn’t understand me at all. She was very transactional.” He felt like he wasn’t being really listened to.

So it’s a bit of hit or miss, but it seemed like that’s the – you’ve just got to be able to navigate. There are resources, but you’ve got to be able to navigate them.

Similarly, even stuff with career-wise and job potential. That’s also something that, from discussions with my roommate, it’s like, yeah, Hopkins has a very big pool and a large network, and a Hopkins degree is impactful, but it’s only impactful to the extent that you navigate through the Hopkins networks and you take advantage of them. It’s not going come – it’s not like – you’re not just going be sitting there and it’s going be handed to you.

In terms of recommending Hopkins to other first-gens, if they’re FLI, like first-gen low-income, even with all my other scholarships, Hopkins basically gave me enough money for me to basically have a full ride. The people there are also amazing, they’re very understanding.

Like I mentioned before in my interview, I didn’t have anybody necessarily judge me, but it could also be because I wasn’t in those groups. I have heard of like crazy people at Hopkins, like students and stuff that are not as understanding, but I feel like they’re more the outlier of everybody. Everybody just kind of minds their own business, I would say, and is in their group.

The thing is it’s not just about – you can’t just target Hopkins, because a lot of the things I’m saying are not just things that are solely applicable to Hopkins – it’s just like a bunch of the problems that Hopkins has are things that are applicable to other higher education places, other universities.
Also, you’ve got to look for, I guess, what matters for the other smaller things. The city is not great, but I guess the Hopkins bubble is fine. Although some people want to burst the Hopkins bubble and I understand why, but at the same time, it feels a bit naïve to try to do that – I remember – I guess overall, administration could do a better job.

There are resources. You need to be able to take advantage of them yourself I would say. If somebody is a first-gen and has that drive and the ability to do that, to sort of navigate networking systems and the institutional systems, I think they can get a lot of advantages, can get a lot of benefits out of Hopkins.

[3:00:00]

AS: Yeah. Is there any advice that you might offer other first-gen or FLI students?

YR: Get to know people. That’s my advice. I keep referencing my roommate, but that’s probably because that’s the person I talk to the most. Honestly, yes, classes are interesting and everything else is interesting, but what will pay off the most is connections.

At Hopkins and everywhere else in your career, whatever they end up doing, even as an engineer or whatever it is, don’t neglect the connections. I feel like a lot of people neglect that and it comes back to bite them. Do the things you find interesting, but just also be a bit more pragmatic and realize that – be a bit forward-looking, I would say.

AS: Yeah, that’s really helpful. I always like to end on this sort of question of after all these years and all the time that you’ve spent at Hopkins, how would you summarize your time here, your growth maybe.

YR: I would say it was fine. Maybe Hopkins, the school and the city has made me more cynical, probably because of my roommate because he’s also a cynical person, he increases it for me. But I feel like it was fine, I have definitely grown as a person and I have enjoyed the way I’ve grown, the aspect of it.

I believe I have been more realistic to things. I’m better at looking at things from different angles as well. The growth I’ve had, I mean I enjoy it. Even though the atmosphere can sometimes, at least from administration, can feel a bit cold. It’s not a school with the biggest school spirit, which would have been fun and whatever.
At the same time, I feel because – I feel Hopkins reflects life a bit more than some other – life, and adult life and career. It reflects that a bit more than other undergrads and other universities. It will leave you more prepared for that, just the rigor as well for whatever job you have.

The atmosphere makes you learn to deal with people. Even the experience of walking down the street and trying to avoid all the homeless people on St. Paul and tell them no. Even literally stuff like that gives you a more realistic picture of what life really is like, and prepares you a bit more for that than if you lived in this fantasy magical undergrad, where every weekend is always parties and everything is happy, and the all of a sudden you get hit in the face with reality.

I feel Hopkins did a better job of keeping it realistic, even though a lot of people would have rather had that fancy, joyful experience. But then you’ll become one of those people that’s constantly saying that the best time of your life was in college, and I kind of find that very sad.

AS: Yeah, I think that’s a great point to sort of walk away with. You’re bound to do so many more things in life, and I’m excited to see what you’ll achieve and what you’ll do.

I really appreciate you interviewing with me today, so I just want to thank you for that. Then I always end asking if there’s anything else you’d like to add that we didn’t talk about, or if there’s anything in particular that was on your mind that you wanted to share in closing.

[3:05:00]

YR: I would say find your group of people. That was a really helpful thing for me. But I also saw other people that struggled for a while because they didn’t have friends and people to fall back and rely on, even if it’s just like one person, things can get a bit hard.

Overall, especially because of the pandemic, something I realized personally is that the same way that you should have initiative and have drive for academics and career and have that initiative, you should also have that for your social life and for everything else. It’s something that, like now for example, I was fine with my social circle shrinking down during the pandemic, but then you’re
going get to the point where you want to reach back out to them and then it gets a bit awkward.

But at the same time and just generally, you want to reach out to people and you feel awkward, but sometimes you’ve just got to do it, I would say. This is more applicable towards my fellow introverts out there than the extroverts, but it’s one of those where it’s going make life at Hopkins bearable and, honestly, even fun. It's not going be the scholastics, it’s not going be even the clubs, it's just going be the group of people you end up with.

If you don’t have that group of people, even if you’re doing the most chill classes and just cruising by, it’s still going feel miserable. It’s going feel monotonous. Versus if you do have those people, even the toughest moments still have a bit of a ray of light through and you still have those people. And even after college because of a lot of the really good friendships you do make, at least I’m predicting, will continue on after college.

I’ve always been told that making friends after college is definitely more difficult. When you’re in the workplace, rather than during college, you don’t want to start off that experience on a bad foot and being all alone.

I’ll say that and kind of just staying true to yourself. I personally was not a person that had a lot of FOMO or fear of missing out. I was actually really happy just staying in and either reading a book or playing some video games or watching something while people were out and partying and things like that.

So it’s more of like it’s fine what – because a lot of people, some people that I knew in freshman and sophomore year as well, I mentioned those too because that was in person. Also, those underclassmen, it’s more impactful for them, for underclassmen.

Once you get to senior year, if you do go to a party you show up in pajamas. But most of time it’s just like you don’t even care about going and you’d rather just do stuff in your apartment, small group settings. I’m more of that type of person, but I wasn’t even that type of person back during my underclassmen, my freshman and sophomore years, but sometimes you get pulled into an atmosphere that either you’re fine with it or you don’t really vibe that well with it.

I think I would say it’s fine not to fit in, to be honest. You don’t need to get pulled onto the bandwagon. It’s fine not to fit in. If
other people are out doing things, just be yourself. If you want to do it, if you don’t want to do it, it’s totally fine.

Especially at Hopkins, like even that, sometimes Hopkins has a very liberal – like you have people espousing certain ideals – you have people that are like virtue signaling. You’re going run into that in everywhere in life and even other places, but it’s one of those things where you get better at recognizing that and understanding that, but sometimes you end up getting pulled into an atmosphere where people aren’t virtue signaling so much. You still get drawn into that, even though you don’t really believe in it or – [audio cuts out and warbles] – you’re indifferent about it.

There was protest, where they had to shut Garland Hall down – [audio cuts out and warbles] – they blocked all the exits, including the fire escapes. They were protesting this injustice that they saw, and yet essentially locked administrators into a building that was a fire risk and beat up a security guard, who had to go to the hospital. So it’s one of those things where like – I don’t know. Think for yourself. Don’t get pulled into atmospheres.

[3:10:00]

Don’t get just pulled into doing stuff just because. Try to keep aware of yourself and try not to let the environment change you too much. I really say now, because once you go into the real world you get a bit more diversity and opinions, unless you specifically go somewhere where you don’t. But higher education can be one of those places where, because you’re surrounded by people, that don’t generally think the same as you, so hold onto your actual beliefs.

AS:

Yeah, I think that’s a really great point to end on, and super advice for students who are just beginning their journey at Hopkins. So I just really appreciate you sharing your candid thoughts about that.

That brings our interview to a close. I’m going stop recording now.

[End of Audio]