**Class of 2019 Junior Introductory Questionnaire**

As part of the comprehensive college counseling process, please complete the following questions with care and detail. Your responses will be used to assist us as we advise you and write your letter of recommendation. Use as many pages as you need. The word counts given are suggestions, but the more detailed you can be in your responses, the better. Your answers will also be helpful to you in the future, given that many college applications ask questions similar to the ones below. We strongly recommend that you keep a copy of this questionnaire, as it can be a helpful document to reference when you work on college applications next year.

ALL RESPONSES MUST BE TYPED. You must upload your completed questionnaire on Naviance (instructions are below at the end of the document). **Deadline: End of the school day on Friday, January 12th, 2018.** You will not be able to have a junior family meeting until this is completed.

**YOUR INFORMATION**

**Your Full Name:** Sebastian Anand Varma **Year You Entered St. John’s:** 6th Grade (2012)

**Your Email (list all emails that you check):** [svarma@sjs.org](mailto:svarma@sjs.org), [sebasvarma@gmail.com](mailto:sebasvarma@gmail.com)

**Your Cell Phone:** 832-525-5968

**FAMILY INFORMATION**

1. **Parent 1 Name:** Rishi Varma **Parent 1 Email:** [rishi\_varma2000@yahoo.com](mailto:rishi_varma2000@yahoo.com)

***If attended college/grad school, please list degree, name of institution, and grad. year:***

* **Undergraduate:** BA (Philosophy), Georgetown **Year of Graduation:** 1994
* **Graduate:** JD, Georgetown Law **Year of Graduation:** 1997

**(Approximately 150-200 words) Please list this parent’s occupation and share how his/her educational background and occupation have influenced/affected you and your interests.**

My dad is the general counsel for HPE. His job as a lawyer has influenced me to be interested in government and public affairs. As a result, I have become engaged in activities such as Debate and Model UN because they allow for the discussion of important issues and potential solutions. Additionally, his job as a lawyer has led me to become interested in questions of logic and causation, and this interest may be the initial cause for my interest in math because of all the underlying rules and patterns. While I am not personally attracted to the idea of being a lawyer, I still have been influenced by his job in the technology sector, as I have been exposed as a result of it to the latest updates in that industry. I believe that this influence has been a large factor in the growth of my interest in a job working with technology.

* **2. Parent 2 Name:** Michelle Lopez **Parent 1 Email:** [lopezvarma@sbcglobal.net](mailto:lopezvarma@sbcglobal.net)

***If attended college/grad school, please list degree, name of institution, and grad. year:***

* **Undergraduate:** BA (Spanish Literature), Yale **Year of Graduation:** 1993
* **Graduate:** JD, Georgetown Law **Year of Graduation:** 1997

**(Approximately 150-200 words) Please list this parent’s occupation and share how his/her educational background and occupation have influenced/affected you and your interests.**

My mom is a corporate lawyer as well, although she does not practice anymore. Her occupation as a lawyer interests me in the same ways that I listed above. Because she attended Yale, I believe that I am more inclined towards this school than many other upper tier schools. This bias, however, may not last throughout the next few years, as I believe it mainly exists because I have not done much research into different colleges, and as a result, Yale is the only one that I know a lot about.

1. **If you have step-parents, please list their name(s), occupation and school information. Also, share how your step-parents’ education/occupation influenced/affected you and your interests.**

I don’t have step-parents.

1. **Do you have siblings? If yes, please list their names, ages, and school/college/university they attend, if applicable.**

I have two sisters. Nina, 15, is a freshman here at St. John’s. Lucia, 12, is a 7th-grader at St. John’s as well.

**PERSONAL**

***Character***

1. **(Approximately 200 words) What are your principal strengths? Please explain in detail.**

One of my principal strengths is my creativity. It allows me to see relationships between various ideas that are not always obvious. For example, it has helped me greatly in math class because I have been able to apply different theorems in nonstandard ways to solve difficult problems, and in history class I have been able to make interesting arguments relating two events in a new way.

Another one of my principal strengths is my ability to try new activities. Up until the end of eighth grade, my only interests had been in STEM fields. Then, I decided to try out for the middle school play at the end of the year because I had always heard my classmates discussing how much fun it was. I discovered that I really enjoyed it and continued to act throughout high school. Additionally, at the beginning of ninth grade I decided to join Chorale, and I have continued to sing in choir since then, although now in Kantorei as well. Finally, in tenth grade I decided to try a debate tournament because I had enjoyed classroom discussions and arguments in the past. I discovered that I enjoyed it just as much as all of the other activities I had tried, and I still debate today. This attitude, I believe, will serve me well in college because I will be adventurous and take classes in fields that I do not know a lot about or try new activities I have never heard of.

1. **(Approximately 150 words) Name your closest friends. If they had to pick 2-3 words to describe you, what words would they pick? Why?**

Mark, Ishan, Jonah, and Matthew would most likely describe me as witty. I have participated in a range of activities, ranging from debate to the OTC competition, with each of my closest friends, and in these activities I believe that I have demonstrated a significant amount of intelligence via my contributions to the team and that my friends have picked up on this. Additionally, outside of the academic realm, I always try to insert some humor into conversations with my friends, and I believe that they have picked up on this and consider it to be funny as well (otherwise we probably would not be good friends).

Another word that my closest friends would most likely use to describe me is sympathetic. Because of our friendship, we regularly share the issues that most affect us with each other. When this process takes place, I do my best to provide advice rather than judgement to my friends in order to help them resolve the situation.

1. **(Approximately 150 words) In which ways have you demonstrated leadership either in or out of the classroom? Describe in detail.**

Inside of the classroom, I demonstrate leadership by always engaging in the lesson and potentially involving others as well. Sometimes this means raising my hand to answer a question when no one else will. It can also mean being willing to ask a question (that others might have as well) about a confusing concept. I believe that through these actions the lesson can move along at a quicker pace, benefiting the entire classroom.

Outside of classes, I demonstrate leadership through a variety of different occupations. I served as an elected representative to the student government and organized a number of school-wide events. I am also a member of the leadership of a number of different clubs. I am an officer of the Freethinkers club, which discusses the role of science and rational thought in contemporary society, the Young Liberal Organization, which educates the student body on a number of societal issues and registers voters, and the Microfinance club, which invests in the enterprises of entrepreneurs in low-income areas as a means to uplift the entire community. I am also the leader of the Philosophy club, which holds discussions about important issues and often collaborates with the Ethics bowl club. For all these clubs, my duty is to organize meetings and establish long-term goals for the club. I am also a board member of Texas Students United, a political organization dedicated to the pursuit of an equal, quality education for all students. In this capacity, I organize volunteers to help the campaigns of various candidates and to lobby at the state capitol.

***Activities***

1. **(Approximately 200 words) What 2-3 activities are you involved in outside of the classroom that you most enjoy? Why are they important to you?**

Throughout high school, I have enjoyed working on engineering competitions. Last year, I was a member of the four-person St. John’s OTC team, which was tasked with creating a more efficient and time-effective alternative to the current process of oil rig decommissioning. Through the competition, I met with industry officials and conducted extensive research on the existing processes. Eventually, we presented our solution at the OTC conference and were awarded second place. This year, I am a member of the St. John’s team competing in the GoFly competition, in which teams must construct a vehicle capable of transporting a man 20 kilometers, as part of the electrical engineering and computer science groups. I have enjoyed both of these competitions because they allow me to apply the knowledge I have gained in math, science, and computer science classes and also expose me to new subfields in those areas that I would not have otherwise come in contact with.

Another activity I have enjoyed is speaking competitions such as model UN and debate. Last year, I competed in two debate tournaments and won both in my division, and I have continued to debate this year as well. Topics that have been discussed at tournaments range from whether to require a warrant to conduct searches at schools to whether missile-defense systems should be deployed in South Korea. I also served as a delegate to the Houston Area Model UN as part of the environmental programme committee, which discussed methods to clean earth’s waterways, and I won an award within the committee. This year, I plan to attend the Houston Area Model UN again as well as the MIT Model UN. I have enjoyed both debate and model UN because they allow for the discussion and debate of important issues and have helped me develop my argumentative and public speaking skills.

1. **(Approximately 200 words) Describe your most significant summer experience during high school.**

After spending much time with my mom’s side of the family during winter break of freshman year, I decided to try to become fluent in Spanish in order to be able to talk with them in their native tongue. Some quick online research revealed that immersion is the most effective and efficient way to become fluent, so I decided to apply for the SYA Summer Abroad Program in Spain and was accepted.

The immensity of the decision I had taken did not really sink in until I stepped foot off of the plane and realized that I knew no one and could not speak fluently with anyone around me. All of this changed, however, within the next few weeks. I became close with my host family through family meals and sightseeing with them and got to know many of my peers quite well in classes and cultural activities. Through all of this socialization, my Spanish abilities rapidly improved to the point where I actually thought in Spanish rather than in English.

This improvement in my Spanish has greatly benefited me since that summer. I regularly talk with my family in Spanish and have performed better in Spanish class. Additionally, fluency in Spanish has allowed me to help others more effectively through community service, as I have helped tutor children that underperform on standardized tests and only speak Spanish.

***Reflections***

1. **(Approximately 200 words) Imagine you were hired to design and teach a class. Describe the title of the class, its contents, and why you chose it.**

If I were to create and implement a class, it would be “The Applications of Mathematics in Computer Science.” In this class, students would learn about how mathematical tools are used to enhance algorithms. Possible case studies include the use of gradient descent in neural networks, fourier transforms in audio engineering, matrices and matrix operations in graphics systems, and calculus-based physics in engineering software. Students would be expected to have a background in real analysis and linear algebra, as the course would be focused on teaching how to apply these fields of mathematics in computer science rather than teaching the math itself. A class like this would be important for a number of reasons. Primarily, it would demonstrate that math is in fact quite vital to much of our society, contrary to what many nowadays say. Additionally, I would hope that a class such as this would instill in the students a greater sense of curiosity about how various types of technology work. This curiosity could inspire some to solve existing problems in today’s society in more efficient and effective ways because they may realize an unexpected connection between the problem and a mathematical concept.

1. **(Approximately 200 words) What is your favorite fiction or non-fiction work (book, album, poem, or play)? Why?**

My favorite work of all time is without a doubt Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation*. Set in the far future, this fictional book explores the ascendancy in the wake of the fall of the all-encompassing galactic empire of a weak colony established on the periphery of the galaxy by renowned mathematician Hari Seldon, who has discovered how to mathematically predict how large groups will behave. This colony initially believes its goal to be the creation of a grand encyclopedia; however, it discovers that Hari Seldon has proven mathematically that it will eventually come to dominate the entire galaxy and thus serves as the “foundation” for a second galactic empire. Throughout the remainder of the book, this colony defeats its stronger neighbors through a variety of methods.

This book greatly interests me because of the idea that one can scientifically predict how groups will behave. It was this idea that first interested me in machine learning. Until recently, this ability has eluded the scientific community; however, recently developments in machine learning have enabled researchers to predict based on previous trends the choices people will make. While this is not exactly the process described in *Foundation*, it still holds the same immense potential as Hari Seldon’s field of mathematics.

1. **(Approximately 150 words) Describe a favorite quotation and explain WHY it’s your favorite. Or, share a motto by which you try to live.**

Bill Gates once wrote, “Success is a lousy teacher. It seduces smart people into thinking they can’t lose.” This quote is my favorite because my own experiences have led me to agree with its message. For example, in middle school, I had much academic success, and this success in turn led to slothful studying habits that ultimately caught up to me in ninth grade and negatively affected my grades until I finally started studying harder and more efficiently. It is not because of my success in middle school but rather my failure at the beginning of high school that I have adopted a better work ethic that will help me throughout the rest of my life. My acceptance of the message of this quote has produced two effects: a cautiousness in the face of a major success (such as an award or acceptable grade on a difficult exam) that ensures that I am able to experience more success as well as an optimistic attitude in the wake of a failure that allows me to learn from my mistakes and improve.

1. **(Approximately 200 words) Share an important high school academic experience or memorable “learning moment.” For example, did you ever have an “a-ha” moment in a class that changed the way you viewed a concept? Or have you ever had a breakthrough moment when you learned something beyond the obvious facts?**

Last summer, I participated in the Harvard Pre-College Program as a student in the Data Structures with Python class. This course required us to complete a final project that examined the relationship between multiple sets of data and drew a significant conclusion from our analysis of the data. As I had recently read an interesting book on the history of economics (*The Wordly Philosophers* by Robert Heilbroner), I decided to focus my project on some relationship between two sets of economic data. After conducting some research online, the largest data set I could find was on the United Nations website, which stored data on various economic and geographic aspects of every nation going back to the 1960s. I decided to examine the relationship between these economic and geographic statistics and % GDP growth per capita in the hopes of developing an algorithm that could accurately predict the % GDP growth per capita. However, after many days of cleaning and rearranging the data, I could find no significant relationship between the data and the factor which I was trying to predict. Finally, on the night before the project was due, I decided on a whim to examine the relationship between the economic and geographic data and whether or not the GDP would grow at all and was astonished to find that I could predict this factor with greater than 80% accuracy. This breakthrough that I had while working on the project is one of the factors that has led to my interest in data science, as I greatly enjoyed finding a hidden relationship between two factors.

1. **(Approximately 200 words) What one or two accomplishments (excluding an academic grade or a test score) in high school has/have given you the greatest satisfaction or sense of pride?**

The idea of writing an essay has always proved daunting for me. In elementary and middle school, I could easily spend hours to write a single page of an essay because of my inability to restrain from crafting primitive, non descriptive sentences that did not flow. Oftentimes, I would receive poor grades on written assessments because of my lack of ability, thus fortifying my fear of writing. Ironically, this distaste for writing stood in stark contrast with my love of literature, particularly in the category of science-fiction, thus proving even more frustrating because I had no idea how to emulate the authors I enjoyed so greatly. When I entered freshman year, I carried with me this distaste for writing, resolved to avoid humanity classes as much as possible. However, a peculiar thing happened. Through my english and history teachers that year, Ms. Carswell and Ms. DiPaolo, I finally began to understand the specific elements that made up good writing. As a result, I finally began to actually enjoy writing essays because I could effectively communicate my ideas. This improvement was exemplified last year when I won the award for best student in English II last year over classmates who I had long considered to be much more talented than I in writing.

1. **(Approximately 150 words) Is your high school record an accurate measure of your ability and potential? Have there been circumstances, personal or academic, that have interfered with your academic performance?**

For the most part, my high school record is an accurate reflection of my academic progress; however, there is one significant event that interfered with my performance that occured at the beginning of freshman year. Throughout middle school, I was able to secure acceptable grades without much effort, and as a result I never felt the need to study extensively for assessments, making the academic transition between middle school and high school particularly rough. The rigor of classes dramatically increased, and while I could still follow along in class, my relaxed studying habits left me unprepared for more challenging tests. By the end of the first semester, I finally began to perform well consistently as a result of realizing and correcting the issue of not studying enough, but by that point some damage had already been done. As a result, I believe that my lower grades from freshman year do not accurately indicate my understanding in those classes.

1. **Which teachers and/or other faculty or staff (e.g., coaches, club sponsors) know you best?**

My history teacher, Mr. Soliman, and my math teacher, Mr. Friedman, both know my personality quite well. There are many opportunities for classroom discussion in both subjects, and as a result I have expressed my opinions on various issues/problems in front of them.

1. **(Approximately 200 words) In the college process, we want to make sure students feel like we “get” them. Is there anything else that you think may not be evident from your objective credentials (transcript, scores, extracurriculars, etc.) that you’d like us to make sure we know that will help us “get” you?**

Over the past few years, I have attempted to avoid discussing college applications as much as possible because the importance of the process overwhelms me and causes great stress. I do not enjoy listening to the theories of classmates or people on the internet regarding what makes someone the “perfect” applicant or the factors that the most selective schools weigh most heavily because they do not seem that credible, and I do not want to waste my time doing the activities that those theories say would increase my chances of getting into a “good” college. Instead, I have tried to spend the last few years doing a wide range of activities to see which ones I enjoy the most, and I do not regret this. However, pushing college to the back of my mind may have hindered me somewhat, as I feel more ignorant than my classmates about the different colleges. I understand that some are at the very highest academic tier, whereas others are at the lowest, but I do not know what specifically differentiates any of the colleges at the highest tier from each other or whether I would fit in well there. I hope that in the coming months I will learn more so that I will be able to make informed decisions about the colleges to which I should apply.

**COLLEGE SEARCH**

1. **(Approximately 200 words) What academic area(s) are you most interested in studying at college? Do you have any possible major(s) in mind at this time? If so, what are they? Share any experiences that piqued your interest in these areas.**

At this point, I believe that I will study math and computer science in college. Computer science is my primary interest. I enjoy it because it allows me to create virtually anything I can think of. Specifically, I would most like to study artificial intelligence. I believe that this technology has much potential. That it is a “new” field is attractive to me because there are many different applications for it that are yet to be discovered. Currently, many companies in a variety of industries are eager to recruit college students that are capable in this field because there are so few established engineers that have experience with the field. There is no one experience that led me to this field; rather, I found out about it when doing my own online research about different computational algorithms. I would like to study math because a firm mathematical foundation can put one ahead of other students in the field of artificial intelligence because it is so math-intensive. Additionally, I would like to study math out of sheer interest. It is the subject in school that I have always enjoyed most just because I find its patterns incredibly fascinating.

1. **Possible career plans (one or several or undecided):**

Currently, I believe that I will join a larger tech company right after college to gain job experience. After a few years there, I might start my own company if I have an exceptional idea, but if not I would just try to move up within the company. I recognize, although, that this career plan as well as my main interest could easily change in the next few years.

1. **Do your parents agree with your choice in possible major or career plans? If not, what have they suggested?**

I have not discussed my career plan or possible majors with them, but I do not think that they would have any significant objections. They have never tried to push me towards one specific occupation or career path because they want me to do what interests me.

1. **Are you interested in pursuing any specialized programs? Please check all that apply:**

☐ Art ☐ Music ☐ Dual Degree (Dental) ☐ Co-Op Program

☐ Dance ☐ Design ☐ BS/MD ☐ Pre-Vet

☐ Theatre ☐ Architecture ☐ BA or BS/MBA ☐ ROTC

**Additional explanation:**

I do not believe I would want to pursue any of these programs because they all lead to careers that do not interest me.

1. **Do you plan on playing competitive sports in college (athletic recruiting)? If so, provide details:**

No.

1. **Do you have any specific colleges or universities in mind/on your radar screen at this time? If yes, please list:**

As I have mentioned, I have not done a significant amount of research into various colleges yet. However, there are some in which I am interested: Yale, MIT, Harvard, Stanford, Rice, University of Chicago

1. **Are any colleges or universities already at the forefront of your mind? If yes, please list them in order of preference (up to six). *It’s fine if you don’t have preferences yet!***

(1) Yale (4) Stanford

(2) Harvard (5) University of Chicago

(3) MIT (6) Rice

1. **Do you plan to defer going to college for a year or more? (Yes, No, Maybe)**

No

1. **Are there any other factors that may affect your college choice (e.g. family or personal circumstances)? Will finances/financial aid play a role in your college choice?**

I don’t believe so.

1. **(Approximately 150 words) Do you feel little, some, or a lot of pressure due to the college process? Why? How do you respond to the pressure?**

I definitely feel some pressure in the college process so far. For the past few years, I have tried to focus as little as possible on college and instead do activities such as acting or singing just because I enjoy them. However, now I have to think about doing activities such as preparing for the SAT with the only purpose of getting into a good college. I also am worried because deciding where to go for college is one of the first major decisions I have had to make, and I am not sure that I will make the right decision. I am lucky that the majority of this pressure is internal. While my parents press me to get good grades, they have assured me that they will be happy with whichever college I attend. Thus far, I have responded to the pressure by reminding myself that this entire process will hopefully be done within a year. This strategy has so far been effective in relieving some of the stress I feel.

***Social/Academic Climate: Try to identify criteria for making decisions about college (check all that apply).***

**Size of School:** **Campus Setting:**

☐XS (<1000) ☐ Super Urban (in the heart of a city, no real sense of campus)

☐ S (1000-3000) ☐ Urban (in a city but w/ a campus feel)

☐ M (3000-8000) ☐ Suburban (close to a city but removed enough to have its own feel)

☐ L (8000-15000) ☐ Rural (campus pretty much the only source of entertainment)

☐ XL (>15000) ☐ Super Rural (nothing but the college)

**Location of Campus:**

☐ Houston ☐ Texas ☐ Southeast ☐ Southwest

☐ West Coast ☐ Mid-Atlantic ☐ New England ☐ Midwest

☐ Great Plains ☐ International

**Do your parents agree with these geographic preferences?** ☐ Yes ☐ No

**Comments:** My parents agree with all of these preferences except for Texas. They would rather that I move outside of the state for college. I would rather this as well, but if the best school I get into is in Texas, then I would be OK with attending it.

**How challenged do you want to be academically?**

☐ Rigor Galore ☐ Very Rigorous ☐ Somewhat Rigorous ☐ Somewhat Easy

**What level of ethnic or racial diversity among the student body do you desire?**

☐ Very diverse ☐ Somewhat diverse ☐ Mostly like myself ☐ Not important

**What level of geographic diversity among the student body do you desire?**

☐ Very diverse ☐ Somewhat diverse ☐ Mostly from my area ☐ Not important

**Student Politics:** ☐ Liberal ☐ Moderate ☐ Conservative

**Religious Affiliation**: ☐ None ☐ Light ☐ Moderate ☐ Strong

**Are you willing to consider a single-sex college?** ☐ No way ☐ Perhaps/not sure ☐ Yes

**Naviance Upload Instructions**

Please follow the following instructions to submit your Junior Questionnaire:

**Naviance Family Connection→ About Me → Journal → +Add New Entry**

1. Type: assign your journal entry to a general category
2. Subject: title your entry “JUNIOR QUESTIONNAIRE”
3. Share with: you MUST check the “counselor” share box in order for your counselor to view the item, otherwise it is a private entry
4. Choose file: select documents from your personal computer to add to Naviance
5. Attach: it is easy to forget to “attach” – don’t lose your work!
6. Add journal entry: this saves your entry, you may edit or delete at a later date
7. **Email your counselor** letting him/her know you’ve completed the Junior Questionnaire.