

February 1, 2026

Dear Members of the Admissions Committee: I first met Shivani Pandey in 2021 at a coffee shop near the Metropolitan Museum in New York. She had just begun her freshman year at Vassar and had only been in the U.S. a short time. What struck me that morning wasn't anything dramatic—just how naturally she handled a new city and how quickly she turned a casual conversation into a thoughtful discussion about art and perception. It was clear she was thinking hard about the ideas that interested her.

We've kept in touch since then, mostly through occasional calls. When she asked if I would be willing to write on her behalf, I hesitated for a moment only because I should say up front: I'm not an academic psychologist, nor am I a professor. My background is in business. I teach in Stanford GSB's Executive Education programs and work with founders on innovation and business model design. So my perspective on talent is very much shaped by applied problem-solving, not scholarly frameworks. I hope that context is useful rather than distracting.

Even from that vantage point, there are things about Shivani that stood out. She has been very deliberate in how she's built her skills. Once she realized that her questions about human memory required more technical grounding, she didn't abandon psychology—she added computer science. Her master's at UNC Chapel Hill was, in my view, a strategic decision made unusually early in her career. Many people discover they need technical depth only after running into a wall. She anticipated it.

She's also been geographically and intellectually adventurous in a way I don't often see in someone her age: growing up in a smaller city in India, attending high school in Singapore, then choosing a college near New York. That pattern—seeking out new contexts rather than staying with the familiar—is consistent with how she approaches her work.

During the period when she was designing the study that became her first-authored paper for the HCII 2025 conference, we spoke a few times about her ideas. Her hypothesis was that virtual reality might strengthen the Mind Palace technique. She built the environment, ran the study, and learned that the traditional mental method worked better. I remember being impressed by her reaction. She didn't try to rescue the hypothesis or explain away the results. Instead, she became more curious and ran follow-up interviews to figure out what was actually going on. That kind of response—treating an unexpected result as information rather than a setback—is something I see in the strongest founders I work with. It's rarer than you'd think.

Because I'm not an academic insider, I can't evaluate her in the same way a research mentor or professor would. What I can say is that her trajectory from cognitive science to computer science to neuroimaging has been cohesive, not opportunistic, and that she has the kind of disciplined curiosity I've learned to recognize in people who end up doing meaningful work. She thinks across domains, and she does so with intention.

If your program is looking for students who ask real questions, adjust quickly to evidence, and build their skills in service of long-term goals, I believe she would fit well. I recommend her with confidence.

Sincerely,

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