

Episode published October 29, 2025 | Transcription by Augusta Smith, '29

Maggie Johnson

Welcome to *As Spiders Do*, the University of Richmond podcast where we share stories about our amazing alumni. I'm your host Maggie Johnson from the class of 2018. Today I'm speaking with Siwanta Thapa, class of 2023. Join us as Siwanta shares his journey navigating cultural transitions, embracing his identity, and finding community and mentorship in unexpected places. From academic excellence to personal growth, we explore the balance between planning and discovery and the importance of authenticity and self-care.

Siwanta Thapa

Well, I'm Siwanta Thapa. I graduated class of 2023. I'm originally from Nepal, now I'm a current grad student, also at Columbia on a leave of absence. Yeah, that's me.

Maggie Johnson

So how did you find UR from Nepal?

Siwanta Thapa

That's a great question. So, we didn't have this usual, I guess, high school counselor structure. It was very much self-directed and it was me and three other high school students who, you know, started exploring common applications and colleges, and University of Richmond was in the mix because it's a liberal arts university. It teaches you, you know, not just your field of discipline, but also the cultural capital, right? And like a more holistic sense of development. And I really liked, when researching liberal arts universities and small colleges, I really liked the welcoming environment and the support that was given to students from diverse backgrounds. So that really drew me to Richmond.

Maggie Johnson

And did you find that same experience once you arrived and started your studies here?

Siwanta Thapa

Yes, honestly, I would say I found that and more because in Nepal I used to be, oh I mean, I still am a queer person, but I was somewhat alienated from my peers back home. And then when I came for international orientation, there were all these icebreakers and questions about who I am, things that I enjoyed about myself. And that was fascinating to me because I feel like the American system of icebreakers allowed me to kind of see the rainbow or the diverse range of my identities. And also, to realize that queerness was indeed not the overshadowing arc of who I was, but there was also many different aspects to myself as a human being.



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I love that you kind of point that out, I think a lot of times we're so used to doing icebreakers that we don't always think of it as a chance to explore who we are. Do you think your identities changed at all over your time at UR?

Siwanta Thapa

UR definitely helped me see the multi-layered aspect of my personality, whether that was the opportunity to write these really thoughtful essays or engage in discussions. I think the feedback and the ability to engage in a dialogue with the mentors there who have such incredible cadence, I think that helped me discover a lot of who I am. For example, I enjoy social settings, I really enjoy discovering other people's interests and learning more about the community, and I think these values still stick with me.

Maggie Johnson

That's wonderful. On its face, folks might think that those would be at odds with each other. But when I hear you talking about like learning about people and discovering their interests, I get that scientist vibe from you. So, I don't think many people would be familiar with I think you called the connection or two for one program that led you to Columbia. Could you talk a little bit more about that?

Siwanta Thapa

Yeah, so the [Combined Plan program](#) is where you spend either three or four years at the University of Richmond with your primary major and then you transfer those credits to Columbia where you start an engineering program of your choice. Whether that's electrical engineering, mechanical, or if it's one of the surprising programs, I guess, that's that like you said, it's hard to discover. One of the other programs that I did when I was at U of R was, I'm forgetting the exact name, but you were allowed to take one or two classes at any Virginia university, and I took advantage of that to study at VCU. So, I guess I'm technically also a VCU alum. So, U of R has a lot of fascinating programs. I think it's about exploring and asking the right questions.

Maggie Johnson

How did you find studying at the other universities compared to University of Richmond? I know you probably had a more kind of full on-campus experience at UR, but what did you see as the connection points between all the places you've studied?



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Siwanta Thapa

All the places, because like I'm thinking back to Nepal and that's like really different. I think South Asian families tend to focus on academics a lot, like I remember in Diwali, Tihar, it used to be said, "I bless you with the ability to study a lot." But I would say Nepali education was, it was very helpful in the sense of not being afraid because there, it felt like there was no limitation to what you could achieve. University of Richmond was different in the sense that it was much about the individual exploration. Like Richmond is just a really different place because a lot of factors, like you're set up for success. And there's a lot of spurious variables that are, you know, removed from the equation. You're in this really like, you know, you have this connection with nature because the campus is beautiful. You have all these resources that, you know, support you in your journey to learn. And I think I also went to Galway, Ireland, NUI Galway. I also, guess Columbia was another university. I would say Richmond listened to its students a lot and supported students on their individual journey. And I think that kind of an environment was really rare to find because in a city environment, you're almost diffused into the outer world and it's more difficult to establish that cohesive community, and even outside of academics, I had a lot of opportunities like being involved with the international club, and being a part of the International Student Advisory Board, I am still in touch with our mentors, Lisa, I think she's retired now from Common Ground, and Roger. So, those kinds of, you know, close-knit community where you're able to engage in a more customized and individualized dialogue with, you know, your mentors and professors, that's definitely like aspects of Richmond that I think is very, very different.

Maggie Johnson

So, I know you've mentioned a few people and a few activities, but is there anyone, experience or person that was really influential for you on your time or during your time?

Siwanta Thapa

Oh my God, that is such a hard question. When I first stepped into U of R, it was very much new. Everything was new. The culture was new. And I think there's a lot of strength in finding the extraordinary in the ordinary. And I think even just the randomness aspects of the culture really intrigued me. For example, people holding doors for you. Like sometimes I would just like run to make it to the door because I felt bad that the other person was holding it. From the very beginning, I was part of the Peers, Advisors and Mentors program, and I would say Ms. Walton and Roger were and have been, you know, guiding factors or like mentors because that exuberance and excitement, right, about just, you know, everyday mundane aspects. I think they kind of helped me give that space to strategize and reflect because there was so much that was happening and whether it was, you know, getting my first job on campus, which was with Dr. Warwick in the biology department. I think there were many



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instances where Roger and Ms. Walton culturally guided me. Whenever I needed that space for guidance, it felt very natural to reach out to Lisa too. You she was in common ground. I was heavily involved with, you know, the activities. And I think that space for just an authentic feedback, I didn't realize was very rare. Even outside of the staff, right? I think the faculty too, like were very crucial. For example, Dr. Lechrone would spend time outside his office hours to help me understand Mathematics properly. I also did research with Dr. Diaz who, and this still sticks with me, which was she always mentioned the saying, you know, completion over perfection. And now I've started using that as a mantra to guide my next steps where I'm like progress over perfection.

Maggie Johnson

I love that. So, did you do research kind of in the biology field then, with that professor?

Siwanta Thapa

Yes, yes. So, Dr. Warwick, took, I mean, now I'm forgetting the name of the class, so I feel bad. I think it was called, it was a first level bio class. We read a book called Time Love Memory, I think it was called, and it was about genetics and how Seymour Benzer was able to isolate, almost, the genes of behavior using the Drosophila fly as a model organism. So, this was my first year in itself and I was already ready to do research with Dr. Warwick and it was an incredible opportunity because I was able to perform like behavioral tests for these larvae. We were trying to check the role of Ataxin-3. So, Machado-Joseph disease was a motor degenerative disease where the neurodegeneration of certain neural pathways or neurons led to motor dysfunction. I got to dissect Drosophila larvae under a light microscope and they were so tiny and then their brain was even tinier, and then prepare slides and then, you know, observe like fluorescent stain and then observe those slides under a confocal microscope to see if there's any co-localization between the disease protein and a taxin-3. And interestingly enough, that project led me to another internship in a completely different field, quality testing because that motor precision was a transferable skill that I could use to test the tiniest semiconductor particles. So, I found that link to be an example of the transferable skills that I would hear a lot at the University of Richmond. And working with Dr. Warwick really helped develop better habits in the sense of journaling your entries or showing up on time and, you know, doing your due diligence. It was a unique opportunity that I think would have been hard to discover as a first year.

Maggie Johnson

Yeah, absolutely. I'm getting a lot from your stories about both the planning and the question asking, but also a little bit of the like unexpected. Here's where I ended up despite all the

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planning. Is that a thread you see or how much of a role do you think planning plays in that genuine discovery?

Siwanta Thapa

There seems to be a balance because I started off with trying to get to the bottom of things. Like I really found, you know, Dr. Warwick's class amazing. I also really enjoyed the research that we did together. But then I started trying to get to the atom of, you know, the universe and behavior. And I think I realized that physical phenomenon dictated a lot about, you know, the constraints of the physical world. And that kind of led me to physics in a way, even though I hadn't planned on it. And I agree you have to plan and be like, okay, these are like goals that I want to set. But there's also a certain level of calling where you kind of have to make that informed decision of what is it that I enjoy? Right? What is the impact that I want to create and what are my constraints, right? My background. And then trying to find that, that middle ground, that common ground. And I think that's kind of what led me to Columbia. And after I graduated, I worked with Dr. Paul in the Applied Physics Department. It was a nuclear fusion project, something completely different from what I started with when I first came to Richmond. And like now I'm back for grad school, but I had to take a leave of absence because of, you know, health setbacks. But I'm a bright engineer and scientist. And sometimes I think there are these setbacks and I think you have to navigate them with care, compassion, and planning for sure. Being able to recognize these rare spaces where you get to strategize your plans moving forward. I think I'm incredibly grateful for those opportunities and spaces that were created by, you know, my peers and mentors, because as important as it is to discover your interests, it's also equally important to be compassionate to yourself and also pursue wellness into the equation.

Maggie Johnson

Yeah, I think we've all had experiences where we're facing a setback or something almost stops us in our tracks in a way. And I love that you highlight both care, compassion, and compassion for self I think is so important too, but also strategy. So how have you worked through those moments and is there kind of advice you would share with anyone else who might be kind of facing a setback in their own lives?

Siwanta Thapa

I guess this advice, right? It would depend on, you know, where the recipient's background is sometimes because being a first-generation student, I think for me, the first phase was discovery, right? It was curiosity, which then led to exploration, which then led to discovery. Trying to find your place. Sometimes you do that through active exploration, right? You collect enough information and then you find a place where you're able to utilize your

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interests, right? But also, sometimes I think there's a balance between personal autonomy and collective care. And you also have to realize the environment that you're working on, right? It's like the intersection between collaboration and impact. So, let's say you're really curious about physics, right? Then the next question would be like, which setting would I you know, be able to make the most impact or, know, whatever's important to you, right? Whether it's in an academic context or whether it's, you know, in an industrial context or, you know, something else entirely. And I think gathering field data also tends to be helpful. So, when I was at Richmond, I went to interactions with alums because then it was a space where you got to ask these questions of things that are important to you. So, I think it's about like collecting information of different paths and then making that decision where you put the weights on objectives that matter more to you. And then you optimize that moving forward. Even at Columbia, I went to so many, and I still do, go to so many different speaker events because there are these kernels of wisdom that, you know, aren't easily discoverable, but in these spaces, right, where the speaker is engaging with, you know, the audience, it's a chance for you to actively dig at what's important to you. So, guess that would be my, my advice to people that are actively exploring. Health setbacks, I think it's, it's okay for things to just be and to just exhale. I've learned to realize that. It's interesting that you asked this and I hope I'm not blabbering because yesterday I was questioning like what made me, you know, so fulfilled at Richmond, right? What made me so, you know, exuberant and excited because like you said, everything kind of stopped. And then I discovered one of those aspects, which was nature. So, I went out and then I lay down this mat in front of this tree in our backyard. And I just lay down there and I didn't think about achieving. I just took some time to just be and just observe nature. And that made me content and present. Sometimes it's okay to just be, I think. And health is really important and everyone keeps mentioning it, but eventually you will find that synergy between human doing and being. And I think that's a journey that is lifelong.

Maggie Johnson

Absolutely. And probably comes in different eras and ways. There might be a time where you're being more than you're doing and vice versa. I think it's really beautiful. And I think that's always at the heart of kind of when we talk about mental health and balance and it's not always going to be one for one or equal. And you have to define the moment that works the best for you. I would love to ask if there's been a speaker either at UR or Columbia that's really challenged or helped you kind of recalibrate the way you think?

Siwanta Thapa

How do I say this? I think it's been the dialogue that I've been able to engage with. For example, there are some professors at Columbia. Like one of the things that he would tell me, and this is D.D. Meakin too, was you have all these goals, right? And all these things that



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you want out of life. But the first thing sometimes to ask is, what is the first step to achieve this? Because sometimes these goals are so exciting, life is full of possibilities, and it's easy to get swept in that direction. But taking a step back to, you know, breathe and figure out, okay, if I want to do this, what is the first step that I need to achieve this? And I think that helps to kind of formulate a more strategic approach to things. The more personalized feedback that I've been able to get has definitely been from mentors. One of the things that, you know, D.D. Meakin told me was, because there was a moment where I seemed to struggle, compromise on the quality of my work or the care for the people that I love. And one of the things that I guess my mentors helped me realize was your kindness can be a wrapper, right? Your culture, your heritage, your heart, humanity, knowledge. That's at the core of that kindness, and I feel like feedback is important because sometimes when you're in the middle of things and you're so driven, your mentors kind of, or your peers, helps you to just reflect and take a step back. And I think those moments are really important because sometimes you're at crossroads and you're trying to find clarity and then it feels as though the wave is pushing you towards a certain direction. But, you know, ultimately it's up to you to make that decision. And in order to make an authentic decision, I think it requires a lot of like exploration as well as introspection. And I'm really grateful for these spaces that, you know, helps you make a more informed decision.

Maggie Johnson

So, I'd love to ask just where are you in your journey? Kind of what's next and where are you headed?

Siwanta Thapa

I think for now I'm doing the active work of, you know, what my next step should be. I mean, my family has been incredibly helpful. For example, when I went to Colombia, my mom would cook food for me twice a week and my dad would drop it off to me. And I'm starting to realize how lucky I am to have such dedicated parents because I remember my mom, she would wear these gorgeous silk saris, head above shoulders, pencil stilettos. And she was the first woman I ever saw ride a motorbike in Nepal. And it was a masculine motorbike. And she would pick us up from school, me in the front and my sister in the back. And then she would go on working as a bank officer at Nepal bank limited. And my dad similarly held a position of reverence. And like one of the reasons they left Nepal was because they wanted me, they knew that I'm queer and they wanted me to be safe. So, it's hard to forget the sacrifices that they've made. And I think now everyone's coming together to kind of strategize next steps. And I am incredibly grateful for their support as a son of immigrants. It's been a journey of that collective excellence across different cultures. So, all these experiences at Richmond, Columbia, I don't think it would have been possible if not for some of the decisions that they've made.



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Maggie Johnson

I love that idea of finding excellence across cultures. So, I guess I would love to hear a little bit more about that and what you think navigating that has been like and any threads of continuity that you see?

Siwanta Thapa

It's interesting because in Nepal, from at least what I remember, excellence would be academic excellence for as long as I've remembered. And then I kind of did use it as a shield to protect myself in a way, because I realized academics was a way where I'd be able to find community, right? It led me to the University of Richmond. And then coming to the U.S., I think that definition of excellence has varied quite a bit and it seems to be different for everyone. And there's still very much that attachment to excellence, but I think now it's been about what does that mean for me? I think another aspect of finding that excellence has been how good of a listener I am or a team player, right? Even outside the context of school. For example, when my sister came to the U.S. while I was still at Columbia, there was a lot of cultural adjustment. And I think being able to be there for her as sort of like a bridge or just a listening ear. I think excellence comes in different shapes and forms. And sometimes I think the pressure to conform, it could shadow your own authentic version of excellence. And I think being able to separate those two or kind of like see what excellence means to you, I think that's where you get to live your authentic life.

Maggie Johnson

Yeah, absolutely. So, in this moment for you, what does expressing your authentic self-look and feel like?

Siwanta Thapa

Honestly, in this moment, I think being authentic, think it's about just taking care of my physical and mental well-being. The expectations of conformity from one culture was very much different from the other because Nepal is very much a collective culture where people tend to think in terms of families. And then in the US it seemed to be a bit more about the individual. And I think being at that juxtaposition for a bit to me felt disorienting, but there's also a lot to gain from that. Having multiple cultural references because then you're able to see what identities of certain culture works for you. What aspects of, you know, this other culture works better for you. And I've learned how to kind of navigate those mercury waters, but, you know, draw strength from the, from the synergy between them. And as much as, you know, it was helpful to be in these academic institutions to do research, right? And engage with peers and academics and learn more about, you know, your field of interest.



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Being back at home is definitely grounding. Nature has been grounding and as important as it is for a tree to keep going up. I think it's also important to spread your roots and be reminded and grounded. So, I think that's what authenticity is for me right now.

Maggie Johnson

Yeah, I think that's beautiful. So really my last question is just, what does it mean to be a Richmond Spider?

Siwanta Thapa

I mean, reflecting back on my time at Richmond, I think it gave me this very important reference of what I value in a community or person, right, versus what aspects I would want to improve. And I think coming from this intellectual community, right, this place of, you know, the safe haven and the liberal arts education, right, being able to navigate the landscape from multiple different lenses, because there's infinite ways to view the landscape, right. And I think it gave me this sense of being and having that reference and measuring this unknown quantity with a known quantity and making that decision and the beam balance of finding community and your place in the world. So, I think being a Richmond Spider, for me, it has meant being connected to this web of people that have made different choices from you, right? There are directions in this web of like, life outcomes, they perhaps optimize for something else, But I think despite all that, still being able to be connected and still creating that safe haven so that people from all sorts of different backgrounds still have that place and are still able to come and reflect and strategize and feel like they're a part of the community, regardless of who they have been. So, I feel like being a Richmond Spider means to be empathetic. It means to stay connected. And it's about finding that common ground, not just with your peers, mentors, but also varying cultural contexts.

Maggie Johnson

Thanks for listening to *As Spiders Do* from the University of Richmond Office of Alumni Engagement. We hope you enjoyed hearing from our alumni and learned a little bit more about what it means to be a Richmond Spider. This episode was edited and produced by Stephanie Moki, class of 2026. See the show notes for information about our music and sound effects. You can subscribe to *As Spiders Do* wherever you get your podcasts. Write our show and leave us a review to let us know what you think. We're always looking for new stories to share. So, let us know who else we should feature by emailing us at alumni@richmond.edu. That's all for this episode. Talk to you soon. And remember, there are spiders everywhere and that's a really good thing.

