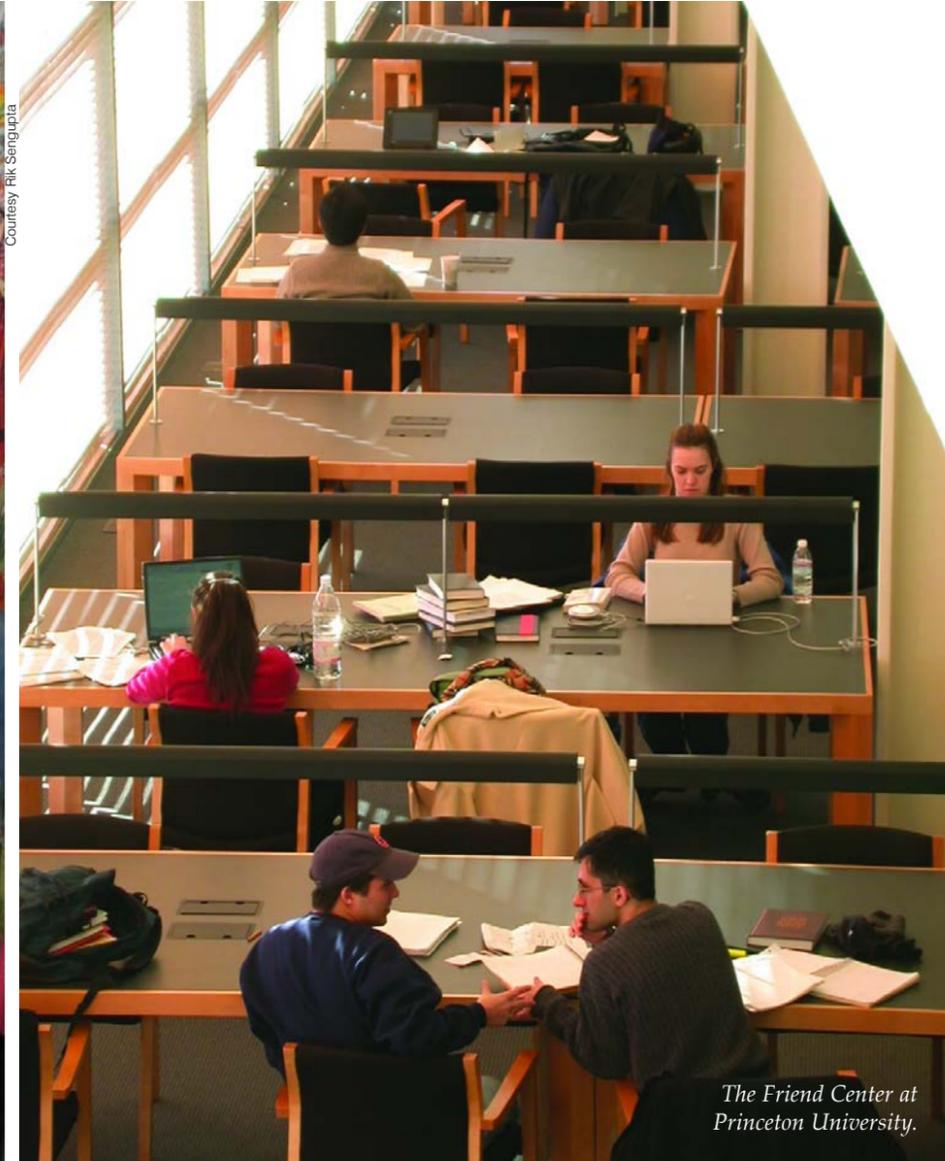


THE GENIUS NEXT DOOR

By VAIDEHI IYER

Rik Sengupta, who was offered full scholarships by seven U.S. universities, is an academic whiz as well as a fun-loving teenager.



The Friend Center at Princeton University.

Rik Sengupta is a charming, extroverted, soccer-crazy, piano-playing teenager with a wicked sense of humor. The 18-year-old from Kolkata also has the distinction of having been offered undergraduate admission with full scholarships to seven top universities in the United States.

The scholarships, ranging from \$49,000 to \$54,000 a year, would cover tuition, housing, meals, and hugely subsidize the cost of books and personal expenses.

Sengupta ended up choosing to attend Princeton University in New Jersey this fall semester. He says he did not opt for the conventional Indian Institute of Technology route to higher education favored by most Indian students. “I am more of a pure math-theoretical physics sort of guy, and applied science has never been my passion.

“Moreover, I realized that while the IITs might have had very good science

and math courses, studying there would mean that I would have to let go of my other worlds altogether,” he says. “I would never, for instance, be able to take a course in creative writing or music. But these two are as much a part of my world as mathematics and physics are, so letting go of them was out of the question. And then I explored the option of going abroad for my studies and found out that Princeton was the perfect match for me.”

Sengupta, who also got admission offers from Yale University, California Institute of Technology, Massachusetts Institute of

The Nassau Hall at Princeton University.



ROBERT MERKEL

Technology, Duke University, Williams College and Amherst College, says he has modeled himself on one of his favorite scientists, Richard P. Feynman. “Like him, I am serious and intensely focused on whatever I do, but at the same time I am a fun-loving, outgoing person who loves playing pranks on unsuspecting souls—something I’m sure my blog will attest to.”

An aspiring mathematician and physicist, Sengupta says he chose Princeton because not only is it No. 1 in the 2008 *U.S. News and World Report* rankings of national universities, but it also has the No. 1 mathematics and No. 2 physics graduate programs.

“I am glad to be a student at a university with which three of my favorite scientists—Albert Einstein, Feynman and John Nash—were associated. While studying mathematics and physics at Princeton, I also look forward to taking creative writing courses with eminent authors like Toni

Morrison, a Nobel literature laureate; Joyce Carol Oates; and the Pulitzer-winning poet Paul Muldoon,” he says.

Sengupta, who studied at Kolkata’s South Point High School, secured a score of 2,380 (out of 2,400) in the SAT reasoning test in January 2007. On the SAT subject tests in May and June 2007, he scored full marks (800) in first and second level mathematics, physics and chemistry, and a 760 in literature. Sengupta’s Test of English as a Foreign Language score was 118 out of 120.

Despite such an awe-inspiring academic record, the teenager revels in his lighter side. “I absolutely love playing soccer, chess, Texas hold ’em poker, and hanging out with my friends. I worship Richard Feynman, the

For more information:

Rik Sengupta’s blog

<http://thethirteenthdimension.blogspot.com/>

Princeton University

<http://www.princeton.edu/main/>

Beatles, Zinedine Zidane and Johnny Depp, among others.” Best of all, “I am one of the most popular guys in school, and that is one of my points of pride!”

Sengupta also credits his parents with where he is today. “My parents are both historians,” he says. “They taught me how to find the joy in learning, and how to enjoy whatever I did.”

“I am a little sad that he will be going away,” says Aparajita Sengupta, his mom, “but also glad that he will find his freedom in a place that will nurture him as well as challenge him to the limit.”

From early childhood, Sengupta enjoyed cracking math puzzles and gradually “came to appreciate how the magic of patterns lay hidden in literary texts as well, for instance, in *Alice in Wonderland*. Then, I started playing the piano, and...perceive(d) patterns in the scales and arpeggios that I had to master. So, in many ways, my passions merged into one another. The worlds of

books, of music, of mathematics became one in spirit.”

He also enjoys writing poems, all types of music from European classical to Indian contemporary and American rock ’n’ roll, as well as European films and Hollywood film noir. To his eclectic skills must be added magic tricks—especially sleight of hand with cards.

He feels that “every student in India should be given the chance to question received wisdom. Criticality is a quality that, in my opinion, is somewhat missing from the Indian system of education. I can only say that a student should never be afraid to follow his or her real passion, and to make a good gamble or take a calculated risk if he or she feels up to it. For, in the end, to follow one’s own passion is the best path to success.”



Vaidehi Iyer is a journalist and editor based in Chennai.