



This 20-year-old Fresno State grad is a real whiz
John Mahajan made it in two years, but he's not done.

The Fresno Bee
Central California's Leading Newspaper
May 20, 2006

By Denny Boyles / The Fresno Bee

Spend a few minutes with John Mahajan and the idea that the 20-year-old is about to graduate from Fresno State with a biology degree doesn't seem as crazy as it sounds.

Mahajan is a study in perpetual motion. He's happy, animated, talkative and intelligent.

If you're lucky, in eight years he just might be your doctor. Shortly after 10 a.m. today, Mahajan will make California State University, Fresno, history as he accepts a bachelor's degree just two years after accepting a high school diploma.

Mahajan said he didn't plan to be one of the fastest graduates to ever call Fresno State his alma mater, and he never imagined that he would graduate only two weeks after his older brother, Jay, who started at the University of Southern California when John Mahajan was 16 and in the 11th grade.

Plans change, though.

Mahajan, a Smittcamp Family Honors College student and a 2004 graduate of Clovis West, finished high school with a grade-point average well over 4.0 and a whopping 51 advanced placement credits from honors courses.

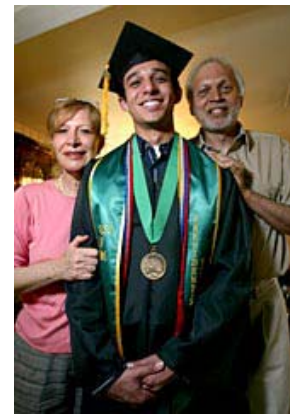
Today, he will graduate from Fresno State with a bachelor of science degree in biology and a 3.87 GPA.

As he sat for his first class in September 2004, Mahajan already had sophomore standing and became a junior during his first few months in school. That first semester, Mahajan carried 14 units, slightly above-average for college students. Every semester after that he enrolled in at least 20 credits worth of classes and completed a grueling 23 units this semester to qualify for graduation.

Why the rush? Mahajan said it was less about being in a hurry and more about the reality that he still has many years of school ahead of him.

"I want to be a doctor, and I know that I have eight or more years of school left," Mahajan said. "I also knew I couldn't rush medical school, so I thought I would just do as much as I could here."

Doing as much he could meant sometimes taking the prerequisite for a science course in the morning, then taking the next level that afternoon. During his last semester, Mahajan had days when he was in class more than 12 hours, with just a one-hour break in the afternoon.



Mahajan said his schedule over the last two years was manageable, but Fresno State professors called it amazing.

"I've been teaching for 20 years, and I can't remember another biology major that has come in from high school and finished in such a short time," said Shirley Kovacs, chairwoman of the biology department. "It's even more amazing when you consider how difficult it can be to schedule your courses."

Kash Mahajan, John's father, said that after 20 years of watching his son develop, he isn't surprised.

"I knew he would be done with college quickly, though even I am surprised that it only took two years," the elder Mahajan said. "But he has his own mind. You can't tell him 'don't work so hard' because he wouldn't listen."

Kovacs said because of prerequisites and limited class space, some students take five or more years to complete the biology major.

"We've even had junior college transfers that had to spend three years working toward that degree because they simply couldn't get the classes scheduled," Kovacs said. "Doing this degree program in the first place is a challenge. It would be difficult to finish in four years. To do it in two years is very dramatic."

Mahajan said what made the difference for him was the Smittcamp Family Honors College, a limited scholarship program that offers priority registration, limited class sizes, individual attention from professors and even regular interaction with Fresno State President John Welty.

He said that program was also the main reason he chose Fresno State over other schools, including University of California campuses.

"I was actually set to go to UCLA when I visited the Honors College," Mahajan said. "I have friends at other colleges that never see their professors. Here, you can walk into their offices and they know your name."

Kovacs said that as proud as she is of Mahajan, he has taken a path that wouldn't work for every student.

"There are a lot of students who are anxious to run forward to the next step; that's not unusual," Kovacs said. "What is unusual is for someone to actually be able to do it. John has done it, and done it well."

Now that his whirlwind trip through college is coming to an end, Mahajan said he is ready for a break — sort of. He will take a few weeks off before heading for Argentina for a summer research program. Then he will wait to hear whether he has been accepted to medical school.

The reporter can be reached at dboyles@fresnobee.com or 559. 441.6659