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Opinion

Nikcevic: Take Off Your Green Key Goggles — Dartmouth Needs More Negativity

Loving Dartmouth takes time — incoming students should know that.

**By Nicolas Nikcevic****Published May 17, 2024 | Updated
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During my junior year college tour trip, I allowed my dad to drag me

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one of those people, too. During my first two terms here, not only did I not love Dartmouth. I hardly even liked it.

Reflecting upon that time, I struggled for all the normal reasons. I missed home, I was cold, I was busy and I was generally uncomfortable. What made such benign issues especially challenging was the guilt surrounding them. To me, being unhappy at Dartmouth felt transgressive. I thought that I must have been doing something wrong to not love it here, because everyone else did. That conceit was the source of my pain, more so than the weather or homesickness.

The statement “Dartmouth is amazing” is true. But that statement carries an implied corollary that is not always true and sometimes even harmful: “Dartmouth is amazing immediately.” Incoming students are flooded with positive information — the community, the outdoors, homecoming, traditions — that when “Dartmouth is amazing” gets reinforced, so does its corollary. The result is when a freshmen’s first term, or even their first year, isn’t amazing, they believe themselves to be the problem.

I think Dartmouth is phenomenal, and we shouldn’t tell prospective students otherwise to lower their expectations. We want them to come here excited, not scared. But while we reinforce that first statement, we should dismantle the second. At this point in the year, especially for freshmen, there’s a sense of perfection in the air. The administration might be fallible, as well as professors, departments or fellow students. But Dartmouth itself can do no wrong when the days are 70 degrees, hacky sacks soar over the Green and the excitement of a concert weekend hangs in the air. It’s with this lens — let’s call it Green Key goggles — that I look back upon my thoroughly difficult first year of college and think to myself: “It wasn’t that bad.”

I’m probably correct in saying that “it wasn’t that bad,” but it sure felt “that bad” during winter term, when I averaged 15 minutes outdoors and 12 hours in the library per day. And I felt even worse for being unhappy, because I had been told — by students in my position today — that “it wasn’t that bad.” Of course, false expectations aren’t only a

Dartmouth issue. College in general is endlessly romanticized. But here, the phenomenon is more acute.

People talk about the “Dartmouth bubble.” The outside world is removed from campus, but the school is also kept from the world. It’s exceedingly difficult to describe Dartmouth to those who don’t attend it. That is why we rely on simplification and romanticization when talking to incoming students. It’s much easier to say the weather is “bad” than to describe the subtle loss of waking up to another overcast day in mid-January. And, because it’s insular, the adjustment to Dartmouth life can take longer than at other schools. Simply the idea of “going out” here, given Dartmouth’s unique social geography, is an acquired skill that takes time to learn. That long adjustment period, combined with the expectation that things will be perfect immediately, is a recipe for unhappy first-year students.

The information about Dartmouth broadcasted to incoming students, and to the world, is overwhelmingly positive. The “camp Dartmouth” narrative that often gets pushed during first-year trips, while sweet and exciting, primes new students for a year of hanging by the river and lounging on the Green. That’s part of Dartmouth, certainly, but not the experience in its entirety. In the rare instances when the information is negative, the critiques are too vague. I spoke with incoming freshman Kip Nilsson ’28 about his conceptions of Dartmouth. When I asked him about downsides he had heard, he responded, “not a whole lot.” When I pushed him on it, he cited “the bad weather.” The weather is a significant factor here, but calling it “bad” doesn’t really mean much. Such is the case with the few complaints, most of them empty adjectives, that incoming students do hear before arriving on campus: cold, challenging, isolated. Kip described Dartmouth’s “downsides” as the kinds of things he didn’t feel would bother him greatly. I can’t blame him for that mentality. But if I had to guess, Dartmouth’s weather, isolation and rigor will all challenge him eventually, as they do most students. Still, it makes sense that Nilsson has a positive attitude; there is a difference between being told information and truly knowing it, as I can attest.

My call to action? I think we should foster more dialogue around what's been hard for us at Dartmouth, especially when talking to first-year students. I wish, nine months ago, upperclassmen had shared their worst Dartmouth memory with me instead of their best. We should be specific in our grievances and emphasize that loving this place can take time. Paradoxically, things will be easier if we tell the whole truth.

There is a difference between saying that "everyone loves Dartmouth" and "Dartmouth is awesome." The first is a challenge — everyone loves Dartmouth, so you must too. The second is an offering. It suggests that at one's own pace, on one's own time, a Dartmouth student can discover how great this school can be.

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