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Parents Letter #3

Dear Parents of '71:

This letter is primarily to accompany mid-term reports in courses in which your sons are standing at "unsatisfactory" levels - i.e., "D" or "E." If the normal experience of the past several years prevails, a half to a third of you will find one or more such reports in this letter. To those of you who receive reports, I want to give a little background for realistic appraisal of your sons' situations.

Even among those of you whose sons have not received any of these mid-term reports, I know that in recent weeks many have received worried or frustrated letters from their sons. The majority of freshmen have been finding, during the recent wave of hour examinations, that more academic effort than they have ever previously exerted is producing grades in the C range. This is normal.

To all of you I should like to give a brief report on the first two months of your sons' freshman year at Dartmouth.

MID-TERM
GRADES

At mid-term, in order that students may check their scholastic standing in their respective courses in time to improve their work if it is at an unsatisfactory level, instructors report advisory grades of freshmen standing D or E. (No higher grades are reported at this time.) Normally, as is indicated above, barely more than half of the members of the Freshman Class pass mid-terms without any E's or D's. In the last three classes, which had exceptionally good records, better than two-thirds of the freshmen escaped mid-term reports at this time. If you do not find a card enclosed with this letter (and I can see you shaking the envelope now) it means that your son is one of these and is currently standing C- or better in all of his courses (unless we have inserted a slip in a wrong envelope, which, alas, we almost always do among the Joneses and Smiths). This is the way they look:

JONES JOHN J	71	ENGL	1	E2	67F	999
STUDENT NAME	CLASS	COURSE	GRADE	TERM	ADVISER	

MID-TERM GRADES

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EXPLANATION OF GRADE

- D - Passing, but unsatisfactory
- E-1 - Slightly below passing
- E-2 - Considerably below passing
- E-3 - Impossible of passing

The cards which are enclosed show grades lower than C-. The grade of D is considered unsatisfactory but passing. E-1 is slightly below passing and E-2 considerably below passing. It is assumed to be next to hopeless for a man to achieve a passing grade in a course in which he stands E-3 at mid-term. A man receiving a grade of E-3 should promptly discuss with his instructor and with me the desirability of dropping the course and taking a failing grade in it, in order to concentrate on his other courses.

With honest effort, most low mid-term grades can be pulled up to a satisfactory level, and the majority of them are. For example, you may be interested in these figures concerning last fall's mid-term grades compared to final grades for the fall term. Of all the mid-term D's, 74.7% were converted to final grades of C- or better; 20.5% remained at D; 4.7% dropped to final E's.

Among mid-term E-1's, 45.6% were converted to final grades of C- or better; 85.4% were converted to a final grade of D or better; and 14.5% remained at the failing level. Among mid-term E-2's, 66.6% finally passed (one with an A!).

These figures are quoted to show what application and self-discipline can and do accomplish after mid-term for students of low standing at that time, with the help of their growing skill in handling college courses and in using time efficiently. The latter is the most important lesson learned during the beginning terms at college.

For those who have a particular need of developing these skills, we offer special assistance during the remaining weeks of the term. Mr. Kramer of the Office of Student Counseling conducts a seminar in study techniques during the remaining weeks of this first term for freshmen whose mid-term grades indicate need for such assistance. I have invited those freshmen who have two or three mid-term reports to sign up for this program with Mr. Kramer.

ADVANCE CREDITS
AND EXEMPTIONS

Another type of enclosure which some of you will find in this envelope (shake it again!) is a different form of IBM card which shows credits and/or exemptions which have been granted to your son on admission. To avoid repetition of work already well done in secondary school, Dartmouth for a good many years has recognized exceptional preparation among its incoming freshmen. Course credit for one or more term courses is given to those freshmen who at or before entrance present satisfactory evidence of college-level competence in any subject in the Dartmouth curriculum. Such credit does not carry any grade (or "quality points") with it, but does count as a course (unit) passed. Many entering freshmen have studied a subject thoroughly enough in the course of their secondary education to gain a solid introduction to a discipline, even though their level is less than that required for Dartmouth course credit. For such students a proficiency exemption is granted which carries with it a reduction in the humanities, science, and social science distributive requirement by one term course in a particular discipline. This allows a student a wider choice by freeing him from one or more of the specific degree requirements and gives him entry into more advanced courses. If you would like more detailed information, please write us for the pamphlet Recognition of Exceptional Preparation.

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ABOUT WORRYING

As I observed in the opening paragraphs, there are a good many students without any D's and E's who are doing their share of worrying. You may remember that I forecast this prospective experience in my August letter. There is considerable shock for many Dartmouth students, who have been accustomed to receiving only A's and B's in secondary school and perhaps without a great deal of effort, to find in some or possibly in all their Dartmouth courses that they are working extremely hard and receiving mediocre or inferior grades because of lack of experience with college-type examinations, inadequate training in writing, unfamiliarity with new types of subject matter, need for practice in the organization of college-level work, or inexperience with the quantity and quality of work expected by college teachers.

Let me add two or three more observations about this business of worrying. The first is that it is a normal, and probably in general a quite wholesome, phenomenon of the freshman year. It is the blithely unworried among the relatively low hangers who worry me. They are most often the ones who come a cropper. The others who are "running scared," as long as they don't panic (and few do), are most often the ones who win out. Of course, when one encounters a badly worried freshman, one cannot help sharing the distress that his parents feel; and I must say that every fall I am re-impressed by the responsiveness of Dartmouth teachers to the needs of such students for encouragement and help. However, I sometimes ask myself this question: suppose a college - through engaging a massive corps of counselors and hand-holders and by utilizing all of the ingenious devices, overt and subliminal, that psychologists could dream up - should be able, without lowering academic standards, to remove all of the stresses from the college experience: would this be a good thing? I suspect that a lot of the growing which is done during this period might not take place without the stresses that are a normal part of the experience.

THE LETTER HOME

Another general observation about the worrying business is that the typical "letter home" tends, usually quite unintentionally, to picture things as somewhat bleaker than they are. I think this, too, is a wholesome thing: that a student can unburden himself of his anxieties in his letters home and then, somewhat purged of worry for the nonce, go about his business with more or less normal equilibrium. More often than not, when the "letters home" suggest to understandably distressed parents that the student may be on the verge of a crack-up, on the campus scene he is going about his business with normal poise. In conference, his anxieties will usually prove sincere and genuine; but when encountered with his companions on the street or in the dining hall he will look thoroughly chipper and healthy.

If your son has written or telephoned you suggesting that he should perhaps leave Dartmouth and transfer to another college, you should not regard this as a rare or exceptionally worrisome thing. Letters of this sort are dispatched homewards by freshmen in some numbers every autumn from every college in the land. By this time of year, Dean Palmer and I normally have already heard this question discussed by several freshmen, and one feels sure that others are talking to their friends and writing home about it.

I'm sure I don't need to spell out the reasons. I shall have more to say on this subject in a later letter, in reference to what I call the "January Syndrome." Briefly, every college student comes from a school and community in which he has had recognition. He has been recognized and, more often than not, considerably

respected for his particular qualities and talents. He arrives on a college campus with some hundreds of fellow-freshmen, all equally bereft of status. Inevitably, they will wonder how they are going to measure up in this new group, which is larger in most cases than were their school groups and is known to be selective. Unless one is totally lacking in sensitivity and humility, there will be some self-analysis and anxiety. One student, in the first week of college, came right to the point. "Sir," he said, "I don't think I should be here. I've been talking to these guys who got all A's without cracking a book. Now I had to work for my grades, and they weren't all A's, either." I told him I was confident of his success, but probably we ought to worry about his friends. Others approach the question of belonging here less directly, talking about their health, some especially good course offered by the college back home, etc.

A word on the subject of "flunking out" - a phrase somewhat loosely used by freshmen during the mid-term period. Only a man with final failure in all three courses, or two E's and one D, would normally be considered for suspension at the end of the first term. It seems fully possible - even probable - that there will be none such. Two course failures will result in probation. One failure plus one D will result in an academic warning. The tolerances for adjustment and getting on one's feet are broad during this first term: for example, a man with two C-s and one failure will be, technically, in "good standing" at the end of the term, although he could not safely continue at that level of achievement.

Some freshmen have a way of referring to mid-term reports as "warnings." These reports are, in a sense, unofficial warnings that the level of work to date in those courses is unsatisfactory. But these reports at mid-term are not grades, and do not become part of the permanent record, and are not to be confused with "official college warnings" for unsatisfactory scholarship or conduct.

Although it may be presumptuous of me to suggest what should be your reaction to the mid-term grades of your son herein reported, our experience is that the great majority need sympathy, understanding, and encouragement more than they need chiding and exhortation. If your son is already worried, it does not help to add your anxiety to his.

Exhortation, however, may be in order for your son if his past pattern of academic behavior has reflected sporadic attention to his studies and achievement clearly below his abilities; or if you have reason to believe that he has been doing less than his best at Dartmouth this fall, has taken too many weekends, or otherwise through lack of sustained effort has failed by his own neglect to live up to your and our expectations of him. It would be appropriate for you to encourage your son to take advantage of the counseling services available to him and to see me or Dean Palmer if he is in any difficulty.

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TRANSPORTATION

I hope you will use your influence against your son's planning too tight a travel schedule coming and going for his winter and spring holidays, whether he is traveling by plane, train or automobile. If the latter, he will be dependent on others, but even here influence can be exerted. It is encouraging to note in this college generation an increasing sobriety over the perils of automobile travel: although students cover considerable distances

in surprisingly short times, it is standard procedure to keep one passenger awake to talk to the driver, to shift drivers at frequent intervals, to provide seat belts, etc., and the adolescent urge to speed for speed's sake has been generally outgrown. But the optimistic inclination of youth tends not to take into account the unpredictability of weather from November to April everywhere, and especially in the north-east. Weather can knock the most reasonable travel schedules - whether by plane, car, or train - into a cocked hat, and it frequently does. For those who are pushing to meet a tight schedule, unnecessary hazards are undertaken.

Registration for the next term is from 1:30 to 4:30 and 7:00 to 10:00 in the afternoon and evening of Wednesday, January 3.

Looking ahead a bit, experience leads us to expect that between now and June several dozen freshmen will come in with requests, for extraordinarily varied reasons, for permission to bring cars to the campus, even though there are well-known regulations against this. Some freshmen will mistakenly assume that it is permissible for them to bring cars temporarily and have them impounded here. This is not permitted, unless authorized by this office in advance. If any number of these requests were granted, the number of petitioners would certainly multiply astonishingly. One of the perennial diversions of this office is to admire the variety and ingenuity of these requests and the good humor of the usual parting remark: "That's what I thought you'd say, but it doesn't hurt to try..." One would be callous not to sympathize with the logistical problem of the seasonal home-campus-home transportation of those vast quantities of clothing, sports paraphernalia, electronic equipment, etc., etc.; but....

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A GOOD BEGINNING

Having been concerned earlier in this letter with the anxieties which constitute a normal part of the first weeks of college, in the hope of relieving some of these concerns, let me turn now to some of the things which make us feel that this has been a good fall at Dartmouth. Academically, it does seem that the Class of 1971, as intimated above, is off to a good start.

The letters home have surely commented, invariably and with emphasis, on how hard the writers are working, on how intensively they are "booking." Allowing a little for the hyperbole which is customary in the "Dear Mom and Dad" form of literature, there is a good deal of truth in the accounts you have received. Freshmen find very quickly that their instructors expect a good deal more work of them than did their secondary school teachers. A great many of them are genuinely puzzled for a while in trying to figure out "what the prof wants." The introductory foreign language courses, in which most freshmen are enrolled, proceed at a pretty fast clip, and this involves difficulty for some students of excellent general ability who have come to college with a minimum of linguistic training.

The conduct record of '71 continues good to date. There has so far been only one disciplinary case resulting in a major penalty, which is a pretty good record for 800 highly kinetic young men.

When we speak this early in the year of the Class of 1971 appearing to be a good class off to a good start, it is of course an impressionistic comment -

reporting the impressions conveyed to us by teachers, faculty advisers, members of the Interdormitory Council, leaders of the Outing Club's Freshman Trip and other upperclassmen.

One of the qualities mentioned with unusual frequency with respect to the new class is its maturity. Perhaps this is an observation that one should not dwell on publicly. I have discovered that some young men bristle at this kind of praise from their elders. They seem to figure that it is somehow an insult to be accorded this kind of approval by the Older Generation and that there must be something wrong with them if they earn it. However, this comment with respect to '71 has been offered most frequently by fellow-students of the three upper classes.

During the last two years, student government has set a new keynote with respect to freshman traditions. Instead of seeking to enforce participation in these, they have all been declared optional. However, many of these traditions are continuing strongly on their own vitality. There are enough freshmen who enjoy building bonfires for football rallies that this year's efforts have been notable - including the crash rebuilding of one prematurely ignited by vandals. The '71's won the tug-of-war in a romp - which they just barely refrained from turning into a dangerous gallop down the Main Street - just barely. Many '71's, like many '70's, have lamented the early disappearance of freshman hats, the wearing of which is no longer required. "Why did they take our beanies away?" many say. It seems not to have occurred to them to wear them in defiance of "optionality."

On other fronts, among "new traditions," the second year's program of book discussions in Freshman Week again enlisted strong participation - more than half the class joining in these student-led seminars, many of which continued in animated discussion for two hours or more.

It's been a good fall at Dartmouth. After New England's drippy "regular" summer, there has been a golden Indian summer, right up to now. Our very strong freshman soccer team went to Providence undefeated and gave the traditionally strong Brown freshmen their first defeat after 37 consecutive victories over the past several seasons. A week later, our freshmen yielded to Harvard, 2-1; they weren't quite able to contain two very talented foreign players on the Harvard team. They have been defeating the varsity regularly in scrimmage, they tell me. The '71 football team lost to the Holy Cross freshmen, who had the advantage of extensive pre-season practice; but in winning from the Harvard freshmen here, on the Friday before the varsity game, they looked big, talented, well-manned at all positions, and very spirited. As this is being written, they are headed for another big test in New Haven.

There's a yeasty ferment in the air, a lively interest among the students in the world around them and the big issues of these times. The '71's seem just as much involved in these as the seniors and juniors.

Sincerely yours,

Albert D. Dickerson