



After a tough but promising freshman year, Dartmouth student tackles change at elite campuses

Moments of cold, loneliness — and missing the merengue

By: Liz Willen | July 17, 2018



Dartmouth freshmen Daniel Inoa (right) and Natan Santos had uncomfortable moments as they were told: “You look suspicious.” Photo: Liz Willen/The Hechinger Report

Editor’s note: The Hechinger Report followed six students through the college application process last year at [Match Charter High](#) in Boston. This story follows the journey of Daniel Inoa, who just finished his freshman year at Dartmouth College. You can read [the entire series here](#).

HANOVER, N.H. — Here are some of the things that happened to Daniel Inoa during his freshman year at Dartmouth College. He discovered team sports he never knew existed, such as equestrian and rugby. He studied harder than he thought possible and still got his first C. He got unexpected mentoring and support from a senior pre-med student.

Inoa also endured questioning looks when shopping for cereal after midnight at the local drugstore with his friend Natan Santos, also a freshman. And the two were confronted at a fraternity party, by a member who told the Afro-Latino men, “You look suspicious.”

The incidents were reminders of the [many challenges](#) that set Inoa apart on this rural campus that has been predominantly white and wealthy since it opened as an all-male institution in 1769. He and Santos, both 19, are first-generation college students from Boston and children of single mothers, Inoa’s from the Dominican Republic, Santos’s from Puerto Rico.

Both are keenly aware of the many odds they’ve already defied: [Fewer than 1 percent](#) of children from the bottom-fifth income level of American families attend elite colleges. Black adults are only two-thirds as likely to hold college degrees as whites, while Latinos, the fastest growing and largest ethnic minority in the U.S., are only half as likely, [recent Education Trust data show](#).

“We are expected to fail,” said Inoa, discussing widely held perceptions of poor black and Latino young men, while gesturing towards Dartmouth’s iconic symbols of privilege: white brick buildings with black shutters, sweeping lawns and well-stocked libraries. “We are not supposed to be here.”

At several Ivy League schools like Dartmouth and other elite colleges, more students come from families in the top 1 percent of the income scale than from the entire bottom 60 percent; children of top earners are 77 times more likely to attend an elite college. The knowledge leaves students like Inoa and Santos eager to see more students like themselves at Dartmouth. They’ve become part of the latest wave of first-generation students who arrive at elite schools carrying the burden of great expectations, along with the promise of a very different future — if they can persevere.

“I am my family’s last best hope for financial security,” said Santos, who designed [his own clothing](#) line in high school and also started a nonprofit matching minority students in the Boston area with mentors. He’s now studying sociology along with [markets, management and the economy](#), while working two part-time jobs on campus so he can send money home. He hopes eventually to get a master’s degree in business administration.

“Realistically, education is the only way I have out. I have nothing else to fall back on,” said Santos. “It just makes me more hungry and ambitious.”

Their racial isolation is also understandable: there [are just 746 black and Hispanic students out of 4,410](#) undergraduates at Dartmouth, a group that’s [even more underrepresented](#) in recent years at top colleges and universities than it was 35 years ago. President Donald Drumpf issued new guidelines this month that, if followed, would only make the situation more acute: he is [aiming to reverse](#) Obama administration policies that called on universities to consider race in admissions.

Both Inoa and Santos are not used to standing out as minorities: they grew up speaking Spanish at home and graduated at or near the top of their majority minority public high school

classes in Boston. Both got mentoring and financial support from [Janey Scholars](#), a Boston-based philanthropy. Neither could consider attending Dartmouth, where [annual estimated costs](#) are \$73,800, without full financial aid.

Where is New Hampshire, anyway?



Dartmouth College on a rare hot day in the spring. Photo: Liz Willen/The Hechinger Report

Before he got into Dartmouth, Inoa said, he didn't know where New Hampshire was; he'd never been to that neighboring state. While visiting, he was simultaneously impressed and overwhelmed by the university's spacious classrooms, gleaming science labs and historic houses on fraternity row.

He wondered what he'd have in common with the athletic, outdoorsy students he saw dressed in green-and-white Dartmouth garb, preppy pastels or [Patagonia](#) gear, hauling rackets and golf clubs.

"I was, like, golf is an *actual sport* at Dartmouth and there's a golf course next to a pond here, and they ride golf carts," Inoa said.

Inoa had never golfed, skied or played a racket sport. He also had trouble figuring out what kind of clothing he'd wear after seven years of khaki pants and polo shirt uniforms at [Match Charter](#) in Boston, where nearly all the students were poor and whites were a distinct minority.

"I didn't grow up with people who are mostly rich and don't know the mindset of someone from inner-city Boston," Inoa said. "I really wondered how I would relate."

Visiting the [overwhelmingly white town of](#) Hanover for the first time, Inoa worried about looking "scruffy or like a wolf," if he couldn't find a barber who could cut his kinky hair. He's since

watched You-Tube videos and learned to cut his hair himself; he also bought clippers and shears and started a side business cutting hair for black and Hispanic classmates.

Financially, Dartmouth's generous aid could not be beat: It's one of a handful of well-endowed colleges that say they [meet 100 percent](#) of applicants' demonstrated financial need. "The perception is that we are more than \$72,000 a year, and that obviously is a really daunting and scary number, but for students with tremendous need, we are going to be more affordable than the state university," said Dartmouth's financial aid director, [G. Dino Koff](#).

With aid, the [University of Massachusetts at Amherst](#), the state's public flagship, would have cost Inoa at least \$22,000 a year in tuition and fees alone.

Still, [54 percent](#) of Inoa's Dartmouth classmates get no financial aid from the school at all, and Inoa overheard conversations about privileges unknown in the world he came from: weekends on yachts, trips to Hawaii, trading in Range Rovers for newer models.

Inoa and Santos both decided against inviting their mothers to visiting weekend, when wealth is on full display with parents arriving in Porsches, rounds of golf, pricey farm-to-table meals at [The Pine](#).

"My mom wanted to come, and I said, 'How will you relate?'" Inoa said. Santos told his mother he thought "it would be really boring."

'Like a fantasy'

Wealth disparities aside, Inoa is floored by his freedom to take a pre-med track along with sociology and a dizzying array of courses in subjects to which he'd never been exposed.

"It's something like a fantasy for me here," Inoa said, after meeting with health science advisor Sarah Berger, who is part of a [Pathways to Medicine](#) initiative at Dartmouth that he's joined.

Berger had given Inoa a hug, asked how his studies were going and provided pros and cons of courses that will keep him on a pre-med track next fall. Such advice and support have made a huge difference for Inoa, as has mentoring from successful upperclassmen from similar backgrounds.

Santos took advantage of Dartmouth's [First Year Student Enrichment Program](#), which offers pre-orientation events, workshops, retreats and an array of supports. [Jay Davis](#), the dean who heads the program, also keeps a box of Kleenex handy in his office.

"People put their initials on it when they cry in our office, that way they don't have to apologize," Davis said, adding that he wants them to know that "struggling is part of being a college student."



Freshman Daniel Inoa discusses what pre-med classes to take at Dartmouth with his advisor Sarah Berger. Photo: Liz Willen/The Hechinger Report

Inoa missed participating because he hadn't read the email invitations. Still, Santos introduced him to many freshmen in the program, along with older students from similar backgrounds who helped advise Inoa on courses and professors.

He spent his little free time lifting weights, shooting hoops with Santos and playing on the [rugby club team](#) (he stopped because it took away too much from his studies).

Occasionally, he went to parties at [fraternity houses](#). Aside from the uncomfortable looks he and Santos got at one of them, Inoa said he found the parties "pretty boring. They play a lot of pong. And no one dances! They just fist-bump to the music."

'The doubly disadvantaged'

Culture shock, along with looks of suspicion like those Inoa and Santos experienced at Dartmouth, often shapes the experience of students whom Harvard sociologist [Anthony Abraham Jack](#) dubs "[the doubly disadvantaged](#)" — meaning they've come from public high schools that are both segregated and largely poor.

They may struggle more in college than the group Jack calls "the privileged poor," who have attended well-funded prep or boarding schools and are often part of support networks such as [A Better Chance](#) or [Prep for Prep](#).

"The norms, the rules of engagement, the very feel of a place like Dartmouth is foreign to the doubly disadvantaged," said Jack, relating to his own alienation as a first-generation black student at Amherst College; he graduated in 2007 and earned his Ph.D. from Harvard in 2016.



The peaceful, rural campus of Dartmouth in Hanover, N.H. Photo: Liz Willen/The Hechinger Report

“Your roommates are flying on private airlines and going on vacations to places you have never heard of,” Jack added. Inoa and Santos “may be feeling blacker or more Latino and poorer in all these white spaces.”

There [are just 746 black and Hispanic students out of 4,410](#) undergraduates at Dartmouth, a group that’s [even more underrepresented](#) in recent years at top colleges and universities than it was 35 years ago.

In addition, first-generation students are often less socially comfortable than their peers, [new research shows](#).

“Giving the scholarship is the easy thing,” Jack said. “That’s just money. The real work is making them feel like a full citizen at the institution.”

Dartmouth says first-generation college students have ranged between 10 to 15 percent of each entering class since it started tracking the number in 2009; they will be 13 percent of the incoming class, [its most selective ever](#).

The class of 2021, according to [the most recent data provided](#) by the college, is 10 percent Latino and 9 percent black. At the same time, Dartmouth says 11.7 percent* of the class are children of alumni, so-called “legacy admissions.” That advantage is now [coming under attack](#) for perpetuating what some critics call “affirmative action for the wealthy.”



Daniel Inoa gives his freshman year at Dartmouth “eight out of 10.” Photo: Liz Willen/The Hechinger Report

The editorial board of *The Dartmouth*, the school newspaper, last year [called for ending legacy admissions](#), while students groups at several Ivy League colleges this year [urged a review](#) of the practice. Jack of Harvard is among those who believe giving an admissions advantage to alumni children “has no legal, political or moral foundation.”

[Lee Coffin](#), Dartmouth’s dean of admissions and financial aid, expressed a different view that same year in an [interview](#) with Dartmouth’s alumni magazine; he said legacies “ultimately make up about 12 to 13 percent of each entering class,” and called them “an important constituency in each applicant pool and in the way we think about the class we are shaping. A goal every year is to include as many of these students as we can.”

Inoa is more concerned about creating an inclusive atmosphere for Dartmouth’s minority students in common spaces — all topics of discussion in a class called Status, Power and Interaction he took with assistant professor of sociology [Kimberly Rogers](#).

The final project included presentations on ways to decrease inequality on campus, based on theories studied in class. Rogers invited administrators from around campus to hear student suggestions, ask questions — and ideally act on them.

“There’s a dialogue, and a starting point now,” Rogers said. At Dartmouth, “We have made strides, but there is much work to be done.”

One presentation noted that three-quarters of the 80 black athletes who participate in Dartmouth’s 35 varsity teams miss orientation and most of the welcoming events for freshmen; they suggested coming up with ways of including them.

Another urged eliminating application questions for exchange programs that assume previous travel experience in studying abroad and offering ways to help with additional costs so poor students can afford to go.

Inoa and Santos's presentation focused on rearranging social spaces on campus and suggested the school's programming board come up with additional ways to include minorities in planning events "that make different people from varying backgrounds feel welcomed."



Rachel Edens, an assistant dean, chats with Dartmouth's financial aid director G. Dino Koff. Photo: Liz Willen/The Hechinger Report

Rachel Edens, assistant dean and adviser to first-generation and low-income students at Dartmouth at [OPAL](#), the Office of Pluralism and Leadership, has heard many such suggestions, and she, too, worried about a lack of diversity in the area when she came to New Hampshire from Tennessee.

"It can feel really isolating here," said Edens, who is black. Like Inoa, she obsessed about where she'd get her hair cut in Hanover; she now crops it close to her head and has arranged to bring a hair stylist to campus for black female students.

'No one does that here'

Inoa attributes some of his freshman year isolation to "the woods effect" of rural life. But he also elected to live in a single room without a roommate and wants nothing to do with Greek life on campus, which he finds too exclusive; financial aid does not cover membership dues, and the frat houses he walks by on his way to classes seem overwhelmingly white. "They pick those who look like them," he said.

He would love to see more students from the Dominican Republic at Dartmouth (the school said it does not keep track of how many are there now) and especially would love to grab a partner, as he does in Boston, and dance "the [bachata](#), the merengue, salsa – no one does that here."

Instead of studying abroad, he and Santos both expect to spend a semester in Atlanta at historically black [Morehouse College](#), with which Dartmouth has an exchange program. Inoa also hopes he'll become more involved in leadership.

He may even learn to ski; Dartmouth has its [own mountain](#).

Inoa gives his freshman year "an eight out of 10," despite some setbacks and discomfort. After his first dismaying C, he developed better study habits; the rest of his grades were all A's and B's. "I think next year will be better," he said.

**Clarification: This story has been updated to reflect that the share of legacy admissions in the Dartmouth class of 2021 refers to incoming not accepted students.*

This story about minority students at elite colleges was produced by [The Hechinger Report](#), a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education. Sign up for the Hechinger newsletter.