

Cooper Stimson, Class of 2013  
Dartmouth College Oral History Project  
Dartmouth Community and Dartmouth's World  
May 15, 2013

WOMICK: Okay, I'll get us started. So my name is Cally Womick, and I'm here in Rauner Library with Cooper Stimson. Today is Tuesday, May 15, 2013.

STIMSON: Wednesday.

WOMICK: Wednesday? Oh, gosh! It's Wednesday already. [Laughter]

STIMSON: It's one of those weeks.

WOMICK: Wednesday, May 15, 2013. To get started, why don't you talk about where you grew up?

STIMSON: I grew up in a smallish town in California called San Luis Obispo. Um, it's about ten miles inland. And it's almost exactly between LA and San Francisco, right in the middle there. Um, and it's a college town. And so although it's bigger than Hanover, it has a kind of similar feel, just scaled up.

WOMICK: Mm-hmm.

STIMSON: Um, yeah, we moved there when I was three. I was born in San Diego and moved up to San Luis Obispo, and my family's still there.

WOMICK: What kind of schools did you attend growing up?

STIMSON: Um, so I went to the kindergarten in our neighborhood and I started asking my mom to homeschool me. Um, and she thought that I was just like missing being at home. So she started volunteering in my first-grade classroom and then saw that it was more an issue of like the pace of um, the classroom not really matching and that sort of thing, so then we started homeschooling. And I homeschooled all the way through the end of high school.

WOMICK: Oh. So how'd you end up here?

STIMSON: Um, kind of a long story. Okay. So when I was in high school, I started playing a lot of classical piano. I picked it up...I only started

playing the piano at all when I was 13, but got really into it, um and was giving recitals, and I started playing competitions and also doing composition competitions. And so I decided I wanted to go to a music conservatory. Um, but I knew that a conservatory that's basically all you do is music. And I do have other interests. And so I decided to take two years and go to the community college in our town and kind of do a miniaturized liberal arts general education, um, in that context. So I went there for two years, taking classes in all the different departments. And then when I got around to.... By the time I was doing my conservatory applications, it was in my head: I'm not sure I want to stop studying all these other things. And so relatively at the last minute, I Googled some liberal arts colleges and sent off applications and Dartmouth was one of those. And um, it was a.... On my list of colleges, Dartmouth was the one I considered like the longshot. That is, was just kind of, oh, what do I have to lose by applying? And sent it off.

WOMICK: And you got in. So was the first time you saw Dartmouth.... orientation?

STIMSON: Yep. Yeah, I showed up for my DOC Trip, having not—I had not been to New Hampshire before. I wasn't 100 percent sure where New Hampshire was. [Laughter] And um, it was kind of surreal showing up because I'd never seen like the New England architecture and all that kind of thing. It very much looked like something out of a movie to me.

WOMICK: Yeah? Did you go on a DOC Trip?

STIMSON: Yes.

WOMICK: You want to talk about that?

STIMSON: Yeah, actually I really enjoyed my DOC Trip. I did the easy hiking trip, but when.... Like we were dropped off by a DOC car at a spot where the Appalachian Trail crosses the road. And we were all so excited to be going off on the trip that we didn't realize we had to cross the road and then get on the trail. So we started going the wrong way. [Laughs] And um, the... so we were going the wrong way. We were heading back towards Hanover. And the trail somewhat resembled our directions enough that we were able to convince ourselves that maybe we were going the right way. And the trees were touching overhead, so we weren't really keeping track of where the sun was or anything like that. Um, and then it

started getting really rough. And this was supposed to be like the easy hiking section. And we even got to a point where we needed to um, like climb down a short cliff face. Um, and then we saw some joggers coming in the other direction. And we asked them where they were coming from. And they said, oh, they'd just left Hanover. [Laughs] And so we realized we were going the wrong way and our choice was either to turn around—and we'd been a few hours already—turn around or to keep going to Hanover and then get a ride. But we were enjoying ourselves so much, and enjoying each other's company so much, that we decided to turn around and so went all the way back to where we started. And then did the first day... actual. So I believe it was supposed to be four miles the first day and six the second day. And it ended up being eight the first day, and then six the second day. And so the second day, except for the fact that the second day was steeper, the second day was in some ways the easier of the two days.

WOMICK: Mm-hmm.

STIMSON: And then the last night of the trip, um, we stayed in one of the cabins up by the ski slopes. And we were um...and our trip got raided, but at first we didn't notice because we were staying up late playing... Um...I'm blanking on the name... It's the game where one person in the room is the murderer, and you're trying to figure it out.

WOMICK: Yeah.... All I can think of is Assassins, and I don't think that's it.

STIMSON: Might have been that. Well, whatever it is, we were playing this game, and getting like very vocally into character and basically just like yelling accusations at each other. So we didn't notice that the cabin was surrounded by students who were making like spooky noises. [Laughter] And they weren't able to get our attention. So they ended up just coming in the door. [Laughter]

WOMICK: Yeah. So then orientation—how was that?

STIMSON: Um, let's see. I remember I went to a lot of departmental open houses. And I was here for almost all pre-orientation because I was in the either first or—I think I was in the first trip section that like stays. And I was living in East Wheelock. And so for the first few days, um, I didn't see anyone else in East Wheelock except on occasion I'd hear a distant door slam and that kind of thing. And it was kind of creepy. And then I found out that there was actually

someone living in the room right next door to me. We just had completely different schedules and were never seeing each other. Um, and, yeah orientation I went to a lot of departmental open houses, including.... Um, the one I remember really well was a—I had written down a list of all the ones I was going to on this particular day. And I wrote down linguistics at the wrong time, so I showed up an hour early. And so like all the food was, or like all the um.... like paraphernalia was out but there was no one there. And so I stood there for a few minutes trying to figure out what to do and a linguistics professor walked by and was like, “Can I help you?” And I said, “Oh, I’m here for the open house.” And he said, “Oh, it starts in an hour, but, here, let me get some of the faculty.” And then all the linguistics professors show up, and we just chatted for an hour until the open house started, which was pretty fun.

WOMICK: Wow, yeah.

STIMSON: I’m trying to think of other orientation memories. Oh, okay. So the — Um, I went to the library open house during orientation. And I was interviewed by the Jones Media Center for the—I think it’s called Voices of Dartmouth, that they interview for like every year. And at the end of the interview, I started chatting with the student who was doing the interview about the camera that they were using. And the... one of the supervisors at Jones walked by, heard me chatting about that, and said, “Oh, you should apply for this, for our technical assistant position.” Um, which normally Jones hires people during sophomore summer. So I applied for it, and I got the job. And so I’ve actually just been working there the entire time I’ve been here, um, which was a very fortuitous way to get a job that kind of fits my interests very perfectly.

WOMICK: Mm-hmm. So how did freshman fall go?

STIMSON: Freshman fall was kind of a shock to the system. I...so, part of the way I was homeschooled was that instead of having deadlines and then there’s just a grade at the deadline and then you move on, we just...I’d keep working on something, no matter how long it took, until it was like A-equivalent work and then move on. And so meant that by the end of high school, I was ahead in some things, behind in other things, um, depending on how long it would take me to actually understand it. Um, and part of the idea of going to community college first was to get used to the different format of having just like set deadlines and not being a perfectionist, I guess. Having to just let it go and move onto the next thing.

But the short terms at Dartmouth and the intense workload, I was not really prepared for. And in particular I took a screen writing class freshman fall, which is one of those things where it doesn't have to be super time-intensive, but it easily can be, um, particularly once you have gotten to the point in your script where you can be um, distracted by, oh, this word choice right here, what are the implications of this forty-five pages later? That kind of thing.

Yeah, so freshman fall was definitely a shock to the system. And um, when they switched deans in East Wheelock and I was introducing myself and meeting with Dean Francine [A'Ness], the way I described my freshman fall was hubris. I kind of came in... I was used to being like the student who's absolutely on top of everything. And so um, as soon as, like a few weeks in, um, I was not on top of everything. That was like a little identity crisis. And my initial reaction was to kind of mentally sweep it under the rug. So then I repeated the exact same thing, um, freshman winter before kind of getting my head on straight. [Laughs]

WOMICK: Yeah. So how did the rest of freshman year go?

STIMSON: I ended up taking freshman spring off and working, auditing classes, and just kind of trying to figure out like...um, figure myself out and figure out like my academic year.

Another element was um, freshman fall I had been thinking I would be a music major. And I did the audition to do piano lessons and totally bombed it. And um, I was playing...let's see, I was playing Debussy and Mozart. And the only comment I got back was that my Mozart sounded like Debussy, [Laughter] um, which was definitely a fair criticism. I'd mostly been playing Debussy and just kind of pulled out the Mozart to have a contrast. And so that had also been kind of discouraging.

So that spring I audited English 60 with Professor [Nancy] Crumbine, which... um, her version of English 60 is called Writers at Work. And it's a hybrid of academic writing and creative writing. So you.... Well, first of all we look at a bunch of different authors. We look at what they've written about their own writing process. And then you pick one of them and spend the entire term reading their major works, reading what they've written about the act of writing them, and then do a final presentation and paper about that. That's one half of the class. And then in parallel you're also writing

a creative manuscript and keeping a very detailed journal on the process. And that class really just clicked for me. And um, and that was the first time at Dartmouth where I ever felt like very comfortable and confident in my um, academic skill set and my ability to fit it into, um, this academic model.

So then.... What else was going on then? Um... Oh, also freshman winter was my first of several incidences of deciding I would take four classes and then dropping one a few weeks in. [Laughs] Which I did— I've done several times. Some of those terms I was thinking I'm going to finish these four classes. Other times it was that I couldn't pick between two. So I'd spend a few weeks before deciding. And that's what I did this term actually.

WOMICK: So who were you friends with for freshman year? How'd you meet those people?

STIMSON: Um, let's see. My freshman floor was pretty close. Um, and so I spent a lot of time with my freshman floor, in particular a group of three friends. I was a bit of a hermit freshman year. Oh, I did— um, one friend I made freshman year was at that open house that they started an hour early. Part way into it another freshman student came in and we were talking about um, the art of translation and all that kind of stuff. Um, and then years later we ended up like in the same major and, um, participating in a lot of the same student groups junior and senior year. And he's actually my roommate now. [Laughs]

Yeah, freshman year I wasn't terribly interested in the like social scene. I didn't feel pressure to like get out and meet people, that kind of thing. So, um, the friendships that I did, um, pick up and maintain were all the people who I happened to be around, um, and then finding the people within that set, who I clicked with.

WOMICK: So what did you do that summer?

STIMSON: Uh, that summer I went home. And...that's the only term off that I've had that was... actually like a vacation. Although my brother was at summer camp that summer. So I hung out with my mom a lot and also one of my friends from community college who is still living in California. We spent a lot of time hanging out, and um... he's a big history buff, which is one of the subjects that had always been my weakest subject. And so, um, we had a lot of fun.... Almost like lecturing at each other like the things each of us knew a

bit more about than the other, and then finding interconnections and stuff. Um, and I also attempted to learn bass, and we'd jam. But – [Laughter] But I hadn't really played a stringed instrument before, so I mainly just stayed on one string [Laughs].

WOMICK: And, you came back that fall?

STIMSON: Nope. I took that fall off. And I ended up taking classes at the community college as kind of a last-minute thing. And... so what did I do that term? I... Oh, actually I remember my motivation for that was that in freshman winter I'd taken Calc 1. And then my next opportunity to take Calc 2, Math 8, was sophomore winter, and it had been a year since I'd done calculus. So I went to the community college and retook intro calculus just so it would be fresh in my mind. Um, and then just took some classes that looked like I wouldn't be able to fit into my D-Plan. So like I took a law class, I took a um... dance class, things like that, just all over the place. Excuse me. It was fun, but it also... I got myself back into the mental pace of being on a semester instead of being on a quarter.

So there was a miniature version of the rough reentry, um, into Dartmouth that winter. Um, but that first winter back I was taking Math 8. At this point I was thinking I would probably be an English major. And I was basically just continuing to take math because it was fun. And I took math with a grad student.

So as opposed to what the tour groups say, there are actually several courses at Dartmouth that are taught by grad students. Um, and often those are like incredible classes they're... because they tend to be the like ABD PhD students who have been... they've finished all their teaching seminars and that kind of thing. Um, and in this particular term, all he was working on that term was—he was working on his dissertation and teaching this class. And, um, he had like four or five hours of office hours every day and was....

Math 8 is a course that ends up functioning kind of as a weeder course for the math major. Um, 'cause, it's a... definitely a step up in complexity from Math 3. And, um, it also introduces the more advanced like sequences and series stuff, um, which isn't as explicitly related to the rest of the calculus material as the stuff in Math 3 where everything's very tied together. And so a lot of people get lost in Math 8. And a lot of people will like excel at the calculus, but then kind of flounder on the sequences and series or vice versa.

And the grad student who was teaching this was very aware of that. And also aware of the fact that, um, calculus courses don't really reflect what it's actually like to be a math major, what upper-level math courses are like. And so he really tried to (A) help the students who were stronger at one part of the class than the other to kind of like figure out where that strength was coming from and how to fit it into the other material. But also to kind of open our eyes to what the future of like upper-level math courses is like.

And so that was the first time that it occurred to me, hey, I actually really like doing this, and maybe I could minor in it or something. So then I started taking more math classes and declared the math major sophomore summer, which was exciting and a very like big step. I'd never thought of myself as someone who would be a math major.

WOMICK: Mm-hmm.

STIMSON: Um, and... I'm just rewinding and thinking what else happened in that time period. Also, um, sophomore spring I retook English 60, this time for credit. Again, with Professor Crumbine. And, um, the rules about getting credit for a course that you've already taken before are either that the first time you only attended a certain number of classes, or, in the case of the topics course, you pick a topic or a research paper or whatever that is separate and different enough. And so I talked to Professor Crumbine ahead of time about this. And so the first time I'd written about—I'd researched and written about—um, oh man I'm blanking on her name. She wrote "Holy the Firm" and she wrote—I'm sure it'll come to me 15 minutes later, and I'll blurt it out—um, a contemporary kind of philosophical prose poet type author. Um... Yeah, I'm not going to remember the name right now. So the second time around I wrote about [Jorge Luis] Borges and researched him. Um, unfortunately, I had to do it all in translation because I don't speak Spanish. But it turns out that he, um, spoke English at home and grew up reading and writing English. Um, so that was a useful hook into it.

WOMICK: Mm-hmm.

STIMSON: Um, okay so then I declared the math major... Um, okay then sophomore summer. Alright. So right after declaring the math major in sophomore summer, I took one math class and two English classes right after deciding that I wasn't going to be an English major. And I took Shakespeare 1 and Creative Writing. And the



same guy sat next to me in both classes. And so we ended up becoming friends: Jaymes Sanchez ['13]. And it turned out we're both really interested in writing and in theater. And he introduced me to the...kind of, Dartmouth theater scene, which I hadn't really been in contact with. The only theater production I'd been involved with was back at the community college I'd done a soundtrack for a play. Um, but... so he introduced me to like the Displaced Theater Company and all of that. And the... we ended up producing the play I wrote freshman fall, um, with him directing it. And then we've collaborated on stuff like almost every term since then. So um, he's been in—I've cast him in things. He's directed my stuff. We've co-written WIRED plays twice. Um, and currently actually he's one of the leads in the film project I'm shooting.

WOMICK: Mm-hmm.

STIMSON: Um... And what else happened sophomore summer? Oh, also topical. That's when I kind of rediscovered how cool Rauner was. Um, because I'd just stopped by Rauner during orientation, looked around, and it was really cool. And then freshman fall, um, swept me off and it kind of dropped out of mind. And then for the Shakespeare course, the professor mentioned on the first day that we have the First Folio here. And so I came over here thinking maybe I could get a look at it. And they just brought it out, sat on that table, and said, "Let us know when you're done." And that kind of blew my mind. And so I ended up coming back multiple times a week for that summer. And I'd just do my Shakespeare homework by sitting and reading from the First Folio, which, um, was really cool. By the end of the summer I'd gotten pretty good at, um, being able to quickly read the original like spellings and typesetting and all of that. Um, so that was really cool.

Yeah. Um, also that creative writing class I took with Ernie Hebert, who is the like Intro to Creative Writing course. And, um, that was really fun. At that point I started thinking maybe I could take all these English classes I'd taken and turn it into a creative writing minor, which I've ended up doing...although I need to file that. Mental note. [Laughs] Yeah.

WOMICK: So then junior year?

STIMSON: Oh, okay. So junior spring I took CS 1. It was the first term that they were teaching CS 1 — they'd just switched over from CS 5. And I was partly taking it for the distributive and also it just seemed

interesting. I was really nervous about it. I was very intimidated by the idea of writing code 'cause I hadn't done so before. And so during the sophomore summer, I did a bunch of online video tutorials through Jones to teach myself Python and write some basic programs in it. Um, and I spent about a month on that and probably only covered about the first week and a half of CS 1. But it did make the transition into writing code a lot smoother.

And that course was really, really fun. And, um, CS has a lot that appeals to me that math does, um, but has.... For me the thing that's most interesting about studying math is that it's all about looking at like relationships between things and kind of interlocking meshes of relationships. And one thing moves and pulls everything else. And it's this interesting dynamic system. Which is also kind of what my interests in creative writing is. Is looking at that just with people.

But then CS, while it's a little bit less like analytic- and logic-based than math is...or at least in practice in classes, it has the bonus of, I'm making stuff. And, um, having stopped doing my composition and all that kind of stuff, I was kind of jonesing to make stuff, make stuff that did stuff.

And it turned out the CS professor, Professor [Devin] Balkcom, one day in class he made—he runs the Robotics Lab and does a bunch of cool robotics stuff. And he made a joke about that in class one day. Um, he said that— something along the lines of, Roboticists, if they need friends, they make them. And I did a double take, and it was very obvious. I was sitting in the front of the class, I was right in front of him and like.... Because when I was seven or eight—some nebulous young age—my uncle had given me a T-shirt that had that joke. Um, it says: "Need friends?" on the front. And then "Make some" on the back. And a picture of a robot and the Carnegie Mellon Robotics Lab, which is where my uncle works.

And, um, I went up and asked the professor.... No actually I was too nervous to just ask him. This was like a 100-person lecture-type class. So first I Googled him and saw that he had gone to Carnegie Mellon. So then I asked him. And it turned out he had taken classes from my uncle while working on his PhD. So that was pretty cool. And, um, it's possible that I actually talked to my uncle about the class that Professor Balkcom was in; because when I was little, when my uncle visited, we would always talk about like his robotics classes. And, um, about like ideas for what their final projects could

be. Um, and there was one where he had had a class where their final project was to make a robot that could cook a pancake, including flipping it. And it was like a team project, and all the teams were doing different things, including one flipped it using a curved ramp and air jets. [Laughs] So I can't remember if that one actually worked, though, or if they just designed it. So that was fun and, yeah, CS 1.

What else? I think the fact that I did some coding over the summer and got more comfortable with the language ahead of time was a really good thing. Um, like CS 1's a really good course, and it's very focused on order. It—there's a lot of structure built into the course that's designed to help people who haven't done CS before get into it. But there's still a not quite inevitable, but approaching inevitable, level of culture shock going into writing code having not done so before. And an exacerbating factor to that is, um, that you have to learn a program language before you can start programming. And so in the first few weeks you're learning Python while also learning programming concepts. And if you're hung up on some syntactical stuff, then that prevents you from being able to work on the larger-scale steps.

So that was actually something that I think Dartmouth could use a CS Club that's kind of not quite Hacker Club. Like Hacker Club's really cool. I've done stuff with them. But because it's project-centered, you need a certain amount of coding experience, which is kind of the computer system, engineering mentality, to really thrive there.

And, um, the CS and Math Departments kind of have a PR problem, I guess. Which is that—particularly CS, but also math—that they're kind of seen as like this pseudo separate thing that the math and CS kids do. And so like deciding I'm going to take some CS courses, unless you're doing math, engineering or physics or something, it is a— kind of a statement about yourself socially. Um, and part of that is also there's a kind of an intimidation factor. And I think some of that comes from the fact that freshman year, um, so we take Writing 5. We all take Writing 5 or 2 and 3, and we all take a freshman seminar. And those give us all this kind of shared base of skill and confidence in academic writing and research. Um, but for the more technical, analytical reasoning type of stuff, we don't—we haven't experienced anything like that. And so unless you come in having that as a chunk of your background, it is definitely an intimidating thing to make that...there's a perceived divide that you

have to cross into there. And then it very quickly becomes part of like your outward-facing identity. Whereas taking a handful of English courses or what have you, whatever other department doesn't necessarily define you... Um, I don't know how I got into this tangent. Oh, CS 1.

So a lot of people come to CS 1 as just like this is to get a distributive out of the way or like this is something that'll look good on a resume or whatever, um, without having any confidence in their ability to actually do it. Um, so yeah, I think Dartmouth needs some way to.... I like I think probably the best option would be like a counterpoint to Writing 5, so everyone takes like Writing 5 and then like Analytical Reasoning 5, or whatever it would be, which would be like, um, math and CS and the more, um, like formal reasoning systems type stuff. Um, because in the same way that like Writing 5 is centered on like writing across the curriculum, and the idea that being a good writer and researcher applies to everything, I think the same goes for, um, math and CS and that type of rational analysis type thinking. Um, or... The problem is like they'll have technical definitions, but also they have like overtones that sound a little bit snobby-ish. Saying like this stuff is rational, and there's some other stuff.

But, yeah, I think that would be a very helpful thing for Dartmouth to have, and definitely...because like CS 1—a lot of people end up dropping CS 1, including like, you have a lot of freshmen come and take CS 1—or back when it was CS 5. And this also happens with like the introductory math courses. Come in, sometimes, um, pretty confident in their math from high school or whatever, um, and then get kind of blindsided by the pace and the rigor of doing such things in a collegiate context. Um, so I seem to have wandered up onto a soapbox [Laughter].

WOMICK: That's fine.

STIMSON: So one thing that I do at Dartmouth is I'm the president of the, um, Mathematical Society, and we do, um, like evening talks, given by professors, grad students, sometimes undergrads, sometimes visiting lecturers. And the— one of the core things that we want to do with Math Society is have— use these lectures to introduce cool math stuff that normally you wouldn't encounter until upper-level courses, but introduce it in a way that's accessible to anyone. Because one problem that this kind of academic study of math has, particularly for undergraduates, is that the first several courses you

take... Um, so you take all the calculus courses, and then you take linear algebra. By the time you finish all of those, you still don't have much of an idea at all about what the actual landscape of academic mathematics is.

So like even the major branches of mathematics—you have algebra and number theory and topology, etc., etc. And you can get through and be terms into your math major without actually knowing what those are, unless you take the intro course in each one. And so some of the coolest math ideas don't show up 'til later. And it's a relatively, I think, unique problem to mathematics, partly because mathematics is all about—everything builds on previous things, and a lot of it is about defining language to describe things.

So it's like the Chinese Remainder Theorem. That's going to be really difficult to describe to, um, a freshman taking calculus. Because not only is it a pretty, um, or—it's a relatively complex concept. But also the language to describe it isn't there yet. Whereas like taking introductory English courses, um, you can quickly gain, um, awareness of the larger literary landscape. Um, I seem to be going to English as my default "it's not math" thing, because that's the one I've done most in.

So through Math Society we've had some pretty cool events with professors talking about these more advanced concepts that are interesting to them, but in language that's accessible to any Dartmouth student even if you haven't taken Math 3. And so in the last year in particular, we've started getting more attendance at Math Society events from non-math majors, which is really exciting.

We've had—we had one event where a professor, who was about to leave for a year of traveling the world presenting her research, did a Math Society talk about that research. And, um, then a pretty lively Q&A at the end with non-math majors asking questions and like really getting into it, which was really exciting. Because an unfortunate tendency at, um, like academic talks... um, and this happens a lot with guest lecturers, visiting lecturers on campus, is that the Q&A will quickly be dominated by the people in the know, asking like very specific technical questions, and then that shuts out a large part of the audience. And, um, so that's one of the things we've been working to avoid, and it seems to be going pretty well by now, which is exciting.

WOMICK:

Yeah. You wanna talk about your senior year?

STIMSON: Yeah. So I took CS 1 and started getting really excited about computer science. And for a while I was thinking I would take a fifth year and add in a CS minor on top of everything else, um, which I've decided not to because most CS grad programs are open to having like math majors come in and then you kind of spend some time doing like catching up on the CS. Um, but I am going to have to graduate one term late because I was trying to cram all that in at the last minute.

Let's see, what have I done this year? I've been doing a lot of distributives which I kept putting off when I was switching around majors and all of that. So that was actually my last term. I'm going to come back this fall and just take distributives and finish my language requirement. Let's see. Oh, a particularly cool thing this year was in the first like math course I took that counts towards the math major was, um, Introductory Number Theory, which was really, really fun. And I then took an upper-level number theory topics course. And then this fall I took a graduate course in number theory. And that was really fun. And, um, that was one of the best classes I've taken at Dartmouth, and it was very, um—it really opened my eyes to like what studying math can be. And that's one of the really cool things here, is that you can just, if you have the prerequisites, you can take a graduate course, and it counts for undergraduate credit.

So, um, one of my friends is taking a graduate course right now at Thayer. Actually I have a lot of friends who are taking graduate courses [Laughter]. And like particularly math, because there are a lot of branches of math. And our department is mostly like introductory in everything and then a handful of intermediate undergraduate courses in each branch; and then maybe one or two more advanced ones. Um, I happened to pick numbers theory, which is the one that has the least undergraduate courses. Um, but also really, really good number theory professors.

And the professor I took the graduate course with, Carl Pomerantz. I did a massive double take when I realized that's who it was. Because like I studied the work he's done. Every number theory book I have ever studied cites him, that kind of thing. Um, so having that opportunity was really incredible. Um, what else have I been doing? Um, I'm still taking CS classes. They, um, you can count CS classes toward...you can count a certain number of CS classes toward the math major. And so I'm able to kind of fit those in

together. I'm not actually modifying the major. But I'm counting some of them in just letting me be a bit more flexible.

This term I, um, started out with four courses, and I was trying to decide between a math course and a CS course. I ended up deciding to—I'm in the CS course and auditing a math course. I've now taken three CS courses with Professor Balkcom, who's really cool. The course I'm taking with him right now, it's a new course which is a—there's a ten-week project course. Because like the CS Department has...like if you're a CS major, then your last two terms you do a, um, a two-term CS project. Um, but for— there weren't really other courses that had...you just kind of do a project unless you were doing independent research. So this is a new course. It's, um, loosely aimed at um...to be like your junior spring project course. Um, and it's just the first week everyone pitches projects. And then you kind of glom together into teams, and then just spend ten weeks writing it. And, the requirement is that by the end of the course, you do something that it be in a publishable state. So, um, that's been pretty fun. And because like it's this big goal...but it's also relatively nebulous how you get there, it um... it kind of feels like I'm graduating into actually like being a software developer as opposed to just being a student who does problem sets [Laughs].

WOMICK: Mm-hmm. I know you're not quite done yet. But looking ahead, how do you imagine yourself being involved with Dartmouth after you finish up?

STIMSON: Well, I'm going to be here for another year in Hanover, taking classes for one term. But this term I've been working on a film project I'm shooting. I'm shooting a feature length film. And the original plan was to shoot it, shoot the entire thing this term. But to be able to cram it in that much, we needed a higher budget. And so we've been doing a Kickstarter which has not panned out. The deadline's today, and we have like \$10,000 to go. Um, so in lieu of that, we're going to be continuing doing some shooting over the summer, shooting in the fall. Um, and so I'm going to be, um, like working in Hanover, hopefully at Dartmouth as much as possible. Dartmouth is very, um, open to alumni auditing courses; so I'll probably be doing that as much as I can.

I've been working on software startup with some other '13's. Um, and by now a bunch of other Dartmouth students and some UCLA students as well. And we have our first product launch coming up in

the next few months. And hopefully that's going to, um, take off and be something that I can work on for the next few years.

I'm still kind of waffling between do I want to be doing.... I guess I haven't really talked much about film stuff. I could rewind. Do I want to be going more headfirst into film, or do I want to be sticking on the math and CS? Because they're both really appealing to me. And anytime I'm just focusing more on one, then the other is like a constant distraction. And unfortunately the math and CS I do, um, isn't super like applicable to filmmaking or anything like that. Um, yeah.

So part of the reason why I want to just jump into working right now is to kind of take some time outside of the fast-paced academic environment and really figure out if like grad school is what I want to do. I didn't talk that much about film stuff. So I've done like screenwriting and playwriting courses here. Um, and I've done some film... Um, I've done a lot of like YouTube videos and stuff with my brother in high school and taken one film class at the community college. And, um, this last summer I ended up directing a short film that then got into a film festival. And also about a month before that film festival, one of my student films from the community college also had like won an award and stuff. And, um, I'd kind of—it had not occurred to me really up 'til that point that my filmmaking interest was something that was actually particularly appealing to an audience or anything like that. Because I love writing films, and I love the process of making films. And I think it's a wonderful way to tell stories. But so then having the added element of actually this is connecting with audiences makes it extra appealing. So like on one of my films.... One of my short films is called Chemo, and it's about the experience of going through chemotherapy, was screened a week or so ago at a Relay for Life fundraiser. And like people in the audience were crying. And like I.... That's not a type of connection that I can really make with math profs.

Um, so, yes, I have these kind of two major interests that I can't really decide between. My brother is like very much "I am a filmmaker." He's applying to film schools. He's also shooting a feature film right now. And he's like very focused and knows what his path is. And I'm just kind of wandering, trying to figure it out. Um, so, yes, the next few years will definitely be exploratory, probably in the format of working on software and then doing film projects on the side.



WOMICK: Reflecting back on the time that you've spent at Dartmouth, have there been any times where you've felt like you didn't fit in here?

STIMSON: Yes. I mean I figured out within the first few weeks of being here that the kind of central social scene was not something that I was interested in participating in. Um, not just like the Greek scene, but just kind of the party scene in general. Um, and there's a lot of elitism at Dartmouth, a lot of which is implicit. Like... kind of the social norm is to be affluent and have a lot of resources. And so not being that sticks out. And then also like I don't drink, I don't really like...like parties. [Laughs]

So initially freshman year I was very much, oh, okay, I'm just going to completely ignore the possibility of having a social life here. Um, once I like figured out the math major and kind of started participating more in campus and particularly getting into the Theater Department, um, then I kind of found my two places: um, yeah the rehearsal room and then like Kemeny and Sudikoff.

So by now, I've definitely found my niches at Dartmouth, which are definitely off of the central path. And there's definitely always an awareness, particularly on weekends like Green Key or Homecoming or things like that, that there's this entire current of campus culture that I am not a member of. Um, but that doesn't really bother me.

I think it's unfortunate that there's one kind of model of like, "this is what a Dartmouth person is" that is kind of the default. And lot of, um, organizational and institutional elements are kind of assuming that that's something that we all share. And I think that's unfortunate. And... I think it does for students who don't fit that identity, um, the fact that that's so very normalized kind of tosses people into limbo. Like the choice to not participate in that is like to identify oneself as an outsider...or at least that's how it can seem.

Even though there's so much stuff going on on campus, there are so many people with varying interests, um, that I don't think that norm really needs to be there. Um, but I do think it discourages... Um, I do think it discourages people from exploring their own interests and also just identities and social—like the type of socialization that is comfortable for them. Because there's a default, and it's an act— going with the default can be done passively. Whereas not doing so has to be an active decision. Um, that was a long answer. [Laughs]

WOMICK: What would you say the default looks like?

STIMSON: Um, I mean there's definitely a kind of preppy, elitist Dartmouth student stereotype. I mean for me, I grew up in a mobile home, and then I went to a community college. And then I came here, and it was a big culture shock. The norm Dartmouth student drinks a lot. Um, the norm Dartmouth student parties a lot. Um, there was a recent *D* op-ed where someone referred to the feeling of obligation to party on a Friday night. And he was specifically talking about—like he's an international student. He didn't, um, grow up in a culture that has that as a norm, and it was weird to him. And it was weird to me, too, that Friday nights and also Saturday nights and Wednesday nights has this expectation that everyone's going to go out and get wasted.

I also think that the kind of norm of what a Dartmouth student is has an unfortunate focus on success over—maybe I should say an unfortunately narrow definition of success, which I think one can illustrate with things that when our commencement speaker was announced, the first big vocal reaction.... Um, well, there were people saying this guy sounds really cool. But then there were a bunch of people saying, "Oh, man, this guy didn't pass the name-recognition test. Harvard got Oprah. Darn!" Which.... [Laughter] seems to miss the point. And it's a little discouraging that after four years of an excellent liberal arts education, such a basic point can still be missed. But I think that is a kind of central part of the Dartmouth culture.

And I mean there's definitely a kind of central model of what a Dartmouth student should be. The excellent grades come, and you take some distribs, pick your major, do a thesis, get corporate recruited, and then you're done. Which is very—a very linear model and is very.... Other than like a temporary.... Get your distribs done, period, is a very insular model. There are a lot of students who end up really strongly identifying with what department they're in. Um... yeah.

WOMICK: Would you say that there is such a thing as the Dartmouth community and if so, who's a part of it?

STIMSON: Um, I've been thinking about that a lot recently because I've been doing more and more stuff with off-campus, um, groups. The producer for my film is a filmmaker from Vermont, who is not

Dartmouth-affiliated. And so, like freshman year you show up, and there's this very, very strong sense of community: Welcome to Dartmouth. And then very quickly that then dissolves into a lot of sub-communities. And perceptually it's very much...there's like the central Dartmouth community which is the Greek scene and the sports and Student Assembly and all that. And then the like peripheral sub-communities.

In my experience, everyone is a member of several of these sub-communities. But there's definitely a strong disjoint. Like there are definitely plenty of '13's who I've never met and maybe don't even have acquaintances in common with.

I think the idea of Dartmouth community is a little bit problematic to discuss just because to define someone as a member of the Dartmouth community, you need to have a set of criteria for what it means to be a Dartmouth person. And like in the loosest sense you could just say, a member of the Dartmouth community is someone who is a student, professor, employee, alum; consider anyone who's had any affiliation with Dartmouth, which might be the most accurate way to define it. But then you have.... Um, I definitely know like Dartmouth alumni who don't really have a particular attachment or connection with Dartmouth anymore; um, some who very much do. Um, yeah this is a big question. [Laughs] I think that might be all I've got on that, but I know I'll be thinking about this for... you know.

WOMICK: Yes, it's good. How do you think Dartmouth has changed during your time here?

STIMSON: Hmm. Um, that's a bit of a tough one because I know my perception of Dartmouth and my perception of the world have changed while I'm at Dartmouth. And so that's definitely going to color any commentary I have. Um, it seems like particularly in the last year, the Dartmouth community is getting a lot more self-aware and a bit more open to questioning itself. Which...I mean there was—like for the Dimensions protest there was a big backlash against that, but I think that backlash was more just an expression of the norm that already existed. Um, hmm... I think any academic community is going to always be in a constant state of flux and experimentation.

So like taking the Math Society in this new direction. The changing of CS 5 to CS 1, where they switched it to— from Java, which is a

more syntax-heavy language, to Python, which is more accessible. I think it's the more like technical and scientific departments are starting to move away from the weeder course model, which I think is good. Um, because like in the humanities, like we have Writing 5 and seminars, all this stuff that's designed to be like— give us a toolset to be able to succeed later. Whereas things like the Bio Department has a reputation for having like weeder courses that like, "Oh I'm going to take two courses this term, so I can pass this" and everyone drops it. Um, I think there's definitely a move away from that. Hmm.

I'm not sure how much more I can comment on that just because my perception has shifted so much in the last four years; and also my level of engagement has shifted a lot in the last four years. So I wasn't particularly involved in the campus as the campus until the last like two years, maybe year and a half.

A week or two ago I went to the Accidental Racism Discussion, and that was one of the first such events that I'd gone to. Um, and that's one thing like in hindsight I really wish I had been doing such things more throughout my Dartmouth experience. And I think the fact that I was kind of scared off of the kind of campus mainstream freshman year, I let that discourage me from finding other ways to connect more to the campus on a larger scale. Um, what was the question again? [Laughter]

WOMICK: How you thought Dartmouth had changed?

STIMSON: Yes, I think that's probably... You know those are the main changes that come to mind. Um, and also there was the turbulence of Jim Kim coming in and going out so quickly. Um, and I think a lot of... I think the backlash that his leaving triggered was unfortunate, because some of the stuff he was bringing to the table, some of the ideas that he was initiating, were definitely, um, valuable additions to the conversation. And then there was kind of an...um, anti-Jim Kim, "you've-betrayed-us" sentiment that then poisoned the well for some of the stuff that had started while he was president, which is unfortunate. But, I'm quietly hopeful about our new president, particularly. He's a math major; that's cool. The last president we had who was a math major was pretty cool. Um, yeah. [Laughs]

WOMICK: What about you? How do you think you've changed during your time here?

STIMSON:

I think I've changed a lot here. I came into Dartmouth very academically confident and socially withdrawn. And I think I'm coming out more academically humble and more socially comfortable. I think... I think the biggest change I've gone through at Dartmouth is that I'm a lot more self-aware and a lot more conscientious of broader context, which... I mean I'm definitely not like super self-aware. But I've made progress on that, and now think of that as a central part of, um, how I hope to go through life...is getting more self-awareness and awareness of context.

Um, I'm definitely...I think I've become more open-minded at Dartmouth. Um, having like interacted with a lot of different academic departments and also, um, like people's backgrounds, a lot of—Um, I think I've broken down a lot of prejudices that I didn't realize I had. One thing that was really helpful for that actually is, um, I took sociolinguistics, and we did a lot of stuff of looking at how people react to different accents and dialects. And like that's something that we all do. We're always making little, um, assessments based on how people speak. Um, but being more aware of that, I think, is a great thing. And I think that's one of those courses that everybody should take or at least have some familiarity with. 'Cause, um... this actually kind of ties into what the discussion at the Accidental Racism talk was. Um, there's kind of a natural human tendency to think of oneself as being, you know, pretty good at stuff. And when we think about ideas like prejudices, um, we kind of implicitly assume that's something that other people do, and that's like an action that other people take. And I think recognizing, um, discrimination, that's just kind of a natural consequence of how human brains work. And then I think by de-stigmatizing it, we can actually be—make more progress towards avoiding it. Um, because there have been plenty of studies showing that like basic racial prejudices, um, get encoded in your brain at a very young age. Um, and particularly in like social interactions, a huge amount of our processing is going on on that kind of subconscious level. And, um, we all tend to kind of assume that whatever our brain is doing, it's generally in line with what our conscious beliefs are. And learning to be more aware and to not kind of rest on the laurels of like, "I consider myself a feminist; therefore I don't need to be double checking the consequences of my behavior." Or for whatever other type of discrimination. I think stepping past that has been definitely a big personal growth for me. Or if not stepping past, at least moving in the direction of being more self-aware in that way.

Um, I think... another big thing I've taken away from Dartmouth, I think, or the way that I've changed at Dartmouth, um, is...finding words. I think I've regained a portion of that kind of investigative curiosity from childhood which, um, which I've always tried to cultivate, both academically and artistically. And I think being here and having all these resources has helped me kind of focus back in on that. Um, and kind of the idea of fearless research, that any topic, I can just like go to the library, find a dozen books on it and start figuring it out. And even without the library resource, I think that confidence and openness to saying, um, I have no idea what this is, but let's find out. Um, I think that's definitely something that I've, if not gained, at least strengthened a bit while at Dartmouth.

Um, also in specific— like having done all of the theater stuff, I think has made me a lot more outgoing, and um... I was very quiet when I got to Dartmouth and, um, very shy. And particularly like events like WIRED, where it's this 24-hour kind of pressure cooker of like you have a partner, and you write a play overnight and then the next day just all these actors show up, and it's.... Like, putting on a play is such a collaborative process and doing that type of collaboration with people who you, um, don't know all of them.... I think experiences like that have really helped me be more confident in meeting new people and, um, collaborating with people who I'm not already comfortable with.

WOMICK: Okay. Is there anything that we haven't gotten to talk about yet that you'd like to?

STIMSON: Um...I think we covered just about everything. Yeah. Um, I guess one big influence on me while I've been here that I didn't touch on too much is that the undergraduate deans are just like amazing resources. And so when I came in freshman year my dean was John Pfister, who's just super amazing. And besides like academic advice, we'd also just like discuss literature. Um, we both read comics and we'd like swap comics and that kind of thing. Um, and now I have, um, Dean Francine. I'm still in East Wheelock. And, um, it's been nice to have kind of a grownup perspective on things I guess. Like, um, a larger-scale outside-of-being-a-student perspective on things. And I'm not sure if I've just been like really lucky in every dean I've interacted with or just all the deans are like super cool people. Um, but those have been really wonderful relationships and opportunities to.... All the deans that I've worked with have treated me like a peer, um, and yeah – that's been really

cool. Um, oh— other thought, going back to the question about changing.

Um, like when I was in high school and was playing a lot of piano, it got to the point where I needed to practice like eight hours a day, and I had to pick, um, what stuff I was studying to put on the back burner. And I picked math because I was a bit ahead in it and wasn't thinking in particular that it was going to be something that I'd be doing, um, at a time like in the future. Um, and then by the time I got to Dartmouth, I'd realized, wait a minute, it's been four years now since I did math, and I'm regretting this. And the fact that I was able to then just start from the like freshman-level calculus and now I'm a math major and taking grad courses and stuff. I think besides the fact that I, you know, have found this thing that I'm really interested in and really enjoy, also helped me kind of deconstruct the idea of having a—identifying too closely with what I happen to be doing at the time. Because when I came to Dartmouth, I was very much self-identifying, "I'm the piano guy, I'm the music guy." And that type of focus was putting the blinders on. And, um, one of the big things that my Dartmouth experience has done for me is help widen this.

WOMICK: Okay, thank you.

STIMSON: Thank you.

**[End of Interview]**