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# Jay Gatsby Goes to College

## *Engaging At-Risk Students*

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Jay Gatsby, the main character in F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby*, is a self-made man. He entered St. Olaf College in Minnesota but then dropped out during his first term because of the humiliating circumstances of his poverty. Gatsby's flight from college contrasts with the Ivy League education of Fitzgerald's narrator, Nick Carraway, the Yale graduate better equipped to navigate East Egg's social world. Gatsby's experience is still relevant today: while the transition to higher education is often difficult for young people, it is especially so for first-generation students. Many students can call on the experiences of family members to help them acclimate to the college environment, but first-generation students lack a road map for academic success and social comfort in what can feel like an alien world. These students often face even greater hurdles at highly selective institutions such as Dartmouth College, where expectations for academic achievement are high and the social climate is often unfamiliar.

First-generation and low-income students, referred to here as "at-risk students," have an increased risk of underperforming in a few key areas while in college. These areas are engagement, achievement, and retention. Many at-risk students are less academically and socially engaged than the typical college student: they are less likely to attend faculty office hours, to participate in peer study groups, to make use of campus support services, or to be involved in extracurricular activities.<sup>1</sup> This reduced engagement contributes to their lower aggregate grades and rates of persistence, most notably from the first to second year of college. Eleven percent of Dartmouth students in the undergraduate class of 2018 have identified themselves as the first generation in their family to attend college, the highest percentage since the College tracked this figure.

Early intervention with at-risk students has been shown to ease their transitions to college and to promote their success.<sup>2</sup> Targeted orientation programs that offer personalized attention can help at-risk students make early and meaningful connections with faculty and staff that have been shown to have positive correlations with student success.<sup>3</sup> Dartmouth College excels in its commitment to the academic success of its first-generation students, manifesting its responsibility formally through its First-Year Student Enrichment Program (FYSEP). The Dartmouth College Library is one of several departments within the College community that partners with FYSEP to support these students.

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### FIRST-YEAR STUDENT ENRICHMENT PROGRAM (FYSEP)

Launched in the fall of 2009 as a student-led mentorship program and, in subsequent years, supported by the College President and the Dean of the College, FYSEP provides an eight-day preorientation and year-long peer-mentoring program for students who are among the first in their families to attend a four-year college. FYSEP offers sample classes with Dartmouth faculty, workshops, and seminars designed to simulate life at Dartmouth and to prepare participants to handle some of the academic and social challenges they may face during their first year.

Presently there are 130 students who have attended the invitation-only program. Twenty-three FYSEP students participated in the 2014 commencement exercises at Dartmouth as among the first in their families to graduate from college. “FYSEP provides a rigorous, dynamic, and transformative experience that puts participants in a position to thrive at Dartmouth both academically and socially,” says Inge-Lise Ameer, vice provost for student affairs. “The participation and commitment of student mentors and our faculty has been key to the great success of the FYSEP program,” she says.<sup>4</sup> This assertion is backed up by the students themselves. One recent graduate commented, “I was able to meet some of the nicest, coolest people on campus through FYSEP. These are the people who will teach you the ropes, give you great advice, and will do anything possible to help you. There is no other program that gave me more confidence or connections at Dartmouth.”

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### DARTMOUTH COLLEGE LIBRARY SERVICE ETHIC AND EDUCATIONAL MISSION

Housed in nine separate libraries, the Dartmouth College Library prides itself on its strong service ethic. The Library serves a diverse and highly motivated constituency of students and faculty. As part of an institution with a recognized strength in its undergraduate education, the Dartmouth College Library supports the community’s high expectations with a culture of intense personalized research assistance to both students and faculty.

The Library has long been a partner in the classroom by offering traditional bibliographic instruction, but in 2002 we consciously began a shift toward a more intentional and intensive engagement with the curriculum. The newly formed Education and Outreach program worked across the Library to instill a culture of teaching and learning that continues to affect all Library units.

A hallmark of our Education and Outreach program is its embrace of active learning techniques. Active learning is any instructional method that engages students in the learning process and gives them ownership of the classroom experience.<sup>5</sup> Research shows that active learning positively affects student achievement and improves student thinking and

writing. Eddy and Hogan have found that active learning techniques also improve student success by creating a more interdependent classroom community.<sup>6</sup>

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### ADVENTURES IN RESEARCH

As a component of the eight-day FYSEP preorientation, the Library offers a ninety-minute session that introduces the students to the “faces and places” of the Library. Our primary goal working with the FYSEP students mirrors that of the preorientation program as a whole: to help Dartmouth’s first-generation students begin their first term with an understanding of how to proceed academically. In the case of the Library, this support includes instilling in students an awareness of available research assistance, as well as developing their comfort in seeking help with assignments. FYSEP creates experiential learning opportunities for its participants, including real class lectures by Dartmouth faculty and other activities. The Library offers its interactive session to simulate the research process.

The Library’s session in the FYSEP schedule usually takes place toward the end of the program. At this point, the students have already had multiple academically focused sessions; they have gained some familiarity with faculty and their expectations and teaching styles; learned strategies for success; and been introduced to many student support services. The students have already begun work on an academic essay they will turn in at the end of the FYSEP program. The research strategies learned in the Library session cohere with other strategies students have been developing, and Library staff members are recognized as important elements of the students’ support network on campus.

#### Kicking it Off

The librarians start the session describing its modest, fundamental goal. By the time the Library session is complete, the students should be able to answer the question: “Why would I want to go to the Library?” Secondary goals are numerous and include knowing who to ask for help, developing a comfort level with the environment, and getting a broad sense of the breadth of resources available. To allow the students to understand the purpose of the session, it is imperative to share with them what will take place and why, so the next step is to outline the session’s activities. The Library maintains FYSEP’s commitment to authenticity and real-life situations by adapting an actual research paper assignment used by one of Dartmouth’s English professors in his First-Year Writing class. In the course, students are asked to explore a theme or event in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* by setting it into its original 1925 cultural context. The librarians work with the students to break down this assignment and model how one might tackle a similar assignment in one of their courses. The exercise begins with two or three librarians leading the FYSEP students through a brainstorming

activity. They ask, “What significant cultural phenomena or global events come to mind when you think about the 1920s, the decade during which *The Great Gatsby* takes place?” While one librarian records ideas on a whiteboard, students share an array of topics that range from music and art, to suffrage, to race relations, to politics, to Prohibition, to whatever else comes to mind related to the historical time frame of the 1920s. One of the most significant rewards from this phase of the session is observing the students as they realize how much they already know. For the students, the recognition that they have prior knowledge on a subject and have something to offer is very powerful. Though they are entering the college environment with no direct frame of reference for expectations and may harbor doubts about their abilities, they begin to recognize they have knowledge to bring to their experience. This active learning exercise also provides the opportunity to develop community by allowing the students to work together to solve a problem. This sense of community encourages students to take risks and engage in challenging thinking in a safe environment. Studies have shown that under-represented student groups, especially, develop greater performance and motivational skills when they feel to be a part of a community.<sup>7</sup>

After the students identify a list of topics and events, we invite them to think about what types of materials they might use to learn more about these issues. The students generate a wide-ranging list of potential sources, both primary and secondary, including newspaper and journal articles, diaries, letters, government publications, photographs, and more. Using the Library’s various information resources, we show them how they can locate and access the sources identified while demonstrating searches to give them a sense of the material that they may actually find. The focus is not on teaching students how to navigate the search tools—that will come later when they are in actual classes—but to illustrate the intellectual process of research and the thrill of discovery. The students’ engagement and excitement during this brainstorming process is an indication of its success. For many, this is their first encounter with a research library, and they are thrilled to see their ideas become manifest due to the wealth of resources available to them.

The librarians close this phase of the session by recapping the main points and discoveries made: the identification of significant elements of life and culture in the 1920s; the variety of available resources and materials that can elucidate these elements; and, most importantly, who to contact if they need help of any kind—“Library staff!” This call-out becomes the mantra for the ninety-minute period. Whenever the opportunity arises, and at the close of each portion of the session, we ask, “Who can you go to for help?” The students call out, “Library staff!”

### Faces and Places

Following the brainstorming and exploration exercise, students tour various places within the Library that will be

important to them as they begin their coursework. We start by walking the students to the Library’s main research and information desk, which is staffed dually by a librarian and a student employee. This portion of the session reinforces the connection between students and individuals in the Library and helps students learn that Library staff are part of their support system and welcome their questions. We want to lower common barriers that might otherwise prevent the students from seeking help, such as self-consciousness or timidity.

At this point in the process, we emphasize that students can bring *any* questions to this desk, and that they can ask questions at *any* stage of the research process. Some students think they need to “earn” the right to ask a question at a reference desk—proving that they have devoted significant time on their own before asking for assistance. During the 2012 FYSEP orientation, one student in particular struggled to reshape her notion of libraries to fit with the Dartmouth College Library’s learner-centered model. Throughout the session she repeatedly asked for assurance that she could come to the research and information desk and ask for help as many times as she needs and at any point in the research process. We emphasize that students can come to the desk directly from class, the moment they get their assignment, and ask for help getting started. They can come to the desk with an in-depth research question, with a need for data and statistics, or just to ask for directions.

This introductory session helps to lower the students’ inhibitions toward seeking assistance, but we continue to emphasize this point even further and to connect this session with the overarching *Gatsby* theme. To help the students understand and internalize the availability of assistance at the point of need, we hold up a series of simple reference questions about *Gatsby* and the 1920s; we ask a different student to read each question aloud. After each question is read, the librarian working at the desk, or one of the session facilitators, offers a brief answer—explaining how she would help the student answer that question.

This question-and-answer activity gives the students the experience of asking “real” reference questions related to a real Dartmouth assignment in a low-stakes situation, and then getting friendly, helpful, and positive responses from Library staff. This scripted question-and-answer activity also gives us the opportunity to pull in students who might previously have been less engaged.

### Multimedia

Next, the group heads upstairs to the Jones Media Center where they learn about the Library’s multimedia collections, software, and hardware through the theme of *The Great Gatsby* and life in the 1920s. The Media Services librarian greets the students and shows them an array of DVDs that are part of Jones’s collections, including items such as the 1974 and 2013 film adaptations of *The Great Gatsby* and documentaries on social and political issues from the 1920s.

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The librarian emphasizes that Jones staff have expertise in multimedia creation and editing and are available to support the students on their projects. While the Media Services librarian *presents* much of the information in this session to the students, the students' questions and interests guide the presentation to keep the session participatory. Students are generally excited and intrigued by the resources in Jones. As evidenced by their questions, the encounter leaves them curious about the potential projects the resources enable.

While the first portion of the Library's session is driven in large part by student input, as they share their ideas and interests pertaining to *The Great Gatsby* and life in mid-1920s America, the two service point stops are less student-driven in comparison. We have worked to balance, in a brief time slot, the delivery of important information with student engagement, and that balance sometimes leans more heavily toward content delivery. Each year we work to increase student engagement throughout FYSEP, from dividing the students into smaller groups for increased personal interactions to adjusting session content and format based on experience and feedback. Library-specific questions on the FYSEP follow-up survey (discussed below) will further help the Library assess the success of the program and make informed decisions about future changes.

### Meeting Gatsby

The next stop on FYSEP's Library exploration is Rauner Special Collections Library housed in nearby Webster Hall. On the inside, Webster Hall is airy, light, and open with a stunning view of the closed rare book stacks, but from the outside, Webster offers a formidable façade: it looks more like a mausoleum than a library. Once students enter the building, and see the warm interior and inviting open study spaces, the first hurdle is overcome, but it is what happens next that creates the incentive to return.

When the students arrive in Special Collections, a librarian greets them with a first edition of *The Great Gatsby* in its original, iconic dust jacket. After a brief welcome, the librarian works with the students to do a short analysis of the cover art and the blurbs that grace the back cover. The cover art, with its depiction of a woman's soulful face superimposed on a fairground midway, evokes the pathos of the novel. On the back, a blurb boldly asserts that Fitzgerald has written a book that is "perilously near a masterpiece." What does that mean? Was it just common publishing hyperbole, or would it have affected the reader and influenced her interaction with the text? More importantly, does it say something about the era and how the book fit into the culture of the time? The jacket sets a publishing and social context: it illuminates the book as a commodity in the marketplace but also as an object imbued with cultural capital. The blatant commercialism of the cover helps even a novice reader to understand the book as a material and cultural artifact. This analysis of the first edition is an important introduction to Special Collections. The material artifact is given precedence over

the text within, and students are exposed to a new way of doing research that draws on their creativity and interpretive skills. It also shows the importance of understanding context. Significantly, while the librarians discuss the rarity and monetary value of this physical book, students are also encouraged to examine this first edition, which, from the librarian's introduction, has become more than just an old copy of *The Great Gatsby*. Rauner Library staff encourage students to use the collections as a part of their studies, regardless of how unique or rare the items are, emphasizing the collections exist for their learning.

The students then spend twenty minutes browsing through a classroom filled with archival sources from 1925 related to Dartmouth's history. The FYSEP group is the picture of diversity, but Dartmouth in 1925 was a largely homogeneous social world: all male, nearly all white, and nearly all Protestant. Finding a student of color in the 1925 yearbook is not impossible, but it is certainly a challenge. The students work through a series of sources that expose different parts of Dartmouth in 1925. Through course catalogs, registrar's grade books, a student scrapbook, the campus newspaper, and the campus lampoon magazine, Dartmouth's social world emerges in more detail.

Those items have an air of nostalgia, inviting and provocative in many ways, but a small collection of letters from 1925 about a group of students disciplined (and one expelled) for homosexual behavior at an off-campus house—known for harboring young men of "questionable morals"—quickly exposes the lack of tolerance on campus. There is also a disturbing series of materials related to the aggressive hazing upperclassmen imposed on the freshman class. This includes a freshman beanie, demeaning "rules" for freshmen, a photo of a student in prayer as he is about to be paddled, and even a hazing paddle snapped in half by the force of a blow on a freshman's backside.

The exploration of these materials accomplishes several important missions. First, as a hands-on, active-learning activity with relatively exotic materials, it gives the students an introduction to new methods and opportunities while tapping into another learning style. A period of tactile and intellectual involvement helps to re-energize the group. The exercise also provides the students with a concrete glimpse into the social world into which Gatsby tried to fit. The Dartmouth students of 1925 would have been like Nick Carraway, or like the young men who courted Gatsby's Daisy, and would become the financially successful socialites that reveled at Gatsby's parties. The materials convey some of the exclusiveness of that social and cultural club by illustrating its initiation rights and partially mapping its borders. A hazing paddle, a freshman beanie, and an Ivy League education all contribute to the construction of the social walls that Gatsby could never fully penetrate. These are some of the same kinds of walls—with allowances for nearly 100 years of social change—that the FYSEP students may encounter.

There is a risk that the FYSEP students will see this material and feel further excluded from Dartmouth: what is laid

out on the table is clearly not *their* history, but the history of the third- and fourth-generation Dartmouth legacy students whom they are about to meet in their dorms, classes, and in social settings. On a basic level, it allows the students insight into the history of a handful of campus traditions and institutions—from Winter Carnival to Homecoming and the student newspaper—which can be empowering information heading into the unknowns of the first year. But the materials also serve to show just how much the institution has changed, and the librarians are quick to emphasize this point. “Look around the room. How many of us would have been here in 1925?” The answer is nearly none; this is true not just for the students, but also for the librarians. In fact, approximately 65 percent of the current student body would not have been at Dartmouth. Moreover, the students find humor in Dartmouth’s past. The session is always marked by a lot of laughter and exclamations as the students explore a world utterly foreign not only to them, but to current campus culture. Historical context, even a negative one, can build social cohesion.

The materials do more than elucidate Dartmouth’s history and Gatsby’s social milieu: they show the students, most of whom have never worked with historical primary resources, how accessible and powerful those materials can be. Set into context and alongside secondary sources, they enable the students to make original arguments more persuasively. In addition, the students have been introduced to an area of campus that they may otherwise have felt to be off limits. Rauner Special Collections Library prides itself on its accessibility but it is still a pretty “special” place: the materials housed there are some of the most valuable at the College, and Rauner’s rules and procedures are different from other libraries on campus. Even a highly confident undergraduate needs a little coaxing to get through the doors for the first time. But the FYSEP students come away feeling empowered to make use of Special Collections in their research—not only because they have just had that very experience, but also because they have seen the excitement Rauner staff have in sharing the collection. Because of Rauner Library’s active involvement with Dartmouth’s First-Year Writing program, many of these students will have this point reinforced during their first year as they visit Special Collections again in their classes.

### Wrapping It Up

At the conclusion of our time with the students, we lead a very quick wrap-up. The session began with an explanation of the primary goal for the session: the answer to the question, “Why would I go to the Library?” As a means of assessing this goal at the session’s conclusion, students are asked to answer this question: “Imagine that during fall term you see your roommate struggling with an assignment. From what you learned today, what advice would you give your roommate?” Responses are solicited from multiple students. Their comments vary, but all of them would encourage their roommates to ask a librarian for help. This activity not only provides us with a

quick assessment of what the students have learned during the session, it also provides the students with a few moments of reflection on all the new information they learned about the Library in the previous ninety minutes.

### Assessment

Shortly after completing the eight-day FYSEP preorientation, participating students receive an online survey soliciting their feedback, including questions about the Library orientation; in 2014, twenty-one of the thirty-four FYSEP students responded to the survey. The students rated the Library session highly for its usefulness. Students’ responses to the most useful thing learned at the Library concentrated primarily on the availability of help and the resources available to them. One student wrote, “The most useful thing is that I know I can go to the reference desk for anything. I can ask about anything and they will guide me through the research process.” Another wrote, “I learned more about the resources the Library actually has that range from books, movies, newspaper clippings and so on.”

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### FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Due to the positive response by participants to the Library’s role in the FYSEP preorientation session, we envision the Library’s relationship with the program continuing in future years and foresee a broader role in the program as it evolves. In fact, the director of education and outreach has recently become a member of the FYSEP planning team. We are seeking to connect the Library session to a specific academic class the students attend before their visit to the Library, working with faculty to integrate the content to better model for the students the connection to their coursework and the Library’s role in the curriculum. To date, the Library’s role within the FYSEP program has been limited to the eight-day preorientation session, but there are many other opportunities within the year-long FYSEP program where librarians can continue to play an essential role in linking classroom work to research support. This connection will strengthen the FYSEP students’ understanding of the role of research in relation to their class work.

In addition to the future possibilities for more deeply embedding librarians throughout the year-long FYSEP program, we also see the opportunity to expand the model developed for the FYSEP preorientation to other orientations and workshops. The case-study approach used with *The Great Gatsby* and the context of the 1920s lends itself well to other contexts and eras.

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### CONCLUSION

Rather than beginning their college careers feeling academically and socially disconnected from the experiences

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awaiting them, the FYSEP students begin their first fall term with an established social network and a safety net of academic support that allows them to fully participate in the first-year experience. The most convincing evidence of FYSEP's success comes from the students themselves. FYSEP participants praise the program for the confidence they gain and the knowledge they acquire that allow them to start their first year positively and avoid Jay Gatsby's academic fate. The students' voices best convey the positive influence of FYSEP:

I'm so thankful for being chosen for this program, and could only imagine what my freshman experience would be like without it. Some words come to mind . . . *lost, scared, and shy*. But this program has given me a voice and confidence about the future.

—FYSEP Class of 2014

I feel way more confident to begin my intellectual pursuit at Dartmouth because there was a space for me to acknowledge the intensity and uncertainty of such a transition. Thank you very much, I appreciate your commitment!

—FYSEP Class of 2016

I honestly feel like I have a family away from home behind me to support me and comfort me when I need it the most.

—FYSEP Class of 2015

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