

**P**icture this scene: The Dartmouth Medical School Board of Overseers, an august group of experts in various fields from all across the country, has assembled for one of its semi-annual meetings. As the Overseers take their places around a huge conference table, assorted DMS department chairs and administrators are filling up seats arrayed around the room's perimeter.

I'm privileged to be in one of those seats, observing the proceedings. And what I'm observing this morning morning is *footwear*.

The discussion among the Overseers is conducted at a high level—it's stimulating, philosophical, wide-ranging. (These are actually among the most useful and enjoyable of the many meetings I attend.) But on this particular morning a few years ago, as my ears listen to the lofty debate, my eyes sink to the floor—to what several department chairs sitting across from me are wearing on their feet on this blustery March day.

From the ankles up, these distinguished academics would be at home in any urban boardroom in the country. One is wearing a natty, charcoal-gray, pin-striped three-piece suit. Another has a multi-hued paisley silk handkerchief placed just so in the pocket of his beautiful camel's hair blazer. There are several variations on the classic professorial navy-blazer-and-gray-flannels theme. And DMS's lone woman department chair sports an emerald-green skirt and matching jacket with shiny gold buttons marching up its front.

But when I look lower, I see that to a man (and woman), their feet are clad in footwear that would be at home in any rural feed store in the country. There is a pair of well-oiled leather hiking boots that look like they've been up more than one of the 4,000-footers in Dartmouth's backyard. There are a couple of pairs of sturdy Vibram-soled boots that are surely veterans of more than one winter. And there are several pairs of well-broken-in L.L. Bean-style rubber-bottom/leather-top hunting boots.

It struck me then—and the thought has stayed with me—that the discrepancy between those city-worthy clothes and country-ready shoes perfectly characterizes Dartmouth Medical School and Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center.

This institution's faculty members and its graduates are ranked at the top of any number of fields—

as evidenced by the profiles of faculty and alumni that appear in the back of every issue of this magazine. Testifying to the volume and caliber of the research done here are the stories in any issue's "Vital Signs" section. And the clinical expertise, scientific acumen, and health-services wisdom emanating from Dartmouth are sought after by pundits nationwide, as can be seen in our "Media Mentions" section.

But all of this eminence (the spiffy clothing, if you will) exists in an atmosphere of remarkable collegiality (this is the comfy boots part). The lack of career-advancement back-stabbing at Dartmouth is unusual if not unprecedented for a major academic medical center.

And that's not just party-line puffery. A DMS alumnus told one of our writers a few years ago that he had found here "the same commitment to excellence" as at other top institutions "without the pomposity, the jockeying for position, the arrogant sport of making students feel stupid." Another alum now in a prestigious fellowship elsewhere told me that the attending physicians there are "mean," unlike those at Dartmouth. I recently met a resident from another institution who's doing a rotation here, and when I asked what his perceptions of the place were, his first comment was about its friendliness. And the evidence isn't only anecdotal: A survey of medical students nationwide by the *Princeton Review* found DMS to be the "least cut-throat" of all U.S. medical schools.

**S**o when we expound on Dartmouth's humanistic values, readers can be confident that we're not spinning a yarn. Of course, there's room for improvement. No place is perfect. But the repeated mention of a special "culture" in the feature on page 28, the warmth of the faculty-student relationships evidenced in the feature on page 52, the mentoring that's cited in the profile on page 58—these views of an organization with a big heart as well as high standards are true. Working here is like a vigorous hike (we work hard) in your most comfortable shoes (we get along with each other).

Now, if you'll pardon me, I have to go put on my boots and head home, through 10 inches of new snow, to the end of my dead-end dirt road.

DANA COOK GROSSMAN

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