KATHERINE CARITHERS: Hi, welcome back to Hindsight is 2019, where we look at 250 years of Dartmouth’s history through 25 objects from the Library’s archive, one per decade. I’m Katherine Carithers, and I’ll be your host for this episode.

The letter we’re looking at today begins with seemingly good intentions, the concern for a particular student’s well-being, but given our twenty-first century perspective, it takes a turn, and becomes utterly shocking.

It’s written by the 11th President of Dartmouth, Ernest Martin Hopkins, on March 25th, 1921. The letter is addressed to Dr. Charles P. Bancroft, a well-regarded psychologist who resided near the College, and it concerns Harvey James D. Zuckerman, a junior at the time and a member of the Class of 1922.

President Hopkins begins by asking Dr. Bancroft to speak with Zuckerman because he believes the talk may do the student some good. While, this level of involvement in a student’s personal life might seem surprising, but this isn’t what’s shocking about the letter. That comes when President Hopkins explains why he’s sending Zuckerman down to Dr. Bancroft.

Initially, President Hopkins describes the issue with Zuckerman in vague terms, using phrases such as “abnormality,” “exception to the ordinary run of men,” and “certain tendencies of his.” Now, this level of ambiguity isn’t completely surprising– in many letters, President Hopkins seems rather conscientious about the permanence of the archive and avoids discussing certain subjects directly.

You may already have some guesses as to what President Hopkins is implying. As the letter continues, he implicates an entire campus organization in the problem. Here’s an excerpt from the letter:

“Sometime I want to talk with some of your authorities on mental hygiene in regard to the general problem of whether playing girls’ parts in the dramatic performances makes a man effeminate or whether being effeminate qualifies him for playing girls’ parts. I am considered, among the dramatic group, as being unduly concerned on the question and if so I want to get over it.”

Now, the students primarily involved in the dramatics were members of a student-run acting troupe known as the Dartmouth Players which no longer exists as a student organization today.

In 1921, when President Hopkins wrote this letter, the Dartmouth Players consisted of only men, just like the College.

You may be wondering what the members then did for the women’s roles, and the answer is fairly simple – the Dartmouth students performed them.

And the actors who primarily played women characters were known as “female impersonators,” a term which has a different connotation today. These actors were celebrated for their ability to portray women well. At the time of the letter, Zuckerman was one of the group’s prominent “female impersonators.”

While the idea of an acting troupe of only men might sound strange, at the beginning of the twentieth century at a single gender college, it wasn’t that out of the norm. In fact, the Players’ performances were well-received both inside and outside the Dartmouth community: one of the prominent “female impersonators” was even president of his class and reviews from the Player’s 1914 performance on Broadway of “Misleading Lady” were largely positive, even if critics were generally surprised that, on-stage, there was no lady in sight.

And so, it seems slightly odd that President Hopkins is concerned about the acting-troupe- especially when the archive indicates that in the winter of 1921 the Players were having high financial success in ticket sales as they toured around New England; a concern which is more intriguing given that President Hopkins himself was a member of the Dartmouth Players while a Dartmouth student – even holding an executive position his senior year as Master of Properties.

President Hopkins’ concerns over the effeminacy of men in theater already indicates a very rigid conception of masculinity, which was not unusual, particularly in the aftermath of World War I – a war in which many Dartmouth alumni and students fought.

But it’s the next paragraph I find most shocking– this excerpt is slightly longer, but I think it’s important to hear President Hopkins’ sentiments expressed in his own words:

“The fact is, however, that we have had a distinct tendency among a considerable number of the men who have played the so-called leads in girl characters to develop exotic and un-natural instincts which are thoroughly out of keeping with what the College means to stand for. In one case, three years ago, the boy wandered off from Hanover and safeguarded the College reputation to the extent that he committed suicide in New York rather than here, but the underlying fact was that his affection for one of his dramatic club associates was not only unappreciated but was rebuffed. We have had one other case in which I would a good deal rather the boy would have committed suicide.”

It’s that last sentence that gets me. That he “would a good deal rather the boy would have committed suicide.”

And it’s not even as if President Hopkins’ sentiments were out of keeping with the period - homosexuality was criminalized not only in the United States but also almost everywhere in the world – not that historical context should be an excuse.

And apparently, Dartmouth wasn’t the only college with these concerns. Later in the letter, President Hopkins describes how Dartmouth hasn’t had many instances of what he calls “deviations from normal” or “sex aberrations” in comparison to other colleges, but he warns they must stay ahead of any so-called “outbreak.”

The concern for Dartmouth’s reputation isn’t all that surprising either. You see, during the late 1800s and early 1900s, Dartmouth created a national reputation for itself for one of the first times in the College’s history, all under the guidance of Dartmouth’s 9th President, Chaplain Tucker. And it was under this new national spotlight that, in 1916, Hopkins became President. Since, the 1920s were the first decade of President Hopkins’ twenty-eight-year presidency, it makes sense he is rather concerned about the college’s reputation.

The letter concludes with President Hopkins requesting that he might send more students to speak with Dr. Bancroft, if they are need of a psychologist. The desire for students to have access to a psychologist is ultimately what causes President Hopkins to create a new position at the College, Consultant in Mental Hygiene - which basically is the first version of a college counselor.

As for the student who committed suicide – there seems to be no record of him. Not in cast lists, alumni files, or alumni catalogues. There is always the possibility that President Hopkins over-embellished the incident, but if he didn’t, then the silence in the archives speaks volumes.

If you’re wondering what happened to Zuckerman – he did go and visit Dr. Bancroft, who recommended he end any affiliation with the theater and take up a sport or another hobby that would get him outside. It seems like Zuckerman takes some of this advice to heart. His senior year, he doesn’t appear in any cast lists although he still remains involved in the group in an executive position – he’s listed as the Secretary in the yearbook.

And, for the next four years – nothing much seems to change for the Dartmouth Players, despite President Hopkins’ concerns. That is, until the spring of 1925 when a new policy is instituted that requires the group integrate local women into their performances for the women’s roles – nearly fifty years before the College becomes co-educational. No official statement was released as a reason for the new policy – but that’s another story.

It’s not that the 1920s at Dartmouth were focused on eradicating any queerness from Dartmouth’s campus but the 1920s were an interesting time at Dartmouth, one in which there were many conflicting pressures on what it meant to be a Dartmouth man.

Hazing and drinking culture were running rampant on Dartmouth’s campus - there was a group known as Delta Alpha whose sole job was to haze freshman for two weeks during their freshman fall. The endurance of hazing and the successful rushing of a fraternity were all components of what it meant to be a Dartmouth man.

At the same time that Dartmouth students were expected to engage in this behavior, there were very stern expectations of social conduct and prohibition was in place, although the laws weren’t strictly enforced on Dartmouth’s campus.

The 1920s is also a time when the entire country has been affected and shaken by World War I – a war from which a large number of soldiers didn’t return home. Not only did many Dartmouth students fight in the war, but they also died in training camps and abroad, losses which were felt in such a small community.

As Dartmouth College’s reputation grew – so too did a certain definition of what it means to be a Dartmouth man, a question which Zuckerman is caught in the middle of, and a question which nearly 100 years later, is still be answered today.

*Hindsight*is *20/19* is a production of the Dartmouth College Library, and is produced as part of the celebration of Dartmouth’s 250th anniversary, highlighting selected objects from Rauner Special Collections Library. This episode was written and directed by Katherine Carithers and produced by Laura Barrett - our sound engineer was Jay Satterfield. Thank you for listening and we hope you will continue to enjoy *Hindsight is 20/19*.

To learn more about the Dartmouth Players and Dartmouth in the 1920s, come to Rauner and ask to browse the Dartmouth Players records (DO-60, Boxes 6522-6524); President Hopkins’ Presidential Papers (the specific letter quoted in this podcast is found in DP-11, Box 6764, Folder 101, “Undergraduates S-Z”); the Clifford Orr Papers (MS-532, Box 1); archived volumes of *The Dartmouth* and *The Aegis*.