



From the issue dated March 10, 2006

Renegades Shake Up Trustee Elections

At Dartmouth and Hamilton Colleges, petitions by insurgent candidates signal a new front in the culture wars

By PAUL FAIN

Hanover, N.H.

Private-college officials are accustomed to dealing with alumni who are fervent about protecting the reputations or traditions of their alma maters. But they are not used to dealing with the sort of alumni uprisings that took place at Dartmouth and Hamilton Colleges last year.

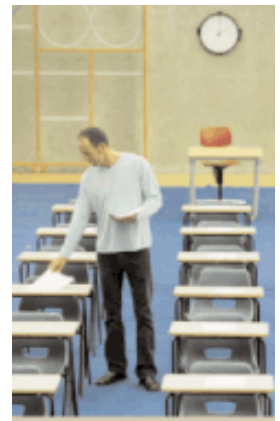
At both institutions, former students waged feisty campaigns for the designated alumni seats on the colleges' governing boards, which are normally allotted to alumni-association leaders or other vetted nominees. The outsider candidates drew the support of conservative bloggers and pundits around the nation, who praised them as insurgents against higher education's status quo.

The culture wars are hardly new to college campuses. But the events at Dartmouth last May and at Hamilton in July revealed the opening of a new front and showed how gadfly alumni, with the help of the Internet and national advocacy groups, can transform private-college trustee elections from staid, uneventful affairs into high-profile slugfests.

During both elections, supporters and opponents of the insurgent candidates set up Web sites, some of which decried alleged election-policy violations. College and alumni officials struggled to enforce and defend the rules of the elections.

The renegade candidates leaned conservative or libertarian and shared the belief that college administrators are restricting free speech. They were supported by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education and the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, national organizations active in battles over free speech and intellectual diversity.

Now that the dust has settled, it appears that the elections were neither flukes nor isolated events.



"Far too many students are not prepared to succeed."

—The Business Roundtable

SCHOOL & COLLEGE
THE QUALITY OF AMERICAN EDUCATION TODAY

click to see a free copy



"Our nation is in a college readiness crisis."

—American College Testing Program

SCHOOL & COLLEGE
THE QUALITY OF AMERICAN EDUCATION TODAY

click to see

Search The Site

[More options](#) | [Back issues](#)

[Home](#)

[News](#)

[Today's news](#) [Current issue](#)

[Special issues & data](#)

[The Faculty](#) [Research & Books](#) [Government & Politics](#) [Money & Management](#) [Information](#)

[Technology](#) [Students](#) [Athletics](#) [International](#) [Community Colleges](#) [Short Subjects](#)

[Gazette](#) [Corrections](#)

[Opinion & Forums](#)

[Careers](#)

[Presidents Forum](#)

[Sponsored](#)

[Information & Solutions](#)

[Campus Viewpoints](#)

[Services](#)

[Help](#) [Contact us](#)

[Subscribe](#) [Manage your account](#) [Advertise with us](#) [Rights & permissions](#)



Such outside candidates are again running in another trustee election occurring at Hamilton, with a slate put forward by a group calling itself Hamilton College Alumni for Governance Reform.

And Colgate University is experiencing a related rumbling, with a group of alumni called Students & Alumni for Colgate now pushing to recruit alumni to seek election to the college's Alumni Corporation Board, an advisory body.

Although the Colgate group's primary focus is supporting fraternities and sororities, its founder, Charles H. Sanford, a former Colgate trustee, says the organization is also concerned about intellectual diversity and academic freedom. And like the upstart candidates at Dartmouth and Hamilton, Mr. Sanford's group has worked with the ACTA and FIRE. "The conservative, if you will, political philosophy is virtually nonexistent on campus," Mr. Sanford says.

Battles Common at Public Colleges

Public colleges have often experienced such battles over the control of their governing boards. In the past decade, conservative regents and trustees have sparked high-profile debates over stem-cell research at the University of Nebraska, affirmative action at the University of California, and free speech and the "academic bill of rights" at the State University of New York.

But such conflict is rare for governing boards of private colleges, which generally see themselves as immune from ideological rancor. Unlike public-college boards, the members of which tend to be selected through overtly political means such as popular elections or gubernatorial appointment, private-college boards select their own members.

Dartmouth and Hamilton are among the roughly 23 percent of private, four-year institutions that have seats on their governing boards reserved for alumni, according to a survey conducted by the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. Most fill such seats with the leaders of alumni associations or with candidates elected by alumni from slates that the associations select. At Dartmouth and Hamilton, however, alumni were able to mount successful petition drives to get on the ballots, joining candidates selected by alumni groups. Most of the colleges that allow this back-door entry to trusteeship are smaller private colleges in the northeast.

Anne D. Neal, president of the ACTA, says her organization tracks such elections and will offer resources to aspiring trustees.

"We are seeing it as a growing awareness of alumni that they can affect their institutions," Ms. Neal says of petition candidacies. She says the old paradigm of "put up and shut up" for alumni is outdated.

Scott W. Johnson is a Dartmouth alumnus, a Minneapolis lawyer, and a fellow at the Claremont Institute. Mr. Johnson wrote about the Dartmouth election on Power Line, a popular and influential blog he helps run, and in a column in *The Weekly Standard*.

Mr. Johnson, who says he received many e-mail messages from alumni in response to his writing about the election, thinks the dominance of liberalism on campuses has contributed to deep currents of disaffection among alumni of Dartmouth and other colleges.

"The institutionalized leftism of elite academia is at absurd proportions now," he says.

The spotlight Mr. Johnson and other bloggers cast on Dartmouth and Hamilton, as well as the attention from the ACTA, FIRE, and the conservative news media, appear to have had a substantial impact. Michael J. Ellis, a Dartmouth senior and editor of *The Dartmouth*

Review, a conservative student newspaper, says the successful campaigns of the two petition candidates there would not have been possible without the national attention. The campaigns' organizers were able to use the Internet to gather the necessary 500 alumni signatures to get on the ballots, he notes.

Politics As Usual?

Although most of the petition candidates resist being pigeonholed as agenda-driven conservatives, both elections exposed ideological fault lines.

Todd J. Zywicki, a Dartmouth alumnus and a professor of law at the George Mason University School of Law, succeeded in his petition bid last year to join Dartmouth's Board of Trustees. Although Mr. Zywicki, who recently spoke at the ACTA's annual conference, touted a platform that included many Dartmouth-specific issues, such as his desire to preserve Greek life and to bolster the sports teams, he says larger societal debates were also at play.

College administrators are often "disconnected from the real world," Mr. Zywicki says, and many alumni are "frustrated with the rising orthodoxy in the academy," which, he says, is overwhelming liberal. Furthermore, Mr. Zywicki, a contributor

to the Volokh Conspiracy, a popular blog with a libertarian bent, says that "alumni feel that they are treated as checkbooks, rather than being valued for their views about their alma maters."

Ms. Neal takes this assertion a step further, arguing that rising tuition has exacerbated a feeling among many Americans that academe is not for them.

Highly publicized controversies with ideological overtones helped inspire the petition candidacies at Hamilton. The college's speaking invitation to Ward Churchill, the controversial professor from the University of Colorado at Boulder, was the spark that began the firestorm in the national news media over Mr. Churchill's provocative writings. Added to this publicity was news that Hamilton had hired Susan Rosenberg, a former leftist radical who was linked to a 1981 armored-car robbery in which two police officers and a security guard were killed.

Mr. Churchill's speech never took place and Ms. Rosenberg never got the temporary job, but Hamilton's involvement with the two radioactive figures earned it the ire of conservative commentators. On his show, Bill O'Reilly of the Fox News Channel called Hamilton a "troubled college" that is "home to radical professors."

Peter D. Brown, a Hamilton alumnus who is a petition candidate in the current trustee election, sounds nothing like a political agitator when he ticks off traditional fiduciary duties, such as improving board transparency, as his priorities.

He acknowledges that the Churchill and Rosenberg controversies exacerbated political divides on the campus and among alumni. But he says the "media ran with that hatchet," overstating the role politics played in the past election, which was primarily about mundane management issues.

Speaking of the coming election, Mr. Brown says he hopes "this effort reunifies the school."

Both Ms. Neal, of ACTA, and Greg Lukianoff, FIRE's interim president, say the petition candidates were not waging ideological attacks, with Mr. Lukianoff arguing that college officials often have a hard time discerning between harsh criticism and strategic assaults.

"Universities aren't used to the public scrutiny that they're getting," he says.

Richard D. Legon, president of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, says election of petition

candidates as trustees can be beneficial for both alumni and colleges by bringing new expertise and viewpoints to boards and by helping to engage alumni.

However, he says, a trustee's performance on a board could be hampered if he felt beholden to a specific political agenda or special-interest group.

"Members of the board should bear in mind the needs of the entire institution," Mr. Legon says. "A member of the board representing a special interest — that is where you can run into problems."

The Rules

Dartmouth alumni officials last year wrestled with complaints that anti-petition-candidate Web sites and competing blog and news-media coverage violated election rules, which prohibit campaigning. In addition, alumni officials were forced to extend the voting period by two weeks because of confusion over when to halt the counting of electronic versus paper ballots.

"We're still playing it by ear," said John C. Walters, who was president of Dartmouth's Association of Alumni, as the group counted votes last May. "There's been more controversy and more publicity about this than in any prior year."

Dartmouth officials had experienced a similar, although less publicized, insurgent campaign the previous year. But for Hamilton administrators, the petition campaign was the first of its kind in three decades.

Hamilton's president, Joan Hinde Stewart, said in a written statement last year that the college did its best to balance free speech with campus security in handling the Churchill and Rosenberg affairs. But her response did not appease some angry alumni, who formed the Hamilton College Alumni for Governance Reform. The group created a bare-bones Web site and helped three alumni candidates collect the 25 alumni signatures required to get on the ballot.

The college hired an independent consulting firm and outside lawyers to vet the rules for the unprecedented election and to ensure that it was handled fairly, but the new rules drew heavy fire from petition candidates and their supporters. Candidates were allowed 100-word statements to accompany the ballots and could send mail at their own expense but were prohibited from sending mass e-mail messages or mentioning Web sites in the written statements.

FIRE called the rules "draconian free-speech restrictions." And

petition candidates said the limits on electronic communications were particularly unfair to them, as they lacked the official endorsements Alumni Council candidates received and had to rely more heavily on Web sites. A Hamilton spokeswoman says the rules sought, in part, to prevent e-mail spamming of alumni.

When the votes were counted in August, the three Alumni Council candidates won the open seats, receiving roughly double the votes of the petition candidates. James W. Coupe, a petition candidate and a Los Angeles lawyer, was fuming after the election.

"I didn't feel that they treated me with any respect at all," Mr. Coupe said.

Vige Barrie, a Hamilton spokeswoman, said last year's election process was the best approach the college could take. "We were cautious in how we constructed the rules in trying to be fair to all parties," she says, stressing that the procedures were reviewed by outside firms.

Ms. Barrie says that because it was the first time administrators had experienced a contested trustee election in 30 years, it was appropriate for the rules to be "reviewed and modified."

Hamilton is now poised for round two, with the Hamilton College Alumni for Governance Reform again fielding petition candidates. Hamilton has revised its election procedures since last year, a move that pleased the governance-reform group. The limit on candidates' personal statements was increased to 200 words, and candidates may now refer to Web sites and distribute their contact information. Ballots for the monthlong election were mailed at the end of February.

"We welcome and applaud the change and hope it reflects a thoughtful return to Hamilton's traditional principles and not a situational assessment of the public ridicule that would have otherwise ensued," wrote J. Hunter Brown, a Hamilton alumnus, on the group's Web site.

Silver Lining

Hamilton may have been buffeted by unwelcome publicity from its alumni insurrection, but the cantankerous elections had a silver lining: alumni engagement.

During the furor around last year's election, donor dollars actually rose at Hamilton. Last July the college announced that it set a new record with \$5.4-million in donations to its annual fund in the previous financial year, and that about 53 percent

of donors increased the size of their annual gift.

At Dartmouth three petition candidates with similar ideological backgrounds now serve on the 18-member Board of Trustees. Yet the board has failed to dissolve into partisan bickering.

James Wright, Dartmouth's president, was criticized by petition candidates during the election. However, Mr. Wright, who serves on the board, says he has had good relations with all three of the new trustees.

Dartmouth's next alumni-trustee election is scheduled for 2007, and supporters of past insurgents are already recruiting petition candidates.

Asked if college administrators learned lessons from the previous election, Mr. Wright says, "I'm not certain that we could have handled things differently." However, he acknowledges that alumni officials and the college could have done a better job keeping alumni engaged and informed about decisions made on the campus.

The Alumni Governance Task Force, an official college group, has adopted changes in the constitution of the college's association of alumni to try to ensure a smoother election process in 2007.

But many here on Dartmouth's campus and among its alumni say the college will be hard-pressed to please all alumni.

On this 237-year-old campus, even the most subtle of changes can provoke controversy. The decision in 2003 to move the "Senior Fence" to a different location on Dartmouth's green, for example, was sufficiently touchy for alumni and students that the college distributed a press release to explain the move, which was to control foot traffic. The small fence, where seniors have traditionally gathered and sung college songs, is barely noticeable. But to Dartmouth alumni, it is a part of college lore.

"We do have a tremendously loyal alumni body," Mr. Wright says.

Mr. Zywicki agrees, saying his fellow Dartmouth alumni have a unique "ownership and connectedness" to the college.

As a new trustee, he hopes he and the other petition candidates on the board will help alienated alumni "feel like they have a voice and an ear."

<http://chronicle.com>

Section: Money & Management
Volume 52, Issue 27, Page A25

[Copyright](#) © 2006 by [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#) | [Home](#) | [Chronicle Careers](#) | [The Chronicle Review](#)
[Contact us](#)
[User agreement](#) | [Privacy policy](#) | [About The Chronicle](#) | [Site map](#) | [Help](#)
[Subscribe](#) | [Advertise with us](#) | [Press inquiries](#)
[RSS](#) | [Today's most e-mailed](#)

Try 4 issues of The Chronicle
entirely at our expense

CLICK FOR FREE OFFER



So smart.
So easy.