

National group opposes changes in Dartmouth alumni group

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By Katharine Webster, Associated Press Writer

CONCORD, N.H. -- A new fight has erupted at Dartmouth College, long a battleground for conservatives and liberals warring over politics, education and values.

Those fights have centered on the preservation of fraternities and football, free speech vs. hate speech, and the right-wing politics of the Dartmouth Review newspaper.

This time, a Washington-based education policy group that boasts Lynne Cheney as chairwoman emeritus is crying foul over the Dartmouth alumni association board's decision to postpone its annual meeting and officer election until after an alumni vote on a new constitution.

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni also objects to a requirement in the new constitution that independent candidates for university trustee declare themselves and gather signatures before the alumni association's nominating committee announces its candidates.

The group says that would make it "virtually impossible" for petition candidates -- like the three conservative alumni who won seats in the last two trustee elections -- to get elected in the future.

"At a time when there is growing alumni concern about the direction of the college, it is quite frankly shameful that the association responsible for representing alumni is doing all in its power to reduce their participation," the group's president, Anne Neal, said in a letter last week.

The group calls itself nonpartisan and lists a couple of Democrats on its letterhead, but most of its board members are well-known conservatives, including Vice President Dick Cheney's wife; William Bennett, education secretary under President Reagan; and Irving Kristol, an influential writer and thinker.

Members of the task force that drafted the new constitution have some conservative credentials of their own, however.

John Daukas, a leading member of a conservative alumni group who ran unsuccessfully as a petition candidate for alumni association president two years ago, is a former fraternity member and Dartmouth Review writer. He says the new constitution will allow much broader alumni participation than in the past.

Perhaps the biggest change, enacted this spring ahead of the vote on the new constitution, is that alumni can vote by phone, mail, or online for their officers and policies, he said Tuesday. Previously, they had to come to Hanover for the annual meeting and vote in person.

"We're really talking about making some radical changes to open up alumni governance to all Dartmouth alumni," he said, noting that the nominating committee would have elected members for the first time under the proposed constitution.

Right now, an appointed nominating committee must put up two candidates for each open trustee seat. Independent candidates then have 60 days to gather 500 alumni signatures and get on the ballot. Multiple candidates run on a single ballot for one or two open seats, with the top one or two vote-getters winning.

The proposed change would give independent candidates 30 days to gather 250 signatures. Then the nominating committee could name its choice, or formally nominate the petition candidate as well as its own. Only two candidates would run for each seat.

Joe Malchow, a government major from Scotch Plains, N.J., who has a blog, said that "defeats the whole purpose of petitioning."

"They run because they think the nominating guys don't represent the will of alumni," he said. "There's concern that the others will be rubber stamps" for Dartmouth's administration.

Stan Colla, secretary-treasurer of the alumni association, said that's conservative sour grapes. The current system gives petition candidates an unfair advantage by allowing them to split the opposition vote among two or more nominating committee candidates, he said.

Daukas disagreed, but said the group drafting the new constitution thought candidates should be elected by a majority of alumni in two-candidate races.

Petition candidates don't run as "a reaction to particular people; it's a reaction to the way the college is going," he said.

Malchow also said the postponement of the annual meeting and election of officers from Oct. 15 until sometime in the spring of 2007 violates the alumni association's bylaws and "just smells bad," because it extends the current board's power for another six months or so.

Charles Mitchell, program director for the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, agreed.

The proposed constitution is "their baby, they want to get it pushed through, they set the time for the voting," he said.

The vote on the new constitution -- which would combine the alumni association with an Alumni Council that represents alumni concerns to the college -- runs from Sept. 15 to Oct. 31.

Colla said it makes no sense to elect new alumni association officers, then find out two weeks later that the whole organization structure has been voided.

Daukas said the bottom line is that there's no reason for conservatives to be alarmed.

"It's time to declare victory and stop fighting," he said. "They don't realize that we've really won a tremendous amount here, and now the thing to do is work in this great new system we've set up."

On the Net:

Joe's DartBlog: <http://www.dartblog.com>

Dartmouth Association of Alumni: <http://alumni.dartmouth.edu/leadership/association/>

American Council of Trustees and Alumni <http://www.goactablog.org/> ■

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