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Dartmouth board fight draws conservatives

By **Diana Jean Schemo** The New York Times

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HANOVER, New Hampshire Back when Daniel Webster, class of 1801, defeated an attempt by the governor to take control of the Dartmouth College board, his argument before the Supreme Court gave rise to a line famous among Dartmouth students: "It is sir, as I have said, a small college. And yet there are those who love it."

Now those passions for the Ivy League institution have it embroiled in a new and bitter battle over its board of trustees, this time pitting alumni critical of the college against loyalists who have risen through the ranks of the Dartmouth Alumni Association.

The fracas has drawn the attention of conservative bloggers and publications all over the country.

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ADVERTISER LINKS dates for the governing board of trustees endorsed by the alumni association were unexpectedly defeated two years in a row by outsiders who got on the ballot by petition.
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The outsiders accused the college administration of sacrificing free speech to political correctness and of turning Dartmouth into a junior varsity Harvard.

Now officers of the Dartmouth Alumni Association have canceled a vote for new executive officers and are proposing a constitution with new rules for how candidates get on the ballot. Critics say the effort is designed to block outsiders from gaining yet more seats.

Conservative publications and blogs that accuse academia of a liberal bias have lionized the three insurgents at Dartmouth and are tearing into the proposed constitution. The blog of one student, Joseph Malchow, describes the process of drafting the constitution in a "Timeline of Dirty Tricks."

But supporters of the new constitution said the effort began well before the outsiders' triumph and was spurred by simmering alumni discontent and a steep decline, until recently, in alumni donations to the college since the 1980s.

John Daukas, a lawyer and alumnus on the task force that drafted the rewrite, said, "It might not be perfect, but it's definitely better than what we have now."

Dartmouth is not the only private college where dissidents are trying to get a foothold on the governing board through alumni elections. The unfolding controversy is being watched closely by other universities.

Conservative alumni at Colgate University and Hamilton College in upstate New York have also tried to reach the board as petition candidates, so far unsuccessfully.

"What we're seeing at Dartmouth, Colgate and Hamilton are alumni who are profoundly troubled by the direction of those institutions," said Anne Neal, president of the American Council for Trustees and Alumni, a group whose founders in 1995 included Lynne Cheney, wife of the vice president, and Senator Joseph Lieberman, Democrat of Connecticut. "It's time for those looking in from the outside to provide some input," Neal said.

Yale also saw a spirited but futile petition challenge from the left in 2002 by a

labor-backed minister who was a graduate of the divinity school.

The alumni challenges have their roots, in part, in recent conflicts that grew out of the Dartmouth's decision to strip the Zeta Psi fraternity of recognition after it published newsletters describing the supposed sexual practices of specific women students.

Subsequently, the college president, James Wright, posted a letter on Dartmouth's Web site that was taken by conservative alumni to infringe on free speech.

"In a community such as ours," Wright wrote, "it is hard to understand why some want still to insist that their 'right' to do what they want trumps the rights, feelings and considerations of others."

Alumni upset by the doings looked into petition candidacies, something that the first insurgent elected, T.J. Rodgers, said he was "so pleased to find that Dartmouth had in its DNA."

In the past two elections, alumni voted in Rodgers, class of '70, a self-described libertarian and president of Cypress Semiconductor; Todd Zywicki, '88, a law professor at George Mason University; and Peter Robinson, Dartmouth class of '79, a former speechwriter for President Ronald Reagan and research fellow at the conservative Hoover Institution.

Their campaigns attacked Wright's letter, defended fraternities and strong sports programs and criticized efforts to shift Dartmouth's emphasis from undergraduates to research and doctoral programs.

Wright said in an interview that the letter, since removed from the Web site, was never intended to police speech, and he has spoken publicly to support free speech unambiguously.

For all the ideological fervor in the blogs, Rodgers, the first outside candidate who won, said he was irritated by groups and publications that portrayed the controversy as a left-right battle. He said his primary concerns were increasing the budget for teacher salaries and preserving the primacy of Dartmouth's role as an undergraduate institution.

The proposed constitution would permit Internet voting for officers of the alumni association, and allow alumni to directly elect half of the members of committees that nominate trustee candidates.

Editors of the on-campus Dartmouth Review and The Dartmouth Free Press, conservative and liberal publications that seldom agree, called the new constitution "a mockery of the spirit of dissent and free speech."

Robinson agreed: "This is as much a reform as when Joseph Stalin decided to hold elections in Eastern Europe. Voting? Yes. Democracy? Not at all."