

Dartmouth Alumni Battles Become a Spectator Sport

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HANOVER, N.H. — 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."

Jim Wilson/The New York Times

Peter Robinson is one of three dissidents recently elected to the Dartmouth board of trustees.

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

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

It began when candidates 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. The outsiders accused the college administration of sacrificing free speech to political correctness and of abandoning Dartmouth's historical focus on undergraduates to turn it into a "junior varsity [Harvard](#)."

Now the officers of the Dartmouth Alumni Association have canceled a coming 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 intended 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 constitution say 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 1980's.

John Daukas, a lawyer and an 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.

"The old way of doing business, where people get their degree, lead their lives and the only source of information about their institution is the alumni magazine, that's just gone," said Peter Robinson, Dartmouth class of '79, a speechwriter for former President [Ronald Reagan](#) and a research fellow at the conservative Hoover Institution, who was one of the insurgents who won election to the board last year.

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.

At Hamilton, the dissent flared after a campus club issued a speaking invitation to Ward Churchill, the [University of Colorado](#) professor who has called victims of the Sept. 11 attacks "little Eichmanns," and after the college invited Susan Rosenberg to teach a seminar on memoir writing. As a leftist in the early 1980's, Ms. Rosenberg was linked to

the armed robbery of a bank in which two police officers and a security guard were killed.

At Colgate, the opposition reached critical mass over the college's efforts to curb Greek life by taking over ownership of fraternity houses.

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

[Yale](#) 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.

About 25 colleges and universities allow alumni to elect trustees directly. At Dartmouth, alumni elect half of the college's 18 trustees, either Alumni Association nominees or independent challengers.

The alumni challenges have their roots, in part, in recent conflicts that grew out of the college's decision to strip the Zeta Psi fraternity of recognition after it published newsletters describing the supposed sexual practices of specific female 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," Dr. 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 last two elections, alumni voted in Mr. Rodgers, class of '70, a self-described libertarian and president of Cypress Semiconductor; Todd J. Zywicki, '88, a law professor at George Mason University; and Mr. Robinson.

Their campaigns attacked Dr. Wright's letter, defended fraternities and strong sports programs and criticized efforts to shift Dartmouth's emphasis from undergraduates to research and doctoral programs. Dr. 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, Mr. 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 elect directly half of the members of committees that nominate trustee candidates. It would also change the rules for petition candidates and, perhaps most important for both sides, the timing.

Currently, petition candidates can declare their candidacies after the Alumni Association has announced its official slate. The new rules would reverse that, so the Alumni Association would know of any outside challengers before selecting its candidates.

Jodi Hilton for The New York Times

Merle Adelman supports a constitution with new rules for how board candidates get on the ballot.

Mr. Daukas said the current system put the official candidates at a disadvantage because they did not know whether they would face outside challengers at all or who they might be. The chairman of Dartmouth's board, William H. Neukom, class of '64 and retired general counsel for Microsoft, in an interview called the proposed constitution "a sincere effort" to create "a more democratic, more participatory form of alumni self-governance."

Merle Adelman, a vice president of the Alumni Association, said the election for new officers, which had been set for October, was not postponed to extend the terms of incumbents but because the new constitution would change the structure of the association's leadership and could render the election results moot.

But critics said the changes upended the whole rationale for petition candidacies — created as a mechanism for expressing discontent with the status quo — and gave the official Alumni Association the upper hand.

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

Mr. Robinson agreed. "This is as much a reform as when Joseph [Stalin](#) decided to hold elections in Eastern Europe," he said. "Voting? Yes. Democracy? Not at all."