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News

Alumni battle in national spotlight

By Benjamin Taylor, The Dartmouth Senior Staff

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The College's internal disputes over the alumni governance task force's proposed constitution exploded onto the national stage last week, when both The New York Times and the Boston Globe published articles on the rancor surrounding the issue. Meanwhile, College Trustee Peter Robinson '79 spoke out against the constitution on the nationally-syndicated conservative talk radio show hosted by Laura Ingraham '85.

At issue is the constitution's provision that forces petition trustee candidates to declare their candidacy before the Alumni Association announces its slate of candidates.

Under the current rules, the Alumni Association nominates two alumni for each open seat on the Board of Trustees, and petition candidates have 60 days thereafter to collect 500 alumni signatures in order to appear on the ballot. The new constitution would reduce the number of necessary signatures by half, but would require petitions to be filed before the Alumni Association names its candidates.

Alumni opposing the new constitution have charged that the change effectively insulates the Board of Trustees from successful petition challenges by preventing petition candidates from running because of frustration with the official candidates.

According to Robinson, the fracas over the constitution is not a matter of left versus right, but a matter of ensuring the greatest alumni participation in the College's administration.

"The current constitution -- as it stands -- provides the College with a wonderful opportunity. Having petition trustees provides an opening to involve alumni directly in the life of the College," Robinson said. "The College should want to benefit from alumni's love of the College and from their intellects, not just their wallets."

Another source of dispute is the Alumni Association's recent decision to postpone fall elections for its executive committee. The official reason the Association gave for the move was to allow alumni to adjust to the election requirements of the new constitution, if it passes, though some alumni have called the postponement a naked power grab by current Alumni Association executives.

Results from the vote on the constitution will be available Oct. 31, the day the month-and-a-half-long voting period ends.

Robinson, quoted in a New York Times article on the constitution dispute, compared the Association's handling of the two issues to Soviet political tactics in Eastern Europe. On the Laura Ingraham Show last Thursday, he alleged that "[The Alumni Association] gets results they don't like, so they try to change the game." He further claimed that trustee elections under the new constitution would institutionalize the process of "insiders selecting insiders." And in an interview with The Dartmouth, Robinson framed the issue in terms of "status quo versus change, control by insiders versus openness for the wide alumni body."

Supporters of the constitution have also turned to the national media to air their views. JB Daukas '84, a member of the AGTF, was quoted in the Boston Globe as saying that the measures in the new constitution make "radical changes to open up

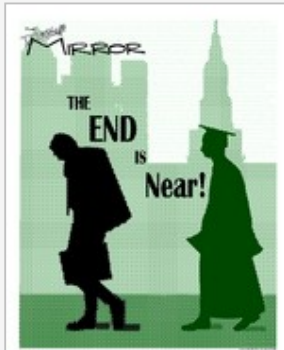
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alumni governance to all Dartmouth alumni."

The current AGTF chair, Josiah Stevenson IV '57, responded to Robinson's statements from the Times article in an open letter posted on the Alumni Association's weblog Tuesday. Stevenson wrote that the constitution "significantly improves the democratic processes of electing alumni trustees and creates a vastly stronger alumni organization." He added that it makes it easier for petition candidates to run and accused the constitution's opponents of trying "to politicize and divide the alumni body and take over the board of trustees."

Robinson dismissed those accusations as "wildly ridiculous to the extent that it achieves a kind of grandeur like theater of the absurd."

Robinson said that the current constitution would be bankable if a few other changes are made, including the addition of all-media voting for executive committee officers, the removal of campaign restrictions and the introduction of rules of order for Alumni Association meetings.

Robinson's vocal involvement in the issue has become somewhat of a controversy within the broader debate and has raised the question of the extent to which individual members of the Board of Trustees should comment publicly on issues affecting the College.

"The Board is supposed to be acting like a cohesive board. To have Peter Robinson come out and make comments like he has made is insulting to alumni volunteers. I think his [public] position is inappropriate, in light of his position on the board," said Merle Adelman '80, first vice president of the Alumni Association.

Robinson vigorously defended his statements and his right to make them.

"My view is that I agreed to abide by the Trustees' charge. I agreed to hold as confidential what's disclosed at meetings of the Board, but I never surrendered my right to speak as an alum. The constitution is for the alums to debate and consider. I and every trustee have as much right to speak as anyone else, I would never presume to speak for anyone but myself, and I am not in any way speaking for the Board," he said.

Both sides claim to have democratic ideals in mind. According to Adelman, the fact that the proposed constitution eases the requirements for petition candidates and gives them a chance to be nominated by the Association represents a significant step forward.

When asked if the nominating committee would ever select a petition candidate, Adelman said, "The nominating committee looks for the strongest candidates.

It's plausible and possible that the committee could nominate a vocal opponent, although it's important to differentiate between attacking destructively and becoming involved with constructive criticism."

Beyond the debate in the national media, the discussion of the constitution and the issues surrounding it have drawn attention from a variety of outside commentators and institutions nationally. The blogosphere, in particular, has provided a forum for students, alumni and advocacy organizations to exchange commentary and opinions. Student weblogs, including Dartblog, which Joe Malchow '08 maintains, and the Dartmouth Free Press's Little Green Blog, have provided a "front line" of opinion and news and have drawn attention from established political weblogs such as The New Criterion's Armavirumque, National Review Online's Phi Beta Cons and PowerLine, run by three Dartmouth alumni.

In addition, advocacy groups such as the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education and the American Council of Trustees and Alumni have voiced their concern about the constitution.

According to ACTA Program Director Charles Mitchell, who has criticized the constitution on ACTA's weblog and on NRO's Phi Beta Cons, the debate surrounding the constitution is part of a broader discussion about outside input on university governance.

"The academy's response is normally 'Don't criticize us -- we'll fix it.' Dartmouth's [petition] trustees are bringing to bear new perspectives, asking new questions and actually expecting problems to get fixed," Mitchell said. "We're seeing these sorts of issues crop up at all sorts of universities, and you're going to keep seeing more of it until universities fix the problems."

Daukas, on the other hand, attributed much of the media and advocacy group attention to the media's unspoken love for conspiracy.

"It makes a great story to say that there's a conspiracy to prevent getting petition trustees elected and that the College in its machinations is pulling a stunt to prevent this. But it's absolutely not true," he said.


Neither Robinson nor Adelman said that they thought the result of the vote will be affected by the media attention, though both agreed that press coverage could impact voter turnout, albeit in different directions.

"I don't think it will affect the outcome. Our goal is to get out the vote and make sure alumni are informed. The negativity surrounding the constitution is creating more confusion and more noise, and some alumni are saying, 'Should I care?'" Adelman said.

Robinson expressed his hope that the publicity will get more alumni involved.

"Dissent and debate are to be encouraged," he said.

Despite the attention, Roland Adams, director of media relations for the College, says that the College is uninvolved and plans to remain uninvolved.

"This is a discussion mainly among Dartmouth alumni, and that's as it should be," Adams said. 

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