

Today's News

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Conservative Trustee Group Takes on the Academy During Annual Meeting

By [PAUL FAIN](#)

Cambridge, Mass.

In a series of panel discussions on Friday, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni wrestled with intellectual diversity, academic freedom, curriculum reform, and lax university management. The discussions were part of the group's annual meeting, held last week in Cambridge, Mass.

Speakers, who gathered at the Harvard University Faculty Club for the round table titled "Ripe for Reform: American Higher Education and What We Can Do About It," doled out criticism broadly, faulting university administrators, trustees, faculty members, and students for declining public confidence in higher education and for what one panelist called "cracks in the ivory towers."

However, the panelists, who often genially disagreed, also found much to praise. In particular they lauded what they see as a growing momentum for accountability and curriculum review.

"This has been a very optimistic day," said Judith Richards Hope, a lawyer, visiting faculty member at Georgetown University Law Center, and former member of the Harvard Corporation, who speculated that such a discussion would not have been possible at Harvard 10 years ago. "We're really making some progress."

A brief rundown of several of the sessions follows:

- One panel praised a review of the undergraduate curriculum at Harvard, conducted by a faculty committee and released last week, which emphasizes the study of science and language ([The Chronicle](#), October 5). Panelists noted that the review also encouraged enhanced teaching of U.S. history and religion.

Harry R. Lewis, a professor of computer science at Harvard and former dean of Harvard College, said he was "just blown away" by the proposed review, which he said contained language that had been absent at the university for decades. The document, said Mr. Lewis, could help counteract a "race to the bottom" by the university, which he said is treating students as consumers and neglecting core academic disciplines.

Mr. Lewis and the three other panelists also sympathetically addressed the struggles of Lawrence H. Summers, who resigned as Harvard's president in February. Ross G. Douthat, a writer for *The Atlantic Monthly* and Harvard alumnus who wrote *Privilege: Harvard and the Education of the Ruling Class* (Hyperion, 2005), said Mr. Summers had been a "change agent." He said Harvard needs another aggressive leader to alter its culture.

"The impetus for change isn't going to come, ultimately, from outside," Mr. Douthat said.

- Stephen J. Trachtenberg, George Washington University's departing president, directed most of his comments at entrenched faculty members at his institution during a discussion titled "The Challenge of Strong Leadership." Mr. Trachtenberg, who has been president for 19 years, said leaders of the Faculty Assembly will have outlasted his tenure as president when he steps down to become a university professor later this year.

The lengthy terms of faculty leaders, Mr. Trachtenberg said, have contributed to making the assembly "completely risk averse." He said the body rejected his proposal for changes in the academic calendar, refusing to even discuss them.

To encourage more educated involvement among junior faculty members in university governance, Mr. Trachtenberg said he would suggest training for new faculty members when he addresses the assembly this week.

- A panel on academic freedom and intellectual diversity was the most freewheeling of the day's discussions, with speakers and audience members jostling over the value of restrictions on free speech.

Alan M. Dershowitz, a Harvard law professor and celebrity lawyer, said campus speech codes that are well-written and defined, as well as neutral and objective, can actually protect free speech. Without clear rules, administrators may arbitrarily punish students, he said.

"The reason we need the code is to prohibit the punishment of students," Mr. Dershowitz said. "I favor regulating things I disapprove of."

Regarding free speech at Harvard, Mr. Dershowitz announced plans to join Steven Pinker, a professor of psychology at Harvard and best-selling author, in teaching a course called "Taboo" in the Spring, in which the two professors will take on 15 controversial topics, including race, colonialism, and religion. Mr. Dershowitz promised that Mr. Summers would be the class's first guest speaker.

Also during the discussion, Mark Bauerlein, a professor of English at Emory University, offered a professor's perspective on why faculty members often use "group think." Mr. Bauerlein said the fierce competition faced by less-established faculty members encourages them to shun controversial ideas and to instead mimic the thoughts of their more influential peers.

Orthodoxy in higher education is caused not by "overt acts of discrimination or intimidation," Mr. Bauerlein said, but by "conformity and timidity."

- A session on university governance featured differing approaches between past and present university trustees. Candace de Russy, a trustee of the State University of New York and a prominent advocate of intellectual diversity, described numerous aggressive reforms she said could improve universities' financial discipline and quality control, including performance reviews for board members, increased faculty teaching loads, and higher-education vouchers. She also encouraged publicly confronting leaders of universities that underperform.

"We should have an open mind to radical structural change," Ms. de Russy said.

However John P. Ackerly III, a former chairman of the Board of Visitors at the University of Virginia, argued for more cooperation and fewer public confrontations to resolve problems at universities.

"I don't see any advantage of seeing the headlines in the newspapers of Virginia," Mr. Ackerly said of challenges he faced while rector.

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