

News, Views and Careers for All of Higher Education

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Dartmouth's Alumni Say No

Trustee nominating processes rarely receive much attention. But at Dartmouth College, graduates [have voted down a proposed new constitution](#) for its alumni association that would have, among other things, changed the timing for when petition candidates would make their intentions known.

Many viewed the proposed changes as designed to make it more difficult for candidates who questioned the board's decisions to win election.

Dartmouth alumni elect some of the board's members, and last year, two candidates who found enough petition signatures to get on the ballot [won their respective races](#), beating out candidates who had been handpicked by an alumni committee.

The winning candidates ran as outsiders who were upset at some of the college's recent decisions. One campaigned on promoting free speech on campus, keeping faculty members focused on teaching rather than research and improving an athletic program that he said was "sunk in mediocrity." He also called for an end to programs that require fraternity members to attend an "inclusivity" seminar. The other candidate said the college's leaders had turned away from the "great legacy" of the institution by increasing class size and chipping away at the athletics program.

Under the current procedure, an alumni nominating committee puts forth two trustee candidates for each opening, and then others can enter the fray if they receive enough petition signatures. The new constitution would have changed the timing so that the petition process would have been prior to the official nominations. Petition candidates often decide to run because they are unhappy with the trustee nominees, so some saw the switch in timing as a direct shot at these "outside" candidates.

In the vote that ended earlier this week, 12,729 alumni (51 percent) rejected the new constitution proposal, while 12,041 (49 percent) voted to accept it. Nearly four in 10 eligible alumni participated in the vote – a record turnout in any Dartmouth alumni election.

None of the four proposed petition amendments to the current Association of Alumni of Dartmouth College constitution received more than 53 percent approval. For any amendment to pass, two-thirds of alumni need to vote in favor. Some of the changes being proposed didn't appear to be as controversial, but they were all caught up in the debate over whether the college was trying to squelch dissent.

"We regret that the proposed reforms to the alumni constitution did not receive the votes necessary for approval," said Merle Adelman, first vice president of the association. "However, we are pleased to see the record number of alumni voices heard in this important decision and we understand that the alumni have clear concerns about the changes that they were asked to consider."

Adelman said alumni had some fundamental differences — particularly about the trustee election process. "You had a lot of campaigning going on," she said. "People wanted certain kinds of reforms but not others. It represents the diverse alumni body."

Adelman said the association plans to speak with some of the upset alumni about the issues that have caused the division. James Wright, Dartmouth's president, said he was impressed with the passion from alumni on both sides of the issue. The administration has not taken an official stance throughout the process, although the college's board — excluding those who won through the election petition process — endorsed the proposed changes.

William H. Neukom, chair of Dartmouth's Board of Trustees, said he has felt a regard for alumni throughout the process. "I will make every effort to help us put aside divisions in the joint pursuit of these larger goals we all share," he said in a statement.

Anne D. Neal, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, called the vote a "significant victory" for reform candidates and alumni who are concerned about the status quo.

"This is a substantial vote because alumni want to ensure free speech and thought," Neal said. "There's a traditional perception that alumni should put up and shut up. That attitude has been changing across the country — it's a healthy situation."

— [Elia Powers](#)