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Trustee Election at Dartmouth Is Seen as 'Battle for Academic Freedom'

By [PAUL FAIN](#)

Elections of trustees to college and university boards are generally a snooze. Not so at Dartmouth College, where an alumni vote for two slots on the Board of Trustees has featured as much drama as a mudslinging congressional campaign. The results of the election will be released in the next few weeks.

Dartmouth alumni choose seven members of the college's 17-trustee board. With two seats open this year, the Alumni Council, a body composed mostly of class and alumni-group leaders, selected a slate of four candidates for the election. However, two dark-horse candidates have mounted successful petition campaigns to get on the ballot, earning them the tag of "insurgents" among sympathetic conservative media and bloggers.

Despite strict limits on campaigning, the write-in candidacies of Peter M. Robinson and Todd J. Zywicki have sparked dueling Web sites, charges of improper electioneering, an extended voting deadline, and the attention of free-speech advocates.

David French, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, thinks the hotly contested trustee election at the prestigious college could have



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national ramifications for the academy.

"This isn't like running for the trustee of your local Elk's Club," Mr. French says. "I think this is a critical development in the battle for academic freedom."

A De Facto Speech Code?

The stir around Dartmouth's trustee elections began with last year's contest, in which T.J. Rodgers mounted a successful petition bid as an alumnus and then defeated the three Alumni Council nominees who were vying for a single seat on the board. Mr. Rodgers, the founder and president of Cypress Semiconductor, a company in San Jose, Calif., won in a landslide, receiving votes from 55 percent of alumni who voted in the election. (About 24 percent of Dartmouth's 62,000 living alumni voted.) He was the first petition candidate to be elected to Dartmouth's board in 24 years.

Mr. Rodgers says concerns about free speech at Dartmouth were key in his decision to run for trustee, claiming that college administrators have enforced a de facto speech code based on subjective definitions of what constitutes bigoted statements.

A college spokesman denies that assertion, citing remarks by Dartmouth's president, James Wright, in an April speech to alumni in New York City.

"It appears to me," Mr. Wright said in the speech, "that there is a lot of speech from every conceivable viewpoint -- both by members of our own community and by guest speakers whom we invite to campus -- and that the free exchange of ideas is alive and well" at Dartmouth.

In the strictly limited campaign materials that candidates have been allowed to distribute to alumni, the two write-in candidates in this year's election have shown that they share Mr. Rodgers's passion for curing Dartmouth's alleged free-speech ills. Mr. Robinson is a fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace who, while working as a speechwriter for President Ronald Reagan, wrote his famous demand, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"

During a six-minute video monologue addressing what a professor called "the deadly grip of political correctness at Dartmouth," Mr. Robinson says, "I'd like to see more than an administration that pays lip service to freedom of speech."

In his video, Mr. Zywicki, a visiting professor at Georgetown Law School and a contributor to the [Volokh Conspiracy](#), a blog with a libertarian bent, says he will work to restore full freedom of speech on the campus.

The similarity of the campaign messages of the two candidates

to Mr. Rodgers's platform of a year ago, as well as the support they have received from the *National Review*, *The Weekly Standard*, and [Power Line](#) -- *Time* magazine's blog of the year in 2004 -- quickly caught the attention of alumni, faculty members, and administrators at Dartmouth, some of whom were worried about a hostile conservative takeover of the board.

Opposition to the write-in campaigns sprang up, chiefly in the form of a group called [Alumni for a Strong Dartmouth](#), which was endorsed by more than 100 alumni. Susan Ackerman, a Dartmouth alumnus and professor of religion at the college, sent a widely posted e-mail message to alumni in which she urged votes for the four Alumni Council nominees and said the petition candidates represent "the same sorts of reactionary ideologies as were represented in last year's elections by T.J. Rodgers."

Another site, called [DartmouthWTF](#), was launched to protest the Alumni for a Strong Dartmouth Web site, which it claims violated rules against campaigning for specific candidates. Ironically, Marion Bates, an alumnus who created the tongue-in-cheek site, says she voted for the four Alumni Council candidates. She says she made the site to protest flaws in the election rules and to defend the legitimacy of the petition candidacies.

Not Too Right?

For their part, the two write-in candidates concede that Mr. Rodgers was their inspiration and, in Mr. Robinson's case, an active advocate in his decision to run for trustee. However, the candidates say they launched their candidacies independently and aggressively deny allegations, which Mr. Robinson calls "piffle," that they are part of a coordinated conservative agenda.

"I don't see that there's really any place for liberal-conservative issues in this election," Mr. Zywicki says. "This is solely and exclusively about Dartmouth and what my goals are for Dartmouth."

Mr. Rodgers, after all, is not a straight-ticket conservative. The outspoken trustee describes himself as a "libertarian with a small l" who comes down on the left side of social issues such as abortion and contraceptive use. Furthermore, Mr. Rodgers argues, the politically charged climate at Dartmouth and on other college campuses has motivated him to steer away from partisan arguments as a trustee.

"Once you dive into that caldron, that's it," Mr. Rodgers says.

When asked why his campaign, if nonpartisan, has attracted backers among the conservative media, Mr. Zywicki says the "extraordinary smear campaign" waged against his candidacy and the strict rules imposed on the election triggered the backlash from conservatives, who were already worried about

dissent being squashed on liberal-dominated campuses.

"Obviously it's caught people's imagination," Mr. Zywicki says.

Whatever camp they support, it seems to most active campaigners in this election that Dartmouth's alumni organizations have struggled to effectively manage the closely watched trustee contest, particularly in how to control Web sites and e-mail.

Geoff Berlin, an alumnus, created the Alliance for a Strong Dartmouth Web site as a rebuttal to what he sees as misleading arguments by the petition candidates. But Mr. Berlin says the real issue might not be the election's results, but how Dartmouth decides to react to two uniquely participatory elections.

"It would be completely paradoxical if we ended up censoring the democratic process at institutions of higher learning," Mr. Berlin says.

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