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News

Voting in action-packed trustee election ends

BY STUART A. REID, THE DARTMOUTH STAFF

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Voting for this year's trustee election wraps up midnight on Friday after one of the most controversial and heated races in recent memory. While most trustee elections in the College's history have passed uneventfully, this year's has raised questions of campaign rules violations, the legitimacy of petition candidates and free speech on campus -- all while drawing national attention.

The Candidates

In light of the Board of Trustees' ongoing expansion from 16 to 22 members, two positions opened this year for which the College's 62,000 living alumni can vote. Six candidates are vying for these two spots -- four nominated by the Alumni Council and two nominated by petition.

The candidates share several characteristics. All were members of Greek houses, all attended graduate school (including four who went to law school) and all are at the top of their fields. Half are CEOs.

The four Alumni Council nominees are Sheila C. Cheston '80, vice president of an aerospace company; Gregg L. Engles '79, CEO of a food company; Richard W. Lewis '84, CEO of an investment management firm; and Curtis R. Welling '71 Tu '77, CEO of a nonprofit organization.

Hoping to tap into the same rebel spirit that propelled petition candidate and Silicon Valley tycoon TJ Rodgers '70 to his landslide victory last year, two petition candidates are vying for the open seats. Author and television host Peter Robinson '79 and Georgetown law professor Todd Zywicki '88 have collected the requisite 500 alumni signatures.

The platforms of these two dark horse candidates echo that of Rodgers' campaign last fall. They have criticized the administration and called for fewer restrictions on free speech.

Election Irregularities, Rules Violations

Because of various election glitches, election overseers extended the voting period from April 22 to May 6. The third party vendor charged with running the election encountered problems sending out the official campaign e-mails. Some alumni did not receive certain candidates' e-mails, while others were inundated with messages. More significantly, the company mailed out paper ballots several weeks late.

However, John Walters '62, in charge of election logistics, said he felt changing the date solved any significant problems.

Furthermore, some alumni have raised questions about possible campaign rules violations. A web site supporting the Alumni Council nominees, www.strongdartmouth.org, stated their belief that "responsible leadership" must remain on the Board of Trustees.

The organization wrote that petition candidates' campaigns "seek to mislead alumni and to denigrate the good name and achievements of the College."

Other websites took the opposite tack -- impugning Alumni Council-nominated candidates and endorsing the write-in candidates. Many accused Alumni for a Strong Dartmouth of violating the strict election rules on campaigning. As per the trustee election guidelines, "campaigning by the candidate or his/her supporters beyond the two e-mails is inappropriate."

According to Walters, the Alumni for a Strong Dartmouth clearly violated the spirit of the guidelines, but the ballot committee can only restrain first-party campaigning.

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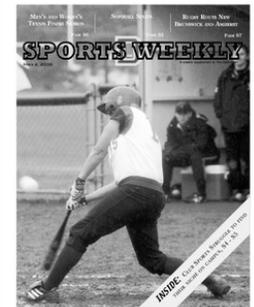
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These campaign restrictions, ironically part of an election that focuses on free speech, have raised questions of their purpose. Walters said they were an attempt to maintain the dignity of the process, but admitted that given the impossibility of enforcement and the growth of online campaigning, they were obsolete.

"We're going to have to do some significant restructuring of those guidelines," Walters said. "Frankly, I would be in favor of more opportunities for open dialogue."

Several alumni responded to Alumni for a Strong Dartmouth by creating a satirical web site, "Alumni Asking WTF" at www.dartmouthwtf.org. The site speaks out against the alleged campaign violations of Alumni for a Strong Dartmouth and intends to legitimize the petition candidates.

Ironically, the site's creator, Marion Bates '00, said she voted for Alumni Council candidates, only furnishing the site as a form of protest.

Free Speech Issue

Freedom of speech on campus has become an unexpected campaign issue. Following College President James Wright's 2001 letter stating "speech has consequences for which we must account," Dartmouth was branded as a campus hostile to free speech. A self-declared watchdog organization that rates and advocates for free speech on campus, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, gave Dartmouth its lowest rating.

David French, president of the organization, said free speech has played a role in this year's trustee election in a way it has not before. The election, he said, has implications not just for Dartmouth, but for schools across the country.

"To my knowledge, it's the first time you've begun to see a genuine grassroots alumni action in response to what's seen as a repressive campus environment," he said.

However, French said the organization plans to upgrade its free speech rating of Dartmouth within the next few days.

"I would say it is now true that Dartmouth does not have a speech code," he said, adding that his organization can only rate official policies and not whether or not the campus is hostile to dissenting views.

This upgrade comes following Wright's declaration in his most recent convocation address that Dartmouth has no speech code and the disappearance of his 2001 letter from Dartmouth's web site.

National, Local Attention

Besides the explosive free speech issue, the candidates' discourse focused on more traditional Dartmouth issues: athletics, alcohol use, Greek life and, most noticeably, undergraduate focus.

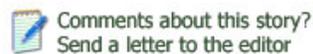
In response to fears about expanding the College and increasing concern with graduate education, every candidate has called for Dartmouth to rededicate itself to undergraduate education.

Unlike most trustee elections, this year's has attracted nationwide attention because of its supposed ramifications on academic freedom.

Prominent national media outlets have published stories on the election. The Chronicle of Higher Education, the Weekly Standard and the National Review have all written about the race afoot. Blogs, mainly conservative ones supportive of the petition candidates, have also commented on this election. Among these is Power Line, a popular political blog run by several Dartmouth alumni.

Locally, one New Hampshire libertarian group protested in front of Baker Library, claiming they should be able to vote in Dartmouth's election because Dartmouth students vote in New Hampshire elections.

The results of the election will be announced within the next two weeks, Walters said.



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