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The Lone Pine Revolution

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By **Michael J. Ellis and Scott L. Glabe** | [Saturday, May 14, 2005](#)

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Two bespectacled, suit-wearing academics make for unlikely revolutionaries. However, the election of Hoover Institution fellow Peter Robinson '79 and George Mason University law professor Todd Zywicki '88 to Dartmouth College's Board of Trustees, announced Thursday, is perhaps the most significant event in the institution's recent history.

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Most Trustee elections at Dartmouth, like those to most corporate boards, are low-key affairs, marked by apathy. But not this one. Just to earn a place on the Trustee election ballot, Robinson and Zywicki each had to collect 500 alumni signatures on a petition. They next fought back a spirited opposition from the four "official" candidates nominated by the administration-controlled Alumni Council, all the while fending off attacks from rogue groups of alumni trying to scuttle their campaigns.

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Many dismissed as a fluke last year's triumph by another conservative petition candidate, Cypress Semiconductors CEO T.J. Rodgers. Rodgers won easily after a low-key campaign. Zywicki and Robinson, a former Reagan speechwriter who wrote the Gipper's famous Berlin Wall speech, would not have it nearly so easy.

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As the balloting got under way, Dartmouth President James Wright embarked on an expensive tour of Dartmouth alumni clubs around the nation, delivering speeches ad infinitum that implicitly endorsed the establishment candidates. More sinisterly, a shadowy organization composed largely of College administrators—and wishfully titled Alumni for a Strong Dartmouth—set up a website openly attacking Robinson and Zywicki. Meanwhile, Professor Susan Ackerman, chairman of Dartmouth's religion department, penned a particularly malicious e-mail asserting that "the two petition candidates both represent, as far as I can tell, the same sorts of reactionary ideologies as

were represented in last year's elections by T.J. Rodgers.”

The candidates were defenseless against this barrage of institutionally-sponsored criticism, as they were prohibited from campaigning except in two e-mails and one letter to alumni. Then, a series of “glitches” befell their campaigns: one of Zywicki's emails was mysteriously “lost” for several days; many alumni never received their ballots in the mail; and, to top it off, the election was suddenly extended for two weeks just as the petition candidates seemed at their strongest.

What was about these two men that provoked such great vitriol and so many irregularities?

Robinson campaigned on three issues: smaller classes (paid for by eliminating superfluous bureaucrats); freer speech; and stronger athletics. Zywicki's platform was nearly identical. All of these issues are highly salient; each, when explored, casts the current College administration in an extremely bad light.

Dartmouth's administrators claim an “average” class size of 18, but the actual value is upwards of 40 in many of the most popular departments. Courses are chronically over-subscribed, even as the College continues to employ literally dozens of deans.

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a nonpartisan advocacy group, gave the College its worst rating for free speech in 2003. Dartmouth's speech code was detailed in a 2001 letter from Dartmouth President James Wright in response some particularly ill-advised expression by some fraternity members. He wrote that students lack “‘rights’ [which] trump the rights, feelings, and considerations of others.”

At the same time, Dartmouth's athletics have been suffering. Last year, ten of the College's 30 varsity teams finished either in last or second-to-last place in the Ivy League—and it is little wonder. In 2002, the administration attempted to quietly cut the swimming and diving teams before widespread alumni and student protest forced them to reverse the decision. More recently, a letter surfaced from Dean of Admissions Karl Furstenberg declaring that the football program had a mission “antithetical” to that of the College (perhaps no one told him that last year's commencement speaker, General Electric CEO Jeffrey Immelt '78, played football during his time at the College).

With further study, it becomes clear that Robinson and Zywicki's issues were not those of a reactionary minority, Prof. Ackerman's claims notwithstanding. In a poll of current students conducted by the student government—a bunch probably more sympathetic to College bureaucrats than relatively conservative alumni—only a quarter of respondents agreed that “the administration is responsive to concerns of the student body.” Just 11 percent claimed to “understand the administration's visions for Dartmouth in 10 years.” These are shocking numbers that indicate grave dissatisfaction with the direction Dartmouth is heading.

As heartening as Robinson and Zywicki's victory may be, nothing has been accomplished yet. Indeed, the most pressing issue at the College has barely been addressed: improving the quality of education and restoring some semblance of a core curriculum. It is practically impossible for a student to receive an education in the Western tradition these days.

However, though significant obstacles lay ahead, Robinson and Zywicki's campaigns and subsequent victory have awakened student and alumni alike to the challenges Dartmouth faces.

Campus newspapers and weblogs have been alive with talk of free speech, class sizes, and administrative deception for weeks on end. Just last Tuesday, FIRE improved its rating of free

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speech at Dartmouth after the administration spent months backpedaling—a move for which the Trustee election is directly responsible.

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Over a half century ago, William F. Buckley Jr.’s God and Man at Yale asked whether the education provided at that university corresponded with the wishes of its alumni, to whom its administrators ultimately report. The answer at Dartmouth today, as it was at Yale then, is a resounding “no.” However, with Robinson and Zywicki’s upset win, the answer at one Ivy League institution could soon be “yes.”

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