

Parity: An Issue for Dartmouth Liberals

Daniel King '02 -- May 15, 2008

I am an openly gay man, a teacher, a card-carrying member of the Democratic Party, the ACLU, and the Human Rights Campaign. Heck, I even voted for Bill Bradley in the 2000 New Hampshire primary, Howard Dean in 2004, and am currently one of those “Obamaniacs.” To call me anything near a conservative would be a gross misnomer.

I don't really think my political leanings should have anything to do with how I vote in the current Association of Alumni elections, nor should it have determined how I voted in the past four alumni Trustee elections. But, according to the slate of candidates supporting the Trustees' Board-packing plan, it does.

Former professor Peter Saccio asserts in a recent letter (distributed by the absurdly named “pro-unity” group Dartmouth Undying) that this current alumni election is part of the broader “culture wars”—part of the wider “left versus right” ideological battle currently ripping our country apart. This is interesting, because the Board has repeatedly made the disingenuous claim that the Board expansion had nothing to do with this. It is nice to see someone finally acknowledge, at least implicitly, that this is a deliberate attempt to dilute the voting power of duly elected Trustees.

This claim, though, that the current controversy is part of some ridiculous “vast right-wing conspiracy” could not be further from the truth. The real battle going on is one between an overly paternalistic College administration, supported by a rubber-stamp Board of Trustees that has totally abdicated its oversight responsibilities—and, on the other side, loyal alumni from *all* sides of the political spectrum who wish to not see the value of their Dartmouth degree plummet and to preserve the historic and unique ties that alumni have to our alma mater.

I have been a supporter of the “petition Trustees” since the first petition election in 2004. I, along with a large number of alumni, wished to register my dissatisfaction with the direction of the administration and the complete disconnection of the Board of Trustees.

As a student, I arrived at Dartmouth in the fall of 1998. That year's Winter Carnival brought the introduction of the debacle known as the Student Life Initiative, a heavy-handed attempt at social engineering that treated grown adults like pre-teen adolescents. While I felt that some of the goals of the SLI may have been laudable, the methods the administration used to implement it—and how they discouraged debate about it—were patently offensive to me.

I never joined a frat, but like all Dartmouth students, I certainly had friends in Greek houses and recognized both the flaws in the system as well as the large amount of good it did on a campus miles away from any other social life. Instead of working with Greek leaders to preserve the good and reform the bad, they actively sought the destruction of Greek life, stifling debate and accusing supporters of the Greek system of being conservative reactionaries and trying to “turn back the clock” at Dartmouth. It wasn't

until alumni of all political persuasions chimed in, and then with the ensuing uproar, forced the College to retreat from its destructive goals. (Sound familiar?)

While an undergraduate I also witnessed an administration that, despite record income from Dartmouth's endowment in the late 90s, could not manage a budget and decided the best way to save money was to eliminate the swim team. This, like the SLI, was announced at the last minute, without debate, and in the administration's usual heavy-handed paternalistic style. No one bothered to explain the plethora of flat-screen TVs popping up all over campus at a time when the college was so financially strapped that it had to eliminate a world-class athletic program. No one bothered to take a look at the budget and perhaps eliminate some of the *dozens and dozens of useless dean positions*, instead of targeting student athletes. There were ways to save the program but the administrators did what they always do: they stuck their fingers in their ears and hummed loudly as reasonable students, alumni, and faculty pleaded with them to find a compromise to save the program. Then, as now, it was loyal alumni who stood up and saved the program. Not the administration, and certainly not the Board.

Dartmouth's own graduates don't know what is best for the College? Chairman Haldeman and his five-person Governance Committee do? (A committee purposely devoid of any voices that were critical of the administration). The last decade at Dartmouth disproves that thesis entirely: the swim team, the speech department, speech codes, the entangling bureaucracy, the need for more professors, renewed support for football, the Greek system, saving Sanborn Library, clamping down the creeping emphasis on graduate programs, insisting upon a good classroom experience. Time and again, alumni and students recognize problems that the administration and Trustees have either blatantly ignored, or simply lacked the proper perspective to formulate good solutions. It is only through a sustained political process, one that fosters dialogue and debate from varying viewpoints, that administrators are forced to make Dartmouth better. Sad, but true.

People don't like being shut out of the process. Liberals certainly didn't appreciate the dirty tricks of the Bush 46 administration (going "nuclear" over judicial confirmations and the like) and this Board-packing scheme is in the same vein. And that is why it is totally dishonest to claim that the distraction of this current lawsuit against the College is the fault of those loyal alums who don't want to be shut out of the process, who care deeply about the institution, its greatness, and its perseverance despite the mediocrity of the current administration.

The Board-packing scheme was announced in much the same way as the SLI and the demise of the swim team. There was no debate, there was no engagement, no outlet to seek compromise or express alternate points of view. It was just....*done*.

I completely agree with former professor Saccio that discussions about Dartmouth policy should remain within the "Dartmouth family," but it was the Board with their blatant abuse of power that rammed through this latest hurtful idea. The only recourse to stop the power-grab was to initiate a lawsuit. Asking the local court for relief was the only way to slow the process down and give time necessary for the debate about the merits of the charter change—the debate that should have been standard operating

procedure before approving it.

As a good liberal, I was steaming mad between 2000 and 2006 as I saw a GOP administration and a GOP Congress drunk on power, who refused to compromise or even entertain viewpoints other than their own. I see nothing different between their heavy-handedness and the current Board's, and that is why, as a good liberal, I will continue to vote for those who will challenge the administration instead of giving them the free pass of the past several years.

My favorite quote of all time comes from Robert Frost. "*Education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence.*" This is the heart of the matter. The Board has expanded itself but refused to add any more elected trustees because, they claim, these elections are "divisive." This is nonsense. Perhaps they are divisive because those who support the administration don't really have the self-confidence in their ideas and policies that is required to listen to reasoned debate without getting angry? This seems to me to be more than likely.

Part of the excellent education I received at Dartmouth came from my interactions with my conservative friends. We would have marvelous debates that would both frustrate me and simultaneously energize me. Their challenges to my beliefs made me re-examine those beliefs, to modify and fine-tune them, and ultimately, to strengthen them. This is the birthplace of good ideas, the intense caldron of respectful debate between opposing viewpoints creates tempered, worthwhile beliefs. But this only happened because I was confident in my own beliefs, confident that "liberal" wasn't a dirty word, and also confident that I didn't have exclusive access to "the truth."

This is the education the Board of Trustees needs. They need to hear from those with opposing viewpoints, hear from those with different backgrounds. And not just hear them, but to actually listen to them.

The past four trustee elections, the defeat of the proposed changes to the alumni constitution, and hopefully the election of the "pro-parity" slate are all messages that more respect is needed for Dartmouth's own students and graduates. Instead of heeding this message, the administration and their supporters have attacked the messengers, making false assertions that all those who support parity do so to further a conservative agenda. It is an insult to my excellent Dartmouth education that the Board and their supporters choose to hide behind a make-believe cloak of ideology, making absurd claims that there is a vast conspiracy to take over Dartmouth, instead of engaging in a debate about the merits of this charter-change that threatens to destroy a unique bond we alumni have with Dartmouth. These baseless, ad hominem attacks distract from the real issues of accountability that should be the focal point of these debates.

That is why I, a confident way-left-of-center liberal, support the petition trustees and the "pro-parity" slate. I am also happy, during the next round of Trustee elections, to offer myself up as a candidate. That way, the fabled "conservative takeover" could never become reality, but the alumni mission to make the administration accountable and the Board an engaged and active one—that mission *would* succeed.