

# The New Criterion

Notes & Comments September 2007

## A putsch at Dartmouth?

*On the Dartmouth administration's latest attempt to stifle dissent.*

Last spring, we reported on Dartmouth College's longstanding practice of electing nearly half of its board of trustees from among its alumni. Until recently, most alumni candidates had been indirectly sanctioned by the Dartmouth administration and so helped to assure that educational matters at Dartmouth proceeded as they did elsewhere: under the aegis of whatever the academic equivalent of conventional wisdom happens to be regnant at the moment.

Beginning in 2004, however, things began to change. It was then that T. J. Rodgers, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur, ran and won as a "petition candidate"—one not sanctioned by the administration. His election was followed in short order by two more petition candidates, Todd Zywicki and Peter Robinson. At that point, the Dartmouth administration really sat up and took notice: a clear threat to business-as-usual was brewing. Accordingly, when Stephen Smith, a University of Virginia law professor, ran as a petition candidate last spring, the administration went all out to stop him. As we reported in June, however, Mr. Smith won handily.

The Dartmouth establishment did not wait long to respond. Congratulations to Mr. Smith were still echoing when, on May 19, Charles Haldeman, Dartmouth's new Chairman of the Board, announced that "the Governance Committee of the Board this summer will review the composition of the Board and the process of trustee selection." James Wright, Dartmouth's president, is a member of this board-within-the-board, and so is in the enviable position of reviewing himself and his own policies—not what most of us mean by "oversight." Three alumni trustees—but not, you will be shocked to learn, any of the four independent trustees—are also members of this select committee. Meanwhile, the college has also withheld customary funds and mailing lists from elected officers of Dartmouth's Association of Alumni who wished to publicize the controversy.

This might seem like a parochial story, of interest only to Dartmouth alumni. In fact, it is an episode that has national significance. As we noted in this space last April, college faculties and administrations represent "an entrenched, sclerotic, and self-perpetuating hegemony." For more than a hundred years, the alumni at Dartmouth have been enfranchised to challenge that hegemony. That right is now under threat by an administration concerned above all to preserve its perquisites and resist change. The deliberations of the Governance Committee are due to end this

month, so by the time you read this we may well know whether Dartmouth has chosen to preserve its heritage of openness and democratic rule or to surrender to the forces of the academic nomenklatura.

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