

Dartmouth

A SUMMARY OF THE PROPOSED ALUMNI CONSTITUTION *Prepared by Emily Ghods, Class of 2009*

Introduction

Despite seeming “transparent, democratic, and encouraging of all viewpoints,” the proposed **Alumni Constitution** in fact veils and dilutes the democratic process. It consolidates the current bicameral structure of an **Alumni Council** and **Alumni Association** into one overarching legislative organization, the **Alumni Association**, under which there lie four bodies: the **Alumni Assembly**, the **Alumni Liaison Board**, the **Nominating Committee** and the **Balloting Committee**. In effect, the proposed constitution dissolves the current Alumni Association, and expands the Alumni Council. The net result? Less democracy, not more.

Further, while the **Alumni Governance Task Force** (AGTF) claims that the nomination of candidates to the Board of Trustees “makes it easier to be a petition candidate,” the constitution in fact has the reverse effect, making it much more difficult for a petition candidate to be elected to the Board of Trustees.

Structure

Current Structure—

As it stands, the **Alumni Association** is a group of all active alumni—about 66,500 individuals who have graduated from Dartmouth College or her graduate schools. Members of the Association, only if present in Hanover, elect an Executive Committee which is meant to control the Association. Through no coincidence, these elections are held the same time the Alumni Council holds *their* annual meetings.

This **Alumni Council** is a collection of 96 alumni, sometimes referred to as “insiders,” for their tendency not to challenge Dartmouth with new ideas or radical reforms. The **Senior Executive Committee**, 40% of which is hand-picked by the College while the other 60% is selected by the senior class, comprises a plurality of the Council’s members. The rest of the Council is drawn from various special interest groups, such as the Dartmouth Asian Pacific American Alumni Association, the Dartmouth Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Alumni Association, and the Dartmouth African American Alumni Association. To be clear about where the power resides under the current system, members of the Council either nominate or are themselves members of the varying sub-committees—such as the Executive Committee, the Committee on Alumni Organization, the Nominating Committee, the Alumni Governance Task Force—and dominates elections of Association officers, as discussed above.

Whether the Alumni Council is truly representative of Dartmouth's 66,500 alumni, the reader can determine himself.

Proposed Structure—

Under the proposed Constitution, the **Alumni Council** remains functionally intact, expands its membership to 125 individuals (20% of this extension in representation is awarded to the *Affiliated Alumni*; that is, those same special interest groups listed above) and changes its name to the **Alumni Assembly**, responsible for most decision-making, while the **Alumni Association** is stuck below the Assembly with amorphous responsibilities.

Under the proposed constitution, the responsibilities delegated to the Association include: deciding the date of “association-wide elections and meetings” where all alumni will have “an opportunity for the expression of alumni sentiment”; it will “present information and views concerning the activities and direction of [various] bodies and the college.” Further, under the Association are two committees: **the Nominating Committee** and the **Balloting Committee**. Yet, these committees will essentially be controlled by the Assembly, not the Association, as will be discussed below.

The Assembly (currently called the Council), on the other hand, is designated with many more responsibilities that lack the wishy-washy quality of the Alumni Association's chores. The Assembly will appoint “one-half of Association Nominating Committee and one half of the Association Balloting Committee.” It will further “appoint the members of Assembly committees,” “conduct business as may come before the Assembly,” “elect representatives to the Alumni Liaison Board,” and “Act on proposed constitutional amendments.”

With the stroke of a pen, it could be the case *today* that all alumni are afforded the right to choose who fills these important seats of power. With a few keystrokes, the proposed constitution *could* have done this, but has not.

After viewing the limited responsibilities of the Association, it is clear that it would be powerless as a representative body.

Election of Officers under Proposed Constitution

Under the proposed constitution, the power is consolidated such that the leading officers of the Alumni Association are also the leading officers of the Alumni Assembly and the other sub-organizations. Only the Vice-President of the Association, “with primary responsibility as Vice Chair of the Assembly,” is elected by the Alumni Association through all media voting. The Vice President is the only elected officer, besides secretaries.

Then, the Vice President will automatically be promoted to the President-Elect in his second year, where his “primary responsibility” will be “Chair of the Assembly.” Then in his third year, he will succeed to be President of the Association; in the fourth, he will become Immediate Past President, “with primary responsibility as Chair of the ALB [Alumni Liaison Board.]” In truth, a “direct election” will not occur for each leadership position. So, after voting for one individual, the alumni are governed by the same individual, who is continually promoted through the ranks,

regardless of the alumni's approval or disapproval of his performance. Further, suppose alumni elect this person for a specific *reason*; after the initial election, it would take three years before he has the power to act on that mandate.

It is also questionable how “markedly more democratic and transparent” the new constitution is when one half of each committee is appointed by the Assembly. Of the 12-member Nominating Committee, six members are appointed by the Assembly, and of the 6-member Balloting Committee, three members are appointed by the Assembly.

Further, the half that is democratically elected is nominated by the Nominating Committee, half of whose members are again appointed by the Assembly. There seems to be structural self-perpetuation here: the democratically-elected half of these committees is nominated by a committee, half of whose members are appointed by the Assembly. The constitution states, “the nominating committee shall nominate candidates for the Nominating Committee and Balloting Committee, in each instance one half of whom shall be Assembly members and shall be elected by all voting members.”

Petition Candidates

Several changes in the proposed constitution make it nearly impossible for a petition candidate to win an election—some believe this to be provoked by the last three victories of petition candidates to the Board of Trustees.

With suspect logic, the new constitution requires petition candidates to announce their candidacies prior to knowing the official slate of nominees. In loopy language, the proposed constitution explains, “prior to the date of the Nominating Committee meeting at which the Nominating Committee Trustee slate will be selected, 250 of the voting members of the Association may, pursuant to procedures set forth in nomination guidelines of the Association, file with the Secretary of the Association a petition over their own signatures selecting an eligible member of the Association as a candidate for nomination as an alumni trustee, subject to his or her agreement if elected.” Filtering out the obscure language, that comes to: “prior to the date of the Nominating Committee meeting at which the Nominating Committee Trustee slate will be selected, 250 of the voting members of the Association may ...file with the Secretary of the Association a petition ...selecting an eligible member of the Association as a candidate for nomination as an alumni trustee.”

There are two faults with this move:

First, a petition candidate only decides to seek a spot on the ballot if Dartmouth alumni are dissatisfied with the official candidates put forth by the Nominating Committee. A petition candidate, in other words, *reacts* against what they consider unrepresentative officially-nominated candidates. This strategy falls to its knees when the petition candidate is forced to announce his candidacy before the official nominees are revealed to the Association.

Second, by having a petition candidate announce his candidacy before the official slate is determined, the Nominating Committee has the option of choosing the petition candidate as one of their official candidates. The AGTF admits as much when it writes that “a trustee nomination

process that encourages two-candidate elections...makes it easier to be a petition candidate.” The problem is that this destroys the incentive for the Nominating Committee to choose a diverse, representative slate. If the Committee can convert a petition candidate to an official candidate, which the AGTF advertises as a good thing, then first, the candidate has almost no statistical chance of victory and, second, it deflates the philosophy behind Petition Candidacy.

Though the AGTF contends that a 2-candidate— with one candidate as the officially-nominated candidate and the other as the petition candidate—“levels the playing field for all on campaigning,” this is ultimately not the case. In the ideal election, there will be two or more candidates chosen by the Nominating Committee — candidates who are meant to vocalize the manifold will of Dartmouth’s alumni.

Thus, everything else equal, these candidates should devise platforms that represent the varying needs and desires of the alumni. When this is not the case— when the governance system is inadequate for whatever reason— *only then* is a petition candidate needed. The petition candidate should only intervene if he perceives a lack of representation in the slate of officially-nominated candidates; his status as a "petition candidate" is symbolic. Essentially, the role of the petition candidate is to check the establishment and balance the distribution of power.

Conclusion

The proposed constitution will effect two key changes to the structure of alumni governance. One change influences alumni governance only, and the other influences alumni governance as well as College governance.

The change which affects alumni activities only is the new Assembly envisioned by the proposed constitution, and its various committees. The Assembly is best understood as an expanded version of the current Alumni Council: Its membership is not necessarily democratically-elected, it wields most decision-making authority, and it is structured to have a generally self-perpetuating membership. The proposal’s language makes plain that the makeup of the Assembly will be very much like the current Council. In this respect the argument that the Assembly represents a “reform” holds little water. There is, however, a significant change in the election of alumni leaders. Currently, all executives are elected in an attendees-only meeting. The constitution allows all-media voting, but reduced the number of elected officers to one. All other leaders are either appointed or indirectly chosen by the electorate.

In the arena of College governance, the most significant change is to the trustee election process. The likely result of the changes contemplated in the proposed new constitution would lead to races in which independent candidates such as those three most recently elected to Dartmouth’s Board of Trustees would have a drastically reduced chance of victory. Moreover, the proposal does not address the most significant alumni concern in trustee elections: That the candidates offered by the Nominating Committee are not diverse in terms of their ideas for Dartmouth.

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