

227th meeting of the Alumni Council (Oct 26-28 in Hanover)

Don O'Neill

OVERVIEW

The 227th session of the Alumni Council kicked off on Thursday , October 26 closing on Saturday Oct 28 after 2 days of presentations , Q&A , committee meetings , networking with staff and fellow alums. Three of the major highlights included a session with President Sian Leah Bielock , 2 meetings with Dean of Admissions , Lee Coffin , and a Q& A with Trustee Sue Finnegan.

The hot topics were :

1. President Bielock's priority initiatives and her vision for the school.
2. The impact race neutral admissions is having on Dartmouth's admission process and the strategies our admissions team is formulating and implementing to try to maintain racial diversity without running afoul of the law.

The Alumni Council is made up of a group of about 100 very diverse and smart volunteers. They represent the entire spectrum of classes and clubs , domestic and international who are willing to spend time learning and giving feedback on the direction and policies of the school. Each counselor is assigned to one of 7 committees. I am on the Admissions / Enrollment committee and glad of it. "The engagement of Dartmouth alums is without parallel anywhere in the country" , observed a non Dartmouth educated faculty member.

In addition , our views are listened to and appreciated. The meeting is collegial , not defensive

PRESIDENT BIELOCK'S LEADERSHIP DIRECTION

In preparation to assume her role as the 19th President in the Wheelock succession , Sian spent a year on a " Listening Tour " of Dartmouth. She traveled the world meeting students , parents , alums , peers. From this process she developed a pretty good picture of what was needed.

She began her talk by expressing her deep support for the people of Israel condemning the vicious and inhumane attack by Hamas on her citizens. She also expressed her support for civilian victims on all sides of this war. She went on to say that "Dartmouth is different. People come together. We're not like the others. Jewish and Middle Eastern faculty teach together .

Sian is leading the development of a Commitment to Care Strategic Plan which is intended to improve Student Mental Health and Wellness. This is not a " new" subject. It's a serious problem. At my first meeting in May ' 22 I asked an acting dean who was tasked with doing

something about the problem if we had a drug and suicide problem at Dartmouth. He said “ No , we didn’t “. Well he was either lying or didn’t know what was going on , citing few if any suicides. Since then we have had suicides and serious cases of mental health impairment. I haven’t seen him listed anywhere as being involved with the issue anymore. And I haven’t seen any data. But Sian is a scientist and she will require metrics showing progress. Our goals should be Zero Suicides and Continuous Improvement in indicators of performance in campus wide mental health.

Here are a few of the key elements of the plan (I think they’re good but I see some gaps which I’ll cover at the end)

1. The development of the strategic plan was tasked to Provost David Kotz ‘ 86. He hired JED , a non profit organization dedicated to helping teens and young people in high schools and colleges avoid suicide and enjoy mental health and well being. A project manager Katie Lenhoff was put on campus , and she co led the planning activity with Matt Duncan , an assistant professor of psychiatry at Geisel. The plan is going public this week.
2. It is comprehensive as it addresses undergraduate , graduate and professional student mental health , the entire Dartmouth eco system , physical infrastructure , student support systems.
3. Our Mission is to be a caring , inclusive community that delivers to our students the mental health resources and skills they need to be successful at Dartmouth and in life (my words plagiarized from various readings from the College)
4. Filling a newly created position on Sian’s Leadership Team , the role of Chief Health and Wellness officer.
5. Doubling the number of Wellness Counselors (increased to 30) and the introduction of 24/7 teletherapy to shrink lead times for access to care - a major obstacle to getting to treating at risk students quickly.
6. Eliminating fees for overnight observation
7. Locating walk in care centers closer to the center of campus
8. Training 700 teachers and staff in suicide prevention.
9. Providing a child care benefit to teachers and staff.
10. Establishing clear metrics of performance. Sian is a data person

I think there are opportunities to make our “ Care Commitment Plan “ even better. (a disclaimer - I’m not a public Health expert nor a psychiatrist but I’ve been around organizational leadership and development for my entire career. I also suffered from depression and dark times while in school. Our family has made a deferred gift earmarked for Mental Health at Dartmouth)

1. Focusing on the back end of the problem ; ie. a kid’s sick so we treat him/her , like how most of medicine is practiced today. The author Peter Atria calls it Medicine 2 for throwing all kinds of pills , treatments etc at a problem after the person gets sick. I think we have to do something before they arrive as students or as they arrive. Parents have to be involved. We need to provide tools and training so that students can recognize they

have a problem and know how and where to get help. We could do experiential workshops on resolving conflict with a roommate , what to do and how to cope with falling behind at a very fast paced 3 term system , what to do if you feel you're relying on drugs or alcohol as a coping mechanism

2. As students come on campus as freshmen or even sophomores and juniors they should be reengaged and refreshed. The parents and students have to "OWN" their mental health.
3. We need to provide tools such as problem solving , decision making , working in groups , conflict resolution , where to go if your need help or need to talk with someone
4. Use the power of AI to build algorithms that spot declines in performance , missing class , conduct and behavior issues ; ie, data indicators that could trigger proactive interventions appropriate to the situation.

We need a proactive strategy in my view

POLICIES and DIRECTION

Sian is very clear. She tells it like it is which I found very refreshing when compared to Phil's more muted , careful manner of expression.

She envisions her role as that of helping Dartmouth evolve and grow , not to change it from what it is. So here are her additional priority and policy directions.

1. The importance of athletics. She has recommitted to excellence in the Ivy League. How that is going to happen was not shared. But .. we now have the President of Dartmouth College committing to a vision of excellence that we never got from Phil or the Board. She noted that 80% of Dartmouth students participate in D1 or club level sports. Also ties to her concept of mental health and wellness. Sian is a jock !
2. Brave Spaces - a concept of " raising spaces " where people can go to talk across differences which will be in support of The Dartmouth Dialogue Project (not defined) She has been clear about two things : first , we are a free speech campus , second , any violence or threats to individual or campus safety will not be tolerated.
3. Residential Housing , a Brave Spaces kind of Issue. First of all it involves everyone - faculty , staff , undergrad , graduate and professional. The planning to address some of the needs has been poorly conceived , poorly communicated and therefore opposed by most constituencies. From what I heard it looks like a sensible rationalization has emerged. First , the overriding criteria would be to retain a rural , , walking distance campus for undergraduates. A new 1000 bed dorm on E Wheelock College land is the first step. The next will entail renovation of existing dorm space over the next 10 years at a cost of \$200 million +. The new dorm will serve as transition space for students displaced by the renovations. Graduate , professional , faculty and staff housing will move out from the center like concentric rings , so the plan is to use out of town , open space to relieve congestion in Hanover. I believe that the 1000 bed Lyme road project moves ahead for graduate housing.

4. Legacies - Sian is very clear. Legacies are not going away. Our admissions process is very wholistic (and has been since 1924). Being a legacy is only one factor in the selection process.
5. Greek System is seen as a great way to build community. 70% of undergrads are in the system. So she values Greek life with two caveats. Fraternities and sororities must be safe and responsible. Amen ! I'd add a third : they must be clean
6. There were no new initiatives on the Academic side of the equation. Our teacher / scholar model is highly valued and practiced. 650 students engage in research with faculty. It's an incredible attraction for top faculty and students to come to and stay at Dartmouth
7. "Dartmouth is for Life" defines a new emphasis to involve and support Alumni with. networking , career transitions , professional development.
8. Support entrepreneurship by developing partnerships with other organizations

THE NEW PARADIGM , RACE NEUTRAL ADMISSIONS.

The Supreme Court decision of June 29 , 2023 set in motion a Tsunami among liberal arts colleges and universities. The value of DEIB was punched in the mouth by a court that ruled that racial preferences amounted to discrimination in favor of a particular race and therefore was on its face unconstitutional.

Over the last month I've heard Lee Coffin discuss the admissions rubik's cube three times. Each time he shares more deeply about the challenges he faces in filling the class of '27 of 1050 students and to maintain a comparable level of diversity without the ability to use any of the old tools for doing so. So how is the new ballgame being played out.

1. Lee has a new partner - Senior Vice President , General Council and Secretary of the College , Sandhya Iyer , a Yale summa cum laude undergrad and graduate of Yale Law. In 2023 she became secretary to the Board which in effect recognizes the new litigious environment Dartmouth has to function in.
2. Sandhya did not attend our 2 hour session with Lee Thursday night , but she was present the next day for the Alumni Council's meeting with Lee.
3. He doesn't do anything without legal oversight and input. Lee commented that he has been told that the law clerks of Justice Alito are watching our every move. I don't know how he does his job. Emails are cleansed , acceptance rationales are reviewed and edited
4. All forms and apps have been cleansed of any reference to race.
5. What is apparently acceptable is for kids to tell their life story which might enable the reader to figure out their race. Not sure whether photos are permitted
6. Dartmouth admissions used to be able to access data from the Common App. This enabled us to know what our class looked like along the way. No longer. We are not allowed to access the class racial data until after the last admittance letter has gone out. Then and only then will Lee Coffin find out the racial profile for the class of '27.
7. "Make no mistake , we and all Ivies are on the radar of those who would sue us. It has been said that if our profile in '27 is comparable to '26 , then we expect to be sued." People are lining up to sue ivies for all kinds of issues , like suing us because the ivy

league doesn't allow athletic scholarships (price fixing being tested at Brown and Columbia) challenges to Legacy policies (Columbia has discontinued any legacy preference) others looking at it. Lee thinks if others cave on legacies it will put pressure on us to change. Union suits (Dartmouth basketball). Interestingly no discussion or questions about this.

8. New strategies to build racial diversity. Note could be a fools errand if we're sued because our profile is comparable. In any event some of the strategies include : moving out (setting up Dartmouth recruiting offices) in rural and urban markets where there's racial diversity and undeserved families such as in Coastal Carolina. (Admissions gone retail). Staff has to get pretty good at reading between the lines (Private Eye)
9. One of the sidelights was to see the painful expressions on the faces of black alums on the Council. Like here we are again. When will it stop ?

OTHER ADMISSIONS FEEDBACK

In no particular order , I'm going to do a dump of everything I learned.

1. 30,000 applicants for a class of 1050.
2. 75 % are qualified. Bottom 25% are dropped.
3. Next is to get 75 % to 24 %. Then get 24 % to 6 %. Alumni interviews very important to get the 24 % to 6%. Staff designates certain candidates with a PRIORITY label. These are candidates who are getting serious looks. Alumni interview often swings it to a yes or no.
4. Yield staying at 70%. Up from 50% in 2019.
5. South , West and International are surging. 1120 applicants from India , more than from Ohio and Florida. Growth markets are poorer and require more financial aid. Last year \$38 mil was spent for aid. International enrollment is about 16 % of the student body , same as last year. New England holding steady at 12%. Pell grants at 16% (low income) no parent contribution from families with \$55 in income. 26% of international need aid. L
6. Legacies not going away. Note legacies of color would be negatively impacted if dropped.
7. Race neutral policy no impact on Native American admissions. Lee stated that we have a contractual obligation as stated in the original charter of the school
8. Dartmouth will be "test recommended " this year vs test optional last 3 years. Apparently class academic quality suffered a bit. There was daylight between those who tested and those who didn't.

ADMISSIONS AND ATHLETICS

Sian has set a new bar for Athletics at Dartmouth. Regardless of past alumni opinions of admissions support for athletics , I think Lee gets the message and voiced support to help the coaches get the players they need. Just as an aside , he did not agree with Hanlon's decision to drop 10% of our recruited athletes. So here's what I learned

1. There are no athletic scholarships in the Ivy League , even though it's being tested as an antitrust violation.
2. The league sets the number of recruited athletes or slots each school can have. It's based on the number of teams one has. The league also sets the academic profile for athletes. Same for all eight schools. There are 3 groupings : likely , possible , no. If an athlete goes below the floor , he or she is a No , period. In the Q&A I posed Ken Kolb's question , which was " if I have a great QB who tests out at 1300 or even less and the coach really wants him will he get in ? Lee's immediate answer without hesitation was " Yes". So I guess the floor is lower than 1300.
3. 18-20 % of Dartmouth's student body are recruited athletes. Dartmouth is the smallest at 1050. Columbia is next at 1,400. Editors note : the exact size of the student body seems to change depending on who you talk to. After Covid our size ballooned to 4600 creating real problems on campus. I see numbers of 1150 , 1050 etc etc depending on who's doing the quoting.
4. Very telling comment from our Dean of Admissions. " I'll increase the size of the athletic cohort if the coaches bring me the talent they want in. I have no problem increasing size by 10 - 15 ". Note: I believe it's the college that allocates the slots per sport not the league.
5. If a qualified recruit is wanted by the coach , he / she will get a " most likely" letter from admissions. These recruits will apply early. Usually if you get a "most likely " you can put it in the bank.
6. Performance is clearly in the hands of our AD and coaches , not admissions.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Lee praised the culture at Dartmouth. The sense of Place , the rural setting , small town , really smart kids who are really good people , scholar / teacher and undergraduate research , the kids really love it here. Bottom line when he's trying to decide on the last few admits , he asks the question , " Hey , this is a small college in the woods , will this place be a good match for you ". Depending on the answer the Dartmouth class of '27 will be filled.

SESSION WITH MATHEW DELMONT.

Each year we are treated to a presentation by one of our top Faculty. This year Mathew Delmont , author of Half American and Sherman Fairchild Distinguished Professor of History talked to us about his book and at the conclusion was honored as the recipient of the John Rassias award. The book was the result of extensive research into the experience of black World War 2 veterans. The name tells the story of how blacks fought in the war yet faced discrimination and Jim. Crow at home. For white Americans, the goal was V in Europe , V in Japan. For blacks it was VV , victory abroad , victory at home.

FINAL COMMENT

Right after the Council meeting an incident occurred on the green which showed President Bielock's mettle in dealing with protesters who threaten violence. The 2 perpetrators were

arrested and jailed. Unfortunately I think the progressives on campus will test her. She needs our support.

Look forward to answering your questions , comments.