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Dartmouth & the Brezhnev doctrine

On the Dartmouth administration's plan to reassert control of the board of trustees.

Disturbances on the periphery can betoken trouble at the center. Bucolic Hanover, New Hampshire, may seem like a remote outpost. But what just happened at Dartmouth College has serious implications for efforts to reform institutions of higher education nationwide. It is not an encouraging development.

Last month, we reported on the unfolding power play by the Dartmouth administration. A brief recap: Dartmouth is—or rather, Dartmouth was—unusual in its governance. From 1891 until early September, nearly half its eighteen trustees were elected from a slate of alumni candidates. The other half, apart from a couple of *ex officio* slots, were appointed by the board itself. In practice, since the administration vetted elected as well as appointed candidates, the board of trustees controlled *all* the seats. In 2004, however, something unexpected happened. T. J. Rodgers, someone not sanctioned by the Dartmouth board, ran—and won—as an independent or “petition” candidate. His victory was followed in short order by the election of two more independents, Peter Robinson and Todd Zywicki. Panicked, the Dartmouth administration tried to change the rules and proposed a new constitution governing the way trustees were to be elected. The administration went all out to get the alumni to vote for the new constitution, hiring a Washington, D.C. public relations firm and inundating alumni with promotional material. Nevertheless, the proposed constitution was soundly defeated. The last straw came in May when Stephen Smith, a University of Virginia law professor, ran and won as an independent candidate. Now nearly a quarter of Dartmouth’s trustees were elected by the larger Dartmouth community, not appointed by the Board. Many important issues were on the table, from the question of class size and growth of the administrative bureaucracy to speech codes and preserving Dartmouth’s character as a college, not an embryo university. What to do?

Well, the people running Dartmouth—president James Wright and Chairman of the Board Charles “Ed” Haldeman—had tried democracy. They put things to a vote. That didn’t work. They tried again. Still no luck. So they employed executive fiat instead. Early in September (a moment between semesters at Dartmouth), the Governance Committee—the five-man board-within-the-board that wields the real power—issued the diktat that henceforth Dartmouth’s board

would be expanded by eight more appointed trustees. Net effect? The power of the independent trustees would be severely circumscribed. The status quo would prevail. The growing threat of reform was quashed.

Will they get away with it? Maybe. *The Wall Street Journal*, several weblogs, and other entities concerned about higher education and good governance have been severely critical of the Wright-Haldeman usurpation. But the powers-that-be at Dartmouth have already demonstrated their indifference to public opinion and the wishes of the Dartmouth alumni. Critical op-eds come and go with the news cycle. Carefully crafted end-runs around democratic procedure have a way of succeeding, especially if one is patient. How long, after all, can the barrage of criticism last? And there is President Wright on the Governance Committee, helping to oversee everything that happens at Dartmouth: his own compensation, the choice of his successor, the whole ball of wax. Nice work if you can get it.

As several observers have pointed out, such insulation from accountability would not fly in the corporate world. But academia is—and in some ways, should be—different. By and large it is a self-perpetuating, impervious bureaucracy, sensitive only to a faculty that, these days, can be counted upon to list leftward. And therein lies the rub. Accountability is not the same thing as democracy; there is an important sense in which colleges and universities, dedicated to intellectual excellence, are meritocratic rather than democratic institutions. Their towers are, or should be, ivory. The real problem is that administrations—and what has just happened at Dartmouth is a case in point—have abandoned the meritocratic goal of education in order to cater to a politicized intellectual agenda set by the faculty. An anonymous contributor to dartblog.com, the excellent weblog overseen by an industrious Dartmouth student named Joe Malchow, captured the reality of contemporary academic governance:

An ineffective board of wealthy seat purchasers, vetted for compliancy, and who view their trusteeships as an honor bestowed on them by the president in recognition of their financial support, rather than as a demanding job of performing oversight, will respond to any ruckus by telling the president to quietly make the problem go away so they are not embarrassed and the social status value of their purchased seats is not diminished. After all, that was the deal: they paid their money for the honor.

This type of trustee typically has little knowledge of the academic world or of principles necessary to the proper functioning of the university. Indeed, they have no very clear idea of what the institution is supposed to be or to do, or even interest in the matter. The president's response will naturally be to appease the faculty and other trouble makers rather than discipline them. As a

result, the president ends up serving disruptive faculty elements as a neutered mascot on the issues that concern them as President Wright has done, or he is ousted, as was the case with Harvard's Larry Summers.

This gets to the core issue. What we see at Dartmouth, as at most institutions of higher education today, is the application of the Brezhnev doctrine to intellectual life. The Brezhnev doctrine stipulated that no country that had fallen under the sway of Communism would be allowed to withdraw and opt for a capitalist alternative. "Freedom" meant the freedom to embrace Communism. Hungary dissented in 1956, and Budapest was soon swarming with Soviet tanks. Something similar happened in Prague in 1968. Since the 1960s, the American university has, with few exceptions, been a fiefdom of the Left. Speech codes, political correctness, the whole multicultural, anti-American agenda are alive and well throughout academia. And administrations, far from resisting those ideological imperatives, have actively abetted them. Indeed, what we see now is the union of leftist ideology (thanks to the faculty) and a lumbering bureaucratic determination to enforce conformity with that ideology (thanks to the administration). It makes for a toxic marriage, paradoxically activist *and* reactionary, that is contrary to the interests of higher education, and therefore contrary to the public interest.

Is there hope for Dartmouth? Perhaps. Even as we write, the Alumni Association, a venerable, quasi-independent but loosely organized group representing the 68,000 Dartmouth alums, is contemplating legal action. We wish them success. It was the Alumni Association (not to be confused with the Alumni Council, which is a creature of the Dartmouth administration) that negotiated the 1891 agreement that was just overturned by the Governance Committee. And the intense loyalty of Dartmouth alumni—and their willingness to fight—should not be underestimated. But short of such legal action, Chairman Haldeman and President Wright will have won. Of course, they might win anyway. But here's our advice for anyone contemplating making a financial contribution to Dartmouth: Don't. Just say no. Your money will be far better spent elsewhere—supporting the Alumni Association, for example, if it chooses to fight against this latest implementation of the Brezhnev Doctrine in higher education.

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