

KOREAN SELF-CRITICISM: DARTMOUTH

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What if Dartmouth Chose Its President the Korean Way?

The Ivy League school Dartmouth College elected as its next president Dr. Kim Yong, aka Jim Yong Kim, chair of the Department of Global Health and Social Medicine at Harvard Medical School. The chair of Dartmouth's Board of Trustees said, "Jim Yong Kim embodies the ideals of learning, innovation, and service that lie at the heart of Dartmouth's mission."

What's grabbing the attention of Koreans is the fact that he and his ideals of learning, innovation and service probably would not have been considered if Dartmouth elected its presidents the way Korean universities do, where heads are chosen by direct vote following a noisy election campaign that makes parliamentary elections look humble.

After launching a 14-member President Search Committee in June of last year, Dartmouth had selected 400 candidates for the presidency, chosen among university professors and prominent social figures following 25 small group interviews across the United States. Dartmouth officials held nine general meetings that lasted two days each. And after the final list of candidates was selected, long interviews followed. Through this process, the committee selected Kim as the new president and the Board of Trustees accepted the decision.

This is unimaginable in universities in Korea, where the election of presidents every four years divides school officials into factions that are split up even further by academic, social and blood ties.

Kim received his bachelor's degree from Brown University and a doctorate from Harvard, where he teaches. He is also a "1.5 generation" Korean who went to the U.S. when he was just five. Among the 10 presidents Seoul National University has chosen since 1980 and the seven selected by Yonsei University and nine by Korea University, not one came from other universities. It is a common feature of Korean universities for presidents who come from different school backgrounds to be forced to step down following the submission of various anonymous letters that slander them.

Dartmouth was able to find a person like Kim, armed with passion, drive and persuasive powers, because it looked for the best person to realize the university's vision, without attaching any conditions. What kind of feelings must be going through the minds of Korean university officials as they learn about Dartmouth's decision?