Among Dartmouth Focus Group, Obama Seen as Disappointing

BY MATTHEW MCCORMICK
Valley News Staff Writer

Hanover — The group's perfect candidate first and foremost demonstrated leadership with just the right mix of inspiration and pragmatism. The candidate set aside partisan playbooks and spoke from the heart. The winning aspirant's personality appealed to people across aisles and beyond the nation's borders.

And last night their first name was Hillary. Or John. Or Bill.

Or, depending on the moment, Mike, Dennis, Chris or Joe.

But while no clear winner from last night's debate emerged for a group of 16 undecided Dartmouth undergraduates who gathered at the Hanover Inn to watch — and judge — the White House hopefuls, a loser did.

"I felt like (Illinois Sen. Barack) Obama said a lot of things, a lot of words, but it was a lot of fluff," said Emily Mirengoff, a junior from Maryland.

"I'm kind of uncomfortable with Obama now," added Becca Boswell, a junior from Florida. "I feel like with his experience people are being misled by his words and that he would be overwhelmed by the position."

Led by Ron Shaiko, government professor and associate director of Dartmouth's Rockefeller Center for Public Policy and the Social Sciences, the students spent two hours yesterday afternoon hashing out six criteria that they would use to determine their presidential picks: leadership, experience, honesty, charisma, accountability and pragmatism/diplomacy.

Seven hours later, a victor emerged: indcision, by a long shot. Only one student said she came away from the debate decided and the group eliminated just two candidates — Ohio Rep. Dennis Kucinich and former Alaska Gov. Mike Gravel — from their short lists.

"I like all of them," Boswell said. "I'm going to have a hard time deciding. They're all better than what we have now."

Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., received points for her reserve during tough questioning at the end of the debate, when moderator Tim Russert
revealed that she had contradicted a statement on torture her husband, former President Bill Clinton, had made earlier this year.

"I was impressed by how she came off to me as stronger and more separate from Bill," said Nick Devonshire, a freshman from Illinois.

Edwards was lauded for his answers to Russert's questions over the former North Carolina senator's lucrative work consulting for hedge funds.

"I spent a lot of the debate waiting for someone to step up, take charge and accept responsibility," said freshman Tanner Mathison of Plymouth, N.H. "Edwards took responsibility."

Students said they were impressed with New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson's experience as a diplomat, congressman and cabinet member. "They all talked about the need for diplomacy with Iran," Devonshire said. "Who's the only person who has done that? Bill Richardson."

Shaiko said what the students did not say was as interesting as what they did. While he said most of the criteria on their scorecards could easily have come from someone many times their age, the students excluded on criterion that almost sure would have been on the list of older Americans: party affiliation.

"For 50 and over voters, partisanship would be number one. And here I prodded them on it but it wasn't important," Shaiko said. "That should give the parties pause."

While more than half of the students placed themselves on the liberal side of the political spectrum, they expressed dismay with the lack of leadership the Democrats had shown in recent years. What once the party of political progress, they complained, has become the party of political correctness.

"People have been saying they identify social issues with the Democrats. I don't think the Democrats stand for social issues anymore," Evan Meyerson, a senior from New York, said.

"If you want to talk about the party of social issues, it's the Republican Party. If you ask Democrats a question about gay marriage, you're not going to get a clear answer. They don't want to talk about it."

Shaiko said students' dissatisfaction, in part, comes from the seriousness with which they take politics - and the formative moments that forged their political consciousness. Be it the first invasion of Iraq, the genocide in Rwanda or the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, the students said they largely were jolted into awareness. "It always just seemed like a fun rat race, seeing who would win. But after 9/11, it started to seem serious," Mirengoff said. "It stopped being a game."

And yet that is what many of the students said last night's debate amounted to. They expressed frustration with the dodgy answers and stump-speech tangents that they said was common throughout. "The candidates will really squirm around," said Eric Lauritsen, a sophomore from California. "They rarely deviate from what they've said explicitly in their platform."