HANOVER (AP) -- Fifty years ago, Dartmouth researchers met to explore a new concept -- "artificial intelligence."

Recently, four of the 10 researchers reunited at a conference on the progress of the scientific field's objective: to simulate human intelligence and build machines that could speak, learn and solve problems.

The term was first coined for the research project half a century ago. John McCarthy, then in Dartmouth's mathematics department, chose the name.

By the mid-1950s, McCarthy and fellow organizers saw their math and engineering colleagues developing computer programs that played checkers and performed complex calculations.

Their goal was much higher -- to develop a machine that could think. That goal made the 1956 session different from other similar events, said Eric Horvitz.
Many of the problems that McCarthy and others tackled 50 years ago continue to be at the center of research today, such as creating a computer program that understands human language, Horvitz said.

Early failed attempts at language recognition and translation software made it clear that a computer needed vast amounts of detailed generalizations about the world, not just of the rules of grammar and the dictionary meaning of words, to grasp even a simple sentence, Moor said.

McCarthy said he was initially disappointed by the outcome of the 1956 session because no great insights had been reached. He said it took him a decade to realize how the event defined the field.

"I completely underestimated the effect of just having this thing would have and starting the name would have," McCarthy said.

The 1956 meeting occurred at Dartmouth, in part, simply because McCarthy had a position at the college before moving to MIT in 1958, and later to Stanford. But the colleges smaller scale and emphasis on interdisciplinary work also likely made it easier to put together, said Carey Heckman, a professor in the Dartmouth philosophy department and conference organizer.

One of the event's goals was to show that a small group with energy and vision can shape a field, Heckman said.

The conference was sponsored by the college, the Pentagon's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), the General Electric Foundation and the Frederick Whittemore Foundation.