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## OPINION

### Student Groups Must Act

By Sarah Richardson

*Sarah Richardson is a Columbia College junior majoring in philosophy. She is co-coordinator of Students Active For Ending Rape (SAFER).*

In recent discussions about the Sexual Misconduct Policy, the Columbia campus has witnessed ardent attempts to portray a community divided between those favoring student rights and those somehow opposed to this notion. This is, of course, a false characterization, since most informed individuals recognize that while last year's student activism surrounding the Policy met with much success, the actual disciplinary procedures at Columbia, and in fact nationwide, can always benefit from further reform.

However, many members of the community, including SAFER, do take issue with certain activities recently adopted in the name of reform. Rather than engage in endless polemic discussion, activists should work to create a constructive, united student campaign to build upon last year's successes.

It is far better for activists to address problems with Columbia's disciplinary procedures across the board than to focus on just one instance of them in the Sexual Misconduct Policy.

The disciplinary procedure of the Sexual Misconduct Policy is simply Dean's Discipline with the addition of an optional student panelist, increased oversight, and training for the hearing panelists. The closed-door, unregulated Dean's Discipline model has been in place at Columbia and numerous peer institutions for over 40 years. Little wonder that the goal of formalizing Dean's Discipline during last year's movement for Sexual Misconduct Policy reform was the one that administrators wouldn't budge on.

The community has an opportunity to discuss very openly the need for formalization of Columbia's disciplinary procedures. Why restrict this discussion to only one appearance of Dean's Discipline? Whether a student is charged with sexual misconduct, physical assault, cheating, stealing lounge chairs, or smoking up in her room, she should have certain rights that guarantee the fairness of the procedure. Those concerned only with cases of sexual misconduct should be interested in reforming Dean's Discipline across the board as well, because it remains

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open as a disciplinary option for cases of sexual misconduct.

Activists should build a grassroots movement composed of the students, not of outside organizations.

A movement for broad-based policy change at Columbia will only succeed if the suggestions for change truly come from an informed student constituency and if the movement has the independence to include the views of many members of the student community.

The intense involvement of an outside organization such as FIRE injects into the campaign certain goals and motivations far different from those of most members of the community and is not a constructive way to work for genuine reform. First, FIRE seeks to revoke--not reform--the Sexual Misconduct Policy, a desire not shared by most students. Further, this organization alienates a significant number of students; in an Oct. 4 press release, it characterized last year's student campaign that brought us the Office of Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Education as "lynch mob hysteria," and maintained that the old Sexual Misconduct Policy, failed and defunct by all accounts, was "fair and impartial."

Further, activists should target the Administration, not individual students and student groups.

Dean's Discipline in all its forms is a longstanding policy of the Columbia Administration. The only body at this University that can change Dean's Discipline or the disciplinary procedure for sexual misconduct is the University Senate--not SAFER, Columbia Men Against Violence, Take Back the Night, or the Rape Crisis Center Policy Reform Organization.

Criticizing students and student groups to stir controversy and attract attention to the cause only fragments the support base needed to present a united front to the Administration. The overall message of the movement is confused and obscured by misdirected, accusatory, and petty criticisms of other students. The reality is that a movement for student rights has great potential because no student group at Columbia opposes more formalized disciplinary procedures that protect student rights. Attacking student groups fails to take advantage of the already existing consensus on the need for student rights reform.

Finally, activists should always negotiate first and use pressure tactics selectively.

While it is key to treat demands seriously, a strong movement for student rights should use pressure tactics only when this strategically advances the position of the movement, not merely for exhibitionism. An all-out attack from the start without attempts to meet with administrators, formally draw up suggestions for reform, and talk to many students means losing realistic negotiating opportunities and alienating numerous students who are uncomfortable with extreme tactics without much initial exploration.

Good communication with students and the Administration, strong coalitions between student groups, and intelligent student proposals for

reform are produced by a steady, strategic, long-term vision, not by relying on divisive campaigns.

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