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Better late than loopholes

Two and a half years ago, while many undergraduates were still in high school, Low Library administrators hit upon an idea for a new committee. Compelled by a growing national health crisis, committee members were to draft a University policy regarding Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). Columbia seemed to be truly tackling this serious issue.

But a month later, when the committee met, its only mission was to examine ways to educate the University community about the AIDS virus. It took a year to fulfill this task; a pamphlet on the disease was issued in October 1986. Meanwhile, the committee had decided it was once again a policy-making body, but was unclear about how broad its jurisdiction would be. By the spring of 1987, committee members believed they had developed a policy, but guidelines were not forthcoming. Their next meeting wasn't until the fall.

In the meantime, New York State had already established regulations regarding AIDS victims. They stated that people who had, or were perceived to have, the disease or its symptoms could not be discriminated against. AIDS would be termed a physical handicap. Nevertheless, the Columbia committee kept talking, hinting it might include something new in its procedures. Finally, this week, the University's new guidelines will be released. But they will add nothing to existing New York standards.

This is not to say that the committee's recommendations are not worthy of support. They are. Any policy that seeks to prevent Columbia from discriminating against affiliates on the basis of AIDS should be endorsed. The decision will affect most areas of campus life,

from hiring and firing to admissions and housing. But after all this time, the University could have produced guidelines that truly articulate its position on the issue.

Instead, the policy contains a loophole that seems to contradict the committee's overall aims. An individual with AIDS could be asked to leave Columbia by a special committee, if that person were judged unable to perform his or her duties. Although drafted with the best of intentions, this clause amounts to a subtle form of discrimination. Policies and procedures are already in place to ensure that those unable to handle their responsibilites will be discharged from the University.

Students, faculty members, and employees who suffer from AIDS should not be treated any differently than other handicapped individuals, as the University intended. The criterion for dismissal should be whether a person is physically able to do their job; AIDS should not enter into the decision. By removing distinctions based on AIDS, the policymakers will have done their job well.