

COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

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STAFF EDITORIAL

How to be an activist

A month ago, as the campus was exploding with discussion of ROTC, ROOTEd—a subset of the Office of Multicultural Affairs—played a role in promoting an admirable type of dialogue. Respecting Ourselves and Others Through Education initiated a discussion among students, encouraging them not necessarily to fall on one side or the other, but to examine the frame of the debate and question how different groups were presenting the issue. When discussion, a huge part of our lives at this activism-saturated University, is so often polarized and “dialogue” between groups can turn into shouting matches, thoughtful debate like this is especially valuable and rare.

As passionate and opinionated people, many Columbians are activists in one student group or another. Campus activism in all its many forms has an abundance of goals, from promoting dialogue and raising awareness of issues, to participating in national and cross-cultural debates, to serving the community. One thing is clear, though—at the end of the day, most activist groups on campus firmly promote their voice on an issue as the correct one. The question, then, lies in whether or not it is possible to take a stance on an issue, or strongly support a cause or an idea, while still being open to hearing the other side and challenging one’s opinions.

One pair of battling groups that does this with some success is the Columbia University Democrats and

Republicans. They each pursue their goals in distinct ways: the Democrats mainly by sending groups of students to campaign for candidates across the country and by talking to students, and the Republicans by hosting speaker events and social gatherings to foster a conservative community on campus. Nevertheless, they both see their regular debates with the opposite group as incredibly important to their work and role on campus, which shows the value they place on engaging with the opposite side. And because they've focused on mobilizing their immediate community, they've even found ways to make national, intangible goals more accessible and realistic.

LionPAC, a group that is similarly political but very different in terms of interests and ties, has also made progress in achieving political goals regarding America's relationship with Israel. At the same time, they use their position to impact the community, advocating their platforms to students and discussing their interests with figures like Charles Rangel. Demonstrating their willingness to engage with other groups, they have productive relationships with groups whose missions extend beyond their support for Israel.

In contrast, Columbia Students for Justice in Palestine are not open to debate, refusing to speak to other groups because they do not want to legitimize what they feel is an illegitimate side of the struggle. They are more than comfortable expressing their opinion in other ways: writing op-eds and conducting mock checkpoints on Low Steps. Saying that the relationship between LionPAC and C-SJP is strained, then, would be an understatement, and though each group's message is valid, this lack of respectful interaction needs to be rectified. While C-SJP does a good job of raising student attention and awareness of its issues, they do a disservice to the student body

by declining to participate in dialogue with opposing organizations.

While some groups have dialogue as their main focus, other groups work to advocate change on a more local level, while still arguing for the importance of their cause. The Student Global AIDS Campaign has expressed that they want to see AIDS research become as important as research on cancer. At the same time, they are doing remarkable things for the community. Though small in number, the group was able to raise over \$1,000 through a party at Mel's and donated that money to health care in Washington Heights. It's often unrealistic for students to expect global, far-reaching change, so it's important for activist groups to focus on the micro level, as that's where the greatest impact is bound to occur.

Groups can be myopic in their goals and unwilling to see the validity of other points and causes, but they do this at their own peril. And any group that essentially talks to itself when discussing its opinions does nothing to encourage the development of nuanced, intelligent perspectives on the part of other students. After all, two monologues are not a dialogue.

This University is filled with students who will inevitably have prominent roles in fields like government, law, medicine, making it crucial that students learn how to fight for a cause effectively and realistically as well as engage in thoughtful and respectful debate. Indeed, our campus discussion of issues should be even more sophisticated than the prevailing national approach to matters, which is often quick to develop misconceptions about others and encourage platitudes about issues that are not going to change without a great deal of work. All you activists reading this, be willing to listen and re-evaluate your goals. It must start with you before real change is going to happen.