

Barnard students deserve a stronger SGA



ISABEL NAREA / STAFF ILLUSTRATOR

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Up until recently, I thought the Barnard Student Government Association typically deals with more superficial subjects and that real changes only come from the administration.

To an extent, this is true. When I look back on my experiences running for Barnard first-year class president last semester, I remember candidates proposing Insomnia Cookie nights and access to Columbia dorms. My own platform included creating class unity by organizing volunteer outings in the neighborhood.

If the purpose of a wonderful women's institution like Barnard is to provide its students with the resources and confidence they need to succeed in and make change in the world, why does it feel like we have such little say in our own school's affairs?

To be sure, it's important to consider how council visibility contributes to this misconception. Last week alone, there were [four Spec articles](#) giving the lowdown on CCSC, ESC, and University Senate elections over at Columbia. And Spectator's editorial board released endorsements for these candidates. Though Barnard elections haven't taken place yet, I'm not expecting much campus media coverage—in the past few years, Spectator's editorial board has not endorsed any SGA candidates.

But while visibility in campus media is certainly one challenge facing SGA, I worry that the administration does not fully understand the weight of SGA's commitment to the students.

One of my friends on SGA recently told me that SGA's role is to cultivate a vibrant student life at Barnard and between all four undergraduate colleges at Columbia. But to actually make changes to Barnard policy, the discussion must leave SGA and make its way up the ranks to the administration.

Understandably, this is where things can get rough. Because students' needs and expectations are different from those of the administration and the board of trustees, it can be difficult to come to a consensus regarding changes in campus policy. State and federal law, finances, and other factors handled by the administration are central to Barnard's ability to make lawful and affordable policy changes,

Take, for example, last semester's debate on [winter housing](#). When SGA released a survey about Barnard's new winter housing policy, which would have restricted winter break housing to "mission critical" students, many frustrated students responded that they would be without housing for several weeks in the middle of winter. But the administration's hesitation in changing the policy was ostensibly to avoid unnecessary costs in keeping the dorms open. While these were logical grounds for hesitation, this is one instance where the needs of the students did not match up with the concerns of the administration.

The root of the problem may lie in a slight misunderstanding on the administration's part as to what the role of SGA truly is. This February, for example, Spectator reported that SGA President Shivani Vikuntam, BC '16, [would not be speaking](#) at commencement in order to allow other students to speak, hitting the students hard as they realized that Deans Hinkson, Friedman, and Wong had made decisions concerning students without consulting them first.

This is a case where the concerns of the administration overrode students' needs to the point where they were completely left out of the decision-making process at one of the highlights of student life: graduation.

I don't want to make the claim that the Barnard administration only ever acts to meet its own needs. It just seems, however, that they do not fully understand SGA's ideal role.

SGA should be a representative body of Barnard students, not a mere liaison between students and the administration. Both students and administrators need to understand that SGA is not meant to work for but with the administration on behalf of student interests. In this way, Barnard's mission to create leaders can be accomplished by starting at the student level. This can only happen with clear communication.

Looking back on what SGA has accomplished this year, such as the [referendum on climate change divestment](#), we have reason to hope that our voices will be heard eventually. But if so few students voted in the referendum,

there's also some reason to doubt our capacity to make immediate change. And based on the amount of general discontent—from op-eds and protests to Facebook comments and angry emails to SGA—students are largely unaware of alternative and, perhaps more effective, ways to communicate and create change on campus.

If communication is key, then it's high time for word to get out about how students can get involved. There are 11 [committees](#) under SGA, yet they have very few active members. If students want things to change, they need to take matters into their own hands. Even I am technically on the Food Advisory Board, and while I love our goals, I have only been to three meetings since September. Though I don't take it as seriously as I should, being on committees is another way for students to have their voices heard.

With the current state of things, it is evident that Barnard students are unaware of how much power they can have if they only choose to act on it. Barnard administrators also must understand that SGA's duty is, first and foremost, to serve the student community.

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