

# ANTI-OPPRESSION & ACTIVIST GROUP DYNAMICS

*(adapted from Rainforest Action Network and the Student Worker Solidarity campaign)*

A lot of students don't get involved in campus activism because they feel like they are not a part of the student activist community. This happens for a lot of reasons including the existence of activist 'cliques' or social groups and behavior that excludes women, queer folks, working class, and people of color. For a lot of these same reasons, what's seen as campus activist communities (and the wider activist communities as well) are often segregated, with 'white' or 'straight' activists working separately and on different issues from queer activists and activists of color. Below are outlined some of the ways you can address these issues, making your organization bigger, stronger and more inclusive. There are no easy answers and the results of centuries of oppression will not be reversed by following several bullet points. However, examining these dynamics can be a starting point to your group's commitment to challenging oppression in your school policy and in our movements.

## **Activist Cliques**

Student organizers building community together isn't necessarily a bad thing- it makes activism more fun, which means people are more likely to stay involved, and it helps foster good group dynamics. It can be a problem, though, when 'activist cliques' emerge. Decisions that should be made through formal process start being made by group members during recreational times; meetings can become too social, making it hard to get anything done; and worst of all, potential new members can be made to feel out of the loop when there are too many inside jokes and assumed background knowledge. Here are some tips for keeping your organization functional and open to new people:

- Make decisions in meetings with an established process that is explained to everyone participating and available in writing. This way, even newcomers and people outside of the 'clique' are included and feel ownership of the group and its projects. Explain the process before you start.
- Make sure social events are inclusive. Not all people interested in the campaign will share your recreational interests. By organizing multiple social events around activities that everyone would feel comfortable participating in, you work toward building personal relationships with people who will be crucial to the work and include everyone in the opportunity to build that network.
- Go easy on the activist-speak! Make sure that all acronyms, activist jargon and references to past campaigns or group members are explained so that nobody feels stupid or left out.
- Avoid inside jokes. This is especially important at the beginning of the year when you are recruiting new members. As hilarious as they may seem to you, nobody likes an inside joke when they're on the outside. The last thing you want to do is scare off potential new members by giving them the impression that your group is some kind of exclusive social club that they're not a part of.

## ***Gender Issues for Men***

Sexism is acted out in overt and covert, conscious and unconscious ways. Just because the guys in your group aren't sexually harassing the women and asking them to make coffee during strategy sessions doesn't mean that there aren't problems with the gender dynamics in your group. We have all been raised in a sexist culture and even when we try to rise above them, we find ourselves playing into gender roles and reinforcing stereotypes. In U.S. society people socialized as men tend to be taught to be more aggressive and to take on leadership roles, lessons on how to be a woman teach passivity, and the existence of trans and genderqueer people is made invisible. Just because we're fighting for social justice doesn't mean we're free of all of this cultural baggage. In order to make the most of all that your members have to offer, you need to foster an environment where *\*everyone\** feels comfortable contributing and taking on leadership roles. Below, we've included a short list of some of the common gender issues facing activist groups and ways you can address them:

- **Division of Labor.** In many groups, work gets divided in a gendered way, with women doing a lot of the grunt work (photocopying, flyering, etc.) and men taking on leadership roles, making decisions and being the ones who represent the organization in meetings and negotiations. A way to avoid this problem is to make sure that all tasks (the fun ones *and* the boring ones) are assigned through a process agreed upon by the group. Don't leave anything to be done without knowing exactly who is responsible for the task. Appreciate all the hard work that goes into campaigns, not just the high profile work.
- **Airtime.** Another major problem is the fact that male members of many groups end up talking the most in meetings. Female and trans members may find themselves either silenced, or simply agreeing with one side of a debate between two men. This can be really destructive since they have really important information or insights that they may not get to share. Make it a habit to keep track of how often people are speaking during conversations, especially in arguments where overly aggressive tones often shut people out of the discussion. Find tools and activities that bring out everyone's voices.
- **Decision-making.** If men play a dominant role in the campaign and your group lacks a formal process for decision-making, choices may be made by 'the group' without the input of many of its members. If your group just assumes a decision has been reached when most people seem to agree, it is more likely that women (in general- not all women) will be hesitant to voice objections. A formal process will ensure that decisions are truly made by the group and not just by its most vocal (often male) members.

## ***Anti-Racist Organizing***

The vast majority of university communities are dominated by white faculty, administrators, trustees, and students. Because of the dominance of white supremacist ideology in the fabric of the U.S., our organizing is done in a racist context. Student groups that are predominantly white need to examine the causes and effects of this dynamic. Many 'white' activists in such groups ask themselves "how can we get people of color to join our groups and movement?" Organizer Chris Crass warns us that this kind of question is barking up the wrong tree. It assumes that white activists "have the answers and now it just needs to be delivered to people of color- as opposed to, people of color have been organizing for a long time (500+ years) and we (white activists) have a lot to learn so maybe we should find ways to form alliances, relationships, and coalitions to work with folks of color and be prepared to learn as well as share." Here are some ways your group can work towards challenging internalized white supremacy in your organizing:

- **Avoid tokenism.** Members of oppressed groups do not represent their entire group. If your group's membership is majority white, for instance, people of color may have reservations about being the spokesperson or acting as a face for the campaign. Seek people out to do tasks based on their skills and interests, not because "it would be good to have a person of color speak at the event tomorrow." Rather than recruiting more people from oppressed groups into the organization and campaign you've organized, ask how you may support the initiatives of people directly affected by racial justice issues and how you can act as an ally in those struggles.
- **Defining 'radical'.** Be careful with your definitions of 'radicalism.' Often white activists create a hierarchy of tactics and assume that the only way to be a powerful activist is to be at barricades or in confrontation. Be respectful of the fact that people have different relationships with authority and stay conscious of the different challenges that working class, queer, women, and people of color have and the risks we take when organizing.
- **Examine the issues** you're focused on. Who is most affected by the issues now? Who would most benefit from the results of your campaign? What input do they have on leading the campaign? How does this fit in the context of your campus and area organizing? What issues are people of color already organizing around on campus and in the community? Do you ever work on those issues and respect the leadership of groups led by people of color?

### ***Queer Inclusiveness for Straight Folks***

The marginalization of GLBTQ people can often be invisible to straight folks since campuses are not places where everyone to feel safe sharing their sexual identity and heterosexism causes us to assume that everyone around us is straight. Here are some tips for making your group a safer space for queer activists:

- **Culture.** Be mindful of words and actions. Using language such as 'that's so gay' is alienating and often hard to confront due to its informality. An explicit anti-discrimination stance as well as building a culture where constructive criticism is an act of love with specific structures in place to do criticism/self-criticism can create the grounds for challenging such behavior and does not make it the sole responsibility of the GLBTQ person to attempt to educate or change others' behaviors.
- **Risk is real.** Violence based on people's sexuality is real. Don't out people. Both being in the closet and being out entail risks for queer folks so don't presume that you know what is best for someone. If you have an established relationship, check in with people to see where they're at. If they're trans, clarify which pronouns that person identifies with, etc.
- **ASS-U-ME.** Don't make assumptions about people's sexuality. A key component of queer oppression is the assumption that everyone is straight until proven otherwise.
- Understand that you have certain privileges (having your relationships valued by society, being able to kiss your partner in public without fear etc) that queer folks are denied.

## ***General Strategies for Combating Oppression***

Here are some things to keep in mind to keep your group a safe and inclusive space for all students, including women, LGBTQ students and people of color. Remember though, the goal of anti-oppression work is to end oppression not just to have well-behaved people with privilege improve their analyses. Creating inclusive meeting spaces is one step toward changing systems so that all spaces are “safe spaces.”

- Don't expect anyone to be a spokesperson for their community. This just singles people out and makes them feel isolated, not included. If you think there are members of your group who have ideas to contribute that they are not comfortable raising their hand to share, find exercises that to give everyone the opportunity to speak (or not) as they see fit.
- Make formal organizational commitments to non-discrimination. Put it in your charter or your by-laws. Make it clear in every way possible that your group does not tolerate discrimination in any form and that no discriminatory actions will be considered acceptable in your group. Model the behavior you want to see and create a culture where oppressive behavior can be challenged and changed in positive ways.
- Caucuses where people meet separately (people of color caucus/white folks allies group, gender oppressed caucus/gender privileged allies group, queer caucus/heterosexual allies group) according to how they self identify may be helpful in creating the space to discuss internal dynamics.
- Seek out and support campaigns being led by oppressed people. Taking leadership from oppressed people often means asking, "How can we be of use?" not judging tactics or telling them how to fight for their own self-determination.
- Find effective ways to confront oppressive behavior. Avoid defensiveness. Recognize that as someone who does not live as a target of a specific form of oppression, you will not always be able to identify the ways it is acted out and may perpetuate it unconsciously. Listen intently and take criticism as a serious opportunity to learn not a character attack. Creating a culture of respectful cultural exchange and constructive criticism will lead to these internal challenges strengthening a group rather than tearing them apart. Prioritize the internal work as highly as the external campaign.
- Don't place the responsibility for fighting oppression on the oppressed. People in positions of privilege need to recognize destructive group dynamics and initiate work to address them.
- Use "I" statements when you speak. People of privileged groups often universalize their experience, not realizing that other people don't share their feelings about situations.
- Interrupt oppressive behavior while it's happening. If a few white males are dominating an argument, point that out to the group and suggest a go-around to get more people talking.
- Think about how much you talk, how easily you take on leadership roles and how much space you take up. Consider what role privilege or oppression related to your gender, sexual orientation, race and class might play in your tendency to take/avoid leadership.
- Learn the histories of resistance of people against their own oppression as well as the history of coalition, alliance, and support work involved in these movements.