

BC Investment Watchdog Panel Holds First Hearing

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The newly formed Socially Responsible Investment committee, Barnard's investment watchdog group, held its first public hearing last night after five years of negotiations with Barnard College's Board of Trustees.

Current Barnard policy stipulates that the Trustees release Barnard's investment portfolio to the SRI committee at a six month lag, at which point the committee can then inform members of the Barnard community of portfolio details, but only verbally.

Additionally, the policy does not require that the Trustees reveal their voting records on shareholder resolutions--initiatives any of the Trustees, who function as shareholders, can set forth for the company's other investors to vote on.

In general, investors concerned with socially responsible investing can recommend passing a "socially responsible" resolution in hopes of influencing a corporation to adopt human rights and environmental standards.

Most of the speakers at the hearing, including alumnae representative and committee chair Gretchen Collazo, BC '02, and student representative Jessica Eisen, BC '04, said they were happy Barnard has an SRI policy, but that the Trustees need to go further and release the school's investing portfolio and voting records directly to the public. The first portfolio released, dated June 2003, includes companies such as General Electric, Wal-Mart, and Citibank.

Barnard's committee was chartered in the summer of 2002, and its five members were appointed last spring. Those members are Collazo and Kathie Plourdy, alumnae representatives; Eisen, the student representative; Richard Pious, political science chairman; and Rajiv Sethi, associate professor of economics. They hope to add another student representative this spring.

Barnard and Columbia's SRI movements began in 1998 and grew out of the student group now known as Students for Environmental and Economic Justice. Columbia's movement came to fruition in 2000, when the Trustees agreed to both a committee and full release of their portfolio. Though Barnard lags behind its neighbor, its commitment to SRI places it ahead of most colleges and universities, most of which do not have committees to address investing concerns.

"We're at the forefront of schools in general," Collazo said, "but not of those schools who use SRI."

"If you talk to other activists, the examples set by Barnard and Columbia have been really powerful," said Nate Treadwell, CC '05, who added that, as a Barnard dining hall patron, he feels invested in Barnard.

Despite SRI's roots in faith-based organizations, it has grown to include universities thanks to student activism. The most notable case of SRI took place in the 1980s, when students pressured their universities to divest from South African companies that benefited from the

country's apartheid regime.

Eisen made clear, however, that SRI has more to do with shareholder resolutions than divestment. "It's not about pulling out of evil corporations," she said. "It's mostly about using your power as a shareholder to improve corporate behavior."

Eisen worries that because of its complicated nature, SRI is an alienating form of activism. "It's not for everyone; you're negotiating with corporations on their terms," she said.

At last night's meeting, Barnard and Columbia students asked the committee to raise concerns ranging from sexual harassment policy, patents and investment in Wal-Mart for the Trustees to consider.

A'yen Tran, BC '04 and SEEJ member, asked that the committee make shareholder resolution recommendations based on the labor rights standards declared by the International Labor Organization, a United Nations off-shoot.

When Catherine Spencer, BC '04, said Barnard students have a "right" to see the portfolio, Pious interjected from the committee's table. "What right do you have to this information?" he asked, continuing, "Is this a moral right you'd like us to express to the Trustees? Or a legal ... right?"

Spencer responded that as a member of the community, she wouldn't want to support "something I think is wrong, especially something I'm paying tuition for."

Colazzo said the committee will not have the final word on investments. "We'd never want our committee to have the final say in investments--that would be ludicrous," she said. "In terms of input, it is our right to be able to dialogue and express hopes and concerns for Barnard as an institution."

To date, the committee has yet to appear before the Trustees to make suggestions.