



STUDENT ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION COALITION

SEAC's Caucuses

Sexism, racism, heterosexism, and classism are all realities in our society and elsewhere. We cannot deny that certain groups of people (whether it be womyn, people of color, queer, or poor people) lack the power and privileges that other groups benefit from every day. As environmentalists, it is our responsibility to examine how all forms of oppression are interconnected and how they correspond to the degradation of the physical environment. This guide will explain how SEAC addresses these issues.

Historically, the leadership of the mainstream environmental movement—including SEAC—has tended to be mostly white, mostly male, and mostly people of affluence, which leaves out some of the groups of people most affected by environmental degradation, like communities of color. Furthermore, racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism (among other things) are just as harmful to our human environment as its physical degradation. Oppression separates us and prevents certain people's voices from being heard. As part of our commitment to recognizing the environment in the broader sense and to uprooting injustices, SEAC incorporates Caucuses and Alternative Groups into its structure.

WHAT IS A CAUCUS?

SEAC defines a caucus as “a space to address the oppression of minority and marginalized groups within society and often even within social movements.” Simply put, a caucus is a safe space for people facing different forms of oppression—sexism, racism, heterosexism, or classism—to meet and discuss how this oppression affects them both within and outside of SEAC. Membership in a caucus is self-defined. No one should feel the need to prove their identity; however, it is important that everyone respects the need for marginalized groups of people to have safe spaces. As difficult as it may seem, this means that if you are white, you should not join the People of Color Caucus even if you believe in color-blindness and celebrating diversity. You should respect the right of people of color—or womyn, queer, and poor people—within

SEAC to create their own safe space. On the national level, SEAC has four caucuses: the Womyn's Caucus, the People of Color Caucus, the Queer Caucus, and the Working Class Caucus.

Caucuses often have scheduled meetings at national gatherings and regional conferences. In addition, all members of a caucus have the power to call a meeting whenever they feel it is necessary, even if it means putting another SEAC meeting or function on hold. All information shared in a caucus meeting is private, unless its members agree to share it with the larger group. The group should decide by consensus whether to report back what they discussed to everyone, though individuals should feel free to share their own contributions.

WHAT IS AN ALTERNATIVE GROUP?

Central to fighting all forms of oppression is recognizing that they aren't just issues for oppressed peoples to fight. Think about it: Would it be possible to end racism if white people weren't involved in the struggle and challenging other white people to do the same? Wouldn't it be pretty hard to fight sexism if men weren't committed to the effort? For this reason, SEAC has Alternative Groups that correspond to each of its caucuses. The purpose of an Alternative Group is for its members to discuss the role that they play in both ending oppression and perpetuating it. There are four Alternative Groups in SEAC: the Men's Alternative Group, the White Anti-Racist Program (WARP), the Straight But Not Narrow Group, and the Acknowledging Affluence Group.

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Alternative Groups do not have the same privileges as Caucuses in SEAC. They cannot suspend a SEAC function or meeting in order to meet. Rather, they meet in response to a caucus. Like caucuses, however, all information shared in an Alternative Group meeting is private, unless members agree to share it with the rest of SEAC. The group should decide whether to report their discussion back to the large group, but individuals, of course, can share their own contributions at will.

Alternative Groups are as important as Caucuses in terms of fighting oppression. It is important that Alternative Group members take themselves seriously and not treat their meetings as an opportunity to socialize or relax.

WHAT ARE WE SUPPOSED TO TALK ABOUT, ANYWAY?

Though we need to recognize the role that oppression plays in our society as a whole, an important purpose of SEAC's Caucuses and Alternative Groups is to explore the how oppression works within our organization as well. This may include blatant forms of oppression like hate crimes, *rape*, and *racist language*, or more subtle (yet more pervasive) forms, such as meeting dynamics, leadership, representation, misuse of power, and so-forth. Ultimately, though, it's the responsibility of each Caucus and Alternative Group to set its own agenda.

The agenda of a Caucus or Alternative Group meeting depends, in a large part, on its context. If they are meeting in response to a particular event or incident, discussion should focus on that. If a member of the Queer Caucus calls a meeting because s/he feels threatened by the remarks of another SEACer, it wouldn't exactly make sense for the rest of the Queer Caucus to start talking about an event that they would like SEAC to endorse. Likewise, the Straight But Not Narrow Group should focus its discussion on why members of the Queer Caucus feel threatened by those remarks.

Caucus and Alternative Group meetings can focus on other things too. Members could decide to meet and talk about a campaign they want SEAC to endorse or a project that they would like to undertake. They may

design presentations or information to make available to other members of SEAC. The structure, scope, and agenda of Caucuses and Alternative Groups are ultimately decided by the SEACers who are part of these groups.

SO, DO CAUCUSES AND ALTERNATIVE GROUPS ACTUALLY DO ANYTHING BUT TALK?

It is up to the Caucus or Alternative Group to answer that question, and hopefully the answer will be YES! Caucuses and Alternative Groups are a space for action, not just reaction!

One of the most critical functions of caucuses is insuring that members of the caucus are represented in SEAC's regional, national, and grassroots leadership.

Caucuses and Alternative Groups have historically developed amazing campaigns, programs and initiatives. Back in the early and mid-1990s, SEAC's People of Color Caucus developed the Environmental Justice Initiative (EJI), a program designed to educate and mobilize people around the issue of environmental racism. At the 1998 Summer Training Institute, members of the Queer Caucus organized a panel discussion in order to educate SEACers on issues facing the queer community. Currently, members of the Womyn's Caucus are organizing SEACers around a Dioxin in Tampons campaign to make menstrual products safer for all womyn. The Womyn's Caucus often has a section in *Threshold* (SEAC National's magazine) called *WomynSpace*, which consists of updates from the caucus, articles, stories, poetry, and art that are submitted by the womyn of SEAC. In the past, the People of Color Caucus and the Queer Caucus, as well as the White Anti-Racist Program, have had similar sections. Though these sections of *Threshold* have been inactive for a while, they have the potential to be revitalized by SEACers like you!

Members of Caucuses and Alternative Groups also make really important changes together. Recently, SEACers from three of our Caucuses and their Alternative Groups undertook the job of drafting a Hate Crimes Policy to be included in SEAC National's Policy and Guidelines. This policy will outline all hate-motivated acts which SEAC considers to be unacceptable and destructive to our movement. It will also include the very serious consequences of these crimes.



OK, IF WE ARE SUPPOSED TO END OPPRESSION TOGETHER, WHY ARE WE MEETING SEPARATELY?

Though it is very important for everyone to fight oppression (among other things), oppressed groups of people need to have a space to discuss issues that they may not feel comfortable sharing with the whole group and to organize around issues that affect them the most. Often, it is best if there is a safe space in which they can talk about these things with people who share their experiences. At the 1995 SEAC National Conference, a female SEACer was sexually assaulted by another SEACer. The Womyn's Caucus provided her with a space in which she felt comfortable sharing what happened to her, as well as a supportive community of other womyn that offered her support and protected her identity. The Womyn's Caucus decided to take action to prevent sexual assault from ever happening again at a SEAC gathering and demanded that SEAC immediately draft a policy against sexual harassment and assault.

It is important for the Caucus and Alternative Group to have a discussion after they meet separately. Often, there are issues that need to be brought to the attention of the whole group. These group discussions may also be a useful place to discuss concrete action for combating oppression. Recently, members of the People of Color Caucus and White Anti-Racist Group in Region 13 (Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, and New Jersey) decided together to take on a campaign to improve working conditions for farm laborers.

COULD MY LOCAL GROUP ORGANIZE CAUCUSES AND ALTERNATIVE GROUPS TOO?

Sure! Caucuses aren't something that SEAC National just institutes for the rest of SEAC. They are formed when members decide that it is necessary to start them, and when the rest of SEAC makes them feel empowered enough to do so. Groups like the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill SEAC have created a Womyn's Caucus and Men's Alternative Group that meet regularly each semester to discuss issues of sexism in their group. If you would like to see your local group start caucuses, we'd be happy to help you with advice, materials, and resources! Just contact

SEAC's National Office to request materials or to get in touch with people that can help you out.

Starting Caucuses and Alternative Groups in your local group is no simple task. It's important that everyone in the group understands the importance of fighting oppression and how that connects to ecological issues before you decide to hold Caucus and Alternative Group meetings. People may be opposed to the idea of Caucuses. After all, confronting oppression isn't always fun or comfortable. The important thing to remember is to be patient and stay dedicated. Challenge people to see the effects of oppression on their own lives and on the lives of others.

WHAT ABOUT OTHER ISSUES OF OPPRESSION? WHY AREN'T THERE CAUCUSES TO ADDRESS THEM?

SEAC recognizes that oppression doesn't end with race, gender, sexuality, and class. While it can be difficult to create caucuses and alternative groups based on less blatant forms of oppression, it isn't out of the question. The most important ingredient needed to start something like this is YOU! If you are interested in working to address other issues of oppression, contact SEAC's Anti-Oppression committee at antioppression@seac.org. Get your National Council Representative to write a proposal to create new Caucuses and Alternative Groups. With the support of 2/3 of the National Council, your ideas could become reality!

HOW DO I GET INVOLVED WITH SEAC'S CAUCUSES AND ALTERNATIVE GROUPS?

Glad you asked! If you are interested in taking an active role in SEAC's Womyn's Caucus, People of Color Caucus, Queer Caucus, Working Class Caucus, or their Alternative Groups, please feel free to contact any of the following coordinating committees. They'd be happy to help you! SEAC's Caucuses and Alternative Groups are always in need of strong leadership. So, if you are committed to working for a more just society, take action! Work to make SEAC's Caucus structure reflect this vision.



Anti-Oppression Committee, SEAC National:
antioppression@seac.org

People of Color Caucus Coordinating Committee,
SEAC National: po4c@seac.org

Queer Caucus Coordinating Committee, SEAC
National: q3c@seac.org

Womyn's Caucus Coordinating Committee, SEAC
National: w3c@seac.org

Working Class Caucus Coordinating Committee,
SEAC National w4c@seac.org

If you are looking to discuss issues of oppression with other progressive environmental and social justice activists, join one of SEAC's listservs that is dedicated to just that! Just surf on in to SEAC National's Website: <http://www.seac.org> and follow links to SEACNet, SEAC's listserv network. Join any of the following listservs (and others):

SEAC-WOMYN@seac.org
SEAC-POCC@seac.org
SEAC-WARP@seac.org
SEAC-QUEER@seac.org

EDUCATE YOURSELF: CHECK OUT
THESE RESOURCES!

Here's a brief list of books, articles, and organizations that might interest you. If you have suggestions for others, just contact the National Office (seac@seac.org)!

Books, Factsheets, and Articles:

Andrea Ayvazian, "Interrupting the Cycle of Oppression: The Role of Allies..." (something like that)

*Robert Bullard ed., *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color* and others

*Linda Kwon and Andi Meck (SEAC alum!). *Environmental Justice Organizing Guide*

Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors* and others

*Barbara Findlen, ed. *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation*

Marylin Frye, *The Politics of Reality*

bell hooks, *Talking Back* and others

*Joanna Kadi, *Thinking Class: Sketches from a Cultural Worker*

Michael Kimmel and Michael Messner, eds. *Men's Lives*

Paul Kivel, *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*

Audre Lorde, *Sister/Outsider* and others

Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies", from *Race, Class, and Gender*, ed. By Margaret Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins.

Suzanne Pharr, *Homophobia as a Weapon of Sexism*

*Susan Raffo ed., *Queerly Classed*

Urvashi Vaid, *Virtual Equality*

Resources marked with a () are available through SEAC's National Office*

Helpful Organizations:

MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán)

United States Student Association (USSA)

National Youth Advocacy Coalition (NYAC)

Black Radical Congress (they have a youth and student caucus)

Asian Pacific Student Union, East Coast Asian American Student Union, and Midwest Asian American Student Union

Feminist Majority (they have campus chapters across the country)

NAACP Youth and College Division

Hope this explains things. If you have any question or would like help in starting your own caucuses, contact the SEAC National Office, P.O. Box 31909, Philadelphia, PA 19104, call 215-222-4711 or visit our website at <http://www.seac.org>