

Committee on College Life rejects Kick Coke proposal in 12-5 vote

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Following nearly two months of vigorous campus debate, the Committee on College Life (CCL) voted against removing Coca-Cola products from campus during its meeting on Dec. 3. Twelve of the 17 members present voted by closed ballot against the resolution.

CCL is one of the College's largest joint committees. It is chaired by Dean of the College Chris Roellke and is charged with the power to review virtually all non-academic Vassar policies. Its membership includes students, faculty and administrators.

The discussion on the resolution lasted for just under an hour, and members shared a variety of concerns about kicking Coke. Some members expressed hesitance in restricting consumer choice on campus. Others remained skeptical about the allegations against Coca-Cola, which had been directly challenged by a 50-page report released by the International Labor Organization. This report held that many of the charges against the corporation were either untrue, or that Coca-Cola had been significantly reforming some of their labor practices. Many on CCL argued that Vassar's movement had come too late, since the corporation had already begun seriously addressing environmental and labor concerns several years ago.

An additional concern that had not been previously voiced during Vassar Student Association (VSA) Council meetings was that College employees had no opportunity to comment on the matter, since debate had been mostly contained within student meetings.

VSA President Jimmy Kelly '09, who sits on CCL, felt that the discussion was healthy and productive. "Regardless of what the outcome was, I do believe it's great that we have an environment here where some students can stand up and say, 'Kick Coke!' and others can say, 'Keep Coke!' We should always empower students to think about policy changes that would enhance life at the College."

Kelly was critical, however, of the complicated process of decision-making that exists at Vassar. "I said very clearly in the [CCL] meeting that the fact that this campaign has been attempting to get a vote from different constituencies since 2006 shows that the committee structure is failing," said Kelly. "Everyone has wanted to pass the buck on this issue, and no one wanted to take responsibility. Regardless of feelings on this one issue, this brings up larger problems of decision-making here. I sympathize with Kick Coke's efforts at trying to navigate through the committee structure."

Last month, the Kick Coke issue raised concerns about the VSA's own ability to gauge student opinion on such issues. Many questioned the role of student opinion on the Nov. 2 resolution, in which Council urged CCL to consider removing Coca-Cola from campus. This resolution passed by only a single vote. As a result of this, the VSA Constitutional Review Committee (CRC), which is chaired by VSA Vice President for Operations Caitlin Ly '10, will examine the most efficient ways of holding official student referenda.

The CCL meeting served as a reflection for many members on decision-making at the College. "I think it's really important that we have a framework in place so that these issues don't always have to be so difficult to discuss," said Kelly. CCL discussed the idea of creating a standing set of standards for companies with which the College does business. Such regulations would allow the Purchasing Department to work within a set committee structure and take action against companies with definite human rights, labor or environmental regulations. CCL is looking specifically at the University of Michigan's model for all of its purchasing decisions, which extends beyond food providers to include its bookstore, as well as construction companies. Such a move would streamline discussion on such issues, Kelly believes.

Roellke sent a lengthy advisory document on CCL's decision to College President Catharine Bond Hill. He also forwarded this document to *The Miscellany News*.

The document had five resolves, the first of which "[commended] our students for their concerns regarding corporate responsibility. Clearly, our students have worked diligently and passionately in promoting their causes," reads the document.

However, after noting the "the apparent lack of consensus in our community on this issue," as well as the lack of definitive evidence against the corporation, the document advised "that Coca-Cola products not be removed from campus."

Additionally, the Committee resolved that "in the spirit of providing our community with consumer choice," Purchasing should work with the Food Committee, Dining Services, the Sustainability Committee and vendors to provide alternative beverages in addition to the Coca-Cola products currently offered on campus. "Provision of these alternative beverages may serve to advance Aramark's stated goal of increasing the use of local providers within food services at the College," reads the document.

The effort to ban Coca-Cola began two years ago, and culminated in October and

November when the Kick Coke Campaign— a coalition of students from six different organizations—brought a resolution to the VSA Council. After much heated discussion, the resolution passed by a single vote. Just weeks later, representatives from the Keep Coke Campaign presented Council with its own resolution, along with 300 student signatures against removing Coca-Cola products from campus. Their resolution was withdrawn, since CCL would be making the final call.

On February 18, 2008, Vassar's Campus Investment Responsibility Committee (CIRC) had determined that the evidence regarding these allegations was inconclusive and elected not to make a recommendation to CCL to ban the sale of Coca-Cola products on campus. CIRC agreed to contact representatives from Coca-Cola and to monitor the situation. More recently, representatives from the Kick Coke Campaign had presented VSA Council and CCL with a 72-page document explaining their reasoning, as well as citing sources for Coke's alleged abuses.

Members of the Kick Coke Campaign were not pleased with the results of CCL's vote. Reed Dunlea '09, the spokesperson for the campaign, was upset that he had not been invited to yesterday's meeting in order to address the Committee members' concerns. "[CCL] sent a terrible message to the student body yesterday. They made it known that any economic decision of this college will not give consideration to how students feel," Dunlea said. "This administration sent us running around their committee structure for two years, and once they finally figured out how to make a decision, and asked for a VSA stance before making it, they completely rejected what the student body had to say, and...didn't even give our Campaign or themselves the respect to have a meaningful discussion of the issue by excluding our voice from the process."

Yet, three of the nine student members of CCL, who revealed their votes on the condition of anonymity, came down against Kick Coke and felt that the majority of Vassar students did, as well. "I don't think that there was nearly as much of a unified voice on this issue as the [Kick Coke Campaign] has claimed," said one member. "As was revealed by the VSA's resolution on the matter, there is a tremendous amount of disagreement on this, and it's ludicrous to try to identify any 'unified' student voice."

Another student member of CCL questioned the tactics of and facts behind the Kick Coke Campaign. "The group really used intimidation throughout this process. I do really believe that they were hard-working and stood up for what they believed in, but they tried to take the moral high ground and pressure this campus into agreeing with them, then labeling their opponents as conservative or cruel." said the member. "Honestly, after reviewing the facts of [the situation] as provided by the ILO and the United Nations, I really, truly don't believe that Coke is engaged in the kinds of practices that they might have once been engaged in five years ago."

These members all felt that CCL's decision likely means the end of the effort to remove Coca-Cola products from campus.

