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HIGHER ED'S CARBON ADDICTION

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Each year higher education produces millions of metric tons of greenhouse gases (GHG). As research and study abroad programs span the globe, faculty and staff travel regularly to professional meetings. Colleges compete for prospective students and offer state-of-the-art technology, entertainment, food services, and other high-impact facilities. Universities that market a comfortable, stimulating campus in order to attract and retain talent may resist carbon budgeting, as combustion of dirty fossil fuels currently remains vital to the operation of most campus buildings, sport fields, and labs.

Universities are integral to climate science knowledge production. Nevertheless, policymakers in many academic institutions appear unaware of important contributions from climate scholars, even those within their campus community. Experts have called for rapid and significant reduction in GHGs to mitigate the devastating effects of climate-related food insecurity, war and conflict, forced migration, economic loss, water shortages, biodiversity loss, polar and glacial ice melt, sea level rise, and ocean acidification. Higher education professionals show they are ill-prepared for climate governance when climate change science does not influence policy or action. In particular, transition away from high carbon-emitting energy sources such as coal and oil is essential to limit climate disruption (Hansen et al. 2013). Multiple pathways for energy transition are increasingly part of ongoing debates on college campuses. Paradoxically, scholarly research assessing fossil fuel divestment remains scant,

suggesting an urgent need for comprehensive data collection and analysis.

Fossil Fool or Fossil Free

After decades of slow progress toward climate action on most college campuses, a relatively unanticipated spike in fossil fuels divestment has occurred in the past five years. Fifty-eight universities and colleges, predominantly in North America, Europe and Pacific nations, committed to divest from one or more types of fossil fuels. These institutions form part of a Fossil Free network of universities, faith-based organizations, pension funds, foundations, and governmental institutions who believe that “*If it is wrong to wreck the climate, then it is wrong to profit from that wreckage.*” Members of hundreds of additional university campuses are discussing fossil fuel divestment, as documented through gofossilfree.org petitions and social media. Students have waged hunger strikes, sit-ins, and protest marches, and escalation beyond previous tactics is a goal in many locations.

Although several institutions of higher education (e.g., Hampshire, Unity, and Sterling Colleges) were early adopters, the majority of universities are not currently considering fossil fuel divestment. Educational institutions make up only twelve percent of the more than five hundred Fossil Free institutions with standing commitments. College administrators frequently attempt to put the brakes on student proposals citing concern over risks, increases in transaction costs associated with managing the endowment

and skepticism over the climate impact of divestment. Detractors suggest fossil fuel divestment creates a slippery slope leading to negotiation of everything else that might warrant divestment (i.e., forced or child labor; discrimination based on ideology, race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.). This concern highlights the extent to which many institutions exclude community members from even basic information about holdings. As a result, financial policies and practices are unlikely to align with broader institutional missions and priorities.

With approximately \$3.4 trillion dollars already slated for divestiture, Fossil Free represents a major global energy shift. In recent years divestment garnered seemingly unlikely support. This included Jim Yong Kim, President of the World Bank, who suggested the world must “*divest and tax that which we don't want, the carbon that threatens development gains over the last 20 years*” (King 2014). Showing clear support for energy transition the UN Secretary General and other high-ranking political leaders have made statements in support of leaving remaining hydrocarbon resources in the ground. In 2013, US President Barack Obama made an infamous climate hawk speech with the oft-repeated line “*Invest. Divest. Remind folks there's no contradiction between a sound environment and strong economic growth*” (Romm 2013).

Beyond Climate, Beyond Divestment, Beyond Graduation

Campus divestment movements have become training grounds for activists. As climate action legislation often gets rejected or diluted as a result of the lobbying power of the fossil fuel industry, divestment provides an outlet for concerned citizens to channel their frustrations and push back. Since there is limited scholarly research on what motivates students to join Fossil Free campaigns, leaders like Jessica Grady-Benson (2014) provide some of our most comprehensive documentation. Grady-Benson records how many of her peers are motivated by frustration with political gridlock and by concern over lack of state action to address climate change. Grady-Benson's interviewees suggest they are attracted to divestment because they see it as representing systemic change. Divestment

campaigns also provide opportunities for collective action and empowerment. These goals are evident in the title of the 2016 Fossil Fuel Divestment Student Network (DSN) (n.d.) Convergence “*Resist, Reinvest, Reconstruct... Our Generation, Our Choice.*”

As part of DSN's mission, members commit to social change work beyond divestment and after graduation. DSN activists reject single issue ‘silos’ while embracing intersectionality and the search for integral solutions to multiple oppressions and injustices. Their attention to inclusivity and their commitment to building a multiracial movement is part of a broader global transition away from a historical understanding of environmentalism as emerging from situations of white privilege. While DSN exhibits nuanced understanding of positionality within their internal structure, when defining potential pathways for the future they chose to not mince words and lay out just two options. Either you support the fossil fuel industry, which DSN (2015) equates with ignorance and fear, or you support students and frontline communities, which they link to reality, hope, and courage.



Fossil Fuel Student Divestment Network Facebook Image

DSN members are critical of private sector control over higher education arguing that serving the interests of the 1% should not be the mission of universities (DSN 2015). Likewise, Green Bowdoin Alliance's divestment proposal suggests “*It is morally wrong for Bowdoin to invest in, and profit from, corporations whose business model is antithetical to the common knowledge of the scientific community and the common good of this planet...Financing our education is not worth selling our future*” (Casey and Kinstler 2013). This last statement is poignant because a common defense from college administrators against divestment is that it might put

scholarship monies at risk. This possibility is often raised without any substantive evidence, but the narrative gets repeated because the message is powerful and emotive. Interestingly, an increasing number of studies from think-tanks and private sector analysts suggest divestment can be done without significant negative impact on returns (Geddes et al. 2015). Early schools to divest report no decline in endowment performance, but do note an increase in contributions to the university. These topics deserve additional attention, during which clarification of overlapping risks is necessary. Some divestment support builds from concern over risk from carbon stranded assets that would lose value before the end of their expected life because of changes in regulation, market forces, environmental concerns, societal norms, or innovation (Briand et al. 2015). Two hundred University of Victoria faculty members want their retirement pensions to be divested because they believe economic risks from staying invested in fossil fuels are too high (UVIC Faculty for Fossil Fuel Divestment 2015).

Are Faculty Members Interested in Divestment?

One of the most vocal leaders of the divestment movement is Middlebury College Professor Bill McKibben, co-founder of the global climate action network 350.org from which Fossil Free spun off. McKibben's (2012) article called "Global Warming's Terrifying New Math" generated considerable public debate. Not all faculty members are as vocal or as prominent, but the 262 faculty members who signed the Harvard Faculty for Divestment (2014) statement did so because of their "*knowledge and research in climate science, energy, business management, ethics, and the effects of climate change on health, prosperity, and biodiversity.*" More often, the position of faculty members is less decisive. While it is likely most faculty members identify climate change-related impacts in their research, teaching, and daily lives, many do not prepare students with basic climate and energy literacy. There is a long list of possible reasons why faculty feel trepidation about taking a stand in support of divestment or divestment campaigns, including uncertainty about the impacts on job security, benefit packages, retirement pensions, media attention, professional credibility, or workplace relationships. Yet, when

facilitated in an open and honest fashion, divestment forums can become an opportunity to clarify an institution's values and commitments. Regardless of whether a university ultimately decides to divest or not, discussions about ecological and social implications of higher education policies and practices, while likely to bring up differences of opinion, provide an opportunity for a campus community to make a clear statement about what it stands for.

Political Power and Climate Justice

Fossil fuel divestment campaigns draw attention to connections between power and justice and to disparate attitudes on various campuses about student voice. College of the Atlantic administrators approved a student divestment proposal as part of a "*student-driven energy framework based on empowering our students to go out and make a difference in their communities and in the world*" (quoted in Aroneanu 2013). But such cases are rare. In 2015 at the University of Mary Washington there was a stand-off between administrators and a group of students who were demanding the University reconsider its earlier refusal to form a university subcommittee to evaluate their proposal to explore coal divestment. A 21-day non-violent sit-in ended with three students arrested for trespassing. A student leader publicly criticized the situation to others in the campus community stating, "*These are your students being arrested by your administration*" (quoted in Estes 2015).

Many academic institutions have long-standing commitments to social justice, although fewer schools link social and environmental justice commitments effectively. Inequalities in power linked to the energy sector clearly extend beyond campus walls. The sweeping energy transformation required to mitigate climate change provides a unique opportunity to ameliorate energy injustice, since communities of color and low income households are disproportionately living nearby polluting fossil fuel extraction and combustion sites. Decentralized energy production can build from collaboration between schools, cooperatives, nonprofits, and communities. If done conscientiously, production of local renewable energy changes our relationship with the Earth and our human

relationships with one another, with the potential to chip away at divisions based on class, race, gender, or neighborhood. If higher education assumes a central role in preparing for and implementing transformative energy shifts, the payback could be huge in both humanitarian and financial terms.

Research Agenda

Accurate campus climate action planning and accounting should include all emissions tied to operations and investments, but every school is different. Fossil Free's standard objective "*to immediately freeze any new investment in fossil fuel companies, and divest from direct ownership and any commingled funds that include fossil fuel public equities and corporate bonds within five years*" has become a common initial demand from divestment campaigns. Yet, institutions that chose to divest have in the end selected a range of approaches, including dropping connections to coal, tar sands, or all fossil fuels, divesting from the most polluting energy companies, and/or investing in renewables or the green sector more broadly.

We need empirical and comparative research to improve understanding of higher education's decarbonization options. Each approach will have both short and long-term impacts on finances and on GHG emissions. Since scholarly research is lacking on nearly all aspects of fossil fuel divestment, the lack of credible research impedes informed decision-making. Paucity of research can be used as an excuse to stall considerations of divestment or low-carbon investment options.

Climate Education and Critical Thought

Geographers are well equipped to undertake climate-oriented experiential education and action research. For example, at the University of Richmond, the Parking Lot Project was a year-long interactive eco-art installation encouraging critical reflection on landscape, space, transportation, parking, and use of the personal automobile. Faculty from the departments of Art and Geography mentored project activities in conjunction with University Facilities staff.



Parking Lot Project Eco-Art Installation (Credits: Finley-Brook 2015)

The Parking Lot Project provided an intellectual and physical space to make connections between personal responsibility for consumption of fossil fuels due to driving cars and decisions about land use planning, urban development, and transportation infrastructure. In this instance, it was a geographic advantage for the parking lot to be located at the top of a slope leading down to a creek that feeds into the James River and eventually to the Chesapeake Bay. Runoff from activities tied to transportation, such as

laying asphalt, enters the watershed. Making these types of geographical connections provides instrumental context for linking personal and institutional commitments toward transportation and fuel alternatives to the health of local and regional water bodies and ecosystems. It is helpful to interrogate consumption behaviors and find parallels between institutional inspection of responsibilities for mitigation of carbon or other pollutants and self-critique of personal agency.

Recovery

Higher education is addicted to carbon at a time when experts are recommending slicing GHG emissions by as much as half over the next decades to avoid climate disruptions that would alter life on this planet as we know it. This is no time left for denial or excuses. After inaction, or minimal action, for decades...remediation is overdue.

Divestment campaigns highlight one segment of carbon addiction, but they also expose hypocrisies related to high-carbon higher education. Advocating to not support divestment, campus leaders frequently signal important climate-related research being done in their institution as sufficient contribution to solving a global crisis. We suggest this is no longer enough. Research must coincide with, and also inform, timely policies and actions to lower carbon emissions from higher education.

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