

CONCLUSION

The fossil fuel divestment movement is in the midst of a dizzying expansion. As this report goes to press in October 2015, the campaign is escalating at dozens of campuses where activists are trying to force trustees' hands. In the spring "escalation season" will come again. The Fossil Fuel Divestment Student Network vows to sponsor 20 sit-ins in March and April.

At some point this movement will exhaust itself. Such causes are fads. Economic reality will assert itself and freshmen will yawn at yesteryear's enthusiasm.

But in the meantime, the divestment movement is doing significant damage. It affronts academic freedom, the tradition of civil debate, and the purpose of higher education—along with free markets, republican government, and individual liberty. The movement offers nothing but symbolic scorn toward the major supplier of energy in modern economies. The fossil fuel divestment movement, like most popular fads in higher education, would benefit from close scrutiny. This report is a start. But there are more questions to be asked, and more people—students, professors, trustees, government officials, public observers, parents, alumni, and scholars—who should ask them.

For those observing and directly involved with the movement, we offer 14 recommendations.

Recommendations

For students

1. **Open your mind.** Chances are that you've heard only one side of a debate in which there are several substantial and well-supported positions. Only a handful of colleges have held actual debates about fossil fuel divestment, and students are typically exposed only to the claims of activists, inside and outside class.
2. **Think critically.** Don't take at face value the activists' cartoon versions of what the "other side" says. The activists want you to think their opponents are dumb and/or evil. Find out first-hand what the opponents of fossil fuel divestment really say. And weigh all the arguments on their merits.
3. **Fight groupthink.** The divestment activists are few in number but they are well-trained by professional propagandists in the techniques of making their movement appear to be overwhelming popular. The aim is to make you think "everybody agrees, so I should go along." It is a false impression, but fighting it is hard because you have to make the deliberate decision to think for yourself against considerable pressure to conform to readily available sets of talking points.
4. **Check your self-approval.** The divestment activists know how to play with your sense of yourself as a good person. They are telling you that "the right thing" is to agree with them, and disagreement is therefore a cause for shame. The self-approval offered by the activists, however, is the shallow stuff of following the herd. The real shame is accepting propaganda in the place of your own careful assessment of the evidence.

5. **Respect opponents.** Activists have smeared those who disagree with them about their goals or tactics as “climate change deniers,” and used other words meant to stigmatize their opponents as immoral. Such mudslinging is a form of intellectual bullying. Stand up to bullies. Whatever your personal views, make a point of listening respectfully to those who have different opinions.
6. **Watch for fallacies.** Ad hominem attacks—attacks on the character of the people you disagree with—are not good arguments against their views. The source of someone’s funding, for example, tells you nothing about the quality of his arguments or evidence.
7. **Speak out.** This comes easily to a few but it is hard for most. But if you don’t speak out, others will steal your voice by declaring that you are among their followers. Once you have been drafted like this it is even harder to get your own voice.

For professors

8. **Teach; don’t posture.** Professors should never award class credit for working on a particular political campaign or pressure students to participate in such work. Presentation of politically charged issues should include both sides of the debate. Let students come to their own conclusions.
9. **Teach students to ask hard questions.** To the extent that divestment does come up in class discussion, professors should encourage their students to wrestle with the questions on which divestment is based. Will fossil fuel divestment help the environment? What are the economic effects of selling investments? Should universities engage in political advocacy? Cross-examine assumptions.
10. **Avoid the repetition of clichés and stock campaign slogans.** Popular claims presented as “facts,” such as the false assertion that “97 percent” of climate scientists believe global warming is real, man-made, and dangerous, or the self-congratulatory declaration that divesting fossil fuels bestows moral worth to the divesting individual, are endlessly repeated. The explosion of unexamined claims pollutes the well of academic inquiry. Professors should scrupulously avoid groupthink and teach their students to avoid it as well.

For trustees and administrators

11. **Enforce order and uphold civil discourse.** Trustees and administrators should not permit intimidation of students or allow themselves to be intimidated. They should continue to meet with and hear the concerns of students who favor divestment, provided that these students abide by the rules of civil exchange.
12. **Seriously evaluate costs and benefits of fossil fuel divestment.** No college should implement a fossil fuel divestment plan that harms its ability to finance its educational endeavors. If prudence warrants it, sell fossil fuel stocks, but remain open to repurchasing them if economic conditions change in the future.
13. **Avoid positioning the university as a political actor.** The fossil fuel divestment movement is at heart a political wedge meant to drive government agents to action. University professors should provide research and testimony on energy and environmental policy (among other things), but the university should not itself endorse political positions or conceive of itself as a tool to force political changes.

14. **Model civil discourse and rigorous examination of arguments.** Colleges and universities should showcase how reasoned and informed people wrestle with reasoned and informed debates. The university cannot perform its role of moderator if it is compromised by its own political advocacy.