

FOREWORD

Peter Wood, president, National Association of Scholars

This study of the current movement on college campuses to persuade boards of trustees to divest their institutional holdings in fossil fuel companies is intended, first, to improve the quality of debate on a contentious issue. Although we express skepticism about both the means and the ends of the fossil fuel divestment movement, *Inside Divestment* will, we believe, prove useful to those on every side of the issue, including those college trustees charged with making a decision about investment policies who have not yet made up their minds whether to accede to the demand to divest. The value of our report to such a broad audience lies in the care Rachele Peterson has taken to gather facts that have not previously been gathered, and to listen to the full range of voices that have not previously been heard.

One measure of the breadth of our outlook is the inclusion at the end of the report of short, previously unpublished, essays by a variety of participants in the larger debate. Here the reader will find Bill McKibben—the national leader of the divestment movement—defending its legitimacy. Professor McKibben’s essay appears in the company of an essay by Alex Epstein, founder of the Center for Industrial Progress, and best known as the author of *The Moral Case for Fossil Fuels*. Our aim in including such divergent views in the “Forum” at the end is *not* to position ourselves outside the debate. We have a definite point of view that informs the report as a whole. But we are also committed to intellectual openness and the fair-minded exchange of ideas.

Indeed, a major thrust of our criticisms of the fossil fuel divestment movement is that the movement does not display such openness. This brings up the second reason for our study. *Inside Divestment* is the latest in a series of in-depth studies by the National Association of Scholars in which we have set out to document as scrupulously as possible the transformation of American higher education. Not so long ago our colleges and universities almost universally avowed that they were rooted in the disinterested search for truth and the shaping of citizens in our self-governing republic. Today these purposes have been largely replaced with claims by colleges and universities that they teach “critical thinking” and various forms of social engagement often summed up as “becoming a citizen of the world.”

To almost anyone outside the university—and to many within—this transformation is opaque. Complaints abound about “political correctness,” esoteric undergraduate courses, and heated ideological disputes on campus affecting the personal lives and activities of students. But it is difficult to discern what realities actually lie behind these complaints. Some observers have attempted to get to the bottom of this by collecting survey data or amassing large-scale comparisons among the 4,810 colleges and universities in the United States.

NAS has chosen a different path. We have sought depth rather than breadth in a series of focused studies. The immediate predecessor to *Inside Divestment* is our report issued in March 2015, *Sustainability: Higher Education's New Fundamentalism*. That study offered an historical overview of the sustainability movement but zeroed in on Middlebury, Yale, Harvard, Cornell, and Swarthmore. Prior to that we published *What Does Bowdoin Teach? How a Contemporary Liberal Arts College Shapes Students* (2013), which was a first-of-its-kind independent top-to-bottom account of virtually all the moving parts of a single college. Before that we published *Recasting History* (2013), a fine-toothed examination of freshman history courses at the University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M, and *A Crisis of Competence* (2012), an examination of political activism in the University of California.

These reports are not the sum total of NAS's work. We publish other studies and a wide-ranging quarterly journal, *Academic Questions*, and we represent a membership of more than 2,500 scholars (and some laymen) who believe that higher education has an indispensable responsibility to continue disciplined inquiry and teaching that builds on what is best in our civilization. Few join NAS unless they see that this mission is in peril—and that the peril arises far more from intellectual default within our colleges and universities than from outside pressures.

Occasionally, however, the peril arises from both at once. The fossil fuel divestment movement is seemingly a campus phenomenon, and certainly many of the activists who favor it are students and faculty members. But the movement has its deeper origins in off-campus developments. The sustainability movement itself is a project launched by the United Nations in 1987 in its report, *Our Common Future*. The UN aimed to channel the popularity of the worldwide environmental movement into political initiatives that would curtail free market economies in favor of strong regulation; favor redistribution over growth; promote birth control in the Third World; and advance an array of other "social justice" causes. The eventual progeny of *Our Common Future* included the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and more than fifty international conferences, including the Rio Earth Summit (1992), the Kyoto Summit (1997), the Bali Road Map (2007), and the Durban Platform (2011).

For a long period, governments and politicians were much more interested in sustainability than were colleges and universities. Indeed industry and commerce were much more interested in the movement than were colleges and universities. The sustainability movement offered potential profits not least to some in the alternative energy sector, where government subsidies tended to flow generously to companies and entrepreneurs that assented to the new ideology.

Our previous report, *Sustainability: Higher Education's New Fundamentalism*, traces the steps by which this movement outside higher education eventually—in the last decade—found a foothold on the nation's

campuses, and still later an enthusiastic welcome. We don't repeat that story in *Inside Divestment*, but it is important for the reader to know that what might at first look like a form of activism indigenous to the college campus is really an echo of long-ago conversations among transnational bureaucrats at the UN headquarters at Turtle Bay, and past-their-expiration-date manifestos by has-been American politicians.

Social scientists are often interested in what we call "leading indicators of social change," and are prone to think that campus protest foretells the future. Sometimes it does. But occasionally campus protest may be a trailing indicator. The leaders of the sustainability movement made a fateful decision back in 1988 when they hitched their ideals to the newly announced idea of catastrophic man-made global warming as an imminent threat to humanity. The rhetoric in favor of this idea has only intensified in the years since, especially in the five major reports issued by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. We are by now all familiar with the claims that a consensus of "97 percent of climate scientists" believe in the existence of catastrophic man-made global warming. This figure and the claims behind it have been repeatedly discredited, but the roar of messianic activism isn't easily quieted and reasoned debate is an elusive ideal for an issue so heavily politicized. Nonetheless, science proceeds on its own paths, and the slowly accumulating results of objective inquiry have not been especially friendly to the original 1988 hypothesis. Gauged by tamper-proof satellite readings, the data show us to be in the midst of more than 18 years during which there has been no appreciable global warming. Dubbed "the pause" by advocates of the original hypothesis, global warming alarmists believe the "excess heat" must be hiding somewhere—perhaps in the deep ocean—and that global warming will come roaring back sometime soon.

If I sound a note of skepticism toward the catastrophists' theory, let me hasten to add that the jury is still out. A theory may stand unproven without necessarily being false. But we have enough evidence in hand to say that the current "models" of climate change do not produce results that comport with the facts.

This leaves the campus activists of fossil fuel divestment in an awkward position. The choices come down to maintaining stalwart resistance to countervailing scientific evidence by refusing to acknowledge it and by ridiculing anyone who defies the *omertà*; declaring that, though the case for catastrophic manmade global warming is unproven, it is still prudent to act as if it were just in case the threat proves real; or holding to the line that we would all be better off without fossil fuels no matter what. All three of these positions can be found among campus activists: doctrinaire defenders of the faith, upholders of the "precautionary principle," and determined foes of the modern, energy-intensive, free-market economy.

The proponents of each of these views deserve the opportunity to make their best case on the college campus, but none of them should enjoy the power to enforce their views on everyone else. The National Association of Scholars comes into this debate above all as a proponent of the right of rational dissenters

to present their view on campus and within the broader academic and scientific community. What dissenters from the catastrophist orthodoxy currently face is marginalization, frequently exclusion, and a strengthening demand that they be coerced one way or another into silence.

The fossil fuel divestment movement is at the moment the hard edge of the campus political orthodoxy that has created this climate that is hostile to intellectual openness. This report draws attention to how that movement is proceeding.

By issuing our report in the midst of what the activists call the fall 2015 “Escalation,” we hope to call students, faculty members, college presidents, and trustees to a higher standard. Decisions about how to deploy college and university resources should not be made to appease activists whose behavior contravenes respect for good argument, carefully sifted evidence, and the norms of intellectual openness. Taking the path of acceding to the wishes of passionate advocates without judging the merits of their case is foolish in any context, but especially so in higher education.

Inside Divestment is also the National Association of Scholars’ latest summons to the American public to pay attention to a pivotal institution that, to borrow the word of a recent critic, is now adrift. It will not be our last such summons. The problems in our colleges and universities are manifold. But for the moment, we ask you to consider what is happening inside the fossil fuel divestment movement. It is worrisome enough.