When Schools Say No to Divestment

How do students find the power, passion, and courage to continue the climate fight after that emphatic “no”?

By Chloe Maxmin

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Sophie Harrison was sitting in Stanford University’s library finalizing her senior thesis on climate policy when her phone buzzed with bad news. After making headlines as one of the first multi-billion endowments to divest from coal, Stanford’s administration had just rejected oil and gas divestment because “it could not evaluate whether the social injury caused by the fossil fuel industry outweighs the social benefit it provides.”

Two days later, shocked and disappointed, Sophie and her Fossil Free Stanford comrades gathered outside Stanford Memorial Church as their President discussed his inspirations for social change in a speech titled “What Matters to Me & Why.” The students’ message to him: climate change matters, and we are why.

Over the past five years, thousands of students like Sophie have called on their universities to divest from fossil fuels. With lawsuits, sit-ins, teach-ins, blockades, marches, meetings, negotiations, faculty letters, and alumni support, these students sent a clear message: if universities truly claim to invest in

Hundreds protest Harvard University’s fossil-fuel investments in April 2015. (Photo courtesy of 350.org)
students’ futures, they must divest from fossil fuel companies that jeopardize those futures. In the face of this growing movement, many administrations continue to ignore students’ voices and reject divestment. This article asks students what they think, feel, and experience when their universities reject fossil fuel divestment and how they sustain the strength to move forward.

MORE THAN MOVING MONEY

For decades, fossil fuel corporations have captured the political process and thwarted climate policy. Grassroots climate action spreads, but not quickly enough to out-flank corporate influence. Meanwhile, the climate crisis grows more urgent.

In this context, the fossil fuel divestment movement sprang to life. It aims to challenge corporate power, achieve climate action, and grow the climate movement. Divestment stigmatizes the fossil fuel industry in order to degrade its political influence and legitimacy. With corporations on the defensive, opportunities for meaningful climate policy can emerge. Divestment also provides the foundation for broad-based inclusive action. Everyone is part of an institution with something to divest—from an alma mater’s endowment to a city or state pension fund. The fossil fuel divestment movement is about more than moving investors’ money.

On campuses, divestment also means more than the word technically denotes. For many students, it’s the way to engage their peers around climate change. As Jesse Baum, a former organizer with the University of Vermont’s divestment campaign, told me, “for students, this is probably the most direct way that you can combat the fossil fuel industry and collectivize your actions.” Alyssa Florack, a student organizer
Climate Justice at Boston College, added; climate change isn’t really addressed on our campus in any other way.” Warren Beecroft from the University of Utah—a school with close ties to the fossil fuel industry—says, “climate efforts are almost nonexistent” on campus beyond the divestment drive.

CRISIS OF HYPOCRISY

Entering Harvard Yard each day for class, Canyon Woodward read the words “Enter To Grow in Wisdom” inscribed above one of Harvard’s grand wrought iron gates. As he left the Yard through the same gate, he read “Depart To Serve better Thy Country and Thy Kind” overhead. Those themes that once inspired him soon rang hollow for Woodward, who was then a leader of Divest Harvard. He internalized the wisdom of Harvard’s climate scientists and social movement theorists calling for urgent climate action. He spent his days in LEED certified buildings and slept in dorms powered with renewable energy. He listened to President Drew Faust call for “necessary trouble” to confront social justice.

Woodward and his peers tried to serve their world by calling on Harvard to divest its $36.4 billion endowment—the largest in the world—from fossil fuels. (Woodward and I co-coordinated Divest Harvard together for a semester.) Harvard University arguably enjoys more influence and power than any other university on earth. How better to serve the planet than to lead on divestment and climate justice? But Divest Harvard was dismissed with disdain. Its objectives and actions were denounced as radical. President Drew Faust called divestment a distraction. The administration refused to engage in open dialogue, despite the support of more than 70,000 students, faculty, alumni, and community members.

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Harvard’s reaction to Divest Harvard represents a hypocrisy that forces students to question the validity and values of educational institutions. As Woodward told me: “One of the fundamental tenets of a university is to teach and inspire critical thinking, to contribute meaningfully to society. If you don’t apply that internally, then it totally erodes the core foundation of your purpose. These universities that are supposed to be creating a better future can’t continue to profess those ideals in good conscience if they’re also actively engaged in supporting a business model that erodes our shot at even having a livable future.”

Almost every student I spoke with expressed profound disillusionment over what they saw as the hypocrisy of their administrations. “I’m in classes learning about climate change and all these reasons that would support divestment,” said Elizabeth Ventura from Divest Northeastern University. Sophie Harrison at Stanford asked: “How can the university tell me that it’s investing in my future and at the same time bank on the destruction of my future? It’s against the work that I and so many of my peers are going to spend our lives on.” Universities need to understand that rejecting divestment undermines their educational purpose and legitimacy. It challenges my generation’s faith in the leadership and governance of all formal institutions.

LISTEN. DON’T HEAR.

Divestment has also become one of the principal vehicles through which student voice permeates halls of power—including university boardrooms and executive offices. Student organizers devote time, energy, and often their health to develop campaigns and contribute to their schools. Such students regard a “no” to divestment as a sign that their schools do not respect
the voices, efforts, or world-views of the very people that they educate.

This destructive dynamic dominates NYU’s divestment campaign. The administration initially told students that they could meet with the full Board of Trustees if the University Senate voted for divestment. NYU Divest organized the faculty, student, and administrative members of the Senate body. The Senate passed a resolution in support of divestment.

Olivia Rich and her comrades at NYU Divest prepared for a meeting with the full Board. Then NYU said that only two members of the Board would meet with divestment advocates. Frustrated with a broken promise a year after the Senate resolution, NYU Divest launched a sit-in inside the elevator that led to NYU’s administrative offices. The students’ demand: to meet with the full Board of Trustees, as promised. After 33 hours, students ended their sit-in after the administration threatened to suspend them. Still, NYU Divest managed to secure a meeting with eight members of the Investment Committee (the total board consists of sixty-eight members). Students met with the Investment Committee in May 2016. Rich described the meeting: “We did a power point presentation. We gave them a lot of research. They didn’t really ask a lot of follow up questions. It was hard to tell if they were following us or not.”

After the meeting, there was no further word from the administration. Then, in June—during summer break—a university-wide memoranda declared that NYU would not divest from fossil fuels. Rich said: “We didn’t know when we were going to get an email. We don’t even know why they chose not to divest. They didn’t address many of our arguments...
and misrepresented the ones they did mention. What’s more—the administration over-rode faculty, student, and administrators voices through secret proceedings in a “flippant disregard for facts or public support,” as Rich described it.

NYU is not the only school where an administration relied on stonewalling and secrecy. After the first meeting between Climate Justice at Boston College and BC’s administration, there was “no response,” Florack said. “We thought it was going to be open dialogue, and it became pretty apparent that they had already made up their minds.” Ventura from Divest Northeastern said that her school’s administration “just avoids us as much as possible.” After a year-long public dialogue about divestment at MIT, the administration released a Climate Action Plan that completely rejected divestment. “They said ‘no’ to everything,” said Ioana Knopf of Fossil Free MIT. “We just didn’t know how they reached their decision, and we didn’t understand.”

Trustees and Presidents sometimes only hear words. They do not listen.

CLIMATE JUSTICE: BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE STATUS QUO

Most student organizers play by the rules early in their campaigns. They ask for meetings with their administrations, gather petition signatures, wait for committees to produce reports. When students receive that dismissive “no,” they are forced to figure out how to create change in a static system where business-as-usual leads nowhere.

Bobby Wengronowitz of Climate Justice at Boston College recalled the early days of the BC campaign: “We played a lot more of their game. We were trying to go through proper channels, and we got the undergraduate student government to
endorse a resolution. It was almost unanimous.” CJBC managed
to secure a meeting with their President. The students prepared
thoughtful arguments about the benefits of divestment to Boston
College. Wengronowitz said that the students were “trying to
speak in the President’s language” and “sell it to him.” Despite
the approach, the administration, “pretty much just ignored us.
By pretty much, I mean entirely. It might as well not have
happened,” said Wengronowitz. He added: “It made us have to
do other things…it moved us to take a much more direct action-
oriented approach. We’re going to continue to build power, and
we’re going to continue to disrupt. That’s where our power
comes from.”

Fossil Free MIT (FFMIT) faced a similar situation. At first,
FFMIT and the administration agreed to public dialogue about
divestment. The administration organized a “divestment
debate.” The administration “convened the MIT Climate
Change Conversation Committee, charged with organizing a
campus-wide conversation.” This committee produced a report
that recommended divestment from coal and tar sands. The
university subsequently released a Climate Action Plan that
rejected divestment and instead proposed shareholder
engagement. Knopf recalls “that feeling that you’ve spoken out
and thought that you were understood. The university’s actions
didn’t reflect that.”

Outraged, FFMIT changed its strategy. Students launched a
sit-in that lasted for 116 days. As Knopf told me: “The sit-in
started because we wanted to show that the administration can’t
just ignore what we’ve been talking about.” Students realized
that the administration didn’t understand the moral or existential
imperative of fossil fuel divestment. So they employed a
tactic—the sit-in—that allowed them to demonstrate the
urgency and passion of their campaign. This allowed students to engage in further dialogue with the administration. They explained their motivations, and the administration discussed its rationale “We were able to have some really honest conversations,” Knopf said.

THE MORAL CLARITY OF YOUTH

How do students find the power, passion, and courage to continue the fight on campus after that ominous “no”? One motivation is a clear vision of justice that never wavers. Most little kids are taught to respect the kinds of people that run universities: the academics, financial experts, philanthropists. These are also the people who are supposed to recognize and foster solutions to major social challenges. When these “experts” and “societal leaders” reject divestment, one might expect young people to question their own motivations or rethink their reasoning. What struck me during my interviews is that these young people know what is right and what is wrong. Rejection does not obscure their moral clarity. “We’re standing up for what’s right,” said Rich from NYU. Josh Lappen, a rising Senior at Stanford University, added that the process of battling with the administration “increased our resolve to make our university into something better.”

Unlike their universities, students don’t pick and chose when to apply their values. Harvard University, for example, can choose to care about climate change when it comes to campus greening but not investments. As Woodward pointed out, the moral hypocrisy “erodes” the very importance of morality. Florack from Climate Justice at Boston College adds that the social justice values of Boston College—a Jesuit school—are “so clearly violated by continuing to invest in fossil fuels…to deny that investing in fossil fuels isn’t contributing to the problem is
just so wrong. “The fight for change in the age of climate chaos requires the moral clarity of youth.

LOVE AND HOPE

No matter the challenges that today’s young people confront, love and hope reign supreme. Lappen from Stanford told me that “the fundamental idea of divestment is founded in hope…that we can improve systems that are fundamentally flawed.” From classrooms to Boardrooms—fossil fuel divestment campaigns build a movement to change how our society responds to the climate crisis. Imagine the strength, faith, and endurance that it takes to fulfill that vision.

Divestment is also based on a deep love for universities. Elizabeth Ventura from Northeastern loves her school. Her entire family has attended Northeastern. She told me: “We’re a school that wants to invest in the international community. We should be concerned with global safety. That’s directly related to fossil fuels.” Stephanie Glanzmann from the University of British Columbia’s divestment campaign echoed this idea. “It’s burned in my brain that I chose this school because it was going to be more progressive. I’m going to try and make that image a reality.” Students choose their schools for a reason. They are devoted to improving and contributing to what they love.

0 COMMENTS

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She has received national and international recognition for her activism, including being named a “Green Hero” by Rolling Stone, receiving the Brower Youth Award, and appearing on Real Time with Bill Maher. For more information, visit chloemaxmin.com.

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