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On Changing History: Divest Harvard and the Power of Confrontation

By Gram Slattery



Divest Harvard co-founder Chloe Maxmin speaks at the Friday night closing rally.

“I think they’re militant, and I don’t think we should be putting our name on a thing that sued the University.”

Such were the words of Daniel Banks ’17, the Undergraduate Council’s Student Initiatives Chair, regarding Divest Harvard. The night was April 12, and the activist group had just introduced an unambitious piece of legislation before the UC that would have allowed Divest to advertise the group’s so-called Heat Week over the governing body’s e-mail list.

The motion failed, 0-27, which I suppose is unsurprising. After all, the UC list would be pretty annoying if everyone could promote their cause *du jour* on it. But Banks’ statement, and the underlying tone of the meeting for that matter, was telling in that many people in the UC, and in the student body writ large, *do* think Divest is “militant,” or at least unacceptably coercive and disruptive.

The Crimson’s editorial board, which I nominally sit on, has condemned the movement six times (read it [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)), and criticized its [tactics twice](#), calling the group “radical” and “not open to debate.” Writing for *TIME*, Aaron Miller ’18 [called down the Divesters](#) for “their proclivity for noise and attention.” Ask many other centrist students on campus about the group, and they’ll say that the move away from dialogue and toward action — blockades, lawsuits, *et cetera*—has been counterproductive and petty.

Such opinions mirror that of President Faust who has [excoriated the group](#) for its lack of “civility” and “fairness.” But on the whole, these criticisms reflect an unsophisticated view toward activism and an uninformed view of Divest. The movement—which has combined argument, confrontation, and spectacle—is a model other groups on campus should emulate. In fact, at a time when the [vast majority of causes](#) in Cambridge quickly fizzle and die, the Divest movement, in the most important ways, has already succeeded.

Many will roll their eyes at that statement—some of my friends among them. But consider the evolution of Divest over time. In the fall of 2012, when the group formed, the Divesters started building an intellectual foundation, holding forums, writing in national media, and arranging meetings with the Harvard Corporation’s Committee on Shareholder Responsibility (CCSR), the Harvard Management Company (HMC), and President Faust, among others.

During this phase, the group managed to raise its profile from a small branch of the nationwide Students for a Just and Sustainable Future to the central node of campus environmentalism in America. But by last spring, the movement was fatigued; many of Divest’s so-called ‘teach-ins’ were no longer attracting crowds. Faust was saying nothing substantive in private, and nothing period in public. The meetings with the CCSR and HMC were proving unfruitful. In an interview last spring, pro-Divest professor Jim Engell told me he doubted the HMC’s sustainability officials—who Faust had hired as a concession—had any actual power.

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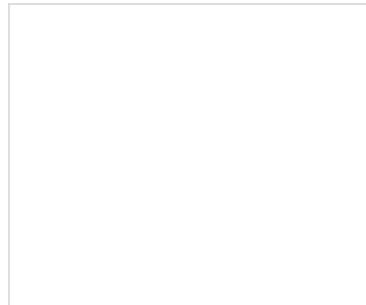
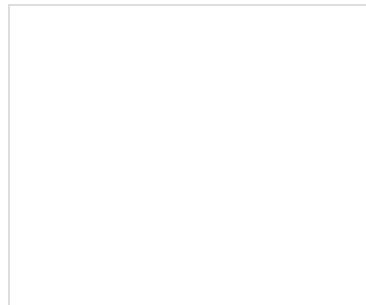
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This is where many causes flatline. But it was here that Divest revamped its tactics, blockading Massachusetts Hall for the first of many times last spring. A few weeks earlier the Divesters had [videotaped an early morning encounter](#) with a frazzled Faust. This winter they filed a lawsuit against the University, [earning prime print space](#) in *The New York Times*, before re-occupying Mass Hall in February.

Recently, during Heat Week, Divest managed to conjure up well more than a hundred students willing to risk arrest in a blockade of both Mass Hall *and* University Hall, and the action, by the time of this article's publication, will have lasted five full days.

People may accuse this kind of work of "militancy." (In an e-mail many saw as disingenuous, Dean of Student Life Stephen Lassonde urged us students to watch out for our "security and safety" in light of the protest.) But when I visited Mass Hall on Thursday, the blockade was just of a bunch of good-natured upperclassmen reading books on Zen and politics and munching on grapefruits. Hippies, they may be. But militants? Certainly not.



During the past week, the group hosted famous environmental activists and writers from Bill McKibben, the founder of 350.org, to Wen Stephenson of *The Nation*—which is to say they've introduced new, powerful intellectual voices to an intellectual community. More importantly, the Divesters have brought the university divestment debate into the international eye, a feat that no recent movement here has managed.

Divest Harvard members Sima Atri and Olivia Kivel at the Friday night march, which attracted more than 600 students, alumni and members of the public.

In the past few days alone, the group has earned serious, in-depth coverage from [National Public Radio](#), [Time](#), [The Washington Post](#), [Bloomberg](#), [BBC](#), [The Guardian](#), the [Financial Times](#), [The Boston Globe](#), the [Chicago Tribune](#), the [International Business Times](#), [WHDH](#), and elsewhere. The group's recent exploits have even gotten its members on [Real Time with Bill Maher](#), and on the [pages of the Grey Lady](#) multiple times. Pretty cool, huh?

Cooler yet, much of the coverage could be described as sympathetic. The stories in [The Globe](#), [Bloomberg](#), and the [Tribune](#) were, in fact, accounts of the intransigence of Harvard's administration in relation to that of other schools, like Stanford and MIT. Evan Horowitz, a policy writer for the *Globe*, even [opined in a second article](#) in that paper that divestment can be effective tactic for stigmatizing the oil industry.

To all this, critics may say that the movement has managed to generate attention and interest, but no action. But attention, with regards to many forms of activism, is really what matters, which Divest knows well. The Divesters are not as naïve as many make them out to be. They know that the University's divestment won't impact Exxon's bottom line; they also know they use fossil fuels every hour of every day. But their goal is not to bankrupt BP, or turn the United States into an ascetic cult. Their goal is to stigmatize the fossil fuels industry or at least foster dialogue about corporate influence on green research and legislation. In doing so, they hope to make the tone of the climate change debate more urgent, more confrontational, more critical.

Regardless of whether divestment was the best way to do this, its proponents have managed to shape the dialogue, the debate, and, in a small way, the political climate surrounding the movement's core issues. In this way, Divest has already succeeded.

I think few students nowadays truly understand Divest's game. Few understand the power of working outside of institutional bounds. But some students do. And it's those students, more than anyone else here, who will change history.

Image credit: Mattea Mrkusic

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