

***Battle Fronts for Social Justice in Higher Education***

***Divestment from Fossil Fuels Investigation***

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**Field Notes 2014-2017**

## Field Notes

Throughout my career I have worked at many institutions of higher learning in senior administration and consultant positions. Those experiences range from small and medium-size private colleges to medium-size regional and large research public universities. I have administered at institutions with titles like vice president and assistant vice chancellor. I have served non-profit organizations as president and chairs of boards. For over a decade I have consulted with a multitude of colleges and universities, creating sustainable brand strategies based on institutional mission, core values, stakeholder engagement and social responsibility.

Despite challenges like decreased state funding for higher education, affordable tuition, a global financial crisis and more, my schools have experienced record enrollment, engaged employees, re-engaged alumni and exponential increases in giving rates. Now those same campuses and others around the world are facing new threats to their image, reputation and viability. Their students are demanding schools be held accountable for issues related to racial justice, gender equality, divestment from fossil fuels, sexual assault, campus carry, colonialism and others.

For the past three years I have investigated a number of social justice movements at colleges and universities to determine the relationship of those movements to institutional image and reputation, and the impact on future enrollment, employment, alumni engagement and giving rates. I will be sharing my observations and insights, as well as battle-tested wisdom and survival skills for campus and student leaders in *Battle Fronts for Social Justice in Higher Education*. This first investigation focuses on the Fossil Fuel Divestment Movement.

### The Investigation of Divestment from Fossil Fuels

A few years ago I was introduced to the divestment from fossil fuels movement on a campus where my team was working. I learned that the university had a significant donor base representing fossil fuel businesses. My questions about what role the fossil fuels energy sector would play in our proposed brand strategy at this university were dismissed. I was intrigued by the speed with which this university voted against divesting from fossil fuels, surprised how off-putting and out of touch responses were from the board to the media, and how student concerns were diminished.

That experience motivated me to learn more about what was happening on other campuses and thus began my comprehensive investigation into the divestment from fossil fuels movement in higher education around the world. In the past three years, I have studied student movements at client and non-client institutions, and embedded myself inside the Fossil Fuel

Divestment Student Network. At the same time my team of consultants has been engaged in dialogue about what a values-based institution of higher learning would look like if it were founded today and how the university would respond when confronted by millennial generation social justice movements.

**Take Away:** Productive dialogue on social activism provide opportunities to take a closer look at institutional mission and core values. Discourse and debate amongst stakeholders leads to strategic development of effective communications, sound policy creation and culture modifications to support current and future debate on social justice.

### **Generations of Conflict**

Just like millennials today, baby boomers in the 1960s and early 1970s engaged in social justice movements on college campuses throughout the United States. The majority of those protests focused on civil rights legislation and the Vietnam War with baby boomers battling campus leaders from older generations. Some of us participated in those movements, others observed and learned from afar. Fellow students burned draft cards, took over campus facilities and left the country. Like millennials today, back then we too advocated a peaceful approach. Our mottos were “Make Love Not War” and “Flower Power.” Now many of these same baby boomer activists are in senior administration and board of trustee positions for colleges and universities, and find themselves on the other side of social justice movements. Some of us are higher education consultants helping campus and student leaders come together to seek peace around a common mission, core values and social responsibility.

Battle lines are being drawn on hundreds of campuses around the world. Millennial students are holding baby boomer leaders accountable and demanding their colleges and universities adhere to a higher standard. Millennial students today believe that it is the moral obligation of senior administration and board of trustees to ensure current and future generations live on a habitable planet. Students are fighting for climate justice and are escalating efforts to force colleges and universities to divest from fossil fuels. Students are taking over campus facilities, singling out administrators and trustees linking them to fossil fuel industries, and sharing their demands and actions in real time on Facebook Live. Students build international networks by seeking common ground with other movements through a strategy of *Intersectionality*, and leverage hashtags like #FossilFree, #Divest, #WhoseSide, #LeadWithUs and #KeepItInTheGround.

**Take Away:** Leaders from institutions of higher learning and student leaders need to understand the generational traits of their respective adversaries and how those traits motivate demands, expectations, actions, decisions and policies.

## **The Fossil Fuel Divestment Movement**

A few years ago the New York City-based NGO 350.org, began working with students on campuses where the fossil free movement was starting to gain traction, in hopes of creating a network of students who would lead the charge for their respective colleges and universities to divest from fossil fuels. To shift their institution's narrative towards climate justice, establish a moral component in the dialogue and press the institution to take a side on the climate justice issue, preferably on the side that divests from fossil fuels.

The student movement nationally started in 2011 on the campus at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, where students were confronted by senior administration and the board who voted not to divest from fossil fuels. A couple of years later and many miles west, Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado chose a different path. That university worked closely with 350.org and university stakeholders to address the issue, and in 2013 became one of the first universities to fully divest from fossil fuels, because the institution's core values warranted it. Since then the movement has gained tremendous momentum on campuses around the world.

In the past year the Divest Student Network has been established as a spin off from 350.org. and operates as an independent, strategic student-managed activist organization. Estimates of more than 50 campaigns are currently taking place on campuses in the United States and several hundred globally. According to its website, 350.org lists over 70 institutions of higher learning from around the world that have divested from fossil fuels in one form or another, with over 40 of those institutions fully divested from fossil fuels.

**Take Away:** The divestment from fossil fuels movement is increasing in scope and energy. Student demands and protests for climate justice continue to escalate.

## **The Battle Cry**

Skirmishes over climate justice often begin when students challenge senior leadership and the board of trustees to publish the institution's endowment, so that the investment from fossil fuels is divulged. This request is often denied by campus administration, in hopes that the perceived few "rebel" students will simply go away. Much to the surprise of administration their denial of transparency of endowment funding is often followed by students mobilizing a sit-in of campus buildings and posting administrator responses, in real time on social media platforms.

Students take offensive postures demanding that their school immediately issue a statement about the policies related to investment from fossil fuel companies and the school's

endowment. If the administration and board do not respond, or it is perceived they are stalling, students often escalate skirmishes by singling out senior administration and board of trustees who have direct ties to fossil fuel companies. In the spring of 2016 students at the University of Massachusetts Amherst produced a series of videos that did just that. Or in the case of Harvard University students, they are now suing the institution. On some campuses, student demonstrators have been arrested by campus security or local police, further escalating skirmishes into a full-blown battle cry for climate justice. These actions, especially when captured on video and posted on Facebook Live, make the college or university appear combative with little respect for their own students.

On other campuses, skirmishes often de-escalate when senior administration and board of trustees issue a timely and thoughtful response. Many schools decide to form an investigative committee comprised of a representative sample of stakeholders including faculty, staff, students, alumni, senior leadership and the board to research divestment from fossil fuels and its relevancy to their institution. Then report back to the board the committee's findings and recommendations. This approach results in accord, and often the decision to divest from fossil fuels like Pitzer College did in 2014.

An increasing number of colleges and universities are taking a deeper look at their mission and core values, and have recognized that divesting from fossil fuels aligns with their purpose and guiding principles. They have voted to divest from fossil fuels. Those institutions, including Syracuse University, Stockholm University, University of Mary Washington and University of Massachusetts System believe it is the right thing to do for their institution and the planet.

To date many institutions have decided that it is not in their best interest financially, politically and maybe socially to divest from fossil fuels. Universities that have voted against divestment from fossil fuels include Cornell University, M.I.T., McGill University, University of Colorado and University of Denver. Some institution leaders have voiced concerns that divestment will dramatically impact local, state or national economies, damage donor relations, reduce scholarships and internships, while others say they do not believe in climate change.

Numerous campuses including Northeastern University, University of California Berkeley, University of California Santa Barbara, University of Melbourne and the University of Northern Arizona are currently engaged in debate and dialogue on whether or not to go fossil free. Skirmishes over climate justice will likely expand onto more and more campuses in the foreseeable future bringing administration, board of trustees, students, alumni, faculty, staff, parents, donors and other stakeholders together to research and battle over climate justice.

**Take Away:** The battle cry for climate justice is part of the larger cry for social justice. Is there a correlation between divestment from fossil fuels and academic reputation?

## Shell Shock

Many institutions are in a panic. Diminished state and federal funding, especially for public research universities, are forcing them to create new avenues to expand their revenue base. To keep the campus afloat and fulfill their fiduciary responsibilities, senior administration and board of trustees are scrambling. In fossil fuels rich states like California, Colorado, Oklahoma, Texas and Wyoming, institutions turn towards donors from oil, gas and coal with the hopes of “sustaining” the financial health of the institution. Colorado currently ranks 48<sup>th</sup> in state funding for higher education, so it is not uncommon for colleges and universities to pick from what they perceive as low hanging fossil fuel fruit.

Adding fuel to the fire, colleges and universities are fighting social justice battles on other fronts in systems that have not changed dramatically since their founding in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. They are in shell shock, scratching their heads, engaged in a dog fight with student activists, not sure whether to accept that student movements are increasingly a part of campus culture, or how best to work with students on re-investment strategies that align with institutional core values and student expectations. Everyone with a laptop, tablet or mobile device can see the shell shock when students capture events and responses on video and post to Facebook and YouTube.

Students are in shell shock when their colleges and universities do not take the appropriate measures to ensure a habitable planet for millennials and future generations. Students are in shell shock when institutional leadership limits the divestment from fossil fuels discussion to the board’s fiduciary responsibility and not enough dialogue and policy development towards the board’s moral obligation to divest from fossil fuels. Students are in shell shock when their college or university votes not to divest from fossil fuels.

**Take Away:** Campus leaders are frustrated and not sure how best to address student movements in the short-term and long-term. Students effectively leverage technology and have an advantage over senior leadership and boards, whose lack of sophistication in the use of technology makes them look out of touch and reactionary.

## The Intersectionality of Social Justice

Students representing the divestment from fossil fuels movement collaborate with student movements from other social justice fronts, including racial justice, gender equality, sexual assault, campus carry, colonialism and others. Collectively, students from these movements identify overlapping aspects from each movement such as race, class and gender, as well as outcomes of discrimination and disadvantage for indigenous peoples and minority groups, to

expand their network and leverage their sphere of influence. We've seen this play out at the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota with the convergence of Divestment from Fossil Fuels, Black Lives Matter and Indigenous Rights movements protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline. This phenomenon, known as *intersectionality*, will increasingly require institutions of higher learning to be thoughtful in their response to students on all fronts and to assess whether institutional brand promises effectively reflect core values related to race, class and gender equality.

Colleges and universities have their own version of intersectionality, especially those in fossil fuels states like California, Colorado, Oklahoma, Texas and Wyoming. A history of extraction has resulted in fossil fuels energy policy interdependence for government, business and financial institutions. The ripples from those relationships expand into the media and institutions of higher learning. Many campus leaders and board of trustee positions are occupied by people from oil, gas, coal and tar sands, as well as from financial institutions and venture capitalists that support fossil fuel industries. These relationships run deep and have sometimes existed for centuries, resulting in enormous fossil fuel investments in colleges and universities, as well as investments from fossil fuels in financial institutions and media companies. Consequently, the thought of divestment from fossil fuels is daunting, not to mention divorce from these relationships seems impossible for many colleges and universities.

**Take Away:** Institutions of higher learning need to better understand and prepare for the concept of intersectionality, and realize students from all social justice movements are looking for opportunities to expand their influence around common values and demands.

### **Fiduciary Responsibility v. Moral Obligation**

In these cross-hairs is the debate over fiduciary responsibility and moral obligation. Board of trustees and their relevant legal counsel, administration, donors and other stakeholders consider the boards' primary duty to be fiduciary, a term that most people do not understand. Its application and interpretation often differs amongst boards and industries. It is expected that boards think of themselves as trust agents for their constituents, serve as stewards of the institution's mission, core values and strategic priorities, and make investments in good faith and manage funds with care.

If the perception is that the board is only looking to invest where the profits seem to be highest or there appears to be self-serving interests, this application of fiduciary responsibilities does not sit well with students and other stakeholders who will escalate their expectations that it is the moral obligation of the board to invest and manage funds from organizations that align

with the institution's mission and values, as well as those who are socially responsible citizens and want to ensure a habitable planet for future generations.

Increasingly students and perhaps state's attorney generals in the future will press colleges and universities to demonstrate they are working towards the Paris Climate Accord that was signed by 195 countries, including the United States on December 12, 2015. The terms of which include:

*Holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, recognizing that this would significantly reduce the risks and impacts of climate change; increasing the ability to adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change and foster climate resilience and low greenhouse gas emissions development, in a manner that does not threaten food production; making finance flows consistent with a pathway towards low greenhouse gas emissions and climate-resilient development. Countries furthermore aim to reach global peaking of greenhouse gas emissions as soon as possible.*

Additionally, all fifty states have enacted some version of the Uniform Prudent Management of Institutional Funds Act (UPMIFA), which governs the management and investment of funds held by not-for-profit corporations. Higher education boards as part of their fiduciary responsibilities for managing and investing the funds, are subject to UPMIFA and must satisfy a standard of prudence when it comes to investing and managing funds. Attorneys General of each state are charged with interpreting and enforcing the Act in their respective jurisdictions and could tie the UPMIFA requirements to the Paris Climate Accord. In other words, Attorneys General could rule that fossil fuels investment is too risky, based on the funds diminished market value or the funds impact on climate change.

Since 2007 over 665 college and university presidents joined the American College & University Presidents Climate Commitment (ACUPCC). Signatories have committed to measure and report their greenhouse gas emissions, take immediate actions to reduce them, and develop and implement a plan to go climate neutral. Students demand that their schools report on actions to date and provide plans for ensuring a habitable planet for future generations.

**Take Away:** Institutions need to fulfill commitments to the ACUPCC and report how they are working towards requirements of the Paris Climate Accord and UPMIFA when making investments and managing funds related to fossil fuels.



## Outlook for the Future

Similarities can be drawn between campus movements today and those from the 1960s. Students from both generations have fought for causes they believe in and demonstrate a passion for their advocacy. Similarities can be drawn between how campus administration has responded to student demands. In the 60s and today, campus leaders and their advisors often limit their thinking to short-term wins, such as how they respond to a local news reporter or dismiss their student's demands in hopes that the situation will solve itself if there is little or no response. In more dramatic fashion, campus leaders in the 60s and today have arrested their students for demonstrating.

There are differences between the 1960s and today's version of student demands. In retrospect, the 1960s students appear to have been more tactical, and campaign or event driven demanding civil rights legislation and an end to the Viet Nam War. Today students are much more strategic and long-term in their thinking and actions. In the 1960s student protests were covered by three or four television stations and reported on the nightly news, or highlighted in a handful of magazines. The story had limited reach. Today technology creates a huge advantage for students in terms of connectivity, communications, collaboration and capturing adversarial response in real time for the world to see on a multitude of platforms. Students do not trust mainstream media and links to fossil fuel advertisers. So students tell their own story.

Depending upon how institutions respond and the growth of intersectionality, future conflicts over divestment from fossil fuels and other social justice issues, movements will escalate to the point where campuses experience the following:

- Students demonstrate during key stages in the new student recruitment process like accepted student days
- Students work more closely with faculty and staff to disrupt the hiring process by weighing in on employment social media sites
- Students and alumni work collaboratively to disrupt athletic events, stop donating their time and no longer donate money to their alma-mater
- Students stop attending graduation ceremonies and alumni return to ceremoniously give back their diplomas
- Millennial faculty and future generation students demand something akin to a tri-governance model comprised of administration, faculty and students
- Parents start protesting on campuses when they believe institutions do not value their sons and daughters opinion, and are not doing enough to ensure their sons and daughters will live on a habitable planet

- When students are arrested, parents assemble with parents from other institutions and form advocacy groups similar to the student-led divestment from fossil fuels
- Parents take action in their communities when they discover that police, energy companies, government agencies or others have infiltrated their sons and daughters movements by posing as advocates when in fact they are on opposing sides
- Millennials will increasingly serve in government positions, as faculty, board members, administration for colleges and universities when and where their demands will more likely be met and become the fabric of communities

The way colleges and universities respond to student demands will impact the institution's image and reputation, ultimately determining where prospective students decide to attend, where prospective employees decide to work, how alumni decide to engage and where prospective donors decide to invest. Brand narratives will need to reflect social responsibility and social justice.

As social justice becomes more of the fabric of institutional culture, college and university faculty, curriculum, programs and majors will reflect this shift. Institutions will redesign their schools and colleges within institutions around social justice categories and provide prospective students with clearer pathways towards career success and greater opportunities to help ensure a habitable planet for future generations. Prospective donors in the alternative energy and related sectors will have greater voice and opportunity to invest. Campus leaders and board of trustees will be viewed less by students as the opponent and more like collaborators in working towards institutional victory.

At the end of the day, students and institutions want the same thing, for their school to fulfill its mission and live its core values. Today, students are requiring institutions to be held more accountable for doing so. Colleges and universities will slowly but surely embrace the fact that times are changing and figure out ways for social justice to become a fabric of institutional mission and values. Similar to what U. S. President Lyndon B. Johnson told the U. S. Congress during the civil rights movement in the 1960s, there is a passing of time.

## **Contact**

Let me know how I can be of assistance in working with you to develop your road map for institutional victory in your battles for social justice. For additional information, go to [www.BrandEDus.net](http://www.BrandEDus.net) or contact Rex Whisman with questions at [rwhisman@BrandEDus.net](mailto:rwhisman@BrandEDus.net).

