

Don't Divest, Educate—An Open Letter to American Universities

Dear American Universities,

You have no doubt heard the calls by certain environmentalist groups for you to publicly divest your endowments of any investments in the fossil fuel industry. We ask that you reject these calls as an attempt to silence legitimate debate about our energy and environmental future.

The leaders of the divestment movement say it is not debatable that the fossil fuel industry is “Public Enemy Number One”—that it deserves to be publicly humiliated by having America’s leading educational institutions single it out for divestment. But the divestment movement refuses to grapple with, let alone educate students about, the staggering, and arguably irreplaceable, benefits we derive from that industry.

The fossil fuel industry produces 87 percent of the energy people around the world use to feed, clothe, shelter, heal, comfort, and educate themselves. It has fueled the unprecedented increase in industrial development, life expectancy, and quality of life we have seen over the last 30 years. And despite received wisdom about our environment and climate, our fossil fueled society has experienced a dramatic improvement in all environmental indicators worldwide, including a staggering decline in the number of climate-related deaths.

We the undersigned are proud to stand in favor of fossil fuels. Based on our honest attempt to reach a balanced, big-picture perspective on coal, oil, and gas, we passionately believe that the economic and environmental benefits of fossil fuels far outweigh the hazards, and that it is not a “necessary evil” but a moral imperative to make use of the most productive, life-giving energy sources available to us at any point in time. But unlike the divestment movement, we do not ask universities to take an official stand in our favor on this complex issue, which requires extensive education and thought—not official dogma and stigmatization.

What we ask for is a more rigorous education on energy and environmental issues. Today’s students do not learn even basic facts about the energy sources that make our civilization possible. But they are encouraged to take strong policy positions on the basis of extremely speculative predictions by individuals and institutions who falsely claim to represent the conclusions of all informed scientists.

As a result, students who have not independently studied the evidence about fossil fuels often exhibit a doctrinaire and intolerant viewpoint toward dissenting opinions. For example, when one of us (Alex Epstein) spoke recently at Vassar College on the benefits and hazards of fossil fuels, the divestment movement did not publicly challenge his arguments despite being invited to do so—they staged a walkout, attempting to pressure their peers into refusing even to hear an “unacceptable” view. To their credit, many Vassar students denounced the movement and were inspired to extensively study and debate the issues.

Universities around the country should follow their example by providing more education and promoting more debate, so that the best ideas can win out.

The undersigned scientists, philosophers, energy experts, and economists are willing to debate anytime, anywhere to defend what we believe is right. If our opponents are willing, then together we can help create a truly educated student body that takes informed positions. If our opponents will not debate but insist on securing your imprimatur to win the argument for them, then please tell them that you are an institution of education—not indoctrination.

Sincerely,

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