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# Justice is the goal: divestment as climate change resistance

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**Abstract** This article takes a sympathetic look at the university fossil fuel divestment movement. The push for divestment is changing the conversation about what “sustainability” means for college campuses. It is also generating a new, more critical and politically engaged cadre of climate activists. We use a shared auto-ethnographic approach from student activists’ and professors’ perspectives to analyze the campus divestment movement based on the experience of American University’s Fossil Free AU campaign. We argue that this issue is one where sustainability politics are re-politicized as they challenge traditional power relations and conceptualizations of what environmentalism entails. The case study explores how a climate justice framework, radical perspectives, and inside/outsider strategies were used within the campaign. We argue that the campus fossil fuel divestment movement holds potential to change the university’s expressed values from complicity with fossil fuel economies toward an emergent paradigm of climate justice, stemming predominantly from student activism. The work presents new vantage points for understanding the relationship of personal experience, local campaigns of ecological resistance, and sustainability politics more broadly.

**Keywords** Divestment · Fossil fuel · Climate change · Higher education · Activism

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Universities and colleges are important sites of political activism and social movement organizing. In the USA, social movements for women’s rights, peace, civil rights, an end to South African apartheid, and many other issues all notably received significant support and impetus from actions by students, staff, and faculty on higher education campuses.

This history and culture of action and activism is seeing new expression today around environmental concerns. In recent years, environmental issues have become mainstream considerations on campuses. They receive attention from many university administrations via commitments to sustainability and reductions in campus carbon emissions. Vibrant student clubs have also sprung up as a way to catalyze and mobilize support for on-campus sustainability activities. Such efforts, though, while important, have done little to illuminate or tackle the underlying drivers of climate change and other forms of large-scale environmental harm. Now, the activist muscle present on campuses is being flexed in new and interesting ways, as a coordinated and sophisticated campaign that seeks to spur universities and other institutional investors to divest from fossil fuel holdings.

In this article, we explore the implications of a growing, more politically engaged resistance to the actions, forces, and structures that are producing climate change. Our contention is that the framing and mobilization surrounding campus fossil fuel divestment campaigns is a response to broader societal failures to meaningfully address climate change—a failure in which colleges and universities, via their large institutional holdings in fossil fuel companies, are complicit. Unlike other recent environmental campaigns and mobilization, which address specific infrastructure projects (e.g., the Keystone XL pipeline) or more general environmental concerns and

consciousness raising (e.g., Earth Day), the campus divestment movement approaches the political economy of fossil fuel exploitation as the foundation for shifting the paradigm of climate change discourse and action.

This paper makes use of the case of American University's student-led fossil fuel divestment campaign—a campaign driven by a broad-based coalition that has gathered under the umbrella “Fossil Free American University” (FFAU)—to examine key themes in the theorizing and practice of university campus-based responses to environmental harm. We highlight three key dimensions of how FFAU has used strategies of political engagement to make climate change issues a potent source of ecological resistance:

1. Development and promotion of a climate justice-oriented framework for the issue of climate change;
2. A radical understanding of and approach to political engagement around environmental concerns; and
3. An inside-outside strategy of exerting pressure upon and simultaneously collaborating with campus authorities.

The following snapshot of the ongoing FFAU campaign provides a glimpse into the evolution of activism that has yet to achieve its stated goal—divestment by American University from fossil fuel company holdings. We explore the campaign's impact on the campus conversation and outlook on climate change and sustainability concerns more generally and suggest that the divestment movement is a newly emergent manifestation of a transformational approach to sustainability issues.

## Methods

The case study presented here is based primarily upon a collective engagement in auto-ethnography and reflexive memory. This methodological approach is aimed at extending sociological understandings by presenting the viewpoints of the author(s) based on personal narrative of experience (Wall 2008). The integration of such auto-biographical and narrative investigations aims to “not only render contingent (and that much more personable and human) the claims to knowledge produced by the discipline but also enable forms of empathetic knowing and solidarity that transcend disciplinary debate” (Mandaville 2011, p. 202). Encouraged by auto-ethnographic and auto-biographical approaches toward the study of politics (Inayatullah 2011; Kumarakulasingham 2014; Neumann 2010), we situate the activism in which we were involved and which our university campus is experiencing within a theoretical framework concerning climate justice and the politicization of sustainability. Our non-traditional methodological format creates a space for individual experience to be examined within the societal and political spheres.

Given that we have co-authored this paper as a team of four individuals, our narratives are distinct and unique but simultaneously reflect our collective interpretations of events. Our methodological process involved dynamic participation within the campaigns discussed herein, sometimes involving roles as organizers, leaders, and participants, and sometimes as sympathetic observers. Early in the life of the FFAU campaign, three of us (Eve Bratman, Kate Brunette, and Deirdre Shelly) decided to start keeping journal-style reflections, which took the form of notes about the campaign, our engagements, and our observations about our own involvement. At that point, the reflections served as a way to record our impressions of a fast-evolving campaign. As we began to plan for this article, our notes and writings were shared as a group and we each wrote additional reflective passages, casting our minds back to key moments in the campaign and to key insights we gained along the way. Our narratives were then coded by topic and further sorted by theme, drawing upon standard ethnographic field note sorting protocols (Denzin 2006; Wall 2008). Then, having collectively identified and discussed central themes, we drew essential parts of these narratives forward into this jointly composed text. We strove to balance our multiple and sometimes differing perceptions and to situate those narratives within a theoretical and analytical framework about the fossil fuel divestment movement. As a team, our insights stem from both shared conversation and multivoiced perspectives, situated within our individual roles as faculty members (Eve Bratman and Simon Nicholson) and students (Kate Brunette and Deirdre Shelly). During our writing process, we endeavored to convey how our varying perspectives are both a product of the different roles we played in the campaign and also of our individuality. While we acknowledge that there are power differentials inherent in the relationships between faculty and students, we worked hard to collaborate in a non-hierarchical manner and to present a coherent discussion concerning the campaign rather than about our singular experiences.<sup>1</sup> Since this was a student-led campaign, we collectively made sure that the voices of the two student authors are strongest and are given primacy in the narrative portions of our account.

Ultimately, our narratives are positioned as a collage of experiences within a case study, portraying what Mike Pearson refers to as “mystory,” in which: “The author identifies with the object of study, acknowledging affiliations and bias, and this drives the research: whilst conventional academic practice is clearly present, it is infused with personal

<sup>1</sup> None of the student authors received course credit, nor were they similarly graded in relation to this work. We occasionally met in person and most frequently collaborated in virtual spaces such as email and video-conference and delineated roles for the case study narrative and data analysis to largely be driven by the student collaborators and theoretical contributions and analysis largely led by the faculty co-authors within a series of iterations of this work.

observations and sources of lay knowledge. The method is emotional, self-reflexive and revelatory” (Pearson 2006). Through these perspectives, we present new vantage points for understanding the relationship of personal experience, local campaigns of ecological resistance, and sustainability politics more broadly. Our discussion reveals the iterative ways in which our experiences and positions, as well as the movement itself, politicize sustainability.

### The environmental politics of higher education and divestment

Worldwide, “greening” and “sustainability” efforts have been gaining in profile and popularity in higher education. For a long while, universities lagged behind governments and businesses in their willingness to adopt and monitor sustainability practices (Ralph and Stubbs 2014; Merkel et al. 2007). While experiments in sustainability within US higher educational settings do have a long historical tradition of attempting to link ecological living with character and community development, achieving sustainability as a response to a planetary emergency is arguably the most important challenge facing higher education (Thomashow 2014). In recent years, in response to increasing demand from students and the arrival of new cohorts of environment-minded faculty and administrators, universities have changed, and now, many are in a race to adopt a “green” mantle. Curriculum and program offerings in sustainability and environmental issues have increased at an astonishing rate: Two-thirds of all environmental science and study programs (undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral) were added since 1990 (Vincent 2009). New standards such as the American Colleges and University Presidents’ Climate Commitment (ACUPCC), the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education’s Sustainability Tracking and Rating System, and the Sierra Club’s “Cool Schools” list reward universities for commitments to carbon neutrality, zero waste programs, “Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design” (LEED) construction for new and retrofitted buildings, and sustainable purchasing policies. These efforts suggest a widening and deepening respect on campuses for the importance of environmental studies and environmental action, and in addition, they provide visibility for universities, attracting new students and donors.

As impressive as this embrace of sustainability by higher education has been, much more remains to be done. International law scholar Richard Falk wrote, in his 1971 book *This Endangered Planet*, of three different orientations to social change, which he labeled system maintaining, system reforming, and system transforming (Falk 1971). The sustainability efforts on most university campuses in the USA have, to this point, been of the system maintaining or reforming variety. Existing university policy, in line with mainstream

“greening” efforts, pumps the brakes on the processes that drive large-scale environmental harm but does little to address them at their roots. Furthermore, environmental policy in higher education is largely depoliticized and pursued independent of intersectional concerns of environmental justice. Environmental justice involves the concerns of both ecological systems and collectivities, encompassing individuals and groups, non-humans, and humans alike; interrelating between and sorting out these different dimensions of human obligations within a justice context is a challenge of deliberative democratic and pluralistic engagement (Schlosberg 2007).

### Climate justice and fossil fuel divestment

The student fossil fuel divestment movement aspires to work in solidarity with the grassroots climate justice movement and centers environmental justice—especially in relation to climate change—in their perspective significantly more than the conservationist and protection-oriented mainstream of the environmental movement of the 1970s (Schlosberg and Collins 2014). The broad idea of environmental justice starts from the principle that “all people and communities are entitled to equal protection of environmental and public health laws and regulations” (Bullard 1996). Environmental justice advocates critiqued mainstream environmental organizations for conceptualizing the environment as existing independent of people and therefore focusing resources on protecting wilderness or endangered species (Wright 2011). Environmental justice advocates instead tend to define the environment as where people “live, work, and play” and demand that environmental action and activism focus on how environmental risks threaten day-to-day life, often with attention to racial inequalities and disparities in environmental harms (Gottlieb 2001; Novotny 2000). The call for environmental justice has since its earliest days served not just as impetus for new forms of environmental activism but also as a critique of mainstream environmentalism, contending that it too often ignores the protection of particular people and populations from social and political abuses (Cole and Foster 2000). As the environmental justice movement predominantly focused on localized impacts of pollution, climate justice activists began in the 1990s to turn their attention to the widespread threat of climate change (Bond 2012).

Traditionally, academics and elite NGOs concerned with climate change have focused their attention on national-level energy and climate legislation and on international climate negotiations. By contrast, the grassroots climate justice community has clearly connected climate justice with the fossil fuel economy, targeting the multinational oil, coal, and gas companies and the governments which support their existence (Moellendorf 2012; Schlosberg and Collins 2014; Shue 1999; Klein 2014). The climate justice movement began to take

shape in the late 1990s and early 2000s. At the first Climate Justice Summit, which was organized around the Sixth Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 2000, activists argued that “fossil fuel companies were responsible for climate change and the already vulnerable—poor communities in urban, rural, and coastal communities already impacted by fossil fuel extraction—would be made even worse off” (Schlosberg and Collins 2014). Tandem condemnation of corporate polluters and activism in support of the populations most affected by their actions orients the “blockadia” strategies of contemporary climate change activists, who take front-line direct action tactics as well as legal battles to leverage opposition to fracking, mining, pipelines, and other “dirty” energy projects (Klein 2014). The climate justice movement is influential as a precursor to the contemporary fossil fuel divestment movement.

The fossil fuel divestment movement can be thought of as a child of the broader environmental justice movement. It had its beginnings at Swarthmore College, when, in 2010, students started the Swarthmore Mountain Justice campaign. They were inspired by Alternative Break trips to Appalachia where students spent time with anti-mountain top removal coal mining activists (Sumka et al. 2015). The students, having read about earlier movements on campuses across the USA to divest from apartheid South Africa and holdings in the tobacco industry, decided that divestment was a tactic they could adopt to organize in solidarity with Appalachian communities impacted by mountain top removal practices. In 2011 and 2012, several other universities and colleges, including Brown University, began their own coal divestment campaigns.

The divestment effort launched as a nationwide (and then global) movement in 2012, with [350.org](http://350.org) and Bill McKibben’s “Do the Math Tour” (Grady-Benson and Sarathy 2015). McKibben’s carbon budget analysis assessed that around 80 % of known fossil fuel reserves must stay buried in the ground if the world is to have a good chance of remaining beneath the climate change threshold agreed to by the international community of no more than 2 °C of atmospheric warming above pre-industrial levels (McKibben 2012). The broad outlines of McKibben’s carbon budget analysis have since been affirmed in a range of academic works, including by the 2014 assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2014). The Do the Math tour call to action echoed the argument made over a decade earlier at the UNFCCC in 2000: The clear culprit of climate change is the fossil fuel industry, and the already poor and vulnerable will be hit “first and worst” within and between nations (McKibben 2012). McKibben’s speaking tour pitched divestment as a tactic to mostly young audiences. His argument was that a “rapid, transformative change,” based on a newly invigorated social movement, was necessary in order to avoid disastrous levels of climate change (McKibben 2012).

The fossil fuel divestment movement aims to respond to continued inaction at the national and international level and puts pressure on specific national governments by morally stigmatizing the fossil fuel industry. Through adoption of the climate justice framework, the divestment movement also embraces the idea of an environmentalism that respects and responds to the needs of the most vulnerable human populations. Even if the political and material entrenchment of fossil fuel industries remains in place, creating a moral crisis over divestment may function to catalyze state actions that would have a greater impact (Parenti 2013). Fossil fuel divestment is meant to do to the carbon polluting industries like coal and oil what the South African divestment push did to the apartheid government—thrust their practices into the spotlight, focus attention on the actors that profit from the status quo, and force moral reevaluation, leading to shifts in political power.

In this way, the fossil fuel divestment movement moves beyond system maintaining or reformist agendas to embrace a “system transforming” orientation (Falk 1975), understanding the fossil fuel economy to be fundamentally unsustainable and unjust, and demanding action by universities and colleges, and, in time, other institutional investors, to catalyze broad-based action. The divestment movement aims to transform the discussion of climate change from a technocratic analysis of carbon emissions to a human-centered narrative calling for systemic change that is both social and economic (Grady-Benson and Sarathy 2015). It asks: how can we move from the path of business as usual (even if that path has been relatively improved by actions taken to date in the name of sustainability), to one that truly brings human actions into line with ecological realities? It is also something of a rebuke to traditional forms of campus greening or at least is calling for a radical extension of those practices, asking, what point is there in having marginally more energy efficient buildings on our campuses if our institutions are not challenging the fundamental sources of pollution problems? The focus on vulnerable people that is central to the climate justice framework has become a rallying point for the activism of the divestment campaign. This justice orientation has also led to the development, as we describe below, of opportunities for new, more broad-based coalitions of student and other groups than has traditionally been seen around “environmental” issues. The fossil fuel divestment movement also represents a divergence from the traditional environmentalism of campus sustainability, insofar as it is based on an explicit call for universities to do the right thing as adversaries of the fossil fuel industry, even if it hurts their (the universities’) bottom lines.

Today, the global fossil fuel divestment movement is considered the fastest growing divestment movement in history (Ansar et al. 2013). It is supported by [350.org](http://350.org), the organization Go Fossil Free, and a host of other groups ([www.GoFossilFree.org](http://www.GoFossilFree.org)). The organizations have been extraordinarily successful in sparking a new movement of environmental activists. As of November 2015, more than

498 institutions, including over 55 colleges, dozens of religious institutions, at least 30 foundations, and well over 40 municipalities, have committed to divest, together representing more than \$3.4 trillion in assets ([www.GoFossilFree.org/commitments](http://www.GoFossilFree.org/commitments)). Notable commitments include Stanford University divesting its \$18 billion endowment of direct investments in the coal industry and, outside the world of higher education, heirs to the Rockefeller oil fortune divesting the Rockefeller Brothers Fund from fossil fuel assets, starting with coal and tar sands (Ball 2014; Fund 2014; Lapin 2014).

We turn now to look at the particular case of the fossil fuel divestment push on the American University campus. We open with a brief review of the campaign. Attention then turns, via the individual and collective reflections of the article's co-authors, to several of the major themes that characterize the Fossil Free American University campaign. Our intent is to situate the campaign within larger process of politicizing sustainability issues in higher education.

### A brief history of the Fossil Free AU campaign

American University (AU) is a mid-sized (around 7000 undergraduates and 13,000 total students) private not-for-profit university in Washington, DC. In recent years, the university has strived actively to become a national leader as a sustainability-focused higher education institution. This aspiration is most notably captured by AU President Neil Kerwin's signing of the American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment in 2008. This commitment set the ambitious goal for the campus to achieve carbon neutrality by 2020. In 2008, the university released a new strategic plan, which articulated sustainability as a part of its ten transformational goals for the next decade. Goal number 7 declares the university's commitment to "Act on our values of social responsibility, service [and] an active pursuit of sustainability" (American University 2008).

Following from the goal, the university created an Office of Sustainability in 2009, adopted a sustainability plan in 2010, and subsequently produced a climate action plan and zero waste plan. The university's sustainability efforts began that same year to be tracked using the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment, and Rating System (STARS). In January 2011, the university published its first comprehensive sustainability report, earning a STARS Gold rating, and in 2014 achieved a record score within that ranking system (AASHE 2015). Other ranking systems have similarly positioned the university at the top of the list: The Princeton Review gave AU the highest possible score in its "Green Honor Roll" ranking, and the Sierra Club scored AU as the number 2 school in the nation for sustainability on its own nationally recognized list (Kaplan and Raman 2014). The university offers more than

1000 courses related to sustainability, with degree programs or a center focused on some aspect of sustainability in six of AU's seven schools and colleges, and many students engage in sustainability-themed and branded activities outside the classroom. The university has also agreed to purchase half of its electricity from a new solar power installation (the university is already purchasing 100 % renewable energy via renewable energy credits), constituting the largest ever solar purchase of photovoltaic power by a non-utility purchaser in the USA (American University Office of Sustainability 2014).

Against this relatively favorable backdrop, student environmental activists at AU began to mobilize for divestment, urging that the university extend its environmental commitments to the university endowment. The FFAU campaign began with the organizational work of several students (including co-author Kate Brunette), many of whom already had histories of environmental activism including protesting the Keystone XL pipeline at the White House the previous year. In the fall of 2012, the on-campus student environmental club Eco-Sense gathered a group of students to Bill McKibben's Do the Math tour. The participants were inspired to demand that the campus administration examine its own financial complicity with climate change due to its endowment-based investments in the fossil fuel industry. At the first meeting of the group, in December 2012, about 30 students were in attendance, as was one professor (co-author Simon Nicholson).

By the spring semester of 2013, the campaign had the explicit support of 80 % of the students on campus. That same semester, a resolution was passed by the Faculty Senate asking the Board of Trustees to consider the proposal to divest the university's endowment from the fossil fuel industry.<sup>2</sup> By the end of that same semester, the university's Board of Trustees and President's office had been moved by the growing FFAU campaign to create an Advisory Committee on Socially Responsible Investment (ACSRI) (Sine 2013). The committee included student representatives from FFAU, as well as faculty members and the campus Director of Sustainability. By the end of the next academic year, Spring 2014, the ACSRI unanimously recommended to the Board of Trustees that the university divest from fossil fuels.

However, despite their recommendation, as well as on-campus marches, rallies, and a string of related events that showed broad-based student participation and support from the campus community, the university's Board of Trustees voted against the divestment proposal in November 2014. A year later, the new chairman of the Board requested a meeting with FFAU and pledged to reopen dialogue on divestment. The FFAU group remains active, alongside other campus

<sup>2</sup> For the referendum and resolution voting results, see: <http://static1.squarespace.com/static/55e5d8e7e4b0bfa49c5f2d56/t/56324bdb4b0008d7da107f7/1446136795524/Spring+2013+Election+Results.pdf> and <http://www.american.edu/facultysenate/upload/05-01-2013-Faculty-Senate-Minutes.pdf>

movements, including Education Not Debt (anti-student debt) and the Darkening (racial justice).

The FFAU campaign participants, especially as the group got off the ground, derived support largely from the student leadership of the Eco-Sense club. This was a constituency that was already slowly shifting from focusing on campus greening, park cleanups, and showing environmental documentaries to more politically oriented efforts, such as organizing groups to become active in objecting to the Keystone XL pipeline issue. Fossil fuel divestment was positioned as a logical avenue by which students could organize for political action on climate change, by engaging the university administration on the question of endowment investments in fossil fuel companies.

An examination of the campaign helps to illuminate the benefits and challenges inherent in attempting to move the environment and sustainability conversations from a focus on campus greening and related activities to a more highly politicized focus on the place of institutions of higher education in the modern fossil fuel economy. In the sections below, we unpack three themes that have been integral to FFAU's work: (1) the importance but also challenges of adopting a climate justice framework; (2) the tensions inherent in a radicalizing of environmental engagement; and (3) the operationalization of an insider versus outsider strategy. The FFAU campaign reveals much about the evolving state of on-campus environmental activism as an increasingly politicized and transformative intervention.

### Theme 1: the climate justice framework

Notions of climate justice are an important component of the wider fossil fuel divestment movement. The Fossil Free American University campaign stands out, however, among campus divestment campaigns for the extent to which it has explicitly leveraged a climate justice framework to build a broad base of student and faculty support. The campaign deliberately frames divestment as a social justice issue, rather than siloing it among other environmental initiatives. This framing has been crucial to the building and strength of the on-campus student coalition.

The founding members of the Fossil Free AU campaign largely drew from two student organizations: Eco-Sense and College Democrats. The campaign quickly evolved to seek a “big tent” approach to campus organizing, however, with climate justice as the central organizing narrative. Deirdre Shelly reflects

*The FFAU leadership would often mention how climate organizing, ‘wasn’t about polar bears—this is about people.’ ... This paradigm means grounding the ways in which we speak about climate change and fossil fuel*

*extraction in the impacts they have on real and marginalized communities.*

Orienting the campaign as one about climate justice turned out to be more than simply a way to understand the need for divestment. The effect of tying the traditionally more narrow conversation around climate change to the much broader and more inclusive conversation around rights functioned to broaden the coalition of groups that were involved in the organizing. The intersections involved in this sort of coalition politics involved the social reproduction of a transformative variety of coalition-based environmentalism, in which intersectionality of interests fostered a more robust activism (Di Chiro 2009; Agyeman et al. 2003). Presenting climate justice as an issue that was mutually attractive and cross-cutting conceptualized the problem of fossil fuel investments in terms of its transformational potential for addressing political and economic inequalities that intersected with the interests of racial minorities and youth (among other groups). As such, the discourse that emerged held wide appeal for mobilization. Through this act of “issue bandwagoning” (Nicholson and Chong 2011), new students and organizations that otherwise did not perceive themselves as environmentally interested became engaged in the campaign:

*By speaking about climate in terms of justice, we were better set up to work with a host of groups on campus: the Student Worker Alliance, multicultural groups, social justice groups, faith groups and even Greek organizations. We can leverage the coalition in many practical ways, but it also bolsters our perspective on climate: that this is an issue not for environmentalists, but for everyone. The notion that just about anyone in the AU community has a reason to support divestment (and thus care about climate change) is very much a given for student organizers. (Deirdre Shelly)*

While the abstracted notions of justice helped in broadening the appeal of the campaign and mobilizing new allies, important questions emerged early in the campaign and became fodder for much debate: climate justice for whom? And, what does climate justice truly look like? These questions extend beyond the FFAU campaign; they are invoked more widely in the environmental justice movement as activists engage with a boundary-pushing frame that more broadly conceptualizes both the environment and justice issues (Schlosberg 2013). For the FFAU student organizers, these were questions that had real implications and often held contradictions, for the manner in which the students and others involved with the campaign viewed themselves and their work.



*The core organizing team for Fossil Free AU was nearly completely white students... While every semester we had an early discussion about how to more actively engage and leverage our coalition groups (including attending their events in support), during my time with the campaign, it remained stubbornly white-washed.* (Kate Brunette)

Through time, the wide embrace of the climate justice frame both bolstered the campaign's external messaging and deepened individual students' commitment to the campaign. The FFAU campaign clearly evolved from spring 2013 (the founding semester) to fall 2015: the climate justice narrative that had grounded the campaign in messaging early on began to appear in practice in actions targeting university leadership. Eve Bratman, a faculty member, reflects on how a rally that took place prior to the Board of Trustees meeting in November 2014 contradicted her previous assumptions about the "privileged" or "sheltered" background of most AU students:

*The student voices were telling stories that directly contradicted my own narrative about shelter, in both the literal sense and the figurative one. A young woman from New Orleans spoke about how her family was displaced by hurricane Katrina. Someone from the Gulf Coast saw the devastation from the BP oil spill, and told the crowd assembled how his town's local economy had been decimated by the pollution. A student from Long Island spoke about how her family was still recuperating from Hurricane Sandy. These stories struck me for their poignancy and visceral descriptions of suffering. The speakers made it clear that climate change is not just about abstract weather models, but about their lives, their families, and their futures. They made clear that these were not just isolated weather events, but that they are the increasing realities of climate vulnerability. The students articulated how these climate events were not one-off incidents, but rather were a product of human-spurred actions and the political and institutional failures of response. The students (although not entirely white, and though I had no idea about their economic backgrounds) struck me as unlikely people to be telling these stories of environmental injustices. But there they were, effectively conveying ideas about disproportionate harms, inadequate institutional responses to climate change, and embodying the next generation of suffering as a result of climate change.* (Eve Bratman)

In addition to these articulations of personally experienced injustices that shattered certain preconceptions about the student body's demographics, the climate justice frame also

functioned in an intentionally strategic way to target some of the core values of the university as an institution:

*As a Methodist university, AU emphasizes a commitment to social justice in its mission statement and strategic plans. By orienting the divestment campaign as a social justice issue, rather than just an environmental one, FFAU situates [our] demands as aligning closely with the university's mission... Since the beginning of this campaign, AU has argued that the endowment is not a tool for political statements. Fossil Free AU has strongly disagreed, arguing that "there is no neutral" and that existing investments in fossil fuel companies in the endowment implicitly support the status quo of dirty energy and increasing climate injustice. The main challenge of this campaign has been to convince the university community at large and especially the Board of Trustees that individual (or in this case, campus-level) actions are insufficient to solve the climate crisis. Broader political action is necessary if the US wants to seriously act for climate justice.* (Kate Brunette)

There seems to be evidence from the campaign that this personal appeal rooted in values has been effective in changing the minds of Board members. Deirdre Shelly reflects on a letter-writing initiative in spring 2015:

*For twenty days, Monday through Friday for a month, we sent each of them [Board of Trustees members] a handwritten letter from a student who had been directly impacted by [fossil fuel] extraction or climate change. Actually, we got feedback one time from a board member on the Finance and Investment committee who told us how touching the letters were. ... As much as these letters were intended to pull on the heartstrings of Trustees, they also did a lot to motivate our core campaign members. Recognizing why we were working on these issues, and sharing those reasons with the broader community was cathartic and inspired other students to see the issue in a more personal and urgent light.*

Fossil Free AU successfully leveraged a climate justice framework to build a broad student coalition and frame the argument for divestment as one of the values core to American University's Methodist mission. Still, building a coalition is never straightforward. The same framework that facilitated a big tent approach to student organizing presented ideological and intellectual tensions within the campaign. The core questions that divided student organizers are the same questions facing the broader environmental movement: to what extent does meaningfully addressing climate change require a revolutionary reimagining of our economy and society? And if so,

to what extent are confrontational, direct action tactics necessary to achieve that change? In the next section, we will explore how the big tent approach and the “radical” nature of the politics underlying it have been in tension since the beginning of the campaign.

## Theme 2: radicalizing environmental engagement

In the time the FFAU campaign has been active, it has incorporated students from a variety of political affiliations. Informal conversations suggest that many members of the campaign feel that their understandings of what it takes to generate effective political action have been sharpened through their work on divestment. Still, many campaign members entered the campaign considering their work only loosely “political,” often unaware, at least in the early stages, of the underpinning idea that divestment takes aim at larger political and economic forces of capitalism.

The Fossil Free AU campaign initially drew from the environmental community on campus and was positioned as the next logical sustainability step for a university already committed to progressive environmental initiatives. Kate Brunette notes that: “Pitching the idea of a fossil fuel divestment campaign to environmentally minded students was a relatively easy sell.” Yet as the campaign advanced, students began to critically examine the ramifications of divesting from fossil fuels on a broad-based scale. The same climate justice framework that facilitated recruitment of diverse student organizations also necessitated some explicit reckoning with the politics and power dynamics of the carbon-based economy. As the climate justice narrative deepened, so did internal discussion and understanding of the radical nature of divestment. For student activists, politically stigmatizing the fossil fuel industry and creating space for meaningful political action on climate change meant drastically reimagining a world without fossil fuels. Focusing on campus investments in fossil fuels paved the way for conversations about the political economy of fossil fuels and the potential social, political, and ecological implications of a fossil fuel-independent future. Deirdre Shelly explains that

*The students who make up the Fossil Free campaign come from various places on the ideological spectrum. From free-market greens to anti-capitalist radicals, the campaign has been able to attract a wide range of students and has never collectively tried to situate the campaign within one ideology. Radicalization was certainly never an intentional, group conversation. A handful of student organizers who had a more radical bent, of course, always pushed campaign conversation to the left. But, in part due to its coalition structure, Fossil Free AU has always seen itself as a “big tent” campaign and community.*

The political engagements of the campaign were radical in the sense of Angela Davis’ notion of radicalism as “grasping things at the root”; the framework of climate justice provided a core set of understandings that on both social and ecological grounds, inequitable harms and risks were perpetuated through a set of economic logics that fundamentally discounted or ignored climate change.

While the campaign participants’ opinions were diverse concerning the utility of different tactics of engagement and the merits of different strategies for tackling the issue through contentious politics, the underpinnings of a radically engaged politics remained a common current within the campaign’s framing as a climate justice issue, despite the negative association some students held with the idea of radical political engagement itself.

*.... ‘Light green’ and less politicized students will need to be convinced to stay involved when things start to get explicitly political and confrontational.... If divestment campaigns want to win, they will need those people — those who care about climate but are new to radical politics — to commit to direct action and other types of work. But I think definitely for the first phase of any campaign and certainly for FFAU, we needed that big tent to be legitimate. (Deirdre Shelly)*

In the above, Deirdre, a student leader of the campaign, suggests coalition organizing as a step that can be a precursor to a more radically engaged political mobilization. This engagement, which transcended most traditional political boundaries, draws upon a sustainability governance approach through extending beyond traditional conservative/liberal, left/right, and Democratic/Republican political affiliations (Thomashow 2014). For Kate, who also was a student organizer in the campaign, situating the campus as a sphere for political radicalization in this context is unsurprising: [At AU], “conversations about privilege, oppression, and racism permeated the academic discussion” (Kate Brunette). The Fossil Free AU campaign successfully engaged students on a personal and political level, building on intellectual conversations happening inside and outside of the classroom. Specifically, academic relationships between student organizers (including authors Brunette and Shelly) with professors (including but not limited to authors Bratman and Nicholson) fostered critical engagement with questions of social, political, and economic power structures. On a personal level, Kate Brunette reflects

*I don’t think I would have been inclined to think critically about the economics of climate change without the groundwork in classes led by Professors Nicholson and Bratman... What’s more, Professors Nicholson and Bratman taught me to think about economics, politics,*

*development, and climate change at a systems level. .... Making the leap to understanding climate change as a justice issue was the next step.*

This justice orientation and mobilization was not something that could have been taken for granted, however. Eve Bratman noted that “while our student body is highly politically engaged, it struck me that it was rather infrequent that there were actual protests on campus.” The university’s website boasts that its students are “among the country’s most politically active” (American University 2014), but the character of that activism, as Eve Bratman perceives it, is often manifested in student pursuits of internships and studying politics rather than on-campus mobilization.

Once the FFAU campaign gained traction, students pushed each other to develop coherent intellectual positions, largely because they were structurally encouraged to do so through the broad coalition of engagement and because of the increasingly high-profile meetings and engagements with institutional committees and university trustees. Kate Brunette describes this as a process of “deep learning and reflection that happened well beyond the walls of any classroom... getting students involved in a tangible, local action facilitated broader intellectual discussions.” Kate further reflects that

*I do think it resulted in radicalizing people. It definitely changed my outlook and what I want to work on for the rest of my life. I one hundred percent believe that was a result of the campaign. I was getting there in my academic course work and having good professors but the conversations I had within this campaign, trainings I went to and going to Powershift, all of that, totally influenced me and I'm not the only one. For everybody who's not going to change their minds and who's always going to be some of the light greens, I think there were a lot of people it totally changed how they're working.*

Deirdre recalls

*Like most students who join divestment campaigns, I did not come with a radical analysis of today's political economy. I had never heard the phrase “climate justice,” had no understanding of coalition politics and had no experience organizing on a campus—or anywhere. I was a student, frustrated with widespread failure to act on climate, looking for something to be committed to. My radicalization and politicization can't be told in a single anecdote. It happened slowly, during casual conversations after long meetings, through articles I read for the campaign and small moments of insight where I started to see political change in new light.*

The radicalization of students involved in the Fossil Free AU campaign can be understood through a lens of engagement with the structural political economy of environmental action. As such, the FFAU campaign represents a significant way in which sustainability efforts on campuses are politicized in ways that extend beyond the traditionally individualized approach that has long characterized environmental activism in the USA.

The climate justice framework that increasingly anchored the Fossil Free AU campaign facilitated a clear understanding among student organizers that the campaign signified a politicized resistance to the climate crisis. The university’s official Climate Action Plan set forward a means to reduce AU’s carbon footprint in an individualized way; in contrast, the Fossil Free AU campaign demanded the university take a position on the carbon economy. Students giving testimonials at Board meetings and rallies understood on a very personal level that carbon neutrality at the university level was an insufficient response to personally experienced tragedies of oil-polluted waters in the Gulf of Mexico, land and water contamination fears experienced in the fracking fields of Pennsylvania, or the hurricane-battered boardwalks and homes of New Jersey.

At its core, the divestment movement nationally demands the immediate transition away from the fossil fuel economy and radicalizes our understanding of previously “neutral” investment practices. It understands that individual responses that do not directly challenge the political legitimacy of the fossil fuel industry, even if made at the scale of universities, will be insufficient in meaningfully combating climate change. Therefore, the divestment movement asks, if the fossil fuel industry is the primary obstacle to transitioning to a just and truly sustainable future, how can a university’s investment in said industry be considered ethical? It politicizes the endowment portfolio, which is a component of university practice that is traditionally ignored in campus discussions of sustainability.

The intellectual radicalization of the campaign occurred alongside a transition toward more confrontational tactics, which we will discuss in the next section. The campaign transitioned from traditional outreach (including petitioning and hosting informational panels) to more aggressive campaigning both within and outside of sanctioned university forums and spaces.

### **Theme 3: inside versus outside strategy**

Some fossil fuel divestment campaigns on other campuses have limited themselves solely to an “inside” strategy, working through official university channels in order to accomplish their goals (Georgetown University, for example). On the other hand, recent and unrelated campaigns on American University’s own campus have refused to engage at all with student government

or administrators, preferring instead to work “outside” the official channels as activists. Noting that at AU, this strategy has yielded only several short-lived campaigns, members of the FFAU campaign purposefully embraced a strong set of tactics that saw (and continue to see) the group operate both inside and outside the decision-making bodies on campus. The inside and outside strategies inform each other and facilitated the big tent structure, allowing students from a variety of political leanings to engage each at a level with which they are comfortable.

In conjunction with the growth and diversity of engagement tactics, students and faculty alike who were involved with the campaign experienced certain constraints because of their various positions within the university. The student-led campaign positioned itself in opposition to university administration and the Board of Trustees, with sympathetic faculty often caught in the middle. Professors (including co-authors Bratman and Nicholson) who facilitated the intellectual orientations of students within the classroom at times felt constrained from expressing outright support of student actions, especially as some student-led tactics directly violated codes of conduct. These constraints informed their relationships to transgressive direct action and expressions of political viewpoints.

The tension within the campaign about the degree to which divestment was considered a “radical ask” was reflected in the types of tactics used to achieve its goals. Kate Brunette reflects on how Simon Nicholson, a faculty member, anticipated that transgressive tactics would be necessary within the campaign and discussed tactics with the FFAU student leadership early on:

*We knew from the beginning of the campaign (I remember Professor Nicholson telling us at the beginning of the campaign) that we were going to end it in sit-ins, occupations, walkouts, etc. But to arrive at that point, we agreed we should work through all ‘official’ channels first to demonstrate legitimacy and to justify the necessity of escalated action when inevitably ‘official’ channels would be insufficient to achieve our goals.*

Simon, for his part, remembers encouraging students to take the helm of the campaign at this first meeting, as he was cognizant of the professional risks, constraints, and relatively weak political leverage he faced as a faculty member. From this starting point came a clear sense of the need for and likely efficacy of a well-developed inside/outside strategy for the campaign. Deirdre reflected

*At the beginning, the campaign was very tame, which helped us to build a broad coalition of student groups who were not otherwise committed to protests or escalated action. As the semesters progressed, more and more direct ‘outside’ actions were taken. The “outside*

*game” consisted of escalated actions such as banner drops, marches and rallies, a silent protest outside a February Board of Trustees meeting that successfully drew over 70 students at 7:30 am on a Friday and occupation of the space outside the Board room at the May meeting. The goals of the outside game became, through time, to increasingly disrupt the Board meetings to increase [the sense of] student pressure.*

As the outside actions escalated, the FFAU campaign made, at one and the same time, greater and more significant efforts in engaging with decision-makers on the inside. Kate Brunette reflects on her personal efforts working the inside strategy, which included several personal meetings with members of the Board of Trustees, who typically insulate themselves from contact with students:

*The “inside game” focused on the ACSRI, meetings with [Dean of Student Life] Dr. Hanson and [American University] President Kerwin, and when possible, meetings with board members themselves. As a member of the ACSRI, I was able to present a status report of the committee at the February meeting of the Finance and Investment Committee of the Board of Trustees. I also leveraged my role as student chair of the ACSRI to meet with trustees ... personally.*

These inside and outside strategies were complementary and mutually beneficial. Deirdre explains how the campaign is structured to handle these different avenues:

*Meetings, even now, are often divided into “inside” and “outside” conversations, working groups and tactics. This delineation, which is rarely implicitly analyzed or challenged, has been a bedrock of the campaign’s longevity and success. Engaging inside decision makers and conducting research attracts students who are usually interested in policy and only official avenues to create change. Building pressure and power through outside actions, on the other hand, involves more radical students who are comfortable with confrontation, though might not have the patience for lobby sessions and lessons in endowment finance.*

This internal structure supported the big tent framework adopted by the campaign from the beginning. United by a commitment to climate justice, students from diverse political leanings and degrees of intellectual engagement could find individual roles aligned with their personal comfort levels. Deirdre notes that

*‘Direct action gets the goods’ is another frequent line of the campaign, and lead organizers have always*

*understood that without pressuring your target, you inside efforts would be insufficient. Our outside actions, whether confrontational or larger mobilizations, are always informed by our inside strategy. We escalate as we see fit, based off of the progress we are (or aren't) making with our Board.*

Clear and open communication within the campaign about both inside and outside decisions kept all members on the same page about what was happening and why. Students (such as sympathetic student government representatives and student trustees) who sat inside Board meetings communicated the tenor and outcome of the discussion to the campaign, informing follow-up actions.

For some students, there was a linear progression from a climate justice narrative to a radicalization of personal politics to participation in direct action against the university. Kate explains how, as a student activist, she understood the tensions between climate justice, radicalization, and tactics informing participation along three distinct but related lines:

*One is the level of comfort with the level of action you're willing to take on a direct action scale, another axis is your personal ideology and what you believe, and then another axis is to what extent you even engage with ideology and engage intellectually with what you're working on. There are people there who were there because that's who their friends were and that's the community they were a part of. The extent to which our campaign was successful was the extent to which there was flexibility organizationally to accommodate all of those different perspectives and levels of comfort.*

However effective the inside/outside structure may be, it also presents personal challenges for team members who must navigate their own personal comfort levels when deciding how to engage with the campaign. In particular, engaging with direct actions involved students and professors alike stepping outside of their university-approved roles. Kate, who at the time of the FFAU campaign was also a finalist candidate for the prestigious Truman Scholarship, notes

*The tension between our inside game and our outside game is one I felt strongly... I personally needed a lot of reassurance that the actions we were taking were necessary and that there would be minimal retribution from the school. Although I knew logically that it was highly unlikely we would get into any real trouble with the campaign, even just scolding conversations or disapproving looks from administrators made me uncomfortable. However, I believe strongly that for an inside/outside strategy to be effective, the people working the inside like myself must understand the purpose*

*and value of outside pressure and believe wholeheartedly in the mission of the campaign.*

Similar fears and constraints were faced by faculty members and administrators, who encouraged students to not only remain at the leadership forefront of the campaign but also to have a significant role within the inside roles such as the ACSRI. Eve, a faculty member, reflects

*At every turn, I felt competition between roles I play on campus as an educator, role model, activist, and employee. More often than not, those different relationships involved navigating a path where I was actively transgressing traditional boundaries between those roles, so that they instead could be mutually supportive of each other.*

The increasingly politicized university environment for confronting sustainability issues was evident on levels that involved inside as well as outside, rule-breaking tactics. At the commencement ceremony, orange felt squares, symbolic of the divestment campaign, were worn on gowns by students and faculty alike. The movement's tactics were less polite, at other times—student-led chants were irate in tone at a protest outside of American University President Neil Kerwin's office: "That's bullshit, get off it, we do not want Exxon's profits"; "Kerwin, get off it, put students over profit"; and "Kerwin, come out, we have got some shit to talk about!" At times, faculty members who supported the campaign were approached by students to take part in various forms of activism; Eve recalls considering a request to be photographed by a student involved in the campaign:

*Did I want my face plastered on the side of the building where I worked, calling for divestment, in some act of low-level property damage at my own place of employment?... I encouraged the student to think about whether a wheat paste mess was in fact necessary for the poster, and asked her to consider who would have to clean it up, and encouraged her to think about digital projections of images instead of paper ones.*

Deirdre Shelly describes how

*I elected to work on both the inside and outside teams. I attended meetings with the student government president, the University president and Board Chairman. I helped do research on university finances, fossil free markets and social movement theory. At the same time, I was leading action planning. I spent many hours on campus roofs working out the logistics of banner drops, recruiting students to rallies and finding events where Fossil Free AU could bird dog*

administrators. Working on both teams gave me appreciation for the breadth of work necessary for a successful campaign.

These reflections illustrate how the positions of faculty and students alike faced discomforts and struggled with the balance between the “ask” for divestment and the “climate justice” narrative, weighing an ideologically radical set of values against something that was framed as financially logical, widely acceptable, and politically pragmatic for the university as an institution. The campaign’s reliance on students to be at the helm of the leadership for the divestment issue allowed for the creation of a campaign that had considerable flexibility in its influence. Students had a greater degree of institutional leverage to protest without fear of recrimination and were able to form the broad coalition of interests that ultimately comprised the Fossil Free AU campaign. By utilizing faculty as a way of raising the profile for the campaign and by having sympathetic faculty play roles as informal advisors, the campaign organizers found ways to incorporate different stakeholders into their cause according to the various constraints and levels of comfort of a wide range of participants. These tactical choices allowed organizers to garner credibility through creating spaces for the more conservative activism of research and committee-based recommendations to be articulated. At the same time, the outside game-oriented tactics utilized transgressive forms of activism to exert influence in the form of protests, petitions, sit-ins, and the like. No single tactic was entirely comfortable to every participant, given the nature of the demands and the foundational commitment to the climate justice framework as a big tent approach. Still, the deployment of both sets of tactics was instrumental in maintaining a certain coherence of the ideologically radical ask that underpins the divestment movement with the big tent inclusionary strategy that was implied by the climate justice framework and coalition-building efforts of the campaign.

## Conclusions

Board of Trustees President Jeffrey Sine announced at a campus town hall meeting in November 2014 that the university would not be divesting from fossil fuels. Instead, he suggested that American University could do more in service of sustainability by continuing with its present endowment investment strategy and focusing additional attention on campus energy efficiency, degree offerings, and the creation of a new “Green Investment Fund.” At present, the American University Board of Trustees’ decision involves a narrow interpretation of their

responsibilities as fiduciaries, focused solely on the potential costs and returns of different endowment investment options.<sup>3</sup> While FFAU frames divestment as an essentially moral issue and as a pragmatic response to social injustice, the Board of Trustees’ public explanation of their choice to maintain the current endowment investment portfolio ultimately hinges upon a litigious detail and entrenches an environmental politics about “global warming” and “green commitments”:

*We know that some AU community members are disappointed that the board has chosen not to divest. However, ACSRI’s work and recommendations from the campus community have inspired vigorous discussions and prompted the board to look at meaningful ways to remain true to AU’s values and support of green initiatives without jeopardizing the board’s fiduciary responsibilities. The divestment movement has highlighted the challenges of global warming as an issue requiring serious thought and ongoing action at AU. The board expects continued constructive dialogue about ways the university can pursue investment and engagement to address global warming.* (Sine 2014, p.4)

As the above statement illustrates, the institution’s response to the divestment issue is one that discursively positions the university’s sustainability commitments as recognizing the importance of climate change, but it does so within a business-as-usual sustainability framework characterized by the green economy discourse. As other scholars have noted, the green economy discourse functions in distinction to in a more system change-oriented notion of sustainability through climate justice (Bullard and Müller 2012).

The university’s formal response to date thus has been characteristic of higher education’s mainstream sustainability efforts rather than transformative, as the climate justice framework would suggest. Such an approach is, perhaps, understandable from so conservative a body as a private university’s Board of Trustees. It is, though, an approach that is ripe for reconsideration: Business as usual is no longer viable as an option if 80 % of known fossil fuel reserves are to remain buried beneath the earth, so as to avoid complicity with causing climate change. The FFAU campaign is asking the Board to do something extraordinary. The step of adopting a system-

<sup>3</sup> The university’s investment advisors, Cambridge Associates, did make clear that a withdrawal of endowment investments from fossil fuel companies would be possible, but management fees were estimated to double by \$1.1 million per year. Since investment in a divested portfolio could not be assured to be financially insignificant for the university, the board decision concluded that “DC law surpassed the relevance of other considerations, including compelling arguments both for and against divestment the DC law concerning fiduciary responsibility.” Sine, J. A. 2014. Fall 2014 Board of Trustees Meeting – Sustainability & Fossil Free Discussion and Decision. ed. A. U. Community. Washington DC: American University.

maintaining to a system-transforming understanding has, so far, been a bridge too far at American University.

Still, the FFAU campaign goes on, building from its many successes to date. The entire conversation about what it means to be a sustainability-oriented institution of higher education has transformed on our campus. A growing cadre of students has found a voice in a vibrant global movement, and many American University students are emerging as leaders in that movement. New and constructive alliances between students, faculty, and administrators have been forged. And, the Board of Trustees may yet be nudged toward a different position in regard to the endowment's investments in fossil fuels.

One thing that has become abundantly clear during the campaign is the extent to which a new generation of activists is eschewing older understandings of conservation and nature protection in favor of a growing focus on climate justice. This evolution of environmental activism has been much noted and certainly warrants greater attention. Climate change is becoming less abstract a notion as identifiable people and populations, visible to those in power, experience directly some of the impacts associated with a warming world. The FFAU campaign suggests that such experiences can drive people to move beyond important first steps like tackling personal energy consumption and move on to sustained, focused, and impactful political action.

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