



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Barnard College wins divestment from fossil fuel companies, 2013-2017

- Fossil Fuel Divestment Movement (2010 -)

October

2013

to: March

2017

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: New York, NY

Location Description: Barnard College

Goals:

For the Barnard Board of Trustees to divest from fossil fuel companies that denied climate change or do not support efforts to mitigate the impacts of climate change.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions

Methods in 2nd segment:

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › Photography campaign
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 050. Teach-ins

Methods in 4th segment:

- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 050. Teach-ins

Methods in 5th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 050. Teach-ins

Methods in 6th segment:

- 050. Teach-ins

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- Women
- students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Divest Barnard

External allies:

Reinvest Dickinson

Divest Middlebury

Divest Smith College

Seven Sisters Coalition to Divest

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Divest Barnard

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Investure Schools' Coalition
- Presidential Taskforce to Examine Divestment

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 7 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Board of Trustees

President Debora Spar

Campaigner violence:

No campaigner violence.

Repressive Violence:

No repressive violence.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

Divest Barnard achieved their goal when the Board of Trustees voted to divest from companies that deny climate change and companies that mine coal and tar sands in March of 2017.

Although Barnard College was part of Columbia University, the two institutions maintained separate endowments. As a result, BCD split into Columbia Divest for Climate Justice and Divest Barnard in the Fall of 2014. Next semester, in the Spring of 2015, Divest Barnard formally launched their campaign for Barnard College to divest from fossil fuels.

The beginning stages of the campaign consisted mostly of education and awareness raising initiatives. For example, Divest Barnard hosted teach-ins every semester and tabled frequently in public spaces with informational pamphlets. They also created a petition to be sent to the Barnard Administration and Board of Trustees, which ultimately amassed 27,618 signatures. Divest Barnard also organized a photo campaign, taking pictures of students with their reasons for supporting divestment. Some photos read, "Divest from Fossil Fuels because there are better green alternatives," and "women are 80% of climate refugees." Additionally, they organized a "Fossil Fools Day" event on 1 April, and continued their photo campaign. The day included taking photographs of students holding a sign that said "Don't be a fossil fool" with the Divest Barnard logo on it and creating a YouTube video featuring students, who shared reasons they thought the school should divest.

After gaining a significant presence on campus, Divest Barnard met with members of the Board of Trustees and President Debora Spar. They discovered that an asset management group named Investure LLC managed Barnard's endowment in a consortium with 13 other colleges. Divest Barnard reached out to three of the member institutions and created the Investure Schools' Coalition made up of Divest Barnard from Barnard College, Reinvest Dickinson from Dickinson College, Divest Middlebury from Middlebury College, and Divest Smith College from Smith College. The Coalition then released a public letter demanding the presidents of the four colleges meet and release a unified divestment statement: "With our unique position in the global community in mind, and recognizing the unacceptable social and environmental exploitation inbedded in the fossil fuel industry, we call on you to stand with your students and take all necessary steps toward divestment."

The presidents of the four colleges met, but when President Spar stated she wanted to consult with the Board prior to making an official statement, Divest Barnard escalated their actions. They met with President Spar and Investure LLC multiple times, who

repeatedly told the students that only the Board could ultimately make decisions about divestment. In October 2015, Divest Barnard attended the Board's annual retreat with signs about divestment. For the entire day, they organized a speak-out and rally outside of their meeting. That November, Divest Barnard was allowed to speak with the Investment Committee of the Board of Trustees; they presented their case for divestment at the annual multi-college Seven Sisters Conference about fossil fuel divestment; and they created a Student Government Association (SGA) referendum on fossil fuel divestment. Of the 24% of students that participated in the referendum, 96% voted yes on divestment.

In December 2015, Barnard's Board of Trustees unanimously voted to create the Presidential Taskforce to Examine Divestment. The Taskforce included various college administrators including the Chief Operating Officer (COO) and Vice President (VP) for Finance, three trustees, three professors, two Divest Barnard student representatives, and three SGA representatives. The Task Force aimed "to work collaboratively with a cross-section of the Barnard community to assess the financial implications of divestment; to understand Barnard's ethical responsibilities as a good global citizen in dealing with the impact of climate change; and to make a determination about the compatibility of these priorities."

Divest Barnard representatives met with the members of the Taskforce on a weekly or biweekly basis for the remainder of the semester. With the creation of the Taskforce, and after a semester focused on educating the Barnard community about the imperative of divesting from fossil fuels, Divest Barnard began to focus more on direct actions. In December of 2016, the Presidential Taskforce to Examine Divestment released a final report to the Barnard College Board of Trustees Committee on Investments recommending Barnard divest from "all fossil fuel companies that deny climate science or otherwise seek to thwart efforts to mitigate the impact of climate change." Ultimately, Divest Barnard achieved their goal in March of 2017 when the Board of Trustees voted to divest from companies that deny climate change and companies that mine coal and tar sands.

Research Notes

Sources:

Advisory Committee on Socially Responsible Investing. 2014. Columbia University Finance Gateway. "Response to Request from Barnard Columbia Divest." May. Retrieved March 5, 2019. (https://web.archive.org/web/20190305024352/https://finance.columbia.edu/files/gateway/content/sri/Final_Response_BCD.pdf).

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[1] <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/wave-campaigns/fossil-fuel-divestment-movement-2010>

[2] <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/mainly-or-initiated-student-participants>