



Global Nonviolent Action Database

Published on *Global Nonviolent Action Database* (<https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu>)

Columbia University students win divestment from private prison companies, 2014-2015.

Time period notes: The campaign took a break from May 2014 - August 2014 for summer break.

February

2014

to: 27 April

2015

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: New York City / New York

Location Description: Columbia University

Goals:

There were three main goals: for the University to divest all shares in two private prison corporations (CCA and G4S), for Columbia's fund manager to contact the 36 other firms that the school's endowment was invested in and ask them to also divest from CCA and G4S, and for Columbia to publicize its full financial portfolio.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support › Open letter to University President Lee Bollinger urging divestment from prisons
- 015. Group lobbying › call-in to President Bollinger's office and the office of the Chief Investment Officer
- 050. Teach-ins › Divestment 101 Teach-in

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support › Second letter to President Bollinger

Methods in 3rd segment:

Methods in 4th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support › Fourth letter to President Bollinger
- 002. Letters of opposition or support › Third letter to President Bollinger
- 006. Group or mass petitions › Petition for a referendum on divestment from private prisons to appear on the next campus election ballot
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › students held signs which said their own reasons for wanting Columbia to divest
- 016. Picketing

Methods in 5th segment:

- 016. Picketing

- 178. Guerrilla theatre › die-in

Methods in 6th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support › Fifth letter to President Bollinger
- 038. Marches
- 175. Overloading of facilities

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Black students
- College students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Asha Rosa CC'17

Columbia Prison Divest

Partners:

Columbia Prison Reform & Education Project

Columbia University Students Against Mass Incarceration (SAMI)

Black Students Organization (BSO)

Columbia Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP)

Radical C.U.N.T.S.

External allies:

unnamed Black organizers in Harlem

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Columbia Prison Divest
- black students

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

- Advisory Committee on Socially Responsible Investing
- University Senate's Student Affairs Committee

Segment Length: 2.6 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

President Lee Bollinger

The Trustees of Columbia University

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Police attended the CPD die-in supposedly to intimidate protestors.

Campaigner violence:

No campaigner violence.

Repressive Violence:

No repressive violence.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

5 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

CPD achieved its goals of divestment from CCA and G4S as well as the goal of contacting the 36 other firms that the school's endowment was invested in with recommendations of divestment from CCA and G4S. However, Columbia's full financial profile is still not accessible to the public or to Columbia students.

In February of 2014, CPD took public action and called on President Lee Bollinger to divest from private prison companies. On 3 February 2014, CPD wrote and delivered a letter to President Bollinger with three demands. First, they called on the University to divest all shares in CCA and G4S. Second, they demanded Columbia's fund manager contact the 36 other firms

that the school's endowment was invested in and ask them to also divest from CCA and G4S. Third, they requested Columbia publicize its full financial portfolio. The letter ended by requesting a response from President Bollinger by 7 February and a meeting by 14 February. The letter was also made into a petition on Change.org, which amassed 1,292 signatures by April of 2015.

President Bollinger did not respond to the letter by 7 February, so on 8 February, CPD organized a call-in to President Bollinger's office and the office of the Chief Investment Officer. From February to April, CPD hosted teach-ins, passed out informational zines and pamphlets, and sold stickers and shirts on campus.

Still without a response from President Bollinger, on 17 April, CPD sent him a second letter demanding a response. During April, CPD activists contacted Ursula Bollini, the Associate Director of Finance Communications and Socially Responsible Investing from the Advisory Committee on Socially Responsible Investing (ACSRI), which consults with university trustees on endowments regarding social issues. Bollini set up a meeting with CPD for the following October.

Next semester, on 26 September, CPD held a rally on campus. Three days later, on 29 September, CPD heard back from Bollini. She said that the ACSRI Chair had resigned, and the meeting with CPD, which had originally been scheduled for 7 October, would be indefinitely delayed as a result. Two weeks later, Columbia hosted the annual World Leaders Forum, and CPD activists held a rally outside of the meeting, again demanding a meeting with President Bollinger.

On 9 October, CPD released a third letter demanding that President Bollinger meet with the group. In the letter, CPD expressed frustration that despite trying to engage in the University's formal process for divestment concerns with ACSRI, there was no Chair of the committee at the moment. They wrote, "we are also determined to seek recognition from our President, who we see as our representative within this institution." President Bollinger did not respond to this letter either.

CPD delivered their fourth letter to President Bollinger on 22 October while holding a silent protest outside of his Freedom of Speech and Press course. Students held signs outside of the classroom with reasons they wanted Columbia to divest from CCA and G4S. As President Bollinger walked out of his class, activists dropped a banner that read "Columbia Prison Divest: Meet With Us." During the banner drop, a member of CPD read a list of the names of people who had been killed by police since the group first demanded a meeting with President Bollinger on 3 February. As President Bollinger walked away, he said to the student standing at the exit, "We don't have to do this." The student responded, "We do need to do this. Divestment is urgent. A black person is killed every 28 hours by police or security... Columbia is invested in that system. And we have to be accountable to that. We've been trying to meet with you for eight months." President Bollinger responded, "We'll set it up," before quickly exiting. This marked the first time that President Bollinger recognized CPD as a group.

On 6 December, CPD held another rally. Four days later, at Columbia's annual Tree Lighting Ceremony, CPD organized a die-in during which students laid on the ground holding cardboard cutouts in the shape of gravestones. The gravestones read "COLUMBIA INVESTS IN PRISONS," "WE WANT JUSTICE," and "R.I.P.," with the names of various unarmed people killed by the police, like Eric Garner and Aiyana Jones. After about five minutes, protestors marched a few blocks to the Intercultural Resource Center (IRC) and chanted "They left us dead, they left us dead, and we ain't supposed to be mad." After a few minutes, dozens of police officers joined campus safety officers at the IRC. Some activists perceived this as an intimidation tactic by University administration.

The CPD campaign was largely inactive until March of 2015, when the group finally met with ACSRI. On 1 April, ACSRI voted unanimously to recommend private prison divestment to the Columbia Board of Trustees. On 2 April, CPD organized an action called "Pack The Senate" with the goal of crowding the annual University Senate Plenary to demonstrate to President Bollinger the campus community's commitment to divestment. As a result of this action, the University Senate's Student Affairs Committee recommended divestment from private prisons.

On 20 April, CPD released a fifth letter to President Bollinger urging him to respond to the ACSRI vote recommending divestment, to confirm a meeting with CPD, and to ensure that the Board of Trustees would vote on prison divestment. Three

days later, students symbolically covered a statue of Thomas Jefferson on campus with a black tarp that read “ABOLISH.” On 27 April, CPD organized a five-hour sit-in inside a campus library reiterating the goals of their fifth letter.

On 15 May, President Bollinger announced that he fully endorsed ACSRI’s recommendation for divestment and that he would bring prison divestment to the Board of Trustees in June. Ultimately, the Board of Trustees decided to divest the endowment from CCA and G4S. CPD achieved its goals of divestment from CCA and G4S as well as the goal of contacting the 36 other firms in which the school invested its endowment with recommendations of divestment from CCA and G4S. However, Columbia’s full financial profile is still not accessible to the public or to Columbia students.

Research Notes

Sources:

Columbia Prison Divest. 2015. Facebook. Retrieved February 25, 2019

(<http://web.archive.org/web/20190224193312/https://www.facebook.com/columbiaprisondivest/photos/a.1379456232323418/15771>)

Armus, Teo. n.d. “Columbia Prison Divest Stages Sit-in, Teach-in in Low, Culminates Week of Engagement.” Columbia Spectator. Retrieved February 25, 2019

(<http://web.archive.org/web/20190225042712/https://www.columbiaspectator.com/news/2015/04/26/columbia-prison-divest-teach/>).

Aronoff, Kate. 2015. “Columbia University to Divest from Private Prisons.” Organizing Is the New Black — Students Push Columbia University to Divest from Private Prisons. Retrieved February 25, 2019

(<http://web.archive.org/web/20190225035657/https://wagingnonviolence.org/2015/06/organizing-new-black-students-push-columbia-university-divest-private-prisons/>).

Barnes, Luke. n.d. “Student Group Calls for Columbia to Divest from Private Prison Companies.” Columbia Spectator. Retrieved February 25, 2019

(<http://web.archive.org/web/20190225040123/https://www.columbiaspectator.com/news/2014/02/04/student-group-calls-columbia-divest-private-prison-companies/>).

Bentley, Angela. n.d. “Columbia Prison Divest Holds Silent Protest Outside Bollinger Class.” Columbia Spectator. Retrieved February 25, 2019

(<http://web.archive.org/web/20190225040417/https://www.columbiaspectator.com/news/2014/10/23/columbia-prison-divest-holds-silent-protest-outside-bollinger-class/>).

Bogler, Emma. 2014. “Columbia Prison Divest Sends 3rd Letter to Bollinger.” Columbia Spectator. Retrieved February 25, 2019 (<http://web.archive.org/web/20190224192039/https://www.columbiaspectator.com/spectrum/2014/10/08/columbia-prison-divest-sends-third-letter-bollinger/?fbclid=IwAR3LF2nloyMywLoJLL7arOpb1gF0U2Jv1p6CSmXwRmj4qi1GgpmJ65PFbz4>).

Cohen, Naomi. n.d. “Students Hold Die-in at Tree Lighting Ceremony.” Columbia Spectator. Retrieved February 25, 2019

(http://web.archive.org/web/20190225041215/https://www.columbiaspectator.com/multimedia/news/2014/12/10/Students-hold-die-in-at-Tree-Lighting-Ceremony/?fbclid=IwAR2zm3Vn_PBGRZIyrQM3cdWCj0au4zKWE9HqwQ8MCeEv4XJwkptlSeqLIwc).

Columbia Prison Divest. 2015. “Columbia Prison Divest.” Facebook. Retrieved February 25, 2019

(<http://web.archive.org/web/20190225042410/https://www.facebook.com/columbiaprisondivest/photos/a.1379456232323418/1585>)

Columbia Prison Divest. 2014. “Columbia Prison Divest Petition for a Referendum.”

Frost, Sarah. n.d. "Columbia Prison Divest Holds Protest Outside World Leaders Forum." Columbia Spectator. Retrieved February 25, 2019 (<http://web.archive.org/web/20190225040527/https://www.columbiaspectator.com/multimedia/news/2014/09/26/columbia-prison-divest-coalition-against-gentrification-hold-action/>).

Columbia Prison Divest. 2015.

"[Http://Web.archive.org/Web/20190224192056/Https://Www.facebook.com/Events/467112130105700/](http://web.archive.org/web/20190224192056/https://www.facebook.com/Events/467112130105700/)." Facebook. Retrieved February 25, 2019 (<http://web.archive.org/web/20190224192056/https://www.facebook.com/events/467112130105700/>).

Columbia prison Divest. 2014. "Petition: Divest from the Private Prison Industry." Change.org. Retrieved February 20, 2019 (<http://web.archive.org/web/20190225035824/https://www.change.org/p/lee-c-bollinger-divest-from-the-private-prison-industry?fbclid=IwAR14Cvpmys5JnprIARZsedtktwq5p8FwNNBbmB7jksiqTi8tPst9Ukit4g>).

Columbia Prison Divest. 2015. "President Bollinger, We Want Action Now!" Facebook. Retrieved February 25, 2019 (http://web.archive.org/web/20190224193520/https://www.facebook.com/columbiaprisondivest/posts/1576067455995627?__tn__=R).

Columbia Prison Divest. 2015. "President Bollinger, We Want Action Now!" CU Prison Divest. Retrieved February 25, 2019 (<http://web.archive.org/web/20150512000601/http://columbiaprisondivest.tumblr.com:80/>).

Staff, Bwog. 2015. "Letter Presented to Prezbo Calling for Divestment from Private Prisons." Bwog: Columbia Student News. Retrieved February 23, 2019 (<http://web.archive.org/web/20190224191956/https://bwog.com/2014/02/letter-presented-to-prezbo-calling-for-divestment-from-private-prisons/>).

Wang, Chris. 2014. YouTube. Retrieved February 25, 2019 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZcjwtOH65-Q&fbclid=IwAR3HHnheX_pOam550VzSFzvRCVDrhJX52mn5xEafLyyRtRWSr1aHY88gN_4).

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Olivia Robbins, 10/5/2019

A project of Swarthmore College, including Peace and Conflict Studies, the Peace Collection, and the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility.

Copyright Swarthmore College.



Global Nonviolent Action Database is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).

Original website design and artwork created by [Daniel Hunter](#).

Permissions beyond the scope of this license may be available at <http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu>.

Registered users can [login](#) to the website.

Source URL (retrieved on 05/24/2020 - 23:07): <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/columbia-university-students-win-divestment-private-prison-companies-2014-2015>

Links:

[1] <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/mainly-or-initiated-people-color>

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