

AN OPEN LETTER:
FACULTY CALL FOR FOSSIL FUEL DIVESTMENT AT NEW YORK UNIVERSITY
SPRING TERM 2016

Faculty: please click [here](#) to sign the letter.

Dear President Andrew Hamilton,

To model our sustainability values and global citizenship, to protect the core operations of our worldwide institution, and to do right by our present and future students, New York University—as a Global Network University¹—has the responsibility to use every peaceful means to mitigate anthropogenic global climate change and adapt to its unfolding, unprecedented challenges.

Our scholarly mission supports research and teaching on the issues raised by climate change. We applaud NYU's role as a first responder in past climate actions.² NYU was, for example, an early signer of Mayor Bloomberg's sustainability challenges and the American College and University's Presidents' Climate Commitment. NYU put our new cogeneration plant into operation swiftly, exceeding our initial greenhouse gas reduction goals as we work toward our commitment of net-zero emissions.

We, as members of your faculty, now call on NYU to complement these initiatives by divesting from fossil fuels. We make this appeal in solidarity with NYU Divest, a coalition of NYU community members linked with a fast-growing global movement.

Global Climate Change Knowledge

According to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change³ [IPCC], human influence on the climate system is clear, as are its widespread consequences for human and Earth systems. Because of human activities since the industrial revolution, present-day atmospheric greenhouse gas emissions have increased steeply. Their concentrations now are unprecedented in at least the last 800,000 years. Carbon dioxide, of major importance, has recently passed 400 parts per million [ppm],⁴ which is already well above the mid-nineteenth century average of around 280 ppm⁵ and the 350 ppm⁶

¹ John Sexton, "Global Network University Reflection" (remarks prepared by NYU President for international conferences taking place in Fall 2010), December 21, 2010, accessed January 25, 2015, <http://www.nyu.edu/about/leadership-university-administration/office-of-the-president/redirect/speeches-statements/global-network-university-reflection.html>

² NYU Sustainability, "Climate Action Plan" (Report, New York University, Winter 2009), accessed January 25, 2015, <http://www.nyu.edu/sustainability/pdf/capreport10.pdf>

³ R.K. Pachauri et al., "Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report: Summary for Policymakers" (IPCC Report, 2014), accessed January 25, 2015, http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar5/syr/SYR_AR5_SPMcorr2.pdf

⁴ Global Greenhouse Gas Reference Network, "Trends in Atmospheric Carbon Dioxide." NOAA Earth System Research Laboratory, Global Monitoring Division, accessed January 25, 2015, <http://www.esrl.noaa.gov/gmd/ccgg/trends/weekly.html>

⁵ The Royal Society, "Climate Change: A Summary of the Science," September 30, 2010, accessed January 25, 2015, https://royalsociety.org/-/media/Royal_Society_Content/policy/publications/2010/4294972962.pdf, 6.

⁶ James Hansen et al., "Target Atmospheric CO₂: Where Should Humanity Aim?" *The Open Atmospheric Science Journal* 2 (2008): 217-231, accessed January 25, 2015, <http://pubs.giss.nasa.gov/abs/ha00410c.html>

threshold for safety. The effects include rising average global surface and ocean temperatures and ocean acidification. Around the world, climate change has brought melting ice and climbing sea levels. It has translated into higher probabilities of extreme droughts, heat waves, intense storms like Sandy—which touched many personally within the NYU community—species extinction risk, alongside eruptions of disease and pest organisms, and greater food insecurity. The world’s poor⁷—who already lack protective infrastructure, access to health care, land, and resources to migrate from unsafe areas—are most vulnerable to devastating consequences of global climate change. As warming continues, today’s youth and future generations are at mounting risk.

On December 12, 2015, the world united on the Paris Agreement to curb risks by committing to limit global temperature rise this century to 1.5-2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels.⁸ Earth’s temperature has risen approximately .85 degrees Celsius since 1880,⁹ already half of the maximum.

According to the IPCC Report, remaining below a two-degree rise will require keeping atmospheric carbon dioxide (eq) concentrations below 450 ppm in 2100. This will require reducing global greenhouse gas emissions by 40 to 70% of 2010 levels by 2050, and bringing net “emissions levels near zero or below” by the end of this century.¹⁰

Resistance of the Fossil Fuel Industry

According to the International Energy Agency,¹¹ carbon dioxide from fossil fuel combustion contributes almost 70% of total global greenhouse emissions from human activity. Keeping carbon dioxide concentrations down, therefore, as the IPCC Report states, will require phasing out fossil fuel¹² power generation by the end of this century. This means keeping at least two-thirds¹³ of proven fossil fuel reserves under the ground.¹⁴ Avoiding climate catastrophe requires a different global investment landscape.¹⁵ It requires shifting¹⁶ hundreds of billions of dollars to low-carbon ventures,

⁷ Piya Abeygunawardena et al., “Poverty and Climate Change: Reducing the Vulnerability of the Poor Through Adaptation,” OECD, accessed January 25, 2015, <http://www.oecd.org/env/cc/2502872.pdf>

⁸ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, “Historic Paris Agreement on Climate Change—December 12, 2015,” accessed March 20, 2016, <http://newsroom.unfccc.int/unfccc-newsroom/finale-cop21/>

⁹ Pachauri et al., “Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report: Summary for Policymakers,” 1.

¹⁰ Ottmar Edenhofer, “Climate Change 2014: Mitigation of Climate Change: Summary for Policymakers” (IPCC Report, 2014, 10), accessed January 25, 2015, http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar5/wg3/ipcc_wg3_ar5_summary-for-policymakers.pdf, 10.

¹¹ International Energy Agency, “CO2 Emissions from Fuel Combustion” (Report, 2014, 8), accessed January 25, 2015, <http://www.iea.org/publications/freepublications/publication/co2-emissions-from-fuel-combustion-highlights-2014.html>

¹² Pachauri et al., “Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report: Summary for Policymakers,” 31.

¹³ Carbon Tracker Initiative, “Unburnable Carbon—Are the world’s financial markets carrying a carbon bubble?” (Report, 2014), accessed January 25, 2015, <http://www.carbontracker.org/report/carbon-bubble/>

¹⁴ Bill McKibben, “Global Warming’s Terrifying New Math.” *Rolling Stone*. August, 2012, accessed January 25, 2015, <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/global-warmings-terrifying-new-math-20120719>

¹⁵ International Energy Agency, “World Energy Investment Outlook 2014 Factsheet Overview” (Report, 2014, 1), accessed January 25, 2015, http://www.iea.org/media/140603_WEOinvestment_Factsheets.pdf

¹⁶ Edenhofer, “Climate Change 2014: Mitigation of Climate Change: Summary for Policymakers,” 26.

stranding investments left in fossil fuels.¹⁷

Immensely wealthy fossil fuel corporations, however, insist otherwise. In the 1970s and 1980s, for example, Exxon Mobil, the world's largest publicly traded international oil and gas corporation, conducted cutting-edge research that forecast global warming with consequential dangers caused by greenhouse gas emissions from burning fossil fuels. Company managers used the scientific information to profit their own operations while failing to reveal externally all they learned. Since then, for nearly three decades, Exxon Mobil has worked deliberately to sow public doubt about the amassing evidence of anthropogenic global climate change and to block controls on greenhouse gas emissions.¹⁸

While industry members now outwardly admit risks of global warming, their actions ignore what is required physically and economically to avoid intensifying global climate catastrophe. For example, reports by Exxon Mobil¹⁹ find it “possible,” but “difficult to envision,” that governments will choose the path to net-zero carbon and strand the company's assets. The industry, led by Koch Industries and Exxon Mobil, also spent over \$129 million on U.S. political lobbying in 2015.²⁰ Another indicator of the industry's ongoing intentions to profit at the cost of climate catastrophe are their increasing outlays²¹—which more than tripled from \$200 billion in 2010 to about \$650 billion in 2013—to expand production and explore for more oil, gas, and coal.²²

Global Climate Change: “A Deep Injustice”

Whatever the fossil fuel industry may say, however, as the IPCC Report stresses repeatedly, delay²³ in

¹⁷ Tim Dickinson, “The Logic of Divestment: Why we Have to Kiss Off Big Carbon Now,” *Rolling Stone*, January 14, 2015, 2, 4, accessed January 25, 2015, <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/the-logic-of-divestment-why-we-have-to-kiss-off-big-carbon-20150114>

¹⁸ Neela Banerjee, Lisa Song and David Hasemyer, “Exxon: The Road Not Taken,” *Inside Climate News*, September 16, 2015, accessed March 21, 2016, <http://insideclimatenews.org/content/Exxon-The-Road-Not-Taken>; Sara Jerving, Katie Jennings, Masako Melissa Hirsch, and Susan Rust, “What Exxon knew about the Earth's melting Arctic,” *LA Times*, October 9, 2015, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://graphics.latimes.com/exxon-arctic/>

¹⁹ Exxon Mobil, “Energy and Carbon: Managing the Risks” (Report, 7, 11), accessed January 25, 2015, <http://cdn.exxonmobil.com/~media/Files/Other/2014/Report%20-%20Energy%20and%20Carbon%20-%20Managing%20the%20Risks.pdf>

²⁰ “Oil and Gas: Industry Profile: Summary, 2015,” OpenSecrets. Org, accessed March 20, 2016, <https://www.opensecrets.org/lobby/indusclient.php?id=E01>

²¹ Morris Beschloss, “Global Oil and Gas Spending Heavy in Exploration/Development,” *The Desert Sun*, May 29, 2014, accessed January 25, 2015, <http://www.desertsun.com/story/money/industries/morrisbeschlosseconomics/2014/05/29/global-oil-and-gas-spending-heavy-in-explorationdevelopment/9733863/>.

²² Recently, due in part to a recent glut of fossil fuels, their prices have dropped. Industry analysts talk in terms of “deferring” some costly projects with the expectation that prices will recover, even if it takes some years. E.g., Clifford Krauss, “Oil Prices: What's Behind the Drop? Simple Economics,” *The New York Times*, updated March 8, 2016, accessed March 21, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/business/energy-environment/oil-prices.html?_r=0; WoodMackenzie, “Deferred upstream projects tally reaches 68, January 14, 2016, accessed March 21, 2016, <http://www.woodmac.com/media-centre/12530462>.

A sustained upswing remains to be seen, however. Climate-conscious policy implemented globally and in good faith, not resource geopolitics, must soon become the primary and enduring determinant of investment patterns. Meanwhile, as of early 2016, the world's five largest oil explorers, including Exxon Mobil Corp, had their credit ratings cut or threatened with downgrade. See Joe Carroll, “Exxon Faces First Downgrade Since Depression as Oil Rout Worsens,” *Bloomberg Business*, February 2, 2016, accessed March 21, 2016, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-02-02/chevron-hess-join-ranks-of-downgraded-crude-oil-explorers>

²³ Pachauri et al., “Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report: Summary for Policymakers,” 17, 18, 21, 25, 27, 34; Ottmar, “Climate Change 2014: Mitigation of Climate Change: Summary for Policymakers,” 12, 15, 16.

shifting the investment terrain, implementing low-carbon technologies, and curbing global greenhouse gas emissions will heighten the risk of increasing the already costly and alarming consequences of global climate change. Delay²⁴ will also shift these burdens to future generations, as will the unwillingness to use every just and peaceful means to resist the fossil fuel industry's support for climate inaction.

As matters stand, future generations, today's youth, and the world's poor—those with little to no responsibility for carbon emissions—will pay the steepest price in devastating climate change consequences. Many agree that this is morally wrong.²⁵ In a 2014 article in *The Guardian*,²⁶ Nobel laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu—South African anti-apartheid champion of a peaceful, democratic, and just society—said that climate change is the “human rights issue of our time....It is a deep injustice.” The deep injustice of anthropogenic global climate change is an unprecedentedly sweeping, grave, and irreversible injustice.

Individual action—including a walk to the recycling bin or riding a bike rather than driving a car—remains invaluable, as does personal integrity. Anthropogenic global climate change, however, is a colossal, collective problem—prudentially, economically, and morally—and necessitates collective, system-leveraging²⁷ feats of greenhouse gas-limiting transformation.

“The good news,” Tutu declared, is that “young people across the world have identified climate change as the biggest challenge of our time, and already begun to do something about it.” Indeed, we are seeing an anti-apartheid-style boycott tailored to the fossil fuel industry—that is, “the rise of a new civil society divestment movement,”²⁸ which continues growing fast.

“The Good News”: Global Fossil Fuel Resistance

Many at the forefront of the escalating fossil fuel divestment call-to-action are those with the most at stake: young people, including our students. NYU Divest: Go Fossil Free²⁹ is a coalition of students joined by us—their faculty—and staff and alumni, networked with campaigns at over 500 other institutions representing over \$3.4 trillion in assets.³⁰ Divesting institutions include over 50 colleges and universities and over 50 cities. A growing number of faith-based groups, pension funds, and health interests also have made divestment commitments, among them The World Council of Churches, the

²⁴ Pachauri et al., “Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report: Summary for Policymakers,” 17.

²⁵ E.g., Pope Francis. *Praise Be To You: Laudato Si'* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015), accessed, March 21, 2016, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

²⁶ Desmond Tutu, “We fought apartheid. Now climate change is our global enemy.” *The Guardian*. September 20, 2014, accessed January 25, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/21/desmond-tutu-climate-change-is-the-global-enemy>

²⁷ Donella Meadows, “Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System” (The Sustainability Institute, 1999), accessed January 25 2015, <http://www.donellameadows.org/archives/leverage-points-places-to-intervene-in-a-system/>

²⁸ Desmond Tutu, “We need an apartheid-styled boycott to save the planet,” *The Guardian*, April 10, 2014, accessed January 25, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/10/divest-fossil-fuels-climate-change-keystone-xl>; “Desmond Tutu: We fought apartheid. Now climate change is our global enemy,” *The Guardian*, September 21, 2014, accessed January 25, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/21/desmond-tutu-climate-change-is-the-global-enemy>

²⁹ “NYU Divest,” accessed January 25, 2015, <http://www.nyudivest.com/>

³⁰ “Go Fossil Free,” accessed January 25, 2015, <http://gofossilfree.org/>

Norwegian Sovereign Wealth Fund, and The British Medical Association. The *British Medical Journal* has endorsed fossil fuel divestment, viewing climate change as a human health emergency.³¹ Other dedicated organizations include the Union of Concerned Scientists, Guardian Media Group, and both the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and the Rockefeller Family Fund.

The day after 400,000 people joined in the People's Climate March through New York City's streets in September of 2014, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund³²—built on the wealth of Standard Oil Company, with a corporate legacy that includes Exxon Mobil and Chevron—announced its plans to divest from the fossil fuel industry. Embracing the irony, the Fund divested because, in the words of a trustee, “There was a very clear moral impetus to do this.” The Fund's decision was also triggered, in the words of its spokeswoman, by “the schizophrenic notion that we had investments that were undermining our grants.”³³ Thirdly, they divested because it was a sound economic decision given the imminent stranding of fossil fuel assets in a climate change-mitigated world.³⁴

Divest the Global Network University from Fossil Fuels

President Hamilton: we, your faculty, in solidarity with the coalition NYU Divest, are calling on you and the Board of Trustees to recognize (1) the clear moral impetus for divestment—climate change endangers present and future generations of our students; (2) the logic of divestment—it makes sense to divest from an industry that not only undermines our endowment, but the Earth-embedded mission of our global network university; (3) that divestment is a judicious economic decision. Recent studies modeling investment returns by S&P Capital IQ³⁵ and the Aperio Group³⁶ suggest that endowments divested from fossil fuels will perform equally well or, as a consequence, better.³⁷ At the same time, helpful resources

³¹ Fiona Godlee, “Editorial: Climate Change,” *British Medical Journal* 349 (2014): g5945, October 1, 2014, accessed January 25, 2015, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.g5945>

³² CBC News, “Rockefellers to Sell Oil Assets as Part of \$50B Global Warming Fight,” September 22, 2014, accessed January 25, 2015, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/business/rockefellers-to-sell-oil-assets-as-part-of-50b-global-warming-fight-1.2773771>; Neva Rockefeller Goodwin, “A Rockefeller explains: Why I lost faith in Exxon Mobil, and donated my shares,” February 15, 2016, accessed March 21, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-rockefeller-goodwin-oil-stock-global-warming-20160215-story.html>

³³ Dickinson, “The Logic of Divestment: Why we Have to Kiss Off Big Carbon Now,” 2.

³⁴ Reasoning likewise, the Rockefeller Family Fund, in March 2016, announced their plan to divest from fossil fuels. Following reports of the Exxon Mobil climate change cover-up, Rockefeller heirs also singled out this company spun out of their family's oil-fortune heritage for “morally reprehensible conduct.” See Rockefeller Family Fund, “RFFs Decision to Divest,” accessed March 29, 2016, <http://www.rffund.org/divestment>; Rupert Neate, “Rockefeller family charity to withdraw all investments in fossil fuel companies,” *The Guardian*, March 23, 2016, accessed March 29, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/mar/23/rockefeller-fund-divestment-fossil-fuel-companies-oil-coal-climate-change>

³⁵ Kevin Begos and Joann Loviglio, “College fossil fuel divestment movement builds,” *AP*, May 22, 2013, accessed January 25, 2015, <http://news.yahoo.com/college-fossil-fuel-divestment-movement-173859677.html>

³⁶ Aperio Group, “Do the investment math: Building a carbon-free portfolio” (Report, 2013), accessed January 25, 2015, <http://divestinvest.org/individual/invest/>

³⁷ A new report suggests that New York State's pension fund, the third largest in the country, would have performed better over the past three years by divesting from fossil fuels and reinvesting in clean energy. Alison Moodie, “New York pension fund could have made billions by divesting from fossil fuels-report,” *The Guardian*, March 4, 2016, accessed March 30, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2016/mar/04/fossil-fuel-divestment-new-york-state-pension-fund-hurricane-sandy-ftse>

are emerging within firms and foundations. The Aperio Group, Cambridge Associates,³⁸ the Responsible Endowments Coalition,³⁹ Divest-Invest Philanthropy,⁴⁰ and Fossil Free Indexes,⁴¹ for example, offer to assist institutions in crafting fossil-free, climate responsible portfolios.

And, (4) divestment matters. The argument that a relatively small amount of money divested from the immensely wealthy, profit-driven fossil fuel industry will not be significant ignores another recent study,⁴² published by the Smith School of Enterprise and the Environment at Oxford University, your former home institution. The evidence of this study supports the far-reaching power of the stigmatization process. Historically, divestment strategies have been successful in transforming corporate behavior, influencing investors, lowering values of stock and pressuring government legislation that would not otherwise have happened. Such indirect effects, which may include leveraging a carbon price and removing fossil fuel subsidies, would indeed have an economic consequence for the fossil fuel industry. Re-investment in climate-responsible alternatives can disrupt business-as-usual and trigger urgently needed fossil free transitions.

President Hamilton, as you know,⁴³ our students have been leaders in generating intelligent dialogue and wide support for fossil fuel divestment within our university community since November, 2012. We applaud your predecessor Dr. John Sexton for responding to their initiative by setting up a Fossil Fuel Divestment Working Group⁴⁴ to study the matter and make a recommendation to the University Senate. This group, chaired by NYU's Chief Financial Officer, Martin Dorph, and composed of members of the University Senate's Financial Affairs Committee, clarified NYU's responsibilities as investors. Taking an admirable step towards transparency, the working group announced that just over 4% or \$139 million of NYU's \$3.4 billion endowment is invested in fossil fuels.⁴⁵

On April 30, 2015, The University Senate—representing us, your faculty, and your students—voted overwhelmingly in support of fossil fuel divestment measures.⁴⁶ We are pleased that our Board of Trustees is now taking up this matter.

³⁸Marina Martinez, "Cambridge Associates, college's main advisement firm, will help schools divest," *The Phoenix*. November 19, 2014, accessed January 25, 2015, <http://swarthmorephoenix.com/2014/11/19/cambridge-associates-colleges-main-advisement-firm-will-help-schools-divest/>

³⁹ The Responsible Endowments Coalition, accessed January 25, 2015, http://www.endowmentethics.org/committees_resources

⁴⁰ Divest-Invest Philanthropy, accessed January 25, 2015, <http://divestinvest.org>

⁴¹ Fossil Free Indexes, accessed Marcy 21, 2016, <http://fossilfreeindexes.com>

⁴² Atif Ansar, Ben Caldecott, and James Tilbury, "Stranded assets and the fossil fuel divestment campaign: What does divestment mean for the valuation of fossil fuel assets?" (Report, Stranded Assets Programme, Smith School of Enterprise and the Environment, University of Oxford, 2013), accessed January 25, 2015. <http://www.smithschool.ox.ac.uk/research-programmes/stranded-assets/SAP-divestment-report-final.pdf>

⁴³Melissa Cronin and *Student Nation*, "NYU Divest Meets with Senior Administrators, Calls for Climate Justice," *The Nation*. April 18, 2013, accessed January 25, 2015, <http://www.thenation.com/blog/173927/nyu-divest-meets-senior-administrators-calls-climate-justice>

⁴⁴ NYU University Senate's Financial Affairs Committee/Fossil Fuel Divestment Working Group, "Mission Statement for Fossil Fuel Divestment Working Group" (Statement, 2014).

⁴⁵ Jeffrey Rathgeber, "Fossil Fuel Divestment Office Presentation" (PowerPoint presentation to the NYU Fossil Fuel Divestment Working Group, NYU Divestment Office, Nov. 20, 2014). As of 9/30/2014, of the approximately 4% exposure, .02% is held directly in NYU's name (Anadarko Petroleum and Noble Energy).

⁴⁶ "Minutes of a Stated Meeting of the Senate of New York University, April 30, 2015," accessed March 21, 2016, <https://www.nyu.edu/content/dam/nyu/univSenate/documents/Senate-Minutes-4-30-15.pdf>

We believe that fossil fuel divestment is the morally and efficaciously appropriate next move for NYU to take as a leader in climate action. We believe that it is also our responsibility to divest as a global network university whose core mission is threatened by climate change consequences. There is strong evidence that divesting our endowment is also a financially responsible step, and there are many resources available that will help make it so.

We—your faculty—in solidarity with NYU Divest and a compelling global fossil fuel divestment movement, call on you, President Hamilton, as well as the Board of Trustees to act swiftly in democratic accord with the bearing of the University Senate. We continue to call on NYU to freeze any new investment in fossil fuel companies and to divest both direct holdings and commingled funds in our endowment from the top 200 publicly traded fossil fuel companies. We also trust that the Board, heeding the University Senate’s recommendations, will study and pursue climate-responsible investments.

President Hamilton, our job as NYU’s faculty is to create new knowledge, to pass it on to our students all over the planet, and to model global citizenship. Today, global citizenship and intergenerational responsibility to students—who already feel the tolls of climate change—mean being able to look our young people in the eyes⁴⁷ and say that our global network community is doing everything it can to alleviate climate change, and to win a brighter future.

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⁴⁷ Gary Snyder, *Turtle Island* (New York: New Directions, 1974), 86: “For the Children,” accessed January 25, 2015, <http://moralground.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/GarySnyder.pdf>

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