



A FOSSIL FUEL-FREE HARVARD

divesting the research agenda //
a white paper by fossil fuel divest harvard alumni



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Nordhaus et al. (2005) used this standard to maximize the discounted net present value of emissions subject to a resource constraint, adding equations to represent activities that generate emissions and found that it was only in later time periods that it would be optimal to

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Executive Summary

In September 2021, Harvard acted on the demands of thousands of students, faculty, and alumni and pledged to divest its multibillion-dollar endowment from the fossil fuel industry.¹ By promising to cut financial ties to oil and gas companies, Harvard showed leadership in rejecting profits from the industry that has been driving the climate crisis.²

Since then, however, it has become increasingly clear that for Harvard to become a leader on climate change, divestment of the endowment isn't enough. Even without direct or indirect investments in oil and gas companies, Harvard still subjects itself to the influence of the fossil fuel industry by allowing it to support the university's many climate-related research and policy programs.

At the Kennedy School alone, fossil fuel interests have funded the Geopolitics of Energy Project, the Harvard Electricity Policy Group, and the Corporate Responsibility Initiative, creating irresolvable conflicts of interest in programs that are meant to be addressing the climate crisis.³ What's more, faculty in those programs often fail to disclose this funding when speaking to the media and giving presentations, violating Harvard's existing reporting requirements.

This report represents the first comprehensive survey of fossil fuel funding at nearly 100 Harvard departments and institutes. Outreach conducted by Fossil Fuel Divest Harvard Alumni shows that the vast majority of these programs are unable or unwilling to disclose whether they accept fossil fuel


industry funding, making it difficult to understand the extent of the industry's grip on Harvard's research agenda. To embody its core value of "veritas" — truth — we call on Harvard to take the following three steps:

- **Ban:** For all research, ban sponsorship and collaboration from any company, trade group, or other organization that explores for further reserves of fossil fuels, obstructs climate policy, delays the transition to clean energy, and/or supports the expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure (e.g., by building oil and gas pipelines).
- **Disclose:** To increase transparency and prevent breaches of the funding ban, strongly enforce and strengthen existing disclosure requirements university-wide, including by writing specific guidance for conflicts of interest involving the fossil fuel industry.
- **Implement:** To turn words into action, convene a panel of Harvard faculty, students, staff, and alumni empowered to create systems to ensure compliance with new research bans and disclosure requirements. This panel should exclude members with a current financial connection to the fossil fuel industry.

Introduction

We are concerned that Harvard's failure to articulate and uphold comprehensive conflict-of-interest and disclosure policies undermines the academic freedom and intellectual autonomy of its research. An extensive body of evidence suggests that industry sponsorship can skew research to favor the interests of the funder — for example, by downplaying the risks of natural gas, a fossil fuel that contributes to climate change.^{5,6,7}

In a time of climate breakdown, fossil fuel industry funders have a vested interest in slowing the energy transition, sowing doubt about the efficacy of climate policies, and shirking responsibility for global warming. It is imperative that Harvard's



Harvard's dependence on private research funding seems to be increasing. In its most recent annual financial report, Harvard noted an 11% increase⁴ in funding from private entities and said that "non-federal funding continues to be an area of growth, as researchers diversify their research funding support."

climate- and environment-related research be unencumbered by these interests. And because the climate crisis touches all aspects of life on Earth, other academic fields like health care, economics, political science, and sociology should likewise remain untainted by fossil fuel industry sponsorship.

As Harvard launches new climate and environmental initiatives under the Salata Institute, the university's new center for sustainability research,⁸ Harvard has an opportunity to become a leading producer of equitable, science-based climate policy to guide future decision-makers — and to set a new precedent for true academic freedom by rejecting oil and gas industry sponsors. While Harvard does not disclose how much money it accepts from these companies, the sum could be large; roughly 34% of the \$976 million⁹ in “sponsored research funds” that Harvard used last fiscal year came from corporations, foundations, and other non-federal sources.

Why alumni?

This report was prepared by a group of volunteer alumni who are deeply concerned about the climate crisis. As alumni, we have a unique governing relationship with the university: We are the electors of the Board of Overseers, the governing body that “probes the quality of Harvard’s programs and assures that the university remains true to its charter as a place of learning.”¹⁰

We recognize Harvard’s outsize influence in the world and thus accept our responsibility to ensure the university is aligned with the alumni community’s values. We also recognize that alumni are generally less vulnerable to repercussions than Harvard students, staff, and faculty, and are therefore well-situated to critique it in the open.

Our report:

This white paper is divided into three sections. In Part 1, we draw on academic research and historical examples to illustrate the concept of “sponsorship bias,” also known as the “funding effect.” This section provides necessary context as Harvard considers ways to prevent its research from being co-opted by fossil fuel industry interests.

Part 2 outlines what we know about fossil fuel industry funding at Harvard. We cite existing research — including insight from a paper recently published by the Fossil Fuel Divest Harvard student campaign — and discuss new efforts we’ve undertaken to understand oil and gas sponsorship at the university.

Part 3 elaborates on the three recommendations outlined in our executive summary. We discuss in greater detail which companies Harvard should reject funding from and what a comprehensive disclosure policy should look like. For each recommendation, we highlight policies from other universities and academic journals that Harvard could emulate — in addition to some pitfalls Harvard should avoid.

Finally, we conclude with a call to action. To safeguard academic freedom and intellectual integrity, to promote climate leadership, and to align with its own espoused value of “veritas,” Harvard must look beyond the endowment and reject all ties to the fossil fuel industry.

Sponsorship Bias

Industry-funded studies that bear the mark of neutrality are often, in fact, not neutral; they are more likely to come to conclusions friendly to the sponsor's interests. This phenomenon is known as "sponsorship bias," and it has been well-documented in many fields of study. Looking at these examples can help illustrate the corrosive effect of sponsorship bias and the pressing need for Harvard to ban fossil fuel research funding.

Take, for example, the classic case of Big Tobacco: Decades of research shows that industry-funded studies consistently produced misleading data about the health effects of cigarette smoke. One 1998 analysis showed that tobacco-funded studies

were 88.4 times more likely to say that secondhand smoking was harmless,¹¹ compared with studies that received no industry funding. This same pattern is repeated again and again throughout the recent history of scientific inquiry — with plastics,¹² painkillers,¹³ corticosteroid drugs,¹⁴ statins,¹⁵ pesticides,¹⁶ diesel exhaust,¹⁷ sugar,¹⁸ soda,¹⁹ meat and dairy,^{20,21} and even oatmeal.²²

Industry-funded scientists don't typically set out to skew results in their funders' favor. Instead, experts have found that corporate interests tend to affect the earliest stages of the research process, when investigators are deciding which questions to pursue and how to frame issues in their fields.^{23,24}

This might result in funding “distracting” research — studies that answer the wrong questions, even if their results are high-quality. For example, the tobacco industry spent the 1990s funding research about various air pollutants that could contribute to lung disease — but it neglected to fund studies on secondhand smoke.²⁵ And to investigate the causes of obesity, big food companies spent years funding research on physical activity rather than poor nutrition.²⁶

Research on climate and the environment can also be compromised — if it is funded by coal, oil, and gas companies.²⁷ A recent study published in *Nature Climate Change* showed that university-based energy research centers that receive fossil fuel industry funding report more favorably on fracked gas than on renewables, while the opposite is true for centers that do not receive fossil fuel industry funding.²⁸ Another example comes from a now-defunct research institute at the University of Buffalo. In 2012, a report on the safety of drilling for natural gas caused widespread controversy when a watchdog group pointed out that the authors worked for — and received funding from — industry groups like the Marcellus Shale Coalition.²⁹ These connections were not fully disclosed in the report, and a group of professors said results from the report reflected “the interests of the gas companies, not scholarship.”

There are many more examples.^{30,31} Just this fall, an investigation by the watchdog Energy and Policy Institute revealed that energy research favoring

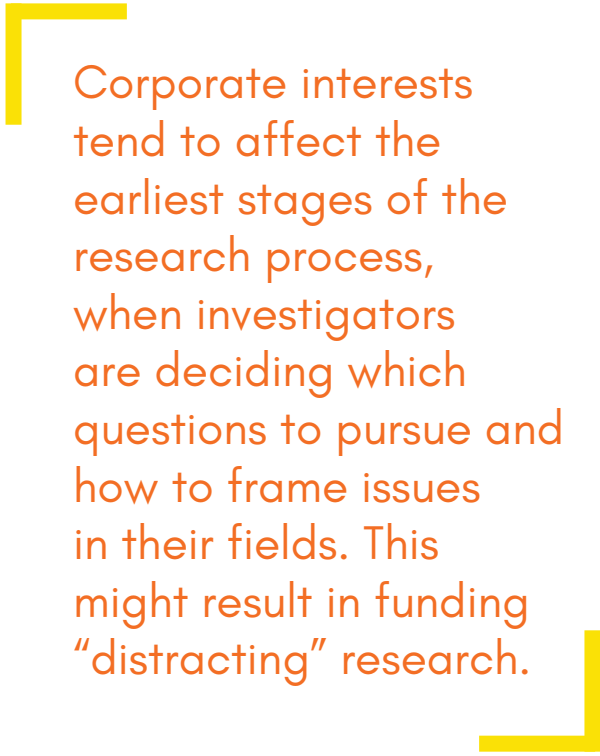
controversial “blue hydrogen” at the University of Massachusetts Lowell had been reviewed, edited, and partially written by lobbyists and funders from the natural gas industry.³² In the U.K., promotional materials at the University of Manchester say the school’s partnership with BP “informs and directs” its research.³³ And Dalhousie University in Halifax, Canada, says it allows Shell to have “final approval on all student research projects” that are subject to the company’s philanthropic donations.³⁴

Nearly all major medical and public health schools refuse funding from tobacco companies; doing so is likely to yield biased research that fails to hold

corporate wrongdoers to account. The same must also be true of funding from the fossil fuel industry, which is similarly likely to prioritize distracting research questions — including, for example, an inordinate focus on politically infeasible market solutions or new and unproven technologies over mandatory emissions reductions.³⁵

These skewed results can have far-reaching influence; academic research reverberates

through press releases, reports, policy papers, and popular media. Prestigious research centers and institutes may have the ear of powerful business interests and government agencies. Their work is often cited in federal policymaking — meaning what they say and do can have significant consequences for climate action. Even research that is intended to be objective can be co-opted by fossil fuel industry sponsors, who use it to delay decarbonization and bolster their public image.³⁶



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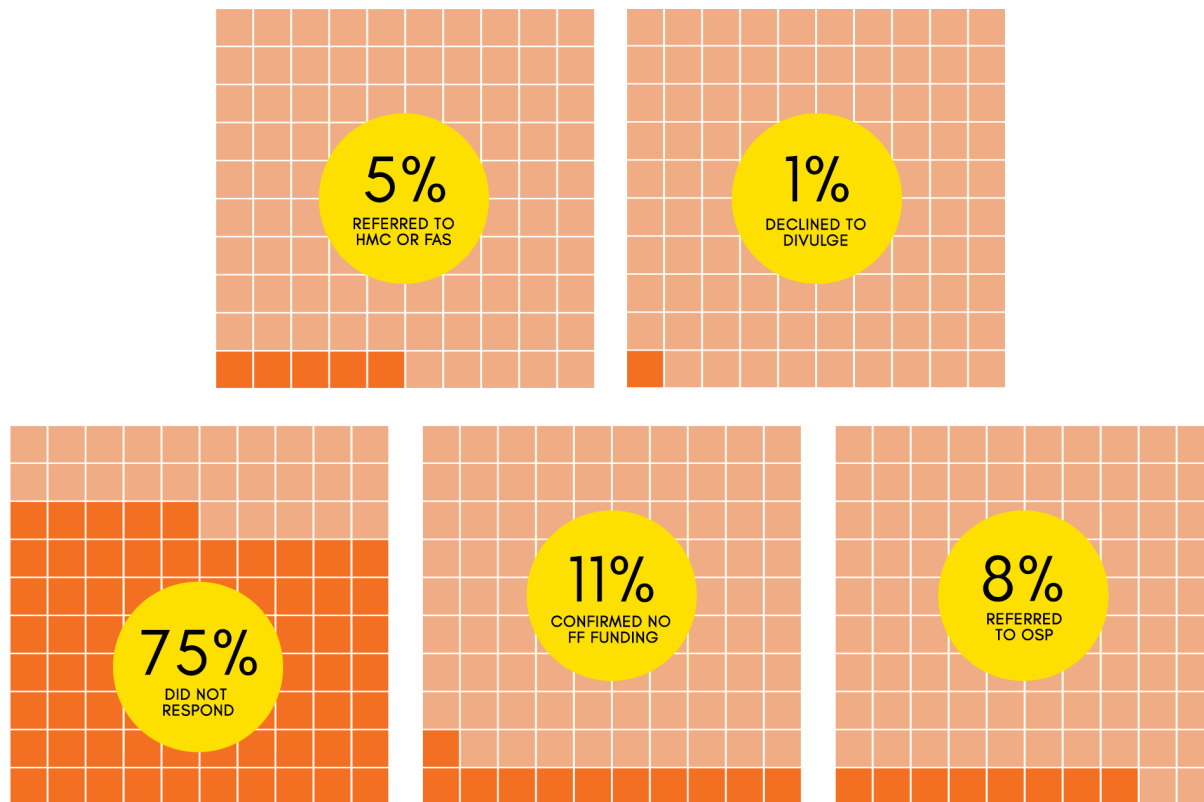
Fossil Fuel Ties at Harvard

According to documents recently uncovered by the U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Reform, executives from the oil giant BP believe their relationships with academics at high-profile universities — including Harvard — are “key parts” of the company’s long-term strategy to influence public opinion and policy.³⁷

Over the past three months, our campaign has systematically reached out to 40 departments and 51 institutes at Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) and 13 graduate-level schools to document fossil fuel funders on campus. We discovered an alarming lack of transparency around funding sources for research grants within individual departments, schools, and institutes.

Of the 26 responses we received from 104 queries sent, only 12 reported they do not accept research funding from the fossil fuel industry, while eight referred us to the Office for Sponsored Programs,³⁸ a university agency that facilitates research grant

Responses from Harvard's Schools, Departments, and Institutes to Our Inquiries About Whether They Receive Fossil Fuel Funding



proposals, submission, administration, invoicing, and reporting. Five referred us to the Harvard Management Company³⁹ — the investment corporation that manages the university's endowment — or to other Harvard leadership, and one declined to divulge sources of research funding.

Because many Harvard departments and institutes choose not to publicly disclose all relevant sponsorship information, it is difficult to know the full extent of the fossil fuel industry's grip over Harvard's research agenda. We contacted the Office for Sponsored Programs for more information, but the office's assistant vice president did not share what percentage of funding at the university comes from the fossil fuel industry. Instead, she directed us

to Harvard's conflict-of-interest⁴⁰ and gift policies,⁴¹ which contain little specific guidance on accepting money from problematic sources. These policies are more concerned with the financial interests of individual faculty members than with those of an institute or department.

Harvard's conflict-of-interest policy for individual faculty members was last revised in 2012 and begs to be reinvigorated by the urgency of the climate crisis. Not even its current stipulations are reliably enforced.⁴² For example, the requirement that researchers publicly disclose relevant financial conflicts of interest when giving policy briefings or speaking to the media is often ignored⁴³ — particularly for the fossil fuel industry. While

other universities, including Brown and Princeton — and soon Stanford — have begun to issue guidance about conducting business with fossil fuel companies, Harvard has not addressed this elephant in the room.



**Case study:
Stanford University**

Fossil Fuel Divest Harvard Alumni is not alone in calling for our alma mater to reject fossil fuel industry research funding. At Stanford University, the Coalition for a True School of Sustainability — backed by more than 800 students, faculty, staff, and alumni — is pushing for the recently inaugurated Doerr School of Sustainability to reject fossil fuel funding. Not doing so, the coalition argues, risks “shifting the research agenda ... toward climate ‘solutions’ that are non-threatening to fossil fuel companies,” undermining Stanford’s credibility and helping the fossil fuel industry to seem greener than it really is.⁴⁴

Following a listening tour conducted by the Doerr School’s dean, Stanford President Marc Tessier-Lavigne said in December 2022 that he will create a committee to review the university’s current fossil fuel funding sources and recommend how to handle future donations.⁴⁵

Despite the many nonresponses to our survey, prior research from Fossil Fuel Divest Harvard’s student campaign suggests that oil and gas funding is endemic at Harvard. A number of the most problematic fossil fuel ties are with climate and environmental policy programs housed within the Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Business and Government and the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, both part of the Harvard Kennedy School. These ties — which include financial connections to BP, Chevron, Duke Energy Corporation, Enel, Enron, Exxon Mobil, the National Gas Clearinghouse, and Shell — are documented extensively in the students’ 2021 report, *Beyond the Endowment*.⁴⁶

Fossil Fuel Divest Harvard Alumni has identified further fossil fuel industry connections at Harvard’s Structural Geology and Earth Resources Group, whose website lists industry sponsors including Ecopetrol, Exxon Mobil, Petrofina, Saudi Aramco, Schlumberger, and Shell.⁴⁷

As the university launches new climate and environment research programs at the Salata Institute — a center whose mission is to “develop and promote durable, effective, and equitable solutions to the climate-change challenges confronting humanity”⁴⁸ — it has yet to articulate sponsorship policies for the institute or announce guardrails to prevent the co-optation of its research agenda.

Such policies will be critical for the success of Harvard’s existing climate programs and new ones launched under the Salata Institute. Rigorous funding policies could make Harvard into a leader in effective, science-based, and justice-oriented climate research, while unambitious ones could hinder academic freedom, favoring research that does little to question oil and gas companies’ power or imagine a radically more just and sustainable future.

Policies Harvard Should Adopt

Harvard must articulate and enforce strong conflict-of-interest and disclosure policies that support academic freedom and uphold the value of “veritas.” Specifically, we urge the university take the following actions:

- **Ban:** For all research, ban sponsorship and collaboration from any company, trade group, or other organization that explores for further reserves of fossil fuels, obstructs climate policy, delays the transition to clean energy, and/or supports the expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure (e.g., by building oil and gas pipelines).
- **Disclose:** To increase transparency and prevent breaches of the funding ban, strongly enforce and strengthen existing disclosure requirements university-wide, including by writing specific guidance for conflicts of interest involving the fossil fuel industry.
- **Implement:** To turn words into action, convene a panel of Harvard faculty, students, staff, and alumni empowered to create systems to ensure compliance with new research bans and disclosure requirements. This panel should exclude members with a current financial connection to the fossil fuel industry.

BAN

Policies to ban research funding from and collaboration with the fossil fuel industry are well within the realm of feasibility. In fact, Harvard said in its own divestment commitment in 2021 that it no longer invests directly in companies that “explore for or develop further reserves of fossil fuels.”⁴⁹ This is the same screening criterion we urge the university to apply to its academic research funding and collaborations, with the added condition that funding should not come from companies that indirectly support the fossil fuel-dependent economy, including companies engaged in the transport, storage, and distribution of fossil fuel products. More than 800 experts from around the world — including Nobel Prize winners, former heads of state, and roughly 100 Harvard faculty and affiliates — have already voiced support for this kind of policy through the international Fossil-Free Research campaign.⁵⁰

Other institutions have set similar criteria in their divestment commitments. Brown has an additional policy, announced in April 2022, that restricts business with people and organizations that “directly support the creation and dissemination of science disinformation, defined as knowingly spreading false information with the intent to deceive or mislead.”⁵¹ At the University of Oxford in the U.K., the Oxford Martin Principles for Climate-Conscious Investment provide an

alternative set of detailed guidelines to screen research funders by taking into account the veracity of their decarbonization pledges.⁵² According to an Oxford spokesperson, the university’s Smith School of Enterprise and the Environment is already refusing donations from fossil fuel companies, in alignment with these principles.⁵³

Princeton University stands out for the scope of its “dissociation” commitment. By pledging to halt investments and research ties with 90 publicly traded companies due to their involvement in “climate disinformation campaigns” or the thermal coal and tar sands segments of the fossil fuel industry,⁵⁴ the policy acknowledges the inherent conflict of interest between some funders and the university’s academic mission. However, Princeton failed to live up to the potential of its commitment when it refused to include any companies on its 2022 dissociation list on the basis of disinformation.⁵⁵

More than 800 experts from around the world — including Nobel Prize winners, former heads of state, and roughly 100 Harvard faculty and affiliates — have already voiced support for a fossil fuel industry research funding ban through the international Fossil-Free Research campaign.

While we commend Princeton for dissociating from these companies, we believe Harvard’s policy should go further to include all fossil fuel companies engaging in exploration and development of hydrocarbon reserves, not solely those that are deemed to be “among the sector’s largest contributors to carbon emissions.”⁵⁶

Harvard Must Go Further Than Princeton’s Disassociation Policy

Why make this distinction over Princeton’s policy? Notably, Princeton’s coal and tar sands policy allows the university to take money from almost all major fossil fuel companies including Chevron, Shell, and BP – all of which rank among the planet’s top 20 fossil fuel expanders.⁵⁷ As the International Institute for Sustainable Development made clear in a 2022 report, there is consensus among major international scientific bodies that no new fossil fuel infrastructure is compatible with climate targets laid out in the Paris Agreement.⁵⁸ Thus, any company that continues to engage in fossil fuel development and exploration is knowingly contributing to the dangerous destabilization of Earth’s climate. Harvard must acknowledge this as a conflict of interest and ban research funding and collaboration accordingly.

	Harvard’s Policy	Princeton’s Policy	Our Proposed Policy
Bans funding from most polluting fossil fuel companies	NO	PARTIALLY	YES
Bans funding from all fossil fuel companies engaged in fossil fuel expansion	NO	NO	YES
Bans research collaboration with fossil fuel companies	NO	NO	YES
Fossil fuel research policy is university-wide in scope	NO	YES	YES
Mandates disclosure of all fossil fuel funding or collaboration	NO	NO	YES

DISCLOSE

To ensure compliance with Harvard’s conflict-of-interest policies, mandatory funding disclosure is essential. Harvard should more strongly enforce its existing disclosure requirements for research funding and sponsorships, update them to prioritize public disclosure whenever possible, and incorporate specific guidance for conflicts of interest involving the fossil fuel industry.

Harvard’s current disclosure policies cover a number of areas where industry influence could rear its head, among them institutional conflicts of interest,⁵⁹ individual financial conflicts of interest,⁶⁰ and philanthropic gifts.⁶¹ Broadly, each of these policies offers university-wide rules requiring faculty, programs, departments, and schools to disclose interests that could impact academic freedom.

However, our efforts to uncover fossil fuel funding on campus, detailed in Part 2 of this report, suggest that these requirements do not shed sufficient light onto industry-related conflicts of interest — in part because many of them ask only for “confidential” or “internal” disclosures, only to be released under legal duress or at administrators’ discretion. Others appear to be unenforced, as when industry-funded faculty speak to the media without acknowledging their fossil fuel industry sponsors.^{62,63} For all of Harvard’s schools, departments, institutes, and faculty, Harvard should require public disclosure whenever possible, ideally mandating that annual funding reports and conflict-of-interest statements be made publicly available in a centralized database.

Harvard could additionally incorporate more specific requirements into its disclosure policies by looking to the following examples.

Research Submissions

For research published in academic and scientific journals, Harvard could ask for funding reports and conflict-of-interest statements at the university level whenever new research is published — on top of any disclosures required by the journals researchers are contributing to. In shaping these policies, we recommend Harvard examine the protocol laid out by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE).⁶⁴

Public Presentations

Although Harvard’s current policies vary widely in strength and enforcement across its different schools, the Harvard Medical School (HMS) boasts one of Harvard’s strongest disclosure policies on presenting research outside of the university.* As laid out by the Faculty of Medicine policy on conflicts of interest and commitment, faculty at HMS must publicly disclose financial interests in any presentation, public comment, research publication, or when providing expert testimony in situations “where the audience could give weight

to the financial interest in assessing the opinions, advice, or work being presented by the faculty member.”⁶⁵ Harvard would be wise to implement a similar policy university-wide.

Additionally, HMS prohibits faculty from participating in “speakers bureaus” in which pharmaceutical companies pay physicians to speak favorably about a product or medication. Harvard should create similar rules for the fossil fuel industry.

IMPLEMENT

While the two policies outlined above may be adopted simultaneously, they need not be; disclosure requirements could — and should — be swiftly implemented to boost transparency even before Harvard puts in place a comprehensive ban on fossil fuel research funding.

To substantiate both policies, we recommend that Harvard convene a panel of faculty, students, staff, and alumni that is charged with publishing a preliminary policy framework for Harvard’s funding and disclosure requirements within its first year. This panel should be representative of the university as a whole, including its many schools and departments, and should exclude members with a current financial connection to the fossil fuel industry.

Other schools including Brown University⁶⁶ and Princeton University⁶⁷ adopted similar decision-making models to consider industry influence on the research agenda and fossil fuel dissociation. To implement recommendations made by its Board of Trustees, Princeton convened a panel to develop quantitative criteria determining which companies to dissociate from.⁶⁸ Stanford University has also announced plans to have a panel review its fossil fuel funding policies.⁶⁹ Harvard should take note of these bodies’ successes and shortcomings as it develops a more robust plan to mitigate the fossil fuel industry’s influence on its research.

* Harvard’s university-wide conflict-of-interest policy grants schools “substantial authority to tailor implementation to their particular conditions” and adopt more stringent policies when necessary.

Conclusion

There is no question that our alma mater has made great strides toward addressing the climate crisis by beginning to divest its endowment from the fossil fuel industry and forming the Salata Institute. But unless Harvard removes fossil fuel funding from its research and academic programs, these measures will have only limited impact on the fate of our world.

It is crucial that all research undertaken by the scientific community, the humanities, and professional schools be done with the utmost respect for academic freedom and integrity. As a global leader across all academic disciplines, Harvard has a unique opportunity and responsibility to establish clear, consistent, and replicable policies

on research funding to advance this goal. Harvard can be a model not only for the world, but for its budding scholars and professionals — the leaders of tomorrow who expect the highest commitment to truth and transparency from their university.

For Harvard to achieve its full potential as a climate leader, it must reject funding from an industry that has worked tirelessly — for decades — to undermine climate and environmental research. We call on the university to additionally require its departments, institutes, and researchers to disclose financial ties to the fossil fuel industry, and establish a panel of faculty to shape and ensure compliance with these policies.

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