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Fossil Fuel Divest Harvard

# BEYOND THE ENDOWMENT

## UNCOVERING FOSSIL FUEL INTERESTS ON CAMPUS





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By Fossil Fuel Divest Harvard

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## Executive Summary

Climate research at Harvard is often deeply intertwined with fossil fuel money. This raises serious concerns, given the industry's long-standing efforts to undermine academic independence and intellectual freedom. To protect Harvard's institutional mission, it is essential that the university enforce meaningful disclosure of research funding, make the extent of fossil fuel industry funding and interests on campus known to the public, and prohibit money from fossil fuel companies for research related to climate change, energy policy, and the environment.

## Introduction

This September, Fossil Fuel Divest Harvard [won a major victory](#) for divestment and climate activists everywhere when, following nearly a decade of tireless organizing, we finally saw Harvard commit to divest from fossil fuels. But our campaign's fight for climate justice is far from over. As we work to [ensure Harvard follows through](#) on its divestment commitment, we know that the influence of the fossil fuel industry remains strong in our political processes and [across the world of higher education](#), where its affiliations with elite universities bolster its public image even as it continues to undermine climate action.

**Universities like Harvard are entangled with the industry in more ways than their endowments. Even as they move to make their investments fossil free, they are allowing fossil fuel companies to fund research and programming, including around key issues of climate science and policy.**



**These companies don't have academia's best interests in mind, so their funding puts the academic mission at risk.** The fact is that [no major fossil fuel company](#) is [meaningfully aligned](#) with international climate goals. Instead, to prop up their business model, the fossil fuel industry has spent decades engaging in a [well-documented strategy](#) of spreading misinformation and undermining scientific consensus, burying information which opposes its agenda, and [silencing its critics](#) (including Harvard faculty members). **Such activities harm the integrity of Harvard's truth-seeking mission. Research shows, moreover, that industry money can have a [distorting](#) effect on academia, disproportionately yielding results which favor corporate sponsors, thereby putting academic freedom and independence at risk.**

Distorted research can have striking implications for our democracy, delaying necessary climate action and amplifying industry influence on our nation's legislative process. One [recent study](#), for example, traced "an influential group of economic consultants hired by the petroleum industry," whose "work played a key role in undermining numerous major climate policy initiatives in the US." This is part of the industry's playbook: as one [1978 manual](#) for big businesses facing regulatory pressure put it, "Regulatory policy is increasingly made with the participation of experts, especially academics. A regulated firm or industry should ... whenever possible co-opt these experts. ... identify leading experts in each relevant field, [hire] them as consultants or advisors, or giv[e] them research grants and the like."

**It seems unclear how Harvard, or any university for that matter, can fulfill its climate commitments while continuing to permit the fossil fuel industry's influence on campus.** Fossil fuel companies' presence on elite college campuses is not accidental. As a 2017 essay by Harvard scholars put it, this is the "[invisible colonization of academia](#)": associations to places like [Harvard](#), [MIT](#), [Princeton](#), and [Stanford](#) serve these companies' bottom lines. **If universities take the climate crisis seriously, then at the very least they must be transparent about the role this industry plays within their walls.**

The university theoretically recognizes this problem — [official university policy](#) notes "faculty members must make public disclosures of financial interests in related outside entities and sources of support when reasonable members of the audience would give weight to those interests in assessing the opinions, advice, or work they are presenting," and that "the expectation of transparency is justifiably high when Harvard faculty members serve as expert advisers to governmental entities or to the public directly. Faculty in such roles should be mindful of this principle and publicly disclose financial interests and sources of financial support that could be seen as biasing." **However, it's not clear how actively this policy is enforced.** This being the case, **it's especially concerning that fossil fuel money is allowed to flow into Harvard's programs — and that the extent of such funding remains unclear to community members and the public.**

Below, you will find a few case studies of how industry money and influence manifests at Harvard. This report is by no means exhaustive, and we will be following up with further installments to reveal more information about the industry's presence on campus in research, programming, recruitment, and the administration.



Our aim in excavating these ties is not to question the integrity of any faculty or Harvard affiliates they implicate. We firmly support each academic's right to intellectually collaborate with anyone and interrogate any question. Instead, our aim is to shed light on a **broader systemic and structural problem: a trend of fossil fuel money funding and a lack of information around how this funding shapes the research mission of the university.** We believe full transparency is essential for climate accountability at Harvard and across the academic world. Our communities and our planet deserve nothing less.

## Case Studies

### Case Study #1: The Harvard Kennedy School

The Harvard Kennedy School hosts numerous programs, projects, and initiatives surrounding the intersection of climate and public policy. Within two major centers, the [Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Business and Government](#) and the [Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs](#), researchers are studying the enormously important question of how to move our planet forward into a greener future. This work, however, is not free from the fossil fuel industry's influence.

#### A) The Belfer Center

The [Belfer Center](#) for Science and International Affairs at HKS is named for a major fossil fuel fortune. It was endowed and named by the Belfer family in 1997. Patriarch [Bob Belfer](#), who has served as a member of the Visiting Committee at HKS, and who sits with his son Laurence Belfer on the Center's International Council, has spent his career in the oil and gas industry. His father, [Arthur B. Belfer](#), founded Belco Petroleum Corp. in 1953 and grew it into one of the largest Fortune 500 Companies and a predecessor to Enron.

The Belfer Center's relationship to the fossil fuel industry has persisted since its founding, taking the forms of both program funding and faculty ties. Many of the center's luminaries have been affiliated with the industry. Board member Robert Stavins is the director of the Harvard Environmental Economics Program and the Harvard Project on Climate Agreements. Both of these programs are funded by Chevron, Shell, and Duke Energy. Stavins has also [consulted](#) for Chevron, Duke, and the Western States Petroleum Association. Founding dean and current Belfer Center board member [Graham Allison](#) previously served as Director of the Getty Oil company. [Meghan O'Sullivan](#), who teaches a flagship course to first-year students at HKS and serves on the Belfer Center board, has served as a consultant to the Hess Corporation, a global corporation involved in oil and gas exploration and production. She's also head of the Geopolitics of Energy Project.

The Geopolitics of Energy Project formerly listed BP as a corporate sponsor on its website (see archive [here](#)) — until shortly after FFDH emailed O'Sullivan for comment on this report, when the "Funding and Partnerships" page of its website was taken down altogether.



The Belfer Center has made some [programming decisions](#) deeply favorable to industry interests. On at least several occasions, [output](#) from the Center has [failed to contain](#) within it disclosures of the nature of the center's funding. For instance, in Robert Stavins' *New York Times* [op-ed about divestment](#), nowhere is it stated that his programs are funded by Chevron and Shell.

According to one former Belfer Center researcher, leadership once [held](#) an all-staff meeting at which affiliates were [instructed](#) never to talk to any journalists who inquired about oil industry funding of Center initiatives.

*Robert Stavins and Meghan O'Sullivan did not respond to requests for comment. Graham Allison and Belfer Center spokesperson Josh Burek refused to comment.*

#### B) The Mossavar-Rahmani Center

The Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Business and Government was renamed for and re-endowed in 2005 by [Sharmin and Bijan Mossavar-Rahmani](#), who made their fortune on fossil fuels. Bijan spent his career in the industry, and currently chairs the boards of oil and gas companies DNO International ASA, RAK Petroleum, and Foxtrot International, LDC. Both sit on the Center's advisory board. In 2019, the couple co-authored a [book](#) on *The Opec Natural Gas Dilemma*, lamenting the failure of OPEC to fully leverage its reserves of natural gas. They described natural gas as "a clean, flexible, and convenient fuel," despite [academic evidence](#) to the contrary.

The [Corporate Responsibility Initiative](#) at the Center receives funding from Chevron and ExxonMobil. Both companies are part of the CRI's "[Corporate Leadership Group](#)," described as "leading companies" who are "helping to inform some of the key questions addressed by the Initiative."

The director of the Initiative, [Jane Nelson](#), sits on [ExxonMobil's Sustainability Advisory Council](#). Although Exxon funds council members' work, the company describes the council, whose reports generally avoid any direct criticism of Exxon's sustainability efforts, as "independent." For example, a recent report signed by Nelson (which did not identify the CRI's funding sources) [claimed](#) that Exxon's progress on decarbonization is "generally consistent with the concerns raised by" the 2018 IPCC report — a claim that [fails to align](#) with the consensus of academic research on the issue.

The Mossavar-Rahmani Center also houses the [highly influential Harvard Electricity Policy Group](#) (HEPG). In the past, HEPG took money from fossil fuel entities such as Enel, Enron, and the National Gas Clearinghouse. Following scrutiny, it [removed](#) specific disclosures of donors from its website in 2016, though its website continues to [list](#) participants (a group that includes entities which have donated money, alongside those who have attended HEPG events, participated in HEPG research, and/or otherwise engaged in the group's activities). Listed participants include Shell North America, Natural Gas Supply Association, FTI Consulting, and Charles River Associates.

According to a recent study, Charles River Associates has [undermined climate policies](#) by producing biased economic models for industry clients. FTI Consulting has helped fossil fuel companies influence public opinion and even [monitor environmental activists online](#).



HEPG leadership has [lobbied](#) states (in a presentation that did not include disclosure of HEPG's funders) to oppose expanded solar deployment. William Hogan, the director of HEPG who is widely [considered the architect of the Texas energy market](#), has [consulted](#) for FTI since 2011 and served as an expert consultant for Shell and ExxonMobil. Following the recent [humanitarian crisis](#) due to the failure of Texas' grid in winter weather conditions (in part due to the [failure](#) of its fossil fuel components), Hogan was widely quoted, in contexts that did not disclose HEPG's funding sources, defending the design and function of Texas's grid. "It's not convenient," he [said](#). "It's not nice. It's necessary."

*Jane Nelson and William Hogan did not respond to requests for comment.*

*Update: Due to ambiguities resulting from HEPG's decision to scrub language surrounding funders from its website, and HEPG's lack of response for comment, an earlier version of this report did not clearly distinguish between "donors" and "partners." While some partners are also listed on previous website iterations as donors, not all listed partners have directly funded HEPG's operations.*

#### Case Study #2: Harvard Law School

Jody Freeman is the Archibald Cox Professor of Law and founding Director of the Environmental and Energy Law Program at Harvard Law School. She is also the co-chair of the Harvard Presidential Committee on Sustainability, created in 2020 to advise President Larry Bacow on the university's vision and efforts around sustainability.

Alongside her climate accolades, Freeman is also a [board member](#) of ConocoPhillips, one of the world's largest independent hydrocarbon exploration and production companies. There, she chairs the Public Policy and Sustainability Committee, and sits on the Executive Committee and the Committee on Directors' Affairs of the Board of Directors. In the [public announcement](#) of Freeman's role in shaping university climate policy, Harvard did not discuss her ConocoPhillips affiliation.

On a [podcast](#) with Harvard Economics Professor Robert Stavins in spring 2021, Freeman claimed that numerous U.S. oil and gas companies are following their European peers in accounting for climate change in their disclosures, strategic planning, and more.

The facts say otherwise. U.S. oil and gas companies [continue](#) to make abundantly clear that they have no plans to rapidly transition their business models amid the climate crisis. Despite ConocoPhillips' [claims](#) of climate action, [an assessment](#) released earlier this year found that the company is failing to take sufficient action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The assessment was prepared by ClimateAction100+, an investor-led initiative of which Harvard is a [member](#) that seeks corporate decarbonization. ConocoPhillips failed to fully satisfy any of the initiative's 10 criteria for substantial climate action. Notably, the company [refuses](#) to take responsibility for [the majority](#) of its emissions.

*Jody Freeman did not respond to requests for comment.*



### Case Study #3: Harvard Corporation

Several members of the Harvard Corporation, Harvard's primary governing board, have current or former ties to the fossil fuel industry.

Most prominently, Corporation member Ted Wells, a [partner](#) at New York law firm Paul, Weiss, is currently a [lead attorney](#) for ExxonMobil, defending it against charges that it lied to investors about the impacts of climate change on its business model. His previous clients include [tobacco giant Philip Morris](#) and [top fossil fuel financiers](#) Citigroup, JP Morgan, and Bank of America.

Corporation member and university treasurer Paul Finnegan is the co-founder and co-CEO of Madison Dearborn Partners, a Chicago-based private equity firm. A [page](#) on MDP's website active between 2007 and 2012 described the firm's energy and power portfolio as "focus[ing] on investment opportunities in" oil and gas exploration, coal production and gasification, oilfield services, pipelines and storage terminals, and refining, among other activities related to the fossil fuel sector. Finnegan [confirmed](#) in an emailed statement to The Harvard Crimson that Madison Dearborn invested in a national pipeline operator and a natural gas fired power plant operator.

Corporation member David Rubenstein maintains significant fossil fuel ties through his firm, the [Carlyle Group](#), where he is co-founder and co-executive chair. Earlier this year, *The New York Times* [reported](#) that Carlyle has heavily invested in fossil fuel projects even amid massive public uproar over these projects' environmental impacts and mounting evidence of the catastrophic risks posed by climate change. The Carlyle Group has [invested](#) at least \$2.5 billion in fossil fuels and [purchased](#) a 47.5% stake in Natural Gas Partners, a private equity firm which exclusively invests in oil and gas. In 2017, the Carlyle-backed company Hilcorp [purchased](#) \$3 billion of assets from oil major ConocoPhillips. In 2018, Hilcorp [bought](#) all of oil major BP's operations and interests in Alaska, which is [warming twice as fast](#) as the global average and is [uniquely vulnerable](#) to the impacts of climate change. Hilcorp is also [now the U.S.'s largest emitter](#) of methane — a shorter-lived greenhouse gas, but with approximately [85 times](#) the global warming potential of carbon dioxide — reporting almost 1.5 times the amount of methane emissions from its operations than ExxonMobil.

Nothing on the Corporation's website publicly identifies these conflicts of interest, and any conflict-of-interest disclosures that corporation members make to Harvard are not open to the public. These ties may violate university [conflict of interest policy for governing board members](#), which states that Corporation fellows must "exercise due care to avoid situations that create conflicts between his or her personal or professional interests and those of the University" and must avoid cases where "the Governing Board member's activities could reasonably be seen as adverse to Harvard or as elevating an external interest above the interests of the University." They may also violate the [legal standards](#) that trustees must satisfy under Massachusetts law. That reality stands, even as the university has committed to divest from fossil fuels. It also draws further attention to the need for [transparency](#) around how Harvard will execute its stated commitment, including a clear timeline for phasing out its remaining fossil fuel investments.



*For more information on the Harvard administration's ties to the fossil fuel industry, visit [HarvardCorpLovesFossilFuels.com](https://HarvardCorpLovesFossilFuels.com) and see Section X of Fossil Fuel Divest Harvard's legal [complaint](#).*

## Recommendations and Conclusion

This report is intended to bring to light the fossil fuel money and interests flowing throughout Harvard's campus. We want to affirm once again that our goal is not to question the integrity of any individuals named here. The case studies above represent only a sample of the information we have gathered so far around the fossil fuel industry's presence in research, programming, and more. However, that information also remains limited by a lack of transparency from Harvard around the extent of its ties to the industry.

More broadly, the lack of transparency around fossil fuel industry influence within and beyond Harvard reflects a systemic failure across higher education and elite academia. Given the history of this industry's work to mislead the public and its persistent attempts to block or undermine climate policy, community members and the public have good reason to be skeptical of its involvement with issues of climate, energy, and the environment. They also have good reason to be skeptical that universities that embrace this industry can fully live up to their climate commitments.

**While a further consideration of the questions raised by this report is in order, there are immediate steps Harvard can and must take to ensure integrity in its research and educational initiatives:**

- 1. Publicly disclose the information already collected by the university regarding funding for research, along with grants, gifts, and donations.** By making the information it already collects from faculty members and university leadership regarding the **nature** and **magnitude** of outside sponsorship public, the university can achieve a meaningful measure of accountability, particularly as its research goes on to influence policymakers and other authority figures, and enable open and honest dialogue with the broader community about the nature of its work. The [comprehensive disclosure policy](#) of Harvard Medical School provides a strong model for Harvard to adopt university-wide, given the importance of full transparency in exposing and mitigating any academic conflicts of interest.

Such an effort can also begin with a thorough and transparent enforcement of [rules](#) already on the books. As noted above, [university policy](#) mandates that faculty, in their dealings with policymakers and the public, "publicly disclose financial interests and sources of financial support that could be seen as biasing." But given the lack of transparency surrounding money at Harvard, it's not clear how actively this principle is enforced. While this rule is not sufficient on its own (as it only mandates disclosure of funding's existence, not its magnitude), it is an important starting place.

- 2. Establish a policy prohibiting the acceptance of money from fossil fuel companies for research related to energy policy, climate change, and the environment.** Such a policy would mirror that of the T.H. Chan School of Public Health, which since 2002 has [refused](#) to take money from the





tobacco industry due to its long history of misleading the public about the health harms of its products. Just like the tobacco industry, which sowed doubt and manipulated research on the adverse effects of tobacco on health, the fossil fuel industry has used many of the same tactics to wage consistent disinformation campaigns that successfully stalled climate policy for decades. Given these parallels and Harvard's commitment to divest from both industries, it would be consistent for the university to extend the tobacco money policy for the fossil fuel industry.

Taking these steps would signify Harvard's commitment to true climate leadership and meaningful engagement with its community members at a moment when our planet, our communities, and the university can afford nothing less.

*This report is the first from Fossil Fuel Divest Harvard in what will become a series of public materials around the influence of fossil fuel money on Harvard's campus. If you have any information about fossil fuel industry ties at Harvard, we encourage you to share them with us at [tinyurl.com/fossilfueltips](https://tinyurl.com/fossilfueltips) (you can do so anonymously). If you're interested in getting more involved with our work to uncover these ties, email [ffdivestharvard@gmail.com](mailto:ffdivestharvard@gmail.com). You can also follow @DivestHarvard on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram for updates on our work.*