

Stepping in and Standing out Nationally

BC becomes the first college in the Southeast to commit to divestment

By Joshua Cole
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Brevard College has made the commitment to divest from fossil fuels. This is now common knowledge, as it's been reported in the Huffington Post, on WCQS, and distributed throughout media outlets by the Associated Press and published at local papers like The Transylvania Times and The Asheville Citizen Times. BC is now the first college in the Southeast to commit to divestment by 2018. Junior, Jamie Ellisor, one of the students that helped lead the movement toward divestment, said, "The fact that we beat Carolina, Duke, and Davidson, that's a really big deal because those are bigger schools."

Divestment is essentially the opposite of investment; it is usually employed to effect a change financially or socially. In the past, educational institutions have divested from tobacco and even companies that invested in the South African apartheid regime.

Though colleges and universities by themselves couldn't enact enough change to affect the apartheid govt., they were able to sway public opinion and with it, companies saw that it was not good for public relations in the U.S. to continue supporting the apartheid govt. of South Africa. Educational institutions were able to raise awareness and illuminate apartheid actions through divestment.

"For me, and I think the students, our school divesting from fossil fuels tells the nation, that we as an institution of higher learning, are dedicated to doing what is right by humanity in the fight against climate change for a better future," said senior Emily Crowley, one of the leading students in BC's divestment movement.

Forbes published an article on Feb. 23 concerning the on-going divestiture battle taking place now at Harvard University, titled A Lesson for Harvard Students: Fossil Fuel Divestment won't Save the Planet. The article goes on to suggest that divestment will not change the

climate, nor will it have a large enough impact on the fossil fuel industry to cause them any distress.

Rory Northam, a senior at BC and originally from South Africa, suggested that those in opposition to divestment are missing the point. "Divestment for students at BC is about setting a social and ethical precedent for others", said Northam. "It sends a message to the fossil fuel industry and to everybody around the U.S. that higher education institutions and the youth of the future don't want to be associated with the fossil fuel industry."

BC's mission statement is largely focused on creating a unique learning experience focused on experiential education. "This is a teachable moment; we teach the students, but the students also teach us," BC President David Joyce said. "The work they did on this divestment campaign beautifully embodies our mission statement. You see the lights come on in the students' eyes, when they realize they have the knowledge and power to make a real difference... this is why so many of us at this College went into higher education in the first place."

The Board of Trustees Chair, Donald Moore couldn't agree more, "The students were proactive and respectful," he recalled. "They dialoged with us rather than made demands. They were passionate but also highly professional; they knew what they were talking about."

The idea for divestment at BC began in the spring of 2013. Later in April, students met with Joyce to discuss possibilities about how to proceed. After summer break, when school reconvened in the fall of 2013, students organized a sit-in at the school cafeteria and collected around 250 student signatures along with signatures from various faculty members.

During the spring semester of 2014, 20-30 people gathered at the cafeteria with candles; Ellisor said that they received a lot of support from BC Greens, Facebook, faculty and other community members in favor of divesting. After

the fall semester started in August of 2014 the petition was again circulated and they received an additional 100 signatures which constitutes nearly half of the school's population.

Later in the fall they had their final sit-in at the library where local media helped to cover the event; Joyce was present to address the sit-in and multiple students abstained from attending class in favor of attending the sit-in.

Ellisor explained that Jim Reynolds, or JR, helped BC's divestment movement to go forward along with the help of Joyce who acted as an advisor for the students when they went to present their ideas to the board of trustees late in the fall of 2014.

On Feb. 13 of 2015, global divestment day, the students held a rally. That Friday happened to be a cold, yet sunny day, which brought out a lot of supporters. Crowley, addressed the crowd, "I'm calling on the students of BC to use their powerful and inspirational voices to ignite change on this campus to start a large scale movement for divestment in N.C." Jerry Stone, head of the investor committee, and supporter of the move to divest, was also in attendance.

Stone previously owned a fossil fuel business. He felt confident that the school would be able to find alternatives to the investments BC has in fossil fuels and hopes to create a "green fund" within the next few years.

Seven days later, on Feb. 20, BC announced their decision to divest from fossil fuels. "One of the keys to our success was our close relationships with the administration," observed Crowley. "We never saw this as an 'us versus them' situation, but rather as something that we were all working toward together. The divestment of our institution could not have happened without the cooperation and support the students got from the board of trustees, and the administration." Ellisor hopes that Brevard, as a town, might follow the college's lead, and choose to divest from fossil fuels eventually.