

Cutting Carbon on Campus

Jaclyn Golsborough | Oct. 7, 2013

Like many college students, Vesta Davis had no idea, in the fall of 2011 when she arrived in Richmond, Ind., as an 18-year-old freshman at Earlham College, what she was getting herself into.

When the REInvestment campaign began at Earlham, the goal was to convince the administration to rid the campus of endowment investments in coal extraction companies. At that point, Davis didn't know much about the coal industry, let alone how successful the campaign would be.

Now, two years later, Davis is in the critical stages of a movement to save her college, to save her community and to save the world. Davis, along with her many student colleagues, is a leader in Earlham's coal divestment movement.

"I feel like I have just woken up in the past year about the current situations (local) communities are put in against their will. It's not just coal that is violating these communities (in Indiana), it's (communities) all over the country and all over



the world that are affected by major fossil fuel corporations," she said.

"Environmental Studies wasn't what I was planning to pursue when I came to college. Over the last few years, there have been a lot of different campaigns and groups (on campus) that affected my decision. The more I got involved, I realized not only how (fossil fuel extraction) affects the physical world, but how it violates human rights."

Now, after spending a summer interning for the Environmental Protection Agency and preparing for another year on the climate change battlefield at Earlham, Davis continues to work to get her college to commit to divesting from coal, and hopefully, exploring fossil fuel divestment in the future.

But Davis is not alone, the grassroots fossil-free divestment movement is spreading like a virus — like an earth-shattering, taking-the-campus-by-the-gonads, ideal-changing virus — thanks to Indiana students. For some campuses, this virus hit before350.org and environmental writer Bill McKibben's Do The Math Tour. For others, the Do The Math Tour was all the students needed to encourage petitions, rallies, forums and workshops.



A voice for the Earlham campus

Members of REInvestment show support during a Sept. 27 SRIAC meeting at Earlham College. From left: David Masterson, Anna Seifert, Vesta Davis, Tim O'Donoghue, Quina Weber-Shirk, Xander Hazel and Faye Christofofo. *Photo: Rachel Warriner*

Recent Earlham-graduate-turned-sustainability-coordinator Sarah Waddle has seen the movement bloom at Earlham. Now as an employee, it's her job to make sure the college is doing all it can to be-

come sustainable, and that includes working with student activists like Davis.

Earlham, being a Quaker institution, is governed by committee, encouraging students, faculty and administrators to take part in the decision making for the college. The Socially Responsible Investing Advisory Committee (SRIAC) is tasked to evaluate the social responsibility of the college's endowment.

The Earlham College Socially Responsible Investment Policy formalized the college's intent "to minimize investing in the securities of companies whose overall behavior results in irresponsible use of the natural environment and/or denigrates the dignity of individuals."

The SRIAC dictates Waddle's job duties, and it also holds her and the campus' sustainability endeavors accountable.

"Earlham has a long history of students being really active in campaigns about a huge variety of things. The more that students can show the administration that they really understand the nuances of how the college works as a business and how it works as an organization — the politics of running a college — the more they can show they have a really clear grasp on this, the more seriously the college is going to take them," Waddle said.

And the college is taking the REInvestment campaign seriously.

"I think that at this point we are not at any position to announce that the college plans to divest it's endowment, but I think what we can say is that the dialog between the students and the Socially Responsible Investing Advisory Committee is going in a really positive direction and I would expect to see really excellent moves being taken by the college in the coming year," Waddle said.

Transparency is an enormous hurdle for most divestment campaigns at other universities, but for the Earlham divestment movement, transparency is not an issue. However, that doesn't mean the battle has been won. There is still a lot of work to be done and Davis only has two years left to make significant achievements.

The next goal for the REInvestment campaign? To get the administration to set a divestment deadline, then take the campaign to the next level.

The responsible investment organization **As You Sow** cites the following disadvantages of investing in coal in its 2012 report "Financial Risks of Investments in Coal":

¥ Capital expenditures for environmental compliance and uncertainty about the cost implications of pending and anticipated environmental mandates.

¥ Persistently high construction costs.

¥ Coal price volatility, rising costs for mining, and shifting markets all placing upward pressure on coal prices.

¥ Competition from low prices of natural gas and other energy sources, which is exerting downward pressure on power prices.

¥ Improved profitability and policy preferences for solar, wind, and energy efficiency investments.

¥ The slow pace of development of viable commercial scale carbon capture and storage for coal plants.

Davis knows there are options for reinvestment, but now she needs to make the university understand that stable and sustainable clean energy options will continue to flourish.

"Our next big goal has always been to divest from coal extraction companies, but overall I think fossil fuels is something we'd like to look into. Our official request is in constant flux because we are continuing dialog with our administration," Davis said.

From putting together reports for the administration on social injustices due to coal extraction to education on campus, Earlham is making strides to create a sustainable future.

Tom Bensman of Earth Charter said it can be easier for grassroots divestment campaigns to find more success on smaller, private and religious colleges and universities than large public institutions.

"I think that the colleges that have religious affiliations where you can talk about God, creation, care and earth justice, (divestment) really should be part of their mission. Those are the colleges that hold the most hope. Once one college in Indiana becomes the first to do this then there is pressure," Bensman said.

He travels to colleges and universities around Indiana talking to students about earth justice, sustainability and activism. He said the education of young people is one instrumental factor in ensuring a less-hellish future for the world.

"My door onto campuses is through faculty members. I'm encouraging students that whatever you feel passionate about as a citizen of a democracy that you want to change, now is the time to go for it and be as courageous as you can be," he said.

Driving force for Divest DePauw

Across the state, a fellow student activist, Carlie Vaughn of DePauw University in Greencastle waits for the fall semester to start. It is an especially vital time for her campus, for her campaign and for Indiana because Vaughn is waiting for a response from the administration. Will they invest in the world's future by divesting from fossil fuels or will they hid behind their portfolio and wait for another school to be the first in Indiana to divest?



Students from 60 colleges in the U.S. and Canada gathered at Swathmore College to learn the ins and outs of divestment campaigns and plan for the future of the national campaign. *Photo: Rachel Warriner*

While Earlham's campaign predates Bill McKibben's "Do The Math," the movement at DePauw was spurred by this countrywide initiative.

Students started a petition in December of 2012; by April Divest DePauw had 600 signatures — at a school of just over 2,000.

Divest DePauw's request is for the administration to immediately freeze any new investment in fossil-fuel companies, and to divest within five years from direct ownership and from any commingled funds that include fossil-fuel public equities and corporate bonds.

Vaughn said while the administration has been open to the discussion, transparency of the endowment and public perception is the biggest issue.

"We are not very big and we are private, but we do have quite a bit of money," she said. "I'm hoping we can be a role model for other schools and that the administration just wants other people to step up before they do. Five colleges have agreed to divest (through the Do The Math tour) and the administration at DePauw is not seeing that as a big impact because none of those colleges are exactly like us."

Vaughn, like many other divestment activists, said divestment is not about students giving the administration a new

portfolio proposal. She said it's not about the marketing plug that the campus has "gone green." She said it's about social justice and righting the wrongs done to communities surrounded by fossil-fuel-extraction companies.

"People need to see this not as a movement about money. It's not about fighting the administration. It's about fighting the fossil fuel industries and making them the enemy and not the administration," Vaughn said. "People need to realize this is against the fossil fuel industry. When you dive into it, you can lose track of who the enemy is."

Kelvin Ho, Great Lakes coordinator for 350.org, said divestment campaigns can be a huge challenge for students because many expect they need to be an expert on finance, investments or bureaucratic institutions.

Ho said that's not the case. Simply having a strong, loud voice and the passion to hold people accountable for their actions is enough.

"Often times we find that universities begin to bring up these concerns of how exactly they are going to rearrange the portfolio and whatnot more as a way of avoiding the actual question. More of these investment managers are paid more than \$100,000 a year and their job is to understand the investments. We can't expect students to really know all the nitty-gritty of how to rearrange a university's investment portfolio. But what we do know is that collectively as people on this earth we cannot simply afford to put in the amount of money in the fossil fuel industry as it stands," he said.

Ho travels around the Midwest speaking with students and educating about 350.org's integral mission: encouraging students to push their universities to divest from the 200 companies with the largest carbon reserves, that can include coal, natural gas, tar sands oil and more.

Grassroots activism has a long history when it comes to college students, Ho explained, not only because as young people they have the most at stake.

There's a long history behind the grassroots activism spawned from small, dingy dorm rooms on college campuses. When it comes to divestment, these young college kids have a lot at stake. Their entire future is at stake.

"If we really want to avert the consequences that many climate scientists are telling us — there is not much time left," Ho said. "Often times it's really the young people that spark larger movements and we thought that the divestment campaigns are something that can be run on every single university in the country that has some sort of endowment. It's very scalable in that sense."

Moving from the campus to the community

Since the popularization of divestment through nationwide campaigns, the movement is beginning to go beyond campus boundaries. The idea of divestment is spreading to municipalities.

As of the summer of 2013, there were 17 cities that have committed to divesting their holdings from fossil fuel companies including Seattle, Portland, Ore., San Francisco, Providence, R.I., Boulder, Co., and Madison, Wis.

Ho said he wouldn't be surprised if that number grew significantly over the next few years.

"Since then it's gone beyond the university and has spread to divestment campaigns at the municipal level," Ho said.



Anna Seifert from Earlham make her voice heard about divestment issues while attending a rally at Swathmore College. Photo: Rachel Warriner

"There are also a growing number of religious institutions pushing for divestment along with art museums and what-not. We are seeing the movement rapidly spread to all sectors of society."

Still, the fossil fuel industry receives an enormous subsidy from the federal government, which driving common misconceptions of its relative market competitiveness with energy sources such as wind and solar.

Ultimately, the divestment movement aims to change the public discourse on energy, causing reconsideration of the role of fossil fuels in our lives and a significant reduction in greenhouse gas emissions.

"Divestment connects very well with the stark reality that we simply cannot afford to burn the amount of reserves of fossil fuels that companies own," Ho said. "There's a carbon bubble that needs to be popped. That is why we are really going after the fossil fuel industry — and at the financial level."

How can I start my own movement?

So you're inspired, huh? You want to make a difference and hopefully change the world? Thanks to tips from Earlham student Vesta Davis and DePauw student Carlie Vaughn, you can. The two campaign leaders want you to ask yourself these following questions. Once you have those questions honestly answered, you'll be ready to build a campaign.

"How To" guide for grassroots divestment campaign:

1. Why are you passionate about this?
2. How much time do you want to put into this?
3. What kind of groups do you want to work with?
4. Where do you want to see your administration/government take this?
5. How can you make the campaign unique to what your campus/city needs?

Understand your bureaucracy

How do you get a change made in your institution? What is the chain of command? What do you know about those people in that chain? Answering those questions and understanding the way of thinking will help you plan and customize your campaign to be the most effective it can be.

Build a support system

Who do you know will take the time and effort to commit to the campaign? How do you plan on gaining new activists? How do you plan on keeping that support system? Remember, no campaign to save the world is ever easy. You need people that are willing to commit to the cause and keep going no matter what roadblocks the group endures.

Look for ways to spread the word

The more the merrier, right? If that's the case, you will need to build your following of activists. From rallies to forums and education to training, the louder the voice of the group the more you will be heard, and taken seriously by your institution.

Remember your purpose

Don't lose focus during your campaign. Find your mission and stick with it. As DePauw student Carlie Vaughn said, it can be easy to forget who the real enemy is. Remember, divestment campaigns are up against the fossil fuel companies, not the university president, not the city mayor.

Are you ready to start your own movement? It doesn't take much to get a campaign off the ground. Simply visit gofossilfree.org or wearethepowershift.org to start a petition in your area.