



WPI

Resolution

Divesting, Investing, and Transforming for Carbon Neutrality: Accountability in Energy Systems, Climate Action, and Sustainability at Worcester Polytechnic Institute

Committee on Financial and Administrative Policy (FAP)

Sarah Strauss, DIGS

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From Divestment to Transformation

- Long history of student and faculty efforts to encourage WPI Trustees to divest from fossil fuels—starting in 2010 (if not before), with the Students for a Just and Sustainable Future (SJSF) and the support of Professors Roger Gottlieb, John Sanbonmatsu, Jeanine Dudle, David Spanagel, and many others.
- Another push by the DivestWPI student group starting around three years ago, and supported by many faculty, led to the successful WPI student Divestment Resolution in Spring of 2022
- In May of 2022, presentation to Faculty of a draft Divestment Resolution that I crafted with Professor Sanbonmatsu, largely based on the Student Resolution, with feedback from other faculty members over the summer, leading to
- Multiple meetings this Fall with WPI administrators and faculty to discuss draft resolution in the context of other relevant campus activities related to climate action, energy transitions, and sustainability
- Revision of the Resolution to expand elements beyond divestment, including accountability measures and planning strategies to help us move from theory to practice for a wider range of actions: from divestment to investment and transformation
- Met with FAP in January and revised according to feedback from committee and Faculty at large; current version of Resolution is sponsored by FAP



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Divesting, Investing, and Transforming for Carbon Neutrality: Accountability in Energy Systems, Climate Action, and Sustainability at Worcester Polytechnic Institute

Sponsors: FAP and The Worcester Polytechnic Institute Faculty

Whereas anthropogenic climate change [requires our immediate action](#) to reverse our impacts on the planetary community, human and non; and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has [demonstrated](#) that we must reduce the burning of fossil fuels, which constitutes the majority of global greenhouse gas emissions, in order to reach net zero by 2050 and thus lessen the consequences of this fossil fuel dependency on the well-being and prosperity of current and future generations. Climate change intensifies the environmental and health challenges that we already face, including biodiversity loss, challenges to the [global food, water, and energy systems as well as drivers of mass migrations of human communities seeking refuge](#)—all substantial threats to the world’s economic and political stability;

Whereas many universities and institutions have [in recent years passed resolutions](#) in favor of divesting their endowments from fossil fuels investments because of their contributions to climate change and its consequent impacts on the well-being of students, staff, alumni, and faculty; we support and stand in solidarity with the [WPI Student Government’s divestment resolution of April, 2022](#), which includes a comprehensive explanation of the history and actions of universities and other institutions in relation to fossil fuel divestment;

Whereas Worcester Polytechnic Institute emphasizes student well-being as a major pillar of its most recent strategic plan, [Lead with Purpose](#), while describing climate change as a major challenge to the planet. [Student mental health is tremendously impacted by climate change](#), and climate action is a critical response, in addition to mental health resources. Student choices about which university to attend are likewise [made in the context of where climate change and their futures are both taken seriously](#). And, at this point, many of our peer institutions have already achieved [carbon neutrality](#). Worcester Polytechnic Institute can address all of these challenges by directly engaging in climate action to support a sustainable world;

Whereas Worcester Polytechnic Institute, a university known for its ability to “think globally, act locally,” recognizes the importance of considering the implications of its own local actions within a global context and climate crisis. A great deal of student and faculty [research](#), as well as [coursework](#) and [student projects](#) at Worcester Polytechnic Institute are dedicated to sustainability, and the university has initiated much relevant work through the Office of Sustainability; we must ensure that our theory and practice are aligned across the institution and that the needed financial and staffing support exists to implement our Sustainability Plan, along with sustainable renovation and new construction, and other new initiatives for energy and climate action;

Whereas Worcester Polytechnic Institute has already demonstrated a strong resolve to evaluate its financial practices by signing onto in September 2021 the [Principles for Responsible Investing \(PRI\)](#), a United Nations-supported framework and reporting tool for responsibly managing investments, by ceasing our direct investments in fossil fuel assets and agreeing to abide by PRI’s [six principles](#), which include environmental, social, and governance issues in investment analysis and decision making. We have also committed to reducing our carbon footprint in ways that can be tracked, by signing onto the [Second Nature Carbon Commitment](#) in April of 2022, as well as having participated in the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education’s [STARS tracking system](#). We now need to track and coordinate all of these commitments, and to create actionable plans and timetables for moving to the next level of both the PRI and the Second Nature Climate Commitment;



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Resolution (cont'd)

Whereas divesting is both a commitment and a process, developing a divestment plan and timeline will take some time. With respect to the value of making that promise and creating a specific timeline to implement a cleaner investment strategy, the Principles for Responsible Investing [discuss that divestment](#) “communicate[s] to the wider market that the investor believes the targeted company’s long-term strategy is likely to remain misaligned with relevant sustainability performance thresholds.” Fossil fuel companies contribute significantly to the climate crisis and are contraindicated with an ecologically sustainable economy. While Worcester Polytechnic Institute has not been directly investing in fossil fuel companies, we must continue the process of reducing our investments in fossil fuel production and, as complex and diversified investments that indirectly support fossil fuel sunset, ensure that we are reinvesting in companies that support a sustainable energy transition and economy, recognizing that the investment and corporate landscape is in many cases shifting its focus as well, such that these decisions will require careful review as the decades unfold. We note that this does not require the elimination of fossil fuel use on campus, for research or other important purposes, but rather the thoughtful reduction in use of fossil fuels and their byproducts for purposes that do not have reasonable replacements.

Whereas the employees of Worcester Polytechnic Institute currently have minimal ability to select responsible fossil-free investments for their retirement, since the [TIAA-CREF ESG SocialChoice fund maintains significant fossil investments](#). The [Fidelity Parnassus fund](#), however, does not, so there is a single option. We, as educators, taxpayers, and citizens of the world, whose communities are already feeling the impacts of climate change, and whose future is in jeopardy, have both a responsibility and a right to demand that our university institution is no longer complicit in the harms of fossil fuel companies; and that the university creates opportunities for employees to personally divest their retirement funds from fossil fuels. We have seen the damages wrought by climate change and we hope to give employees the opportunity to take individual action to combat these impacts with our retirement funds;

Whereas the demands of climate action highlight our commitment to “walk the walk”—just as our strategic plan, [Lead with Purpose](#), dictates. According to WPI’s recent [NECHE Institutional Self-Study](#), “WPI’s lowest rated [learning] outcome by faculty and students is ethical development”; WPI’s role as an institute of higher education is to cultivate the minds and talents of the next generation of humanity. Specifically, Worcester Polytechnic Institute’s vision is to improve society through the advancement of science and technology. Worcester Polytechnic Institute must take our current Strategic Plan seriously and remember that we can only better society through the application of STEM for the greater good. In [Lead with Purpose](#), “[w]e recognize that cultural competence, ethical reasoning, and historical understanding must align with technical capabilities to develop empathetic, collaborative, and creative STEM professionals”; we state further, “[a]s global citizens, we respect our natural environment and acknowledge the responsibility we all have to develop and disseminate sustainable stewardship practices for our planet.” We cannot be (or train) successful engineers, scientists, researchers, or professionals if our innovations ultimately cause more harm than good. Nowhere is this more apparent than with climate change. Industrial revolutions significantly advanced our society, while creating the largest threat to our species we have ever seen;

Whereas, we have at Worcester Polytechnic Institute committed to the creation of a new Institute for Research in Sustainable Systems (IRiSS) that will directly advance multiple objectives under the current [campus Sustainability Plan](#), including increasing Worcester Polytechnic Institute’s investment in sustainability research; promotion of cross-disciplinary approaches and systems approaches; addressing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); and working to solve significant global issues by engaging research, projects, and coursework. We now call on the administration, faculty, staff, students, and wider alumni and community networks to work together to “walk the walk” by advancing a WPI campus “Culture of Sustainability” that includes carbon neutrality goals and ethical actions, allowing us to be a model for others as we reach out to meet community needs beyond Worcester Polytechnic Institute.



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Whereas given the institutional power we wield, the clear and pressing need to make the transition to cleaner, more sustainable energy systems, a circular economy, and a society more resilient to the unparalleled havoc that the climate crisis promises to deliver; ***now, therefore, be it Resolved***, that the Worcester Polytechnic Institute Faculty:

- 1) **Hereby acknowledges the severity of climate change**, and further, the **need for swift action** to prevent the earth's average temperatures from warming more than 1.5 °C to ensure a habitable future;
- 2). **Advocates that** Worcester Polytechnic Institute, **having already ceased new direct investment in fossil fuels, further commits to sunseting existing fossil investments**, via a public declaration made in FY2023;
- 3) **Calls on the leadership of Worcester Polytechnic Institute to create a divestment plan in FY2024, with full divestment of endowment funds from the fossil fuel industry by FY2030** or as the existing investments that include support of fossil fuels sunset (accountability table to be provided for tracking this process);
- 4) Calls on the leadership of Worcester Polytechnic **to ensure by the end of FY2023 that more responsible retirement investment options** that attend to ESG goals (and specifically excluding fossil fuel investments) **are made available to faculty and staff** as part of their retirement benefits plans;
- 5) Calls on the Division of Finance & Operations **to develop a plan by FY2024 for pursuing the highest possible ratings under the Principles for Responsible Investment**, with annual communications on the fulfillment of the plan and current ratings to the Student Government Association and the Green Team;
- 6). Calls on the Division of Finance & Operations **to develop a plan by FY2024 for meeting the requirements of the Second Nature Carbon Commitment, and then moving on to meeting the more extensive goals of the Second Nature Climate Commitment**, with annual communications on the fulfillment of the plan and current ratings to the Student Government Association and the Green Team;
- 7) **Strongly supports the replacement of our police, facilities, and grounds vehicles and machinery with hybrid, electric, or fuel cell vehicles or tools** as their useful lives expire, and with attention to new technologies and options as they arise, with a goal of 2030;
- 8) **Requests that the stated efforts to aggressively pursue energy efficient and transformative strategies for central utility improvements and renewable energy technologies**, in new and existing buildings, including collaboration with WPI's faculty, staff, and students to reduce energy-related emissions with strategies (including, but not limited to, LED lighting upgrades, HVAC optimization, heating and cooling system improvements, addition of geothermal, and on- and off-campus solar, microgrids, and ongoing research on emerging fusion and other technologies), **are publicly tracked so that the WPI community can see continuing progress on these actions**.
- 9) Strongly supports and actively engages with WPI Administration, Staff, and Students **to develop the Institute for Research in Sustainable Systems and to dedicate ongoing funds and human resources that will be required for such research and outreach, as well as to promote the attendant ethics required for a campus "Culture of Sustainability" that includes attention to principles of a circular economy** as a priority element for our institutional mission, in support of stated values in the current WPI strategic plan.
- 10) Strongly supports a broader level of **campus-wide attention to solid waste management through participation in the SWEEP standard or similar approach, along with attention to sustainable renovation and new construction (for example green roofs)** on campus as a community-engaged action, with faculty, staff, and student expertise brought to bear.
- 11) Strongly supports the **use of locally-produced foods for campus consumption, as well as the development of food forests and gardens on campus and in the greater Worcester area, to both minimize our carbon footprint and increase the ability of our local environments to store carbon**. Combining a local food economy with such additional practices as "meatless Mondays," attention to food waste and single-use utensils/packaging, and more vegetarian alternatives can help the WPI community reduce greenhouse gas contributions.
- 12) **Requests that by FY2024, WPI commits to a plan for achieving carbon neutrality status on campus by 2035** and commits to pursuing new strategies to reach this goal as they emerge in the coming decades.



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Resolution (cont'd)

This Resolution was primarily authored by Professor Sarah Strauss, with input from the Faculty at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, including elements drawn from DivestWPI and the Student Government Association at Worcester Polytechnic Institute.

This Resolution was developed in support of and with inspiration from the WPI Student Governance Resolution passed in April, 2022, which was itself inspired by [Ivy League Universities Resolution for Fossil Fuel Divestment](#) written by the [Student Sustainability Association at Penn](#) and the [University of Pennsylvania Undergraduate Assembly](#), and passed by the student body presidents of the universities that make up the Ivy League universities. Their Resolution was also inspired by [Big 10 Schools Divestment Resolution](#)

Definition of Fossil Fuel Divestment:

While there is no universally accepted definition for what it means to be divested from fossil fuels, in alignment with guidelines outlined by 350.org, we believe that a fossil fuel free portfolio includes but is not limited to:

No investments (direct or indirect) in any of the [top 200 fossil fuel companies](#) by size of reserves.

No investments (direct or indirect) in any company that explores for, extracts, processes, refines, or transmits coal, oil, and gas.

No investments (direct or indirect) in any utilities whose primary business function is to burn fossil fuels to produce electricity.

For more information regarding carbon risk and fossil fuel divestment, explore [this comprehensive list of resources](#) compiled by the Intentional Endowments Network and [this guide to Fossil-Free Investing](#) by Trillium Asset Management.

For inquiries, reach out to gr-divestWPI@wpi.edu



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