

# Rationale of early adopters of fossil fuel divestment

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This research uses the social science perspectives of institutions, ecological modernization and social movements to analyze the rationale used by the early-adopting universities of fossil fuel divestment in the USA.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Through analysis of qualitative data from interviews with key actors at the universities that divested their endowments from fossil fuels, the paper examines how institutions navigate competing logics and frame their rationale.

**Findings** – The results show that while many institutions relied on ecological values embedded in their missions to justify their decision to divest, many also continued to embrace an altered version of market logic.

**Research limitations/implications** – This research is primarily limited by its small population size. If the number of adoptees increases in the future, quantitative analysis should look for statistically robust trends.

**Practical implications** – The implications of this research are that we can expect more universities to commit to divesting from fossil fuels if their mission statements provide them with cultural material to rationalize the decision, but also expect them to couch the decision in continued goals and concerns for fiduciary responsibility and the subsequent growth of their endowment.

**Social implications** – Social actors engaged in the fossil fuel divestment campaign may take this research and conclude that they need to build their arguments around the existing institutional logics and cultural identity.

**Originality/value** – This paper contributes original primary data documenting how institutional actors confront dominant logics using both a mixture of internal cultural identity and the reframing of the legitimated market logics.

**Keywords** Social movements, Framing, Institutional logic, Divestment, Ecological modernization, Fossil fuels

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Since 2012, there have been calls for colleges to divest their financial endowments from the fossil fuel industry. Much of this pressure has emerged from a social movement campaign, which is argued to be the fastest growing divestment campaign in history. As of the fall of 2014, the movement had spread to over 300 campuses in the USA, but only a relative few institutions have formally committed to (or formally rejected) the demands of the movement. Why have some colleges and universities committed to divest from fossil fuels while others have rejected the idea? In the highly competitive and

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resource-strained market of higher education, a conservative approach to the risks in financial investment strategies would be expected. The dominant financial norms, such as the fiduciary duty of trustees guide, if not compel, the management of financial endowments toward decisions that increase the financial value of investments.

Can the social sciences help us understand the decision to divest? This research uses the current sociological understanding of social movement framing, institutional logics and ecological modernization to analyze how early-adopting organizations justify their decisions to divest. What cultural framing and institutional logic do the early adopters use to rationalize their decisions? How are ecological and economic rationale brought together? How does social theory reveal a particular pattern that may predict the diffusion of divestment to other institutions?

These questions are explored through rich qualitative data collected during interviews with key informants of ten of the 12 early-adopting institutions. The analysis reveals that the alignment of cultures of sustainability, often expressed explicitly in their mission statements, was a key rationale for committing to divestment. Many of the early adopters also framed their decision as necessary to align what they were teaching in the classroom with their administrative actions. Lastly, rather than fully rejecting the fiscal growth imperative, many continued to utilize it as justification for their decision – citing the rationale of “stranded assets” and a belief that fossil-fuel-free portfolios would perform as well or better as those that did not divest. By understanding the institutional logics and the framing utilized, we are better able to understand how early adopters of the divestment movement are able to overcome dominant market rationale.

### **The fossil free campaign**

The fossil fuel divestment campaign, Fossil Free, was started and is run by the social movement organization, *350.org*, whose name comes from the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere that the scientific community has predicted will most likely sustain life as we know it on the Earth. The current level of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere is around 400 ppm ([National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2015](#)). The campaign demands that colleges and universities, as well as foundations, religious institutions, municipalities and others, halt new investments in fossil fuel companies and phase out existing investments within five years.

There is a strong moral framing of the campaign. In a communication guide, Fossil Free provides examples of a messaging arc that frames fossil fuels as immoral and value driven. Mixing the metaphoric language of accounting and morals, the campaign argues that, “The bottom line is that divestment is the only moral choice for institutions that care about the economy, society, and the planet their students are going to inherit” ([Fossil Free, 2014b](#)). Investment in fossil fuels is equated directly with the destruction that climate change has caused, is causing and will cause. Fossil Free places the moral responsibility on the institutions. They state:

If it is wrong to wreck the climate, then it is wrong to profit from that wreckage. We believe that educational and religious institutions, governments and other organizations that serve the public good should divest from fossil fuels ([Fossil Free, 2014a](#)).

### **Current literature**

Previous analysis of 379 adopters of the American College and University Presidents’ Climate Commitment ([ACUPCC, 2015](#)), a commitment to reduce organizations’

emissions (not divest from fossil fuels), found no determining structural characteristics (White, 2009). Neither size, geographic location, public or private status, research or teaching orientation, nor previous commitments to sustainability were predictors of early adoption of the ACUPCC. White (2009, p. 225) argues that:

Future research would benefit from a more thorough exploration of the innovation-decision process stages [...]. In particular, interviews and/or surveys with those on campus most responsible for planning for and implementing strategies of climate neutrality would be useful in understanding [...] the reasons for these commitments [...].

The paper follows this advice and focuses on literature and methods that will illuminate the explanations of adoption by those who made the decisions. It focuses on the framing process of the social movement literature, the logics of institutions and ecological modernization theory before explaining the qualitative methods involving interviews with key informants.

### *Framing*

The framing perspective from social movement literature theorizes that for social movements to succeed, recruit participants and convince targets to adopt their demands, organizations must align their claims-making efforts with the cultural context in which claims are being made (Benford and Snow, 2000; Snow *et al.*, 1986). Participation in social movement campaigns is encouraged by framing the severity or urgency of the problem, belief in the movement's ability to make change and the need for direct action (Benford, 1993). The particular framing of an issue can help potential participants overcome rational choice limitations of simple cost benefit analysis through "the ways in which movement discourse contributes to emergent revisions of participation risks, costs and rewards" (Benford, 1993, p. 210).

Framing theory then provides a lens to see social movement campaigns as cultural contests that define the meaning of what is wrong, who is to blame and what should be done (Snow *et al.*, 1986). To be successful, claims making must be framed in a manner that aligns with the local cultural context. Claims making by social movement organizations about globally entwined social problems is "localized" according to the culture – even at the college campus level. Einwohner and Spencer (2005) found that anti-sweatshop movements on different college campuses made claims and constructed the issue in different ways based on their local cultures. While their research focuses more on how contentious claims are enacted, the paper would expect that the power and symbolic material of local culture would also be used to make claims about the adoption of social movement demands. Therefore, in the case explored here, we would expect to find that colleges and universities that are early adopters of fossil fuel divestment find cultural affinity with the claims of the campaign and the existing cultural norms of the institutions. We would expect colleges that have already adopted a high degree of sustainability initiatives or have otherwise embedded environmental concern into their norms and values to be more susceptible to the claims of the campaign. This cultural material then not only convinces them to adopt divestment but also becomes a tool for them to explain their decision.

### *Institutional logics*

Complementing the cultural approach of framing, current literature argues that social institutions are driven by central logics that not only structurally define the actions of

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agents within them but also provide cultural meaning to those actions. The power of these logics is *both* structural, through systems of rules and policies, and normative in the cultural definitions of what is appropriate. This approach argues that:

[...] to understand individual and organizational behavior, it must be located in a social and institutional context, and this institutional context both regularizes behavior and provides opportunity for agency and change (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008, pp. 101-102).

The decision to divest occurs within social contexts that contain both structural and cultural restraints and opportunities.

Logics vary across fields and these logics come into competition and conflict when the fields overlap (Friedland and Alford, 1991). The logics of democracy may conflict with the maintenance of bureaucratic market structures; markets may compete with the logic of the family, or religious institutions may conflict with the logic of the state. Additionally, Scott *et al.* (2000) document the overlapping and conflicting logic of the healthcare field with market, professional and state logics. A meta-analysis of institutional logic theory argues that the centrality or dominance of one level of logic may, at certain points in history, be greater than the other overlapping and interacting logics. Several studies have shown that since the rise of neoliberalism in the early 1970s, market logic has dominated other institutional logics (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008, p. 108). However, the literature lacks clear predictions regarding how actors navigate multiple, overlapping and conflicting logics.

For colleges and universities facing fossil fuel divestment decisions, the logic of the market and the logic of education overlap in the fiscal management of endowments and generate conflict over the values of environmental stewardship and social responsibility. Due to this, the structural rules that define the possible action and the cultural norms of appropriate action for colleges and universities must be negotiated. The market logic dominates the management of college endowments with an imperative for growth, while the logic of education contains values of critical thinking, empiricism and knowledge development. The logic of ecological sustainability places an emphasis on limiting, if not eliminating, the destructive human impact on local and global ecosystems. This is dramatically different from market imperatives. While the current literature acknowledges the presence of overlapping logics, it does little to explain how actors behave in the face of this conflict. The paper explores how institutions actually manage these conflicting logics. How do actors explain decisions to divest from fossil fuels when they are influenced by competing structural rules and norms of behavior?

Decisions are not solely driven by internal rationality and efficiency. In fact, many actors in a field may be adopting innovations without thorough analysis or knowledge of the appropriateness of the innovation for their specific situation. Neo-institutional theory predicts that organizations throughout a field becoming increasingly similar, a process referred to as isomorphism, because they simply mimic what other legitimate actors have done, because they are coerced to do so by other more powerful actors in their field, or out of an obligation defined by their professional field (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). However, in the case examined here, the early adopters are the innovators, the ones still making decisions seemingly based on what is “right” for their specific situation. With the continued spread of divestment among colleges and universities, it is possible that it will simply become “something that colleges and universities do” – that is it will be normatively defined as legitimate and an expected action of the field.

However, it remains far too early in the process for this to be a predictive force. As DiMaggio and Powell (1983, p. 148) argue:

In the initial stages of their life cycle, organizational fields display considerable diversity in approach and form. Once a field becomes well-established, however, there is an inexorable push towards homogenization.

With just 12 out of thousands of colleges and universities adopting divestment, the process of normative isomorphism has yet to emerge.

### *Ecological modernization*

These conflicts between market logic and the logic of ecological sustainability are also explored in the theory of ecological modernization. Rather than arguing that the ecologically destructive forces of a capitalist market economy will only be resolved through complete and revolutionary alteration of modern economic institutions, ecological modernization theory argues that modern institutions such as a capitalist economy, science and technology play a key role in ecological reform – for the better (Mol, 1996). Through the lens of ecological modernization, ecological and economic logics/rationality are now on an equal footing and not seen as fundamentally incompatible. Economic actors and institutions are increasingly becoming part of the significant shift toward environmental sustainability. As Mol (2002, p. 94) argues, “ecological rationality has started to challenge the dominant economic rationality”. However, ecological modernization also continues to recognize that this process is not without conflict.

While institutions of higher education are outside of the realm of production of material goods, they must still confront decisions that are often seen as either economical or ecological. Ecological modernization theory argues that decisions can be both economical and ecological (Mol, 1996). Market rationale can be, will be and is used as a tool to improve ecosystem health through mechanisms such as “cap and trade” to limit carbon emissions and a focus on efficiency to decrease energy costs. Ecological modernization predicts that modern institutions and actors will be reflexive, processing information as conditions change and redirecting the institution in an appropriate manner with consideration of both the economic and ecological sphere – undergoing an “environment-induced transformation of institutions” (Mol, 2002, p. 93). From this perspective, we would expect that colleges and universities are able to and actively negotiate the competing logics by bringing in ecological logic to restrain pure economic logic and/or by utilizing economic logic to bolster the goals of ecological logic; that is, environmental sustainability.

### **Methods**

By May of 2014, a total of 12 colleges and universities had publically committed to divest. These included College of the Atlantic, Foothill-De Anza Community College Foundation, Green Mountain, Hampshire, Naropa, Peralta Community College, Pitzer, Prescott, San Francisco State, Stanford, Sterling, and Unity. Due to the small size of the current population of early adopters and the research question’s focus on justifications for decisions, qualitative interviews of key informants are the best methodology for analysis. The Office of the President was contacted at all of the divesting institutions and invited to participate in telephone interviews. Ten of the 12 institutions agreed to participate and the interviews were conducted between May and July of 2014. Two of the

institutions were not responsive to several requests and gave no particular reason for declining to participate. In half of the cases, the Office's of the Presidents redirected the interview request to actors more closely involved in the divestment process. Table I presents a distribution of the types of interviewees. Interviews were semi-structured and ranged from 30 minutes to nearly an hour. All of the direct quotes from the interviews are presented confidentially. While some agreed to be identified to avoid a breach of confidentiality by process of elimination in a small sample size, the paper has maintained everyone's confidentiality. The author generated transcriptions during the interviews. These transcriptions were then analyzed using the focused coding methods of Grounded Theory to systematically extract the main themes within the responses (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2013). Grounded Theory allows for patterns and themes to emerge from the data rather than traditional hypotheses testing that looks for the presence of particular variables.

### Results

The paper now turns to the extensive qualitative data from interviews with key actors of the divesting colleges and universities that will illustrate the complexity of the logics and framing that they used to explain their decision. Three key trends emerge from the interviews. First, early adopters see their decision to divest in direct alignment with their existing culture, often referencing their mission statements as formal, public expressions of their values. Second, early-adopting colleges felt pressure to align the administrative actions with what was being taught in classrooms throughout the campus. Lastly, while on the surface it seems like divestment is a rejection of market logic, early adopters embraced much of the market logic to justify their decision to divest. The paper now investigates each of these emergent patterns in depth.

#### *Alignment with institutional culture*

Many of the early adopters of fossil fuel divestment reported not being pressured to do so by the disruptive tactics of student-based social movements. Instead, all ten of the early adopters interviewed expressed that the demands of the divestment campaign were adopted because they readily aligned with their existing institutional culture and mission. As one college president stated:

It was a no brainer. It was easier than I thought to divest, I think the students were expecting a fight. [...]. *Divestment totally aligns with our vision* of authentic sustainability by 2020 (Interview – July 21, 2014).

In the quote above we see that divestment was not seen as counter to the existing vision of the college. It was not an issue the administration needed to be convinced of by a

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President	5	<b>Table I.</b> Number of interviewees by administrative position
Foundation director	3	
Sustainability director	1	
Trustee	1	
Total	10	

mobilized student campaign. Divestment was readily adopted because it made sense with their existing dominant cultural values.

For several of the early adopters, the issue of divestment was part of a much larger socially responsible investment policy. This was not the first time that many of the early-adopters had considered how their endowments were invested. The early adopters had long been concerned about making sure their logics of environmental stewardship trumped the market logic of their endowment. While not rejecting financial rationale, they actively engaged in developing a socially responsible investment strategy that placed boundaries around what was acceptable. Others also shared similar stories of having aligned their investment strategies to social and environmental concerns even before the campaign emerged. One college president noted:

The board agreed that we should invest in things that support our values rather than divest from things. So by the time the fossil fuel divestment campaign began, we were already virtually out of it. When Bill McKibben came to campus he wanted to know why we were not going to divest. I said we can't, we are not invested in any [...]. The people who gave the money [to the endowment], gave to *support the mission of the organization*. We are a mission-driven organization. *We reflect our values in our decisions* from labor practice to the types of buildings that we build. The proposition that there needs to be an iron curtain between the people who manage the money and the mission of the school is preposterous. *The law does not require you to ignore values* in your fiduciary responsibility (Interview, July 10, 2014).

Another college president was even surprised that because it so clearly aligned with their values, they had not addressed fossil fuel divestment much earlier, even prior to the Fossil Free campaign emerging. He reflected on the process with the following statement:

The board was proactive. There were students involved in the *350.org* campaign, but they did not need to activate this issue for us. In fact, *because of the mission of college*, it was a little surprising that we had not divested from fossil fuels decades earlier [...]. There are all kinds of questions of values in the perspective that the endowment needs to pursue the greatest growth, period. Clearly, colleges draw other lines in the sand regarding what is reasonable to invest in. Yes, we have an obligation to prudently manage the endowment, but not at all costs for income growth outside *the boundaries of our values*. [...] I can't overstate *the influence of the culture of our college*. The response to our divestment was real pride (Interview, May 27, 2014).

The strength of the cultural values that aligned with divestment allowed all of the early-adopting institutions to overcome challenges from market logic about the management of their endowment. As stated by one director of sustainability, "the board expressed minor concerns regarding fiduciary responsibility. It was really very minor. They were pretty much on-board due to divestment's *alignment with our values*" (Interview, June 24, 2014).

Another key informant pointed to more direct actions in addressing climate change and used alignment with those actions as justification for divestment:

We decided to do this for several reasons. One, it *aligned with the ethos of the school*. We have an energy policy that tries to eliminate the use of fossil fuels in our heating, transportation and energy sectors as a whole. We could not ask the community to engage in these challenges without looking at our investments in them (Interview, June 9, 2014).

The cultural values of the colleges and universities were not abstract values that were tucked away in vague language of the mission and forgotten about. Both the student

campaigns and the institutions were aware of the active expression of those values and how they were implemented in normative behavior. Additionally, early adopters did not isolate the market logic of the school's foundation and the logics of educational and environmental stewardship. Instead, they aligned the two logics in a way that the foundation was driven only in part by non-market logics. The director of one of the university foundations said:

In the initial conversation with the students, they said: we are proud to be students of [our university] and *this university prides itself on the values of social justice and we are asking that the foundation reflects the same values* that we are taught in the classroom and you expect us to uphold when we leave here.

Some of the larger universities that have been resistant to this are missing that point. Our foundation and the university are institutionally related and the work of *the foundation should reflect the mission and values of the institution* (Interview, May 30, 2014).

All the early adopters expanded the market logic of maximizing the investment growth of the endowment, often captured by the ideas of fiduciary duty, to include duties to the college's cultural values. Recognizing multiple institutional logics operating within the college, one chairperson of the board of trustees finance committee of an early-adopting college reported:

The main driver was *to align the actions of the college with the mission and the values of the college* [...]. Maximizing returns in the endowment is an incomplete look at fiduciary duty. That duty can be trumped by other concerns. Human trafficking might also be highly profitable, but I think we would all agree that we would not want to own that stock. It is easy to overstate the case of fiduciary duty in seeking an excuse to avoid action such as divestment from fossil fuels (Interview, May 23, 2014).

It is clear that among those that committed to fossil fuel divestment early in the campaign that their existing mission made adoption a process of aligning proposed action with existing cultural values. All of the early adopters leaned on the strength of their cultural values to overcome a powerful market logic that demands the financial growth of endowments. The early adopters were already active in climate change issues. In other ways, they were already engaged in socially responsible management of their endowment, so fossil fuel divestment easily fit into their existing institutional logic and aligned with their prioritized cultural values.

#### *Not shutting down the industry, but walking the talk*

None of the early adopters claimed that their divestment would make a direct impact on the financial status of the fossil fuel industry. In fact, over half explicitly acknowledged that it would have no direct impact on the companies' ability to operate. One college president said realistically:

The press and media and other college presidents vastly misconstrue the main rationale for divestment. We will never affect the market. We might get the market's attention, but they make more money than the history of money (Interview #2, May 23, 2014).

Another president remarked similarly that:

I very much doubt that it will significantly affect oil companies. College endowments are too small a part of the overall investment economy, but the moral impact is huge. The notion that



society is moving to change its relations to fossil fuel companies is huge (Interview, July 10, 2014).

Institutions of higher education may be uniquely situated to act outside of the logic of the market. Colleges and universities have a large audience of students and alumni that are aware of and influenced by their actions. One president noted that, “we are not assuming that we are going to bring the fossil fuel sector to its knees. We are trying to bring attention to the topic and make a conscientious choice” (Interview, May 27, 2014).

Half of the ten interviewees expressed concern with aligning what they taught in the classroom with the additional actions the college took, including divestment. The primary role of colleges and universities, that is to educate and instill the values of education, was a significant justification for divesting. The explanations given by early divestors had more to do with the process and meaning of divestment than the actual act. For half of the early adopters, divesting aligned with the college mission as discussed above, and also with what they taught in the classroom. In the mind of some, by teaching students about the science and social cost of climate change, they were then obligated to back up that teaching with institutionally aligned behaviors – divestment from the fossil fuel industry. They were obliged to “walk the talk”. Speaking specifically to the connection between classroom instruction and how endowment funds are invested, one college president said:

It is not only the mission of the college, but what we teach in the classroom [...]. We do not want any daylight between our institution’s behavior and what we teach the students. We emphasize critical thinking through the liberal arts and we did not think there should be disparity. We are focused on environmental stewardship and divesting is in line with maintaining the authenticity and integrity of what we teach in the classroom (Interview, May 27, 2014).

Another president emphasized this point explaining that:

Students say, “Here is what you say you stand for, how is this aligned with those values?” This really came down to walking our talk. How can we be teaching one thing and doing another in our investments? We actually had our investment firm come out and talk to the students. We wanted to make it an educational experience (Interview, June 18, 2014).

Another saw the opportunity to extend the teaching beyond the classroom: to teach students to be politically engaged in a critical manner. Embracing a logic that learning should extend beyond book learning and abstract concepts, one president argued that:

“Money is too important to apply values to it”. Imagine if we told the students that! [...] I love having our students engaged. [...] I think one of the issues is that traditionally, the committee of the board has run investment, and college presidents have been less engaged in those decisions and tended to leave it to the experts. We may not feel entirely comfortable to challenge [the investment experts’] assertions. They are the ones who work on Wall Street and we are just college presidents. I think that is changing because the administration is there for the students and it is wrong to stonewall student interest (Interview, July 10, 2014).

Divestment decisions were more than just about aligning the values of environmental stewardship with the endowment’s investments – they were also about engaging in the decision-making process in a way that was educational, the core logic of higher education. Early adopters saw divestment as an opportunity to engage students in critical thinking, align what they were teaching in the classroom with the actions they took and foster leadership opportunities and student engagement for their student body.

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The process of deciding to divest was framed not as a contentious process to be resisted, but as something that colleges were tasked with doing – educating young people.

*Still embracing fiduciary responsibility and growth*

Divesting from a profitable sector of the economy is counter to a singular focus on the logic of the market and arguably puts an endowment at the risk of lower rates of growth. On the surface, divestment from fossil fuels seems like a decision where environmental values and social responsibility trump economic rationale. However, 80 per cent of the early-adopting colleges interviewed did not completely dismiss the market logic, but rather adapted the logic to align with the divestment decision. Most were unwilling to concede the concern that their endowments would not perform as well after divesting, but rather argued that there are ways to manage the fund to yield the same growth. One college president held the firm that managed their endowment responsible for finding a way to divest from fossil fuels and maintain the same financial results. He stated, “Obviously, we want the highest return, but we think we can do both. We are working with our investment firm to set benchmarks to show this can be done” (Interview, June 18, 2014).

These early adopters expressed a continued reliance on the expertise of financial analysts and investment firms to find ways for them to divest from fossil fuels but still align with the market logic of financial growth. They were not prepared to dismiss the market logic, but needed to find a way to stay true to their values and maintain a growing endowment. A director of sustainability stated:

In order to make the argument that there will be no financial loss, I relied on a number of reports, such as the *True Cost* report on stranded asset risks, [...] there were many. A few different sources [...] from financial analysts more so than activists (Interview, June 24, 2014).

In addition to the concern about the rate of growth, in the previous quote, we see the idea of stranded assets emerge as part of the logic. The early adopters are still able to engage in the language of the market with concerns about “risk” in the value of fossil fuel companies being inflated if, in the near future, global policies restrict their ability to extract and burn the fossil fuel assets still in the ground. As the same sustainability director expanded on his quote above:

The other [issue] is the rising concern that a number of financial analysts have written on regarding stranded assets. There is near certainty that in the future there will be binding emissions reductions agreements. Based on current levels of atmospheric carbon, we find that about 4/5ths of the proven reserves cannot be extracted and burned. If we look at the future markets with regulations, we can conclude that these companies are overvalued. There is increasingly great potential for sudden reduction in asset value (Interview, June 24, 2014).

Another used the market logic to argue that divestment is not a risk, but rather an investment strategy that in fact aligns with the market logic by resulting in even higher growth rates:

There is an argument out there that socially responsible investing will lose you money. That is unequivocally false. We have done much better. We can still make money in the market. We have done better than the market average (Interview #2, May 23, 2014).

Here divestment is not seen as a financial decision outside of market logic but one that is rationalized with the prospect of even better performance. In the end, market logic was

not dismissed, but embraced in a way that made divestment seem like a logical financial decision.

### **Discussion**

In an environment where colleges increasingly compete for students and financial resources are stretched ever thinner, divesting from a still profitable sector of the market may seem risky for college and university endowments. This research used social science perspectives and extensive qualitative data to document and explain the logic used by the early adopters in making the decision to divest from fossil fuels.

The data demonstrate, as predicted by the social movement framing perspective, how colleges and universities that chose to divest early in the campaign lean heavily on their cultural values and actively frame divestment as an alignment of their action with their values. We see this in the strongest sense regarding claims about the values solidified in the schools' missions. In this case, adoption of divestment is framed in accordance with local culture. Early adopters took little convincing from disruptive student social movement campaigns because it was clear that divestment is "a no brainer" and just "something we do". Institutions whose cultural values align with this or any campaign for change become the "low hanging fruit" of adopters. While the interviews here are limited to the early adopters, the flip side of the argument would be that early rejectors do not align as strongly with the values behind divestment. This is not to say that any institution of higher education would reject the importance of environmental sustainability, but how that is defined and where it sits in a hierarchy of values is likely to determine the readiness to adopt or reject a campaign.

The multiplicity of values is evident in the overlapping and often competing institutional logics. Many of the early adopters confronted this conflict by using an altered logic of the market to justify the decision to divest. While aligning their actions with their values of environmental stewardship, many of the early adopters continue to couch their decision in ongoing financial growth of their endowment and the avoidance of risk in the market. The market logic remains strong, but malleable, that is, able to be molded to operate in the same realm as other seemingly conflicting logics.

No college was able to fully reject market logic while incorporating a strong ecological logic. This fusion of market and ecological rationale is strongly predicted by ecological modernization theory. Only one of the ten actors rejected capitalism outright (not quoted). Divestment from fossil fuels can be seen as a refinement or ecological adjustment to the market, not an attempt to place ecological rationale distinctly above all else. The reflexivity of the early adopters of divestments, predicted by ecological modernization, recognizes the pure economic path to investing their endowments is no longer feasible. They acknowledge the deteriorating conditions of many of the Earth's ecosystems, particularly the build up of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere, but rather than dismissing the market logic (divesting completely from a growth/consumption-based capitalist system) they use ecological principles to alter the path of their participation in the market. They are finding or creating a path within the economic market that does less ecological harm. Here we see an inclusion of the ecological rather than a dismissal of the economic.

This study makes initial inroads into explaining how actors negotiate overlapping and competing logics within institutions. The current literature acknowledges that socially constructed institutional logics are embedded in both structural rules and

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normative definitions of appropriate behavior. In the case of divestment from fossil fuels, external formal laws (structural rules) bind the management of endowments for all colleges and universities. However, while mission statements are bound by some external normative definitions of what is appropriate for an institution of higher education, they are also internally generated and certain values may be emphasized more or less. In this case, actors place greater importance on the values within their mission than the market rules of financial management. When logics were in competition, those embedded in internally generated institutional values trumped those that were more externally imposed by other actors. Future research should investigate further instances of logic overlap and competition with an eye toward differences between formal structural rules and normatively powerful but less formal values.

This study is not without limitations. The systematic qualitative data analysis is limited to the interview data. While explanations directly from key informants are certainly valid data, interviews are subject to social desirability bias. Additionally, administrators may have numerous motivations for downplaying the influence of student social movement pressure. Future research should also analyze depictions of the divestment campaign in student newspapers or online social movement accounts. While those may present a biased version favorable to the students' interests, it would serve to verify or question the administrators' version of events. The coding of the key informants' statements could also be further verified by inter-rater reliability measures. Lastly, none of the early rejectors were interviewed to explore differences in their rationale from that of the early adopters. Future research should take all of this into account.

## Conclusion

What does this say about the future of the fossil fuel divestment campaign? The explanations of the early adopters indicate that we can safely expect other campuses that also prioritize environmental sustainability as a core value central to their identity to be primed to adopt the demands of the divestment campaign. Specifically, the values of sustainability will have to be more resilient but not fully replace the institutional logic of the market. We would expect that colleges that divest in the future frame their decision based on the values of their institutional mission, but couched in a language familiar to the financial logics – growth, risk, market signals and fiduciary responsibility. Individual campaigns may find success when they can frame the issue of divestment around the local cultural values of each campus while not straying too far from concerns of the market.

The social science perspectives explored here inform how colleges and universities justify sustainability initiatives that initially appear to be in conflict with the powerful financial logic of the market. Institutions often navigate multiple logics – financial, educational and ecological in this case. Whether or not ecological logic serves to temper the market logic is driven by a sense of organizational identity and the alignment of central values that are embedded in the mission (ecological sustainability) versus institutional logics that are externally imposed (financial growth).

Additionally, while the framing perspective in the social movement literature often explores the framing done by social movement campaigns, the case here demonstrates that the targets of movements, the adopters of a campaign's demands, must also frame the rationale of their decisions in a way that aligns with their existing cultural values.

Whether or not the explanations that these institutions have presented for their adoption of divestment are wholly valid or not (I have no reason to doubt them), the manner in which they tell the story definitively demonstrates an effort to show consistency in their values – that is, to engage in frame alignment.

From the perspective of institutional logics, ecological modernization and social movement framing we see that culture matters. Previous research found no distinction among the structural characteristics – size, location, public/private or previous commitments – of early innovators of climate change policy (White, 2009). The paper finds that values embedded in a college or university’s mission serve as guideposts on the route to making decisions. Even more clearly, the values within a mission serve as material to justify policies that prioritize increasing ecological sustainability over pure financial gain, despite the cultural dominance of market values in broader society.

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