

Re: An Open Letter to the Board of Managers at Swarthmore College regarding Climate Change and Fossil Fuel Divestment

From: The faculty members of the Department of Sociology & Anthropology

Date: April 16, 2015

We appreciate that as a Board, you are wrestling with the ways forward for Swarthmore with regard to the College's investment in fossil fuels, reduction of our carbon emissions, sustainability, and other strategies for addressing climate change. As beneficiaries of your financial expertise and fiduciary stewardship, we have been pleased to study, teach and learn from each other in an atmosphere of mutual respect, where deep understanding of self and others and critical and creative thinking about ways to engage and transform our society are primary goals.

As an organization holding shares in fossil fuel companies, we recognize that we, too, have a stake in the wealth generated by such investments. The overwhelming evidence in our disciplines suggests that we are experiencing a moment of environmental crisis, such that many of our fellow humans and non-human inhabitants of Earth are and will be suffering from the devastating consequences of anthropogenic climate change.

As citizens of this Department and the College, we endorse the particular strategy of divestment from companies whose main goals include the extraction and burning of fossil fuels. We recognize that divestment is not the only strategy to bring about major social and cultural change, and we are eager to work with others to explore and implement all effective ways of achieving the same ends. In fact, this letter serves as an invitation to engage with us in continuing conversations and strategizing toward global well-being.

If there is one thing that we have in common as members of a department, and perhaps as members of this community, it is our focus on teaching and learning. Many of us are scholars of social movements, of legitimacy and authority, of rhetoric, of social inequalities, of performance and symbolism. As such we understand that one person or one act alone rarely produces social change, but that many people and acts together can set off a series of events that transform the world. We are also scholars whose research encompasses multiple scales of analysis, from the level of families, towns, professions, and cultures to that of nations, transnational economic flows, and the globe as a whole. Our studies have revealed to us a world unequally at the behest of social forces whose ecological consequences are and will be overwhelmingly destructive, particularly for indigenous peoples, people who live in arid climates, people who live on or near coast lines, and people who are on the financial and political margins of world powers. Indeed, while the world's most vulnerable people have disproportionately been experiencing the negative consequences of our dependence upon fossil fuels

for quite some time, even the wealthiest and most protected humans can no longer evade the deleterious effects of climate change.

Not everyone agrees with the tactics that climate change activists have taken, and not everyone appreciates the full complexity of the political and financial challenges that accompany engagement with this social movement. We take pride in our position in higher education as members of a leading liberal arts institution whose participants seek and value evidence and nuance, science and art, and compassion in the spirit of a Quaker-inspired heritage. So today, we join with the multiple voices on campus, some loud, some soft, some organized, others informal, to plea for engagement by our community as a whole with strategies and policies that will reverse the effects of climate change. And we add our departmental voice to supporting divestment and the importance of working for change with urgency. We hope that divestment by Swarthmore will encourage other organizations to seek ways forward as well, and we look forward to our continued engagement—as individuals and a Department—with each of you.