

UVA ECONETWORK



Activism

There are many ways to get involved in activism at UVA, in Charlottesville, and in Virginia at large. Activism at the University entails pushing for the divestment of UVA's endowment from fossil fuel sources, promoting environmental justice, preventing pipeline construction, and advocating for comprehensive government policy and institutional changes to improve our environment.

Involved CIOs/Clubs

- Virginia Student Environmental Coalition (VSEC)
- Green Grounds
- WriteClimate
- Nitrogen Working Group
- Environmental Science Organization
- Growing for Change
- Animal Justice Advocates
- Virginia Environmental Law Forum
- Oxfam America Club

Focuses of Activism

- **Climate change**
 - The future of our race is threatened by our dependence on carbon-emitting sources of energy. Many have rallied around trying to get leadership to take progressive action in protecting our futures, largely through reducing carbon emissions. The general goal of much of this activism is to achieve the [Paris Climate Agreement's](#) goal of limiting global warming to 2°C, or 1.5°C if possible.
- **Environmental justice**
 - From the [EPA](#): “Environmental justice is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.”
 - This goal will be achieved when everyone enjoys:
 - The same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards, and
 - Equal access to the decision-making process to have a healthy environment in which to live, learn, and work.”
- **Conservation**
 - Some groups on Grounds seek to prevent development projects that could endanger at risk species. This work primarily focuses on sites in the greater Virginia Area
- **Divestment**
 - This involves the reinvesting of UVA's endowment from fossil fuel assets to more carbon conscious assets. Below is a more in-depth description of these efforts.

Divestment

Notes from Abby Heher, a class of 2020 student very involved in divestment:

“VSEC had a divestment campaign a few years ago (I believe it started around 2014) that ended in 2017. It ended because some other

environmental activism started requiring more time and because the BOV was very against any considerations of divestment at the time. Although UVA has announced their plan to become net-neutral and free from fossil fuels, and it sounds as though the BOV will vote on it, it is my understanding that there aren't any commitments from the University to divest from fossil fuels. I know there has been a lot of interest especially among underclassmen to start a new divestment campaign, and the upperclassmen students have been trying to put together some information on our past divestment campaign for them. I believe there will be a presentation on the history of divestment at UVA on January 21, although the exact date is not confirmed yet.

- **History of divestment at UVA**

- **Student movement in 2016:** The most prominent student movement in support of fossil fuel divestment happened in 2016. This was an effort led by students on the Student Council and the Climate Action Society (which has since changed its name to Virginia Student Environmental Coalition). These students took both a behind-the-scenes, institutional approach and an activist approach. Along the institutional route, they were able to meet with Dean Groves, some members of UVIMCO, and eventually President Sullivan. Students wrote a proposal to the BOV in support of divestment and emailed it to BOV members before one of their meetings. From a direct-action oriented approach, students rallied outside of BOV meetings and talked directly to BOV members to show their support for divestment. This effort gained a good amount of traction and was supported by extensive research, but was eventually halted by the President's Office.
- **Action since 2016:** Since the formal efforts in 2016 did not end with clear success, students have taken a more public approach. VSEC has hosted some banner drops and public demonstrations throughout the years. In the spring of 2020, a DivestUVA coalition began to come together again. Also in 2019/2020, a Task Force for Climate Responsible Investment had formed and was working behind the scenes on these topics. Although their efforts were put on hold due to the transition to

online classes for the end of the Spring 2020 Semester, the Task Force consulted with several administrative members close to Jim Ryan to encourage them to administer an audit of their financial investments, as well as to revisit the idea of divestiture as a necessary means to address the economic risks tied to climate-related investments.

- **Divestment from Apartheid in the 90s:** A brief side note here. In the 90s, UVA students led a successful campaign to convince the University to divest from Apartheid. This movement was happening at tons of colleges around the country. Although quite different from fossil fuels (Apartheid in South Africa was one institution/political regime while fossil fuels are a massive global industry), it's nice to know that there is some history of student opinion swaying the management of UVA's endowment.
- **Structure of relevant University leadership**
 - **UVIMCO:** UVIMCO is a private company employed by the University to manage the endowment. Since it's a private company, there are some complicated legal dynamics at play.
 - **BOV:** The Board of Visitors is appointed by the Virginia Governor and has a lot of decision making power. The BOV can decide whether or not to employ UVIMCO (hire or fire them), but has less of an ability to actually tell UVIMCO what to do/how to manage the endowment. For that reason, there are some complicated legal dynamics behind a theoretical commitment to divest. It would likely have to be a joint decision making process between UVIMCO and the BOV, with some influence from the President.
 - **President's Office:** The President of the University is hired by the BOV. While the President has the potential to informally sway decisions made by the BOV, his/her power in actual BOV decisions is limited.
- **Barriers to the divestment movement**
 - **Lack of student coordination:** UVA does not have one comprehensive student government. Instead we have StudCo, ESC, College Council, Class Council, Trustees, etc. On top of that we have hundreds of CIOs, a number of which focus on environmental topics. As a result, many students are working on projects without knowing that other students are doing the

exact same work! In the past, the divestment movement has struggled to span across many CIOs and interested students. Moving forward, it's important that DivestUVA can serve as a coalition of all interested organizations and students so that efforts and plans are coordinated. Hopefully EcoNetwork can help with that!

- **Lack of prolonged efforts:** Since the student body turns over every 4 years, it can be challenging to maintain momentum after prominent student leaders graduate, or get too busy with other endeavors. One key part of growing the divestment movement will be assuring that students of all years play key roles so they don't all graduate at once.
- **Lack of communication between students and decision makers:** As students, it can be really challenging to know which University administrators or leaders are relevant to an issue, and it's even harder to get a meeting with them. StudCo can be an ally, as the StudCo President has access to and often personal relationships with deans and administrators. Otherwise, Professors can often point students in the right direction. In the past, the solution to this barrier has been public demonstrations that don't require a personal connection with a decision maker to have an effect.
- **Most recent update: Spring 2020**
 - As of March, 2020, student efforts surrounding divestment had been renewed. At the end of 2019, a protest at the Harvard-Yale football game made national news, and word had been spreading of divestment campaigns at a number of other colleges (both private and public). Throughout Spring 2020, members of StudCo Sustainability had been working on building the DivestUVA coalition. Student leaders from many organizations have expressed interest, including VSEC, Write Climate, and Green Grounds. At the same time, another 4th year had been working on an open letter to the BOV in support of divestment, hoping for publishing in the Cav Daily.
 - In spring 2020, DivestUVA was planning to hold a public demonstration in support of divestment, while working on a signature campaign for the open letter that was written. In

mid-March, it became clear that student efforts surrounding divestment would largely be placed on hold as students were urged to leave Charlottesville as part of UVA's response to the COVID-19 crisis. As of April, 2020, the immediate future of the divestment movement is unclear due to the state of UVA and the entire world as we attempt to grapple with COVID-19.

- **Strategies used in Spring 2020:**

- There was a good amount of discussion among DivestUVA members regarding the nuance of a potential 'ask' and the language of "divestment" vs. "climate conscious/responsible investing". At the time, DivestUVA settled on the idea that divestment is a powerful way to grab public attention and make an ask very clear, but that a more nuanced understanding of what divestment actually means is important for students to prove their validity to decision makers. For example, in 2020 DivestUVA chose to stay away from asking for 'transparency' after receiving advice from professors that 'transparency' isn't a great word to use in the investment world.

- **Future efforts**

- In the future, interested students can focus on building the DivestUVA coalition further to reach more students, especially those not already involved in green organizations. The Facebook page, previously managed by members of VSEC, can continue to be updated and a Listserv could be built.
- UVA's leadership will likely be considering climate responsible investment and divestment during the 2020-2021 school year (conversations were beginning to occur in spring 2020 but were mostly delayed due to the necessary response to COVID-19). If decisions seem to be delayed longer than is reasonable, public demonstrations from students can help push them forward.

Charlottesville Community

- **The Sunrise Movement**

- The Sunrise Movement is a youth-led, grassroots environmental movement working to mobilize people across America to fight for a livable future. In Charlottesville, the Sunrise Movement a

coalition of students and community members to organize and engage in meaningful political action in order to pass good climate policy and elect leaders who recognize climate change as a critical economic, political, and environmental justice issue. In the past, the Sunrise Movement in Charlottesville has led climate strikes, participated in phone banking and canvassing for political candidates who support bold climate policy, and organized lobbying trips to Richmond to speak to Delegates and Senators about the urgency of climate action. They also work with, and support, other environmental groups at UVA and in Charlottesville to support their initiatives and actions. In the future, the Sunrise Movement will continue to engage in political action— from strikes and sit-ins, to canvassing and phone banking— with a focus on electing leaders in 2020 who make climate change a policy priority. If you want to learn more, and/or get involved you can visit the Sunrise Movement website [here](#), or email the contact information below.

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Professors/Courses

- There is currently no course at UVA solely dedicated to covering environmental activism.

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