

DIVESTMENT CONDITIONS AND CONSTRAINTS WITHIN CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

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Introduction

The divestment movement in Canada, unlike in the United States, is failing to convince University boards to divest their endowment funds from fossil fuels. Although the movement seems defective, it has reached campuses all over the nation, with a movement in every major university. This paper intends to examine both the conditions and constraints of the divestment movement at Concordia University through the experiences of current students and alumni, as well as explore the short-lived reinvigoration of the campaign with the intention to convince the Senate, highest academic governance body, to support divestment. The conditions and constraints portion of this paper is a qualitative research based on analyzing interviews with current and former representatives whom served on Concordia University's Governance bodies or committees. These interviews offered three main points that this paper will indulge, team effort, professionalism, and persistence. The interviewed members are also members who have lived through the beginning of divestment talks with the administration or are well experienced within the governance bodies and Committees within Concordia University. The final portion of the paper will investigate the current affairs of Divest Concordia through a participatory action research.

Team Effort

In the experiences of some of the interviewees, working as a team on these university governance bodies or committees broke some of the constraints that university administrators have invented. In some cases, students are repeatedly told that they “must represent themselves, not students”¹ by university administrators. This constraint is meant to ensure that students, faculty and staff representation is divided, rather than organized. This way less

¹ Erik Chevrier (Part-time Instructor, Sociology and Anthropology, Concordia University), Interviewed by Ali Sherra at Concordia University, Montreal, Canada, March 2019.

interventions on these governance bodies and committees are likely to take place. The interviewees identified that there must be collaborations between student representatives on governance bodies, collaborations between governance bodies and committee representatives with action planners, and finally collaborations between students, faculty and staff on these governance bodies and committees.

Collaborations between student representatives is considered the most important factor to ensure that students are heard. Concordia University's Senate is proof that the representation of students on that governance body is much stronger than it is on the Concordia's Board of Governors, ever since the "Shapiro Report"². Hence students have been struggling to manipulate the vote as they can on Senate, through students collaboration. But even on Senate it's not that easy. As described by Marion Miller:

*"Terry (former Concordia Student Union (CSU) Executive) once said to me that there is this flood that is Senate, and the whole year you will have 2 sand bags. So, you will never stop the flood with your sandbags, but you want to think about where you will strategically put them, and that's going to be your little, tiny influence that you're going to have on Senate. You kind of can't expect to change it all, and you are not going to win it all. But if we are all using our sand bags to block one area of the flood we can block areas and we can add little victories."*³

The importance of student collaboration on these governance bodies have been the key to ensuring that some issues can be raised through collective pressure. This way students can maintain a stronghold, and one voice that can ensure that they are heard or at least can prove that they are an allied force. This doesn't mean that students are able to block

² Sophie Hough-Martin (Academic and Advocacy Coordinator, Executive 2018-2019, CSU), Interviewed by Ali Sherra at Concordia University, Montreal, Canada, March 2019.

³ Marion Miller (Academic and Advocacy Coordinator, Executive 2015-2016, CSU), Interviewed by Ali Sherra at Concordia University, Montreal, Canada, March 2019.

everything that happens on these governance bodies, rather only at extreme times, when blocking these “floods”⁴ are a priority.

Another type of collaboration is that between governance bodies and committee representatives and action planners. This is called a “double movement,”⁵ where on one side there are those who must negotiate with university administrators, and others who must put pressure through action planning. These “different pressure points,”⁶ are a way of ensuring that the university administration is compelled to listen to student voices. Those who negotiate with the university must be fully aware of the steps taken by those organizing the action. That way, they can strategize around their actions and put more pressure on the administration to listen and approve of any demands, or requests by students.

Finally, collaboration between students, faculty and staff, or “lobbying,”⁷ is also an important strategy to get non-administrators, to actively strategize, collectively, to make changes on these governance bodies and committee. Unfortunately, as a constraint, the university administration, and specifically the president, Alan Shepard, has repeatedly told students that “lobbying is not allowed.”⁸ Although not written in Concordia University’s bylaws that legally manage the University Senate and Board of Governors, the administration has invented these constraints to separate students and faculty, allowing them to enjoy a less assertive Board and Senate. Hence, today many professors have been conditioned not to accept, or answer emails sent by student representatives to further discuss any specific topics that may lead to collaborations on the governance bodies. “A few answer,”⁹ and usually they are professors who student representative consider as allies. Unfortunately, the administration

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Chevrier, Interview.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Mikaela Clark-Gardner (Academic and Advocacy Coordinator, Executive 2018-2019, CSU), Interviewed by Ali Sherra at Concordia University, Montreal, Canada, March 2019.

⁸ Clark-Gardner, Interview., Hough-Martin, Interview.

⁹ Clark-Gardner, Interview.

constraints have conditioned many of the less experienced senators to avoid any collaborations with students, and over the long run have weakened a coalition force that existed between students and professors.¹⁰

Professionalism

As student representatives, there is a much greater emphasis on how we must act within the governance bodies and committees. Students specifically face many difficulties conveying their messages,¹¹ thus students must insure that they have done their research, and gone through the official avenues of governance to make change. Professionalism does not mean staying quiet, but rather means being ready to convince the crowd. In some ways it can be considered a political game. It is essential to note that the conditions and constraints that parade these governance bodies and committees are more likely to dissipate if a certain level of professionalism is met.

It is extremely important and unfailing when students do their research before debating any topic. Through the interviews conducted, there was both a lot of discussion on the research done prior to questioning or presenting any policy changes but also how this research affects current representatives. Many, to adhere to these high levels of professionalism, must commit hours of free volunteering that go beyond the expected volunteering time they sign up for. This affects specifically students and faculty as they are usually committing to many hours of unpaid work. It was noted in one interview that it was aggravating that “work is being done by students rather than (hired) researchers.”¹²

¹⁰ Chevrier, Interview.

¹¹ Clark-Gardner, Interview.

¹² Hough-Martin, Interview.

On a separate but similar note, some of the issues that face students who demonstrate professionalism is the potential of being “ignored.”¹³ And that is not because of lacking knowledge, or information but rather due to their status as students. As one interviewee stated, “If you were asking for change they ask for your credentials, otherwise they don’t ask.”¹⁴ This was not something only one interviewee stated, rather it is seen very often especially on committees where most interactions between representatives take place.¹⁵ Eyebrows are raised when the information provided by students don’t match their credentials, and suddenly either they are interested to know more about the student or completely ignore them. In most cases though, students have found themselves “ignored.”¹⁶ Some interviewees were even talking about feeling that they were “speaking into the void,”¹⁷ or felt that they saw them as “children,”¹⁸ “who were lucky to be in the room.”¹⁹ It was frustrating to see that all those interviewed shared similar feelings even though they were well versed, professionals at representing students. In one interview, Mikaela Clark-Gardner, current CSU Academic and Advocacy and Senator, shared her fear of even “tokenized student voices.”²⁰ That students are just there, to be there, not for their input.

A part of being professional doesn’t only lie in the knowledge and research done, but also going through the official avenues of governance to make change. This means that large content must be prepared earlier, and submitted to the Steering committee and Executive committee of both the Senate and Board of Governors before their deadlines. That way, the

¹³ Chevrier, Interview., Clark-Gardner, Interview., Hough-Martin, Interview, Kiparissis, Interview., Miller, Interview

¹⁴ Emily Carson-Apstein (External Coordinator, Sustainable Concordia), Interviewed by Ali Sherra at Concordia University, Montreal, Canada, March 2019.

¹⁵ Carson-Apstein, Interview., Chevrier, Interview., Clark-Gardner, Interview., Hough-Martin, Interview, Kiparissis, Interview., Miller, Interview.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Hough-Martin, Interview

¹⁸ Lucinda Kiparissis (Ex-General Coordinator, Executive 2016-2017, CSU), Interviewed by Ali Sherra at Concordia University, Montreal, Canada, March 2019.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Clark-Gardner, Interview.

administration is incapable of making excuses, blaming students for any mismanagement, or to avoid Alan's famous "gotcha moments."²¹ In some cases, especially with highly controversial matter, it is even recommended to meet with people in the administration, like the President, Provost, or other administrator on the committee or governance body to further discuss topics, work on convincing them, while using their feedback to make little tweaks to your work to further advance it. Usually in instances like these, administrators are less likely to attack you, rather support you as "Concordia wants to look good, if you give them the chance to do that, they might look into it."²²

Persistence

Joining governance bodies at Concordia, just like any institution in this neo-liberal world we are living in, is not a job for the un-willing or undetermined. It needs those individuals who can carry one another through the hardest moments, while understanding that their hard work affects an entire educational system that might live to affect their children or grandchildren. Hence, it is extremely important that those who take upon that challenge understand the amount of time and energy it takes for something to change. To simply put it, it is exceptionally necessary to be persistent. An example of this is the Senate and Board of Governors eligibility requirements at Concordia.²³ Even though, some still exist, they are slowly being reduced year by year until the optimal policy allowing students to represent themselves freely without any constraints by the administration. This is a key example showing the short change on the side of the administration, whereas persistence of students.

²¹ Clark-Gardner, Interview., Miller, Interview., Hough-Martin, Interview

²² Chevrier, Interview.

²³ Clark-Gardner, Interview. And Hough-Martin, Interview

The key moral is that university governance is a series of small battles to win the war.²⁴ Thus persistence is “winning piece by piece,”²⁵ until what is needed has been achieved.

The first act of persistence that every representative should adhere to is ensuring that they are heard. Meaning that, if your questions were not answered, ask them again, or push until you have gathered all the information you wish to acquire. Avoiding feelings of fear are necessary, as they only weaken the student’s stance, and allow the conditions and constraints placed by the university administration to further manipulate and control these bodies. These committees and governance bodies are intended to gather people together with different backgrounds to make decisions together. In doing so, it sets a ground that all representatives are equal. Students must use that in their favor. They must push through and ignore any form of provocation that is intended to slow them down or marginalize their voices.

Additionally, with persistence comes creativity. The interviewees have all mentioned that new strategies are vital. “when things don’t work, don’t repeat the same pattern.”²⁶ when the same patterns are repeated, students put themselves in positions where they will lose the chance to advocate and encourage these venues. Such losses can extend from being ignored, to dealing with a passive assembly who blindly “rubber stamp,”²⁷ anything the administration creates with applause. Being persistent creates a resistance, that if smartly executed, can motivate discussions and debates rather than silent and useless governance bodies or committees.

Divest Concordia

The Divest Concordia campaign that reformed as a result of the Geographies of Justice class has had some successes and failures. Without a doubt, the different projects that

²⁴ Miller, Interview.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Chevrier, Interview.

²⁷ Ibid.

came as a result of the class will forever benefit the divestment campaign at Concordia, as well as provide a network that will hopefully deem helpful for other organizations across the nation. I believe the greatest failure we had is the lack of organization to have a more concrete action as well as the likelihood that this reinvigoration is only short-lived.

This year a portion of the class as well as a few external members have met several times across the semester to organize towards a senate presentation, that I will be presenting with Professor Damon Mathews. And as suggested in the document above, a double movement is indeed necessary. Thus, this Divest Group has worked on creating publicity for the divest campaign that both lives on to support the campaign as well as support the presentation. Some of these things are through articles on student newspapers, to a new furniture banner at the Hive, to videos that can be used in the campaign, to sending out weekly surveys to all undergraduate students, all the way even to gathering some investment firms that the Concordia University Foundation is invested in.

With all this great work, I am hopeful that the gathered information will look good in a presentation and hopefully convince the Concordia Senate to approve a motion in favor of divestment from fossil fuels as well as recommend that Concordia University's endowment fund is also divested. Although I do believe that even if it does pass through Senate, much more work is needed, and it would sadden me to see such a project find itself untouched for years. The group I worked with has been extremely involved and energetic, their input and support, and respect to one another proves how much potential the group had. Although by the end of the semester meetings were getting cancelled due to people's schedules. It amazes me though how some are consistently in contact with one another to either help gather information for the presentation or let me know that they will be there to support during the Senate meeting.

I have been guiding many of the meetings and work, even though I have been trying to place my face far away from any of the public work. This is because it weakens my stance when I stand in front of Senate as an action planner rather than a member of the highest academic body at the university. Unfortunately, these spaces tend to not accept both. This is not only for me but also for professors who have been known to ask many questions or get too involved.

Personally, this project has taken up much of my time this semester, which makes me wish that I had the opportunity to work on this earlier. It feels like a huge burden trying to push this through, but I'm feeling optimistic that this may work out fine. This is specifically after meeting with Alan Shepard to discuss the presentation, because I could sense that even though he didn't agree with divestment (for what I think are other reasons than fossil fuels), he was very aware of the issue of climate change.

I would have normally had more to say about the campaign, such as provide results. But due to changes in Senate dates, I must wait until the Senate presentation is over. Finally, I would like to thank you Kevin for such a wonderful class. I believe that you should fight for this class to be retaught, because this is one way the divestment campaign is continuously refueled with new blood.

Conclusion

University administrations, and specifically at Concordia university, has proven to be filled with conditions and constraints that limit the ability of its governance bodies and committees to freely operate and push for change. Many of these conditions have specifically targeted students, and in some cases their relationships with other faculty and staff representatives. Team effort, professionalism, and persistence are the three key aspects to ensure that your term on any of these governance bodies is valuable and accomplishing.

Whether it's for the divestment campaign or any other campaign, the key steps provided in this paper are the absolute minimum to be done to achieve change it is necessary to be creative and come to the table with something new.

Divest Campaign Timeline (updated)

January 28th

- Revived Divest Concordia first Monday meeting
- Plan research around a Senate Presentation and motion to divest

Feb 4th

- Academic Caucus has accepted the campaign to run through senates April 12th meeting (now changed to May 17th).
- Presentation must be ready before April 2nd. The goal is to have it ready by March 28th. (this has now changed to the May 7th Steering committee)
 - o Have both an outline of the presentation and a motion ready for senate

Feb 11th

(In Class)

- Class divided into groups according to research subject of interest.
 - o (FINE) Finance, Image, Networks, Education

(Divest Meeting)

- Professor Damon agrees to co-present in Senate with Ali (Damon is also on board with a divestment motion)
- Alex is writing The Concordian article to jumpstart conversation on divestment.
- JSEC-JMSB Interested in Campaign and are willing to help. Further correspondence should help us prepare research and campaign within JMSB. (we never got in touch with them again)

Feb 15th

- The CSU Finance Coordinator has agreed to prepare and publish the CSU SRI Fund Report by the end of the month. This way we can have leverage over the Concordia Foundation, showing that the CSU is much more transparent than Concordia University.
- Post campaign plans, if campaign doesn't work out, have been shared with both Academic Caucus representatives who attended the meeting in addition to two CSU representatives (general Coordinator, and the Academic and Advocacy Coordinator)
 - o That a Press conference is planned on that day to deliver a message conveying that the University does not take its sustainability policies seriously. (take control of the narrative)

March 4th

- Begin mobilizing senators (such as Part-time and Full-time Professors and Librarians, and Graduate student senators) through both Academic Caucus and the Divest Concordia Folks.
 - o The motion and presentation outline should be available to get them on board.
 - o Build a base of Support Active Allies, passive Allies, Neutral, Passive opposition, and active opposition. Try to get the four Student Faculty on Board and ready to also support both Divest Concordia and the CSU.
- Begin PR Campaign
 - o Get The Concordian and The Link to write weekly to bi-weekly articles up to the Senate meeting with some updates of the Campaign.

March 17th

- Concordia University, Sustainability, and Fossil Fuel Investments Survey sent through CSU Newsletter, every Sunday until the end of the semester as both a way to gather information, and to stir conversations about sustainability at concordia.

March 25th

- Banner for the Hive completed

March 30th

- Alan Shepard meeting. Ended with me deciding to postpone the presentation until the May meeting, which would allow me to have more information prepared for the presentation, as well as time to lobby.

April 2nd

- Steering committee decides to cancel April meeting

April 5th

- Have all interviews finished
- Conclude research and begin writing final paper

April 25th

- Have a completed paper with a research portion on the conditions and constraints of Concordia university's governance bodies and committees. In addition, a documentation of all events since the start of the campaign.

May 7th

- Steering Committee meeting, find out news if it's on the Agenda

May 17

- Potential Senate Divestment Presentation

Plan changes depending on outcomes

May 7th and 17th

- A Press conference is planned on that day to deliver a message conveying that the University does not take its sustainability policies seriously. (take control of the narrative)

Reference

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