

The State of Fossil Fuel Divestment in Canadian Post-secondary Institutions

Divestment from fossil fuels has recently become a hot topic, with \$3.4 trillion already divested globally by concerned educational institutions, governments, and faith-based organizations. Educational institutions are the fourth largest sector divesting from fossil fuels (Figure 1). This research brief is from the paper “The State of Fossil Fuel Divestment in Canadian Post-secondary Institutions” by Naomi Maina, PhD Researcher, and is one component of a broader SEPN study evaluating sustainability uptake in Canadian formal education. The full paper can be found at www.sepn.ca.

Post-secondary institutions have a significant amount of their endowment funds invested in fossil fuel companies, creating close and complex ties with the fossil fuel industry. The higher education divestment movement advocates that endowment funds be invested responsibly in areas that promote cleaner futures for current students and future generations.

In Canada, there are currently 37 active divestment groups in college campuses spread across nine provinces.

Province	Active Divestment Campaigns
Ontario	14
British Columbia	8
Nova Scotia	4
Québec	3
New Brunswick	2
Alberta	2
Manitoba	2
Newfoundland	1
Prince Edward Island	1

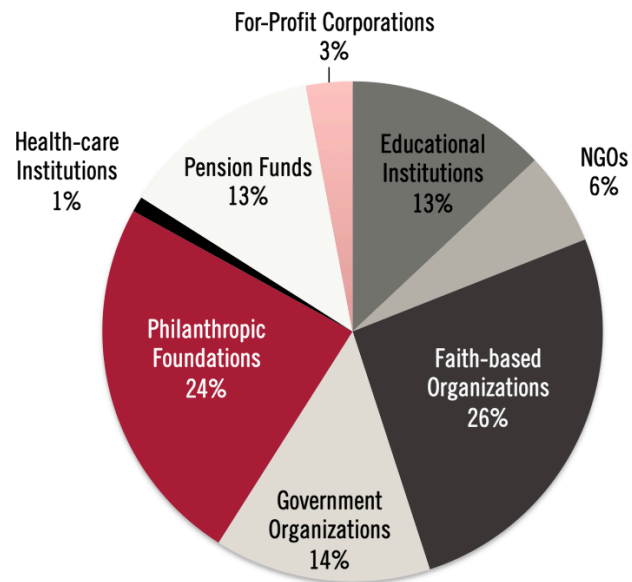


Figure 1. Measuring the global fossil fuel divestment movement (gofossilfree.org, nd)

Students Leading Divestment Campaigns in Canadian Post-secondary Institutions

In many of the 37 active divestment campaigns in Canadian institutions, leadership has primarily been by students, with support gained from other university and community affiliates. At Simon Fraser University for example, the student-led group Sustainable SFU initiated the divestment campaign ‘SFU350’ as one of their projects, and has acquired support from SFU Student Society, Graduate Student Society, the Alumni Association, and various departments on campus. In other institutions such as University of British Columbia, University of New Brunswick, and Lambton College of Applied Arts and Technology, individual students and alumni have come together to initiate campaigns. At Dalhousie University, McMaster University, and McGill University, campaigns began as joint efforts of students, alumni, faculty, and community members.

In April 2016, the University of Ottawa became the first Canadian university to commit to full divestment. However, the timeline for when the divestment will occur has not been defined, and the divestment group, fossil free Uottawa is continuing to push its institution to set a clear timeline. Also, in November 2014, exactly two years after the inception of the student-led divestment campaign, Concordia University became the first university in Canada to agree to partially divest \$5 million of its endowment from fossil fuels (“Concordia University becomes first,” 2014, n.p.). While this decision may be seen as an important win for the movement, the divestment group at Concordia University, Divest Concordia has termed this decision “a flat-out rejection” of calls to full divestment. Their argument is that if this decision is hailed as a win, other universities may follow suit, undermining the long-term commitment to distancing with fossil fuel companies through partial divestment (“Divest Concordia denounces,” 2014, n.p.).

The divestment campaign has also seen smaller victories. The Students’ Society of McGill University voted to divest their endowment funds, followed by the Dalhousie Student Union, which also agreed to divest their \$2.5 million. Student referendums to endorse divestment

have also passed at eleven universities (listed below), and these endorsements have increased credibility and momentum of the divestment movement to keep pushing the administration to rethink their investment policies. Other actions have included campus protests, signing of petitions, rallies, climate action workshops, open letters signed by students, faculty, alumni and community members calling for action.

Out of the 37 post-secondary institutions with divestment campaigns, two campuses have made a decision agreeing to full and/or partial divestment, 12 campuses have had successful votes from students in support of divestment, and five campuses have had successful votes from faculty members. Table 1 shows Canadian post-secondary institutions where divestment campaigns are underway, including the amount of money currently invested fossil fuels. (Note: Blank cells indicate that the information was not publicly available.)

There seems to be a disconnect between publicly declared sustainability initiatives on various campuses, and actual investment practices. While some campuses have positioned themselves as sustainability leaders, they are still heavily invested in fossil fuel companies (University of British Columbia, 2014).

Table of Canadian post-secondary education endowment funds, divestment votes, and decisions from board of governors.

Name of Institution	Total Endowment	Amount invested in fossil fuels	Student Vote	Faculty Vote	Board of Governors Decision
University of Toronto	1,500,000,000	32,400,000		✓	Rejected
University of British Columbia	1,100,000,000	120,000,000	✓	✓	Rejected
McGill University	1,400,000,000	84,000,000	✓		Rejected
Queen's University	658,000,000	29,000,000	✓		Rejected
McMaster University	655,000,000	47,000,000	✓		In process
University of Calgary	710,000,000	40,000,000			Rejected
Dalhousie University	465,000,000	20,300,000	✓		Rejected
Simon Fraser University	367,000,000		✓	✓	In process
University of Victoria	365,000,000	21,000,000	✓	✓	Rejected
University of Guelph	270,000,000	40,500,000	✓		In process
University of Ottawa	193,000,000				Agreed but no timeline
University of New Brunswick	198,000,000		✓		In process
Concordia University	136,000,000	10,000,000	✓		Partial divestment
Mount Allison University	140,000,000			✓	In process
University of Winnipeg	57,500,000	2,580,000	✓		In process
Trent University	41,000,000	34,000,000	✓		In process

Moving Canadian Post-secondary Institutions Towards Divestment

The fossil fuel divestment movement is framed as an ethical issue, invoking the social responsibility of post-secondary institutions and other organizations. Yet there is some reticence within the Canadian context to consider a future with reduced fossil fuels. The economy is heavily fueled by the fossil fuel industry, including many institutions of higher learning which receive significant funds from the fossil fuel industry. Developing campaign strategies that are sensitive to this unique context is critical to the success of the divestment and the larger climate action movement. 🌱

PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education
 Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives
 David Suzuki Foundation
 Learning for a Sustainable Future
 Sierra Youth Coalition

CONTRIBUTING ORGANIZATIONS

Assembly of First Nations
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 Global Youth Education Network
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28 Campus Drive
 College of Education
 University of Saskatchewan
 Saskatoon, SK Canada, S7N 0X1
www.sepn.ca



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