

Civil Disobedience as Civil Dialogue



On April 4th, Divest Harvard joined the Harvard Prison Divestment Campaign to [disrupt](#) Harvard President Larry Bacow’s conversation with Graduate School of Education Dean Bridget Terry Long at the Institute of Politics on the “[essential role of university leadership in transforming opportunity](#).” Thursday marked the first act of collaborative civil disobedience between members of the two divestment campaigns. It also marks the intensification of our call for President Bacow, the Harvard administration, and Harvard Management Company to engage in open dialogue on fossil fuel divestment.

Thursday’s disruption came after a year's worth of refusal by the Harvard administration to engage in any dialogue at all. In *The Crimson’s* coverage of Thursday’s event, President Bacow cites the movements’ lack of civility as the justification to delay a further meeting, reiterating his insistence that he [responds](#) to “reason, not pressure.” In fact, the President has historically declined to engage any form of reasonable disagreement. To date, he has refused to even meet privately with members of the fossil free campaign outside of his limited office hours, nor to engage in any public dialogue on the divestment question.

After receiving no response to our repeated requests for a meeting, we attended President Bacow’s office hours in October, where students were allowed to speak with the President for a carefully clocked ten minutes. When we asked President Bacow for his thoughts regarding divestment from the fossil fuel industry, he redirected the conversation to the importance of campus sustainability initiatives, including improving resource efficiency and eliminating trays in the dining halls. While such initiatives are important, no amount of dining hall tray reduction can justify Harvard’s continued investment in the fossil fuel industry and its perpetration of unparalleled injustices through the climate crisis.

The members of Harvard’s fossil fuel divestment campaign have always been committed to civil discourse and open dialogue. Over the course of Divest Harvard’s six-year campaign, we have continually sought to foster civil discourse and open dialogue with members of the

university. We have worked together with our coalition of over 230 [faculty](#) and the broader [alumni](#) community to advocate for a transparent, financially sustainable, and ethical university.

On April 3rd, President Bacow's office formally declined the latest request by student and faculty requests to participate in a public forum, [indicating](#) that President Bacow was willing to engage only in yet another closed-door conversation, one that was unlikely to include students.

It is clear that President Bacow has not made any time for what he refers to as a "civil" conversation or "reasonable" dialogue with the student body: if the President were truly committed to reasoned discussion or open dialogue, he could have responded to one of our numerous requests for him to do so, including our outstanding offer to hold a public forum on fossil fuel divestment at a time and place of his choosing. Instead, President Bacow has chosen to dismiss these channels of conversation.

At the April 4th event at the IOP, President Bacow asserted that there had never been "an experience to my knowledge in recent memory where a speaker has not been allowed to speak." However, this very year marks the 50th anniversary of the powerful student protests of 1969, and [their legacy](#) of civil, disobedient, direct action. This week, we stand alongside them in honoring the contribution they have made to making this university a more engaged and ethically principled place. As the anniversary of Students for a Democratic Society's 1969 [blockade](#) approaches, we take inspiration from past movements while working in solidarity with present day calls to divest the university from the prison-industrial complex.

Harvard cannot hope to be taken seriously as an educational leader if it continues to profit from the climate crisis and [obscure](#) its role in international land theft. With a virtually incomparable endowment now at nearly \$40 billion, Harvard is not only an educator but also a powerful economic actor. It cannot claim to invest in tomorrow's leadership while investing in the systems that threaten our lives and livelihoods.

Respectfully, the members of Divest Harvard ask President Bacow along with representatives of the Harvard administration and Harvard Management Company to join students and faculty on Thursday, April 11th at 6:30pm in Sever Hall, Room 113 for a [public forum](#) on fossil fuel divestment that is long overdue.

