Petition from the Amherst Community to the Board of Trustees on Divesting from Fossil Fuels and Private Prisons

On August 25, 2017, Hurricane Harvey made landfall in the United States. It would go on to sweep across eastern Texas: killing seventy people, destroying as much as $200 billion worth of property, and becoming the wettest tropical cyclone to strike the country. On September 10, Hurricane Irma – the second most powerful hurricane on record in the open Atlantic Ocean – struck in Florida, after wreaking havoc throughout the Caribbean and damaging 95 percent of properties in Barbuda and St. Martin. Less than a month later, Hurricane Irma has devastated Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, leaving both entirely without power, and gone on to strike the Dominican Republic and other Caribbean nations.

Natural disasters of this scale are unprecedented, and while it is impossible to tie the severity of any one storm to global climate change, experts have noted how new climate patterns could well increase the devastation they cause.¹

Before continuing, we should state the following: We believe, in conjunction with the majority of the scientific community,² that human activity and influence is the primary cause of a century of global temperature rise and rapidly changing climate patterns. Furthermore, much of this human activity is involved the production and burning of fossil fuels. As students and faculty at Amherst College, we have been taught to think critically and analytically - these skills are what have led us to support the scientific consensus on climate change.

Given that it is uncontested in serious scientific discourse that the current period of climate change is either caused or dramatically increased by human activity, as a consequence of which the destruction caused by increasingly potent and frequent storms like Irma and Harvey is

² The specific articulation of the consensus can be found in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change statement that “human influence has been the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-20th century.” Between 90 and 100 percent of climate scientists agree with this position, according to a 2016 aggregate of studies: Cook, John, et al. “Consensus on Consensus: a Synthesis of Consensus Estimates on Human-Caused Global Warming.” Environmental Research Letters, vol. 11, no. 4, Jan. 2016, p. 048002., doi:10.1088/1748-9326/11/4/048002.
magnified, we call on the Amherst College Board of Trustees to divest Amherst College’s endowment from all companies involved in the extraction, refining, or selling of all fossil fuels.³

At the same time as hurricanes have made headlines repeatedly over the past few weeks, more protests have erupted in St. Louis over the acquittal of ex-police officer Jason Stockley in the 2011 shooting death of Anthony Lamar Smith. This is only the latest such case to trigger protests against police brutality, mass incarceration, and the systemic racism that underlies these phenomena. Today, although the U.S. contains 5% of the world’s population, it is “home” to 21% of the world’s prisoners. Although seemingly unrelated, the issues of climate change and mass incarceration are intimately connected by one fact: they disproportionately affect low-income communities of color. The rate at which black men are incarcerated is seven times higher than the rate of white male imprisonment. This is not the result of increased criminality within the black community; the crime rate in the United States today is comparable to that of the 1960s, yet the number of inmates in prisons and jails has skyrocketed⁴. Mass incarceration tears apart communities of color across the country, putting its members behind bars and keeping people of color from participating in the very processes that create these systems.

Though there are a handful of states that allow felons to vote from prison during the period of their incarceration, having a felony conviction is cause for short or long term disenfranchisement in 48 states⁵; in some states, previously incarcerated people are disenfranchised for life, regardless of having served the full duration of their punishment and probation⁶. “It is impossible to consider the effects of imprisonment without considering the racial component of the American carceral system. The role of private prisons in creating this phenomenon cannot be overlooked. A 2011 report from the American Civil Liberties Union⁷ found that “leading private prison companies essentially admit that their business model depends on high rates of incarceration.” Considering the overwhelmingly unbalanced demographics of prison populations, mass incarceration, fueled by capitalist interests, allows for the legally sanctioned exclusion of black and brown voices from contributing to democratic systems via felon disenfranchisement.

The same report noted that private prisons are also more expensive for taxpayers and more prone to commit rights abuses. A 4-month undercover investigation by Mother Jones journalist

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³ This category includes, but is not limited to, petroleum, natural gas, coal, oil shale, and tar sands.
⁵ Ibid.
Shane Bauer drew similar conclusions, finding for example that inmates of private prisons are twice as likely to report being sexually victimized by staff as those in public prisons.\(^8\)

Private prisons are also tied into the immigration system, housing three quarters of Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detainees in 2016.\(^9\) Although President Obama’s Justice Department made the decision in August 2016 to phase out private prisons due to cost and safety concerns, President Trump reversed this in February 2017.\(^10\) Indeed, under Trump, private prison stocks have soared\(^11\) and the Justice Department has sought to increase the number of inmates in private prisons by 7 percent.\(^12\)

In the US, the two companies that control the private prison industry are CoreCivic (formerly Corrections Corporation of America) and GEO Group. 75% of the private prison market falls under their command, and they are the main forces pushing for legislation, at the state and federal levels, to advance the prison industry and expand mass incarceration. Since 2002, the two of them together have spent over $31 million on lobbying efforts, not including the $14 million spent on campaign contributions.\(^13\) Their efforts have clearly paid off: every year, more legislation is passed to expand the regime of mass incarceration and further criminalize black and brown bodies.

None of this would be possible without the generous investors funding these efforts. There are 29 investment companies (the “Million Shares Club”) that hold over one million shares in these two corporations. These 29 companies add their influence and funds to the lobbying efforts led by private prison companies, even sending the same representatives to lobby for their own interests and those of the private prison corporations they invest in. It is thanks to these collaborations that corrections corporations have played a part in advancing legislation such as mandatory minimum sentencing, three-strikes laws, and truth-in-sentencing laws, which has been used to disproportionately target communities of color.\(^14\)

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Given the significant and particularly cruel role private prisons play in the racist system of mass incarceration, in addition to the crucial part major investors play in helping to lobby for legislation that expands this system, we call on the Amherst College Board of Trustees to divest Amherst College’s endowment from all companies with more than one million shares in the private prison industry.

Although the moral reasons for divesting from private prisons are self-evident, there are also moral, democratic, and financial imperatives that demand the Board of Trustees act to fight climate change by divesting from fossil fuels.

Around the globe, communities today are already experiencing the effects of climate change. Alongside Atlantic hurricanes, Pacific storms are making landfall with increased severity. Typhoon Haiyan struck the Philippines in 2013 and quickly became the most deadly storm on record for the island nation, killing 6,300 people. Five years before that, Cyclone Nargis hit Burma and killed an estimated 140,000 people while also destroying 65 percent of the country’s rice paddies, a crucial source of food. Storms are not the only issue however. The nation of Kiribati bought 20 sq km of land in Fiji, more than 2,000 km away, in order to relocate its entire population if sea levels continue to rise. In fact, sea level rise threatens some 634 million people who live within 9.1 meters of sea level, including inhabitants of two thirds of the world’s largest cities.\(^{15}\)

Freshwater, already a scarce resource, faces further shortages from climate change. Rising sea levels will contaminate coastal groundwater and shrinking glaciers will deplete water reserves for populations in South America, Central Asia, and mountainous areas in the United States and Europe. Droughts, however, are the most acute threat to water and agriculture – and they are becoming more common and more severe as climate change progresses.\(^{16}\) They can worsen economic conditions, as the drought in California has,\(^{17}\) as well as aggravate civil conflict, as in Syria,\(^{18}\) Darfur,\(^{19}\) and Somalia.\(^{20}\) A 2017 study\(^ {21}\) found that in 2030, 55,000 deaths would be


caused by air pollution attributable to climate change. By 2100, this number would be 215,000 annually.

The effects of climate change are not evenly distributed. Poorer nations located in the Pacific are disproportionately threatened by sea level rise. Countries with weaker infrastructure and fewer resources to dedicate to rescue efforts will suffer more from storms and other natural disasters. Freshwater supplies are similarly localized – many are confined to the Global North in countries like Canada, Russia, and the United States. The air pollution deaths mentioned above would, according to the same study, occur most frequently in India and East Asia – not in the developed “West.”

It is Amherst’s stated mission to “bring light to the world.” Yet, our $2.2 billion endowment is partially invested in fossil fuels and, though indirectly, in private prison companies which are involved with projects that have fatal ramifications on the communities that we hail from, and on the world. Indeed, Amherst’s own current student body and recent alumni already struggle with the grievous effects of climate change and have experienced ramifications from systemic racism in the justice system. This will worsen in the coming decades. Even sooner, marginalized communities and nations around the globe will suffer rising sea levels, drought, and other natural catastrophes.

There are also pragmatic incentives to divest from fossil fuels. While the S&P 500 index rose 50 percent from 2006 to 2016, energy stocks rose only 1.5 percent over the same period.22 In 2015, the Bank of England declared23 that fossil fuels are a poor investment and that companies could suffer a “huge hit” as climate action continues. The previous December, the U.N. official in charge of climate affairs described fossil fuels as a “high risk” investment “getting more and more risky.”24 The moral and democratic concerns outlined above are our primary motivations for requesting that the Board of Trustees divest from fossil fuels and we believe they should sway the Board as well. If they are not enough, however, we trust these financial imperatives are.

Recognizing that, the student body voted overwhelmingly in two recent polls (in 2013 and 2016) to divest from fossil fuels.25 That the Board of Trustees has, for years, refused to recognize the wishes of the student body in this regard poses a threat to Amherst’s democratic character. Although we recognize that the Board has the ultimate say in these issues, we believe that it is their responsibility to seriously consider the strong mandate to divest that the student body has

repeatedly issued. We recognize the Board of Trustees’ role of managing the endowment in order to further finance the College’s mission and its students’ future. However, we believe that students should not be excluded from a process that significantly affects them.

There is currently a lack of dialogue between the Board of Trustees and the student body. We recognize this as an undemocratic process. Students are not made aware of Board meeting times, conversations, or investments. The vast majority of students at Amherst do not know how the endowment is invested or how the Board screens asset managers. The information released in the Board’s Investment Reports is vague, including large categories and names of companies without a concrete presentation of how much is invested in what specific industries or with what asset managers.

We therefore demand transparency between the Board of Trustees and the student body in the form of released meeting schedules, outlines, and notes, a detailed outline of Amherst College’s investments, including percentages of money allotted specifically to fossil fuels and companies with major holdings in private prisons, to individual asset managers and to each direct holding. We also demand a release of letters the Board of Trustees has sent to asset managers to guide their investments, as in the case of its current ESG, environmental, social governance, standards. These demands for transparency are necessary for the fair and democratic management of an endowment that belongs not only to the members of the Board of Trustees but to a College of students, staff, faculty, and alumni.

We hope that the Board of Trustees will decide at their meeting on October 12-14, 2017 to divest from fossil fuels and private prisons and pursue a transparent relationship with the student body. However, given that demands similar to those articulated in this petition have been delivered to the Board in the past, resulting in little to no action,26 we will begin a campaign of lobbying and direct action in advance of the meeting to further encourage the Board to divest. In the event the Board refuses to divest, we are prepared to further escalate our campaign. We strongly encourage the Board of Trustees to do what is right for the Amherst community and the planet.


Sincerely,

Class of 2018

Alejandro Nino Quintero ’18
Amber Boykins ’18
Ana Gabriela Ascencio ’18
Andrea Quiles-Sanchez ’18
Andrew Kim ’18
Anton Vicente Kliot ’18
Areej Hasan ’18
Asha Walker ’18

Bryan Doniger ’18
Camila Dominguez ’18
Carley Tsiames ’18
Christien Wright ’18
Elias Schultz ’18
Elliot Kuan ’18
Emily Isko ’18
Eva Cordero ’18
Flavia Martinez ’18
Grace Brotsker ’18E
Helen Montie '18
Josh Cave '18
Joshua Ferrer '18E
Juan Villasenor '18
Julia Pretsfelder '18
Katherine Hague '18
Kayla Balda '18
Madeline Ruoff '18
Manny Osunlana '18
Marc Daalder '18
Mariah Hill '18
Mashiyat Zaman '18
Matthew Rusk-Kosa '18
Max Paul '18
Natalia Dyer '18
Nathanael Lane '18
Nolan Lindquist '18
Noor Qasim '18
Olivia Mastrangelo '18
Peter Connolly '18
Phillip Yan '18
Rebecca Ford '18
Rebecca Houedjissi '18
Rene Kooiker '18
Richard Figueroa '18
Ricky Choi '18
Saharsha Karki '18
Samantha O'Brien '18
Sarah Shusta '18E
Sarah Teichman '18
Shantanu Haivaldar '18
Skylhur Tranquelle '18
Sonaali Pandiri '18
Sunna Juhn '18
William Denzel Wood '18
Zoe Kayton '18
and 27 students who wished to remain anonymous

Class of 2019

Aaron Zheng Yang '19
Adrian Chen '19
Aly Levinson '19
Alyssa Snyder '19
Amal Fawundu-Buford '19
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Cindy Gong '19
Clare Leonard '19
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Cristobal Silva '19
Crystal Ganatra '19
Diane Lee '19
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Dominique Iaccarino '19
Eden Charles '19
Elisa Bello '19
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Lizzie Lacy '19
Logan Seymour '19E
MacKenzie Kugel '19
Mackenzie Stein '19
Matt Walsh '19
Nadin El Kak '19
Nathaniel Manwell '19
Nekhoe Hogan '19
Noah Elliott '19
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Rachael Ang '19
Ramona Celis '19
Rebecca Correa '19
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Rojas Oliva '19
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Sam Sharp '19E
Sarah Wishloff '19
Sasha Williams '19
Sebastien Grace '19
Shahruth Ghaemi '19
ShoYoung Shin '19
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Simon Essig Aberg '19
Tacia Diaz '19
Tsion Arwaga '19
Veronica Rocco '19
Zach Allen '19E
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Ali Bien-Aime '20
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Annabelle Gary '20
Aqil Gopee '20
Audrey Cheng '20
Avery Farmer '20
Benedite Dieujuste '20
Bodhi Nguyen '20
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Charlotte Blackman '20
Claire Carlin '20
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Daniel Lee '20
Daria Taubin '20
Dario Didi '20
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Emilee Hammons '20
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Harry Jung '20
Henry Walker '20
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Jenine Shepherd '20
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Jonah Davis '20E
Julian Brubaker '20
Kathleen Isenegger '20
Kevin Zhangxu '20
Khyla Haddock '20
Kola Heyward-Rotimi '20
Kyra Raines '20
Leah Woodbridge '20
Leslie Martinez Garcia '20
Liz Parsons '20
Luz Lim '20
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Marco A. Trevino '20
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Monica Gamon '20
Natalia Khoudian '20
Olivia Moehl '20
Olivia Zheng '20
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Safiatou Sangare '20
Sahara Ndiaye '20
samantha schriger '20
Sarah McDonald '20
Scout Boynton '20
Siobhan Marks '20
Soledad Slowing-Romero '20
Soon-Young Shimizu '20
Tanya Calvin '20
Tara Guo '20
Terrell Haughton '20
Theo Perez '20
Yanjie Qiu '20
Yared Lingo '20
Yuko Nakano '20
Zan Rozen '20
and 28 students who wished to remain anonymous

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Andrea Webb '21
Andrew Swenson '21
Andy Byun '21
Anna Farlessyost '21
Annika Lunstad '21
Ayodele Lewis '21
Ben Gilsdorf '21
Benjamin Aliaga '21
Breanna Richards '21
Bridget Carmichael '21
Bridget Stauss '21
Claire Dunbar '21
Claire Hawthorne '21
Dana Frishman '21
Dorjohn Boakye '21
Emily Kierna '21
Emma Ratshin '21
Evan Daisy '21
Felipe Gomez '21
Grace Cho '21
Haley Greene '21
Hayley Fleming '21
Hildi Gabel '21
Hunter Lampson '21
Irene Cho '21
Isaac Caruso '21
Isabelle Sturges '21
Isiaha Price '21
Jack Kiryk '21
Jackson Lee '21
Jacob Siegel '21
Jeremy Loeb '21
Jordan Andrews '21
Josephine Underwood '21
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Josue Sanchez Hernandez '21
Kiely Mugford '21
Konstantin Larin '21
Lea Morin '21
Lisa Zheutlin '21
Mameastou Fall '21
Mariel Montero '21
Marina Zambrano '21
Martha Naarendorp '21
Naomi Truax '21
Natalie De Rosa '21
Nathan Britsch '21
Nicole Vandal '21
Nishant Carr '21
Noah John '21
Pavan Nagaraj '21
Phebe Palmer '21
Rachel Ruderman '21
Rafael Gonzalez '21
Rebecca Novick '21
Rilla McKeegan '21
Ronnie Marie Falasco '21
Sam Hood '21
Sam Rothberg '21
Sara Bradley '21
Sarah Montoya '21
Tai Christie '21
Thomas D’Aprile '21
Vivian Cordon '21
Yaqui Montes de Oca '21
and 28 students who wished to remain anonymous
Alumni
Alex Farthing
Amir Hall
Andrew Drinkwater
Araceli Aponte
Beselot Birhanu
Dani Lopez
Jordan Young
Karen Odidika
Katarina Cruz

Faculty/Staff
Nayah Mullings
William Ruhm
Hannah C. Joyce
Jayson Paul
Larissa Henkst
Maida Ives
Valentina Paskar
and 6 people who wished to remain anonymous

Those who have signed this petition are not necessarily affiliated with the Amherst United Left or the Direct Action Coordinating Committee.