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By **Matt Rocheleau**

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT NOVEMBER 10, 2014

Professors at Boston-area colleges are adding their voices to a student-led movement that is pressing higher education institutions to shed investments in fossil fuel companies.

The growing faculty involvement has not only galvanized the effort with increased support but also added an important and unique perspective, activists say.

“It’s one thing for these crazy kids to be calling for fossil fuel divestment, but it’s another when you have some of the leading scientists and economists in the world standing behind us,” said Geoffrey J. Supran, a graduate student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a member of a group calling for divestment there.

Faculty members also have become increasingly active around the issue at Harvard University, Boston University, Boston College, Amherst College, Tufts University, and Brandeis University, where they have written open letters, formed groups, or joined student movements to call on administrators at their respective institutions to divest. The professors

are holding educational talks about climate change or participating in other events designed to raise awareness.

Julian Agyeman, a professor of urban and environmental policy and planning at Tufts, said many faculty there who support the movement are veterans of the campaigns to divest from South Africa in the 1970s and '80s.

“What we’ve tried to do with our students is say ‘this is your antiapartheid movement, this is your social justice divestment campaign,’ ” Agyeman said.

Activists have urged colleges to divest from companies that produce oil, gas, and coal because the fuels have been identified as a cause of global warming. A national coalition of college faculty and staff that formed in June to call for divestment says it includes representatives from about 50 schools.

“It creates a sense of community among faculty and staff who are doing this and gives us a place to strategize about our role, which is unique from students’ role,” said Cynthia Kaufman, director of the institute of community and civic engagement at De Anza College in San Jose, who helped launch the Faculty and Staff Divestment Network.

Fourteen colleges have committed to divesting from fossil fuels in some form. Hampshire College in Amherst, which has a \$37.6 million endowment, in December 2011 became the first college in United States to make such a pledge. Most schools that have vowed to divest are relatively small and have small to modest endowments.

Stanford University is by far the most well known and wealthiest college to pledge to divest from fossil fuels in some form. The school said in May it would divest its endowment, worth \$21.4 billion currently, from publicly traded coal mining companies.

But most major colleges and universities have resisted the call to divest of fossil fuels. Some have declared outright that they will not take the step, while others have established committees and task forces to explore the issue.

Harvard’s president, Drew Faust, said last fall that the university would not to divest its \$36.4 billion endowment, despite increasing pressure from student activists.

That decision, however, along with growing attention to the issue of climate change, helped raise awareness for the divestment movement and spurred faculty into action. This past spring, about 100 Harvard professors signed an open letter urging Faust and members of the university’s governing body to reconsider.

The number of faculty members backing that call has surpassed 150, including Harvard Medical School psychiatry professor James Recht. Earlier this month, members of the faculty divestment group met for the first time with Faust to press their case.

Harvard faculty members are also hosting forums and other activities and connecting with colleagues who have established prodivestment groups at other area campuses so that faculty can share strategies and plan events

together.

“In the end, it’s absolutely going to require a combined force in numbers,” Recht said.

At Boston University, sociology professor Itai Vardi cofounded that campus’s faculty divestment group, helped build the national faculty and staff network’s website, and connected with Harvard faculty. He plans to reach out to other local professors.

“The effort is to really form a regional movement because we’re all working toward the same goal,” Vardi said.

This fall, Vardi and other professors went to the office of BU president Robert A. Brown to deliver a petition with the signatures of nearly 250 faculty calling for the university to divest. Brown accepted the letter and had an impromptu, half-hour talk about their demands.

BU has established a committee to explore whether to divest.

At some other schools, faculty contributions have been modest so far.

“I think some faculty have a sense that they take a risk” by speaking out on the issue, said the Rev. Raymond Helmick, a Boston College theology professor. But, “I’m encouraging students to keep going with the divestment effort. I’m convinced that this is the most important issue that they will ever face.”

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