

The fossil fuel industry's invisible colonization of academia

Corporate capture of academic research by the fossil fuel industry is an elephant in the room and a threat to tackling climate change.



A combination of file photos shows the logos of five of the largest publicly traded oil companies; BP, Chevron, Exxon Mobil, Royal Dutch Shell, and Total. Photograph: REUTERS/Reuters

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On February 16, the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center hosted a film screening of the

“Rational Middle Energy Series.” The university promoted the event as “Finding Energy’s Rational Middle” and described the film’s motivation as “a need and desire for a balanced discussion about today’s energy issues.”

Who can argue with balance and rationality? And with Harvard’s stamp of approval, surely the information presented to students and the public would be credible and reliable. Right?

Wrong.

The event’s sponsor was Shell Oil Company. The producer of the film series was Shell. The film’s director is Vice President of a family-owned oil and gas company, and has taken approximately \$300,000 from Shell. The host, Harvard Kennedy School, has received at least \$3.75 million from Shell. And the event’s panel included a Shell Executive Vice President.

The film “The Great Transition” says natural gas is “clean” (in terms of carbon emissions, it is not) and that low-carbon, renewable energy is a “very long time off” (which is a political judgment, not a fact). Amy Myers Jaffe, identified in the film as the Executive Director of Energy and Sustainability at the University of California, Davis, says, “We need to be realistic that we’re gonna use fossil fuels now, because in the end, we are.” We are not told that she is a member of the US National Petroleum Council.

The film also features Richard Newell, who is identified as a Former Administrator at the US Energy Information Administration. “You can get 50% reductions in your emissions relative to coal through natural gas,” he says, ignoring the methane leaks that undermine such claims. The film neglects to mention that the Energy Initiative Newell founded and directed at Duke University was given \$4 million by an Executive Vice President of a natural gas company.

Michelle Michot Foss, who offers skepticism about battery production for renewables, is identified as the Chief Energy Economist at the Center for Energy Economics at the University of Texas at Austin. What’s not said is that the Energy Institute she founded at UT Austin is funded by Chevron, ExxonMobil, and other fossil fuel interests including the Koch Foundation, or that she’s a partner in a natural gas company.

You may notice a pattern. The very experts we assume to be objective, and the very centers of research we assume to be independent, are connected with the very industry the public believes they are objectively studying. Moreover, these connections are often kept hidden.

To say that these experts and research centers have conflicts of interest is an understatement: many of them exist as they do only *because* of the fossil fuel industry. They are industry projects with the appearance of neutrality and credibility given by academia.

After years conducting energy-related research at Harvard and MIT, we have come to discover firsthand that this pattern is systemic. Funding from Shell, Chevron, BP, and other oil and gas companies dominates Harvard’s energy and climate policy research, and Harvard research

directors consult for the industry. These are the experts tasked with formulating policies for countering climate change, policies that threaten the profits - indeed the existence - of the fossil fuel industry.

Down the street at MIT, the Institute's Energy Initiative is almost entirely funded by fossil fuel companies, including Shell, ExxonMobil, and Chevron. MIT has taken \$185 million from oil billionaire and climate denial financier David Koch, who is a Life Member of the university's board.

The trend continues at Stanford, where one of us now works. The university's Global Climate and Energy Project is funded by ExxonMobil and Schlumberger. The Project's founding and current directors are both petroleum engineers. Its current director also co-directs Stanford's Precourt Institute for Energy, which is named after (and was co-founded by) the CEO of a natural gas company (now owned by Shell). Across the bay, UC Berkeley's Energy Biosciences Institute is the product of a \$500 million deal with BP - one that gives the company power over which research projects get funded and which don't.

Fossil fuel interests - oil, gas, and coal companies, fossil-fueled utilities, and fossil fuel investors - have colonized nearly every nook and cranny of energy and climate policy research in American universities, and much of energy science too. And they have done so quietly, without the general public's knowledge.

For comparison, imagine if public health research were funded predominantly by the tobacco industry. It doesn't take a neurosurgeon to understand the folly of making policy or science research financially dependent on the very industry it may regulate or negatively affect. Harvard's school of public health no longer takes funding from the tobacco industry for that very reason. Yet such conflicts of interest are not only rife in energy and climate research, they are the norm.

This norm is no accident: it is the product of a public relations strategy to neutralize science and target those whom ExxonMobil dubbed "Informed Influentials," and it comes straight out of Big Tobacco's playbook. The myriad benefits of this strategy to the fossil fuel industry (and its effects on academic research) range from benign to insidious to unconscionable, but the big picture is simple: academia has a problem.

As scientists and policy experts rush to find solutions to the greatest challenge humanity has ever faced, our institutions are embroiled in a nationwide conflict of interest with the industry that has the most to lose. Our message to universities is: stop ignoring it.

We are not saying that universities must cut all ties with all fossil fuel companies. Energy research is so awash with fossil fuel funding that such a proposal would imply major changes. What we are saying is that denial - "I don't see a conflict," MIT's Chairman told the *Boston Globe* - is no longer acceptable.

Two parallel approaches can help. First, mandatory standards should be established in climate policy and energy research for disclosing financial and professional ties with fossil fuel interests, akin to those required in medical research. And second, conflicts of interest should be reduced by prioritizing less conflicted funding and personnel.

One way or another, the colonization of academia by the fossil fuel industry must be confronted. Because when our nation's "independent" research to stop climate change is in fact dependent on an industry whose interests oppose that goal, neither the public nor the future is well served.

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