Building connections and support during UNE’s divestment campaign

By Aurie Ingraham-Adie

For my experiential learning activity, I took part in a statewide divestment meeting on September 15, 2013. I was particularly interested in this activity because I am apart if Fossil Free UNE, which is the University of New England’s divestment group. It is technically a sub group of the school’s club known as Earth’s Eco, but Fossil Free UNE is only focusing on the divestment of fossil fuels. A small group of about six students are working on getting Fossil Free UNE to be it’s own group on campus, but it was a failed attempt last spring. This semester the seven devoted workers are pouring their energy into this effort.

When the divestment representative for 350 Maine got in contact with Fossil Free UNE about forming a coalition group among other Maine colleges and universities, the entire group was eager to get the ball rolling on this. I was the only person, from Fossil Free UNE, who could attend the statewide divestment meeting. I car-pooled to Augusta Maine with the divestment representative from 360 Maine and two other students from the University of Southern Maine. On the drive up we all discussed our background work with divestment, our majors, and steps our schools have made towards divestment.

Once we arrived in Augusta we set up snacks and welcomed the students coming from other schools in Maine. When every school that planned on attending was represented we started with a campus go-around. A representative from every campus shared what they have already accomplished and what their next plan of attack is. Every campus is in a different stage and is going about achieving their goal of divestment in a different way. All other campuses have reached official club status, which makes everything significantly easier for them, but UNE is still working on that. It was extremely helpful to hear what other schools are doing. Everyone shared what has worked well and what has not worked as well in the past. Especially for a school, like UNE, that is still in their beginning stages of divestment.

The following topic, during the statewide divestment meeting, was about forming a statewide coalition between the colleges and universities in Maine that are interested in support from other campuses. We discussed potential benefits and drawbacks, and then settled on a consensus. This was the main focus of the meeting because many questions came up during this time. A few examples of topics discussed was whether the coalition wants 350 Maine to be involved, or not; if we form a coalition will it be just about divestment, or environmental and climate justice focused; how much involvement should faculty have, and the hardest question to answer was what the name of the coalition should be.

Next, campuses broke out into smaller groups based on location. I met with USM and UMaine in Orono because they are the closest together, and College of the Atlantic, Colby, Bates and Bowdin met together. Part of being in a coalition means that we will share ideas and will help or attend actions that other schools put on. We discussed transportation to Power Shift and how we can all get there on a low cost budget. USM has also been planning a few events based around the tar sands pipeline coming to South Portland. UNE committed to helping with those actions whenever possible.

After the statewide divestment meeting was complete I was left with new connections, ideas, strategies, support and inspiration. I felt extremely fortunate to be apart of the Maine Coalition because divesting your campus from fossil fuels is not, in any way, a simple task. It can often be discouraging when very little progress has been made, even after a great deal of work has been put into it. Meeting the representatives of USM, UMO, COA, Bowdin, Bates, and Colby gave me a sense of hope. Each person is passionate about divestment and is pouring a lot of time into this project, and, even though it does not seem like it sometimes, progress has been made! Before going to this meeting, I already know, first hand that divestment is hard to achieve, but after this meeting I know it is possible to accomplish this goal.

This experiential learning experience definitely changed me, but only in a positive way. I gained several connections that I now keep in contact with on a weekly basis. I met with several of the people who founded the coalition in Pittsburgh last weekend at Power Shift. There we talked about several different projects, other than just divestment. Many Maine schools are interested in starting a community garden to help feed students in their dining halls, starting a more effective composting solution, and getting organic. Locally grown food on our campuses. With a larger group of people tackling these projects the workload is spread out more evenly and the chances of achieving our goals are more likely to occur. I am more optimistic that a student led coalition has a chance of making some very amazing things happen. There is strength in numbers, after all. This student led organization has the drive, perseverance, inspiration and power to make incredible change in Maine and the world. The mission statement that was written during the statewide divestment meeting is as follows,

We are a coalition of students in the State of Maine dedicated to creating a student run, student led grassroots movement for a just and sustainable future.  As the up and coming leaders of our society, it is our moral obligation to curb the drastic ecological damage that has occurred on our planet while simultaneously demanding a seat at the decision making table.  We wish to provide members our community with the skills, resources, and tools to be active leaders on and off of campus while advocating for a just and sustainable future for all.  We wish to use our collective power by looking for solutions to ensure the consumption of resources today will not have repercussions of the generations tomorrow. (The not yet named Maine student coalition group)

There will be a press release coming out shortly with our mission statement and some more information about what we have done so far, such as Power Shift. This will show our community that there is a powerful group of students in Maine who are dedicated to a sustainable future.

Finally, through the concepts we have learned in class, I will relate my experiential learning activity to what Ed Suslovic brought up about transferring tar sands oil through Maine. Mr. Suslovic is a government official working in Maine. He brought up several points as to why the pipeline is a positive and a negative thing. The major advantages being: it can bring money to Maine; bring hundred’s of jobs to people in the local area; it is already built, so it might as well be used; and Casco Bay is highly regulated and responsible with the product that goes through the pipeline. A few disadvantages being: Canada would build a pipeline along the boarder that would be more damaging to the environment, do to clear cutting of land and more habitats being altered; the pipeline is 62 years old and was built before today’s standards; tar sands are the most carbon intensive fossil fuel out there; it would cross numerous waterways where a pipeline fracture could lead to an oil spilling into Sebago Lake, which supplies water for about 200,000 people, and there are several more disadvantages. The students who are apart of the Maine Coalition believe the advantages are not as important as the disadvantages are, and are therefore fighting for a banned on tar sands coming through Maine. The tar sands will harm the environment greatly, and only increase the economy slightly. That is why one of the coalitions’ main focuses, other than divestment, is the stopping of the tar sands pipeline coming to South Portland.

The fight for divestment is also, in a way, a fight for strong sustainability. The Maine Coalition wants human capital and natural capital, or economic gains and ecological gains, to be equal to one another. Both are sustainable and important. A perfect example of strong sustainability is: if Maine colleges and universities divest from fossil fuels and invest in more sustainable and responsible companies and stocks. There are several different ways of reinvestment, a few being community investment, which is when a collection of money is put into a community bank. Another example would be revolving loan fund. This is very high in return and means that the school holds a “contest” for students to present a useful green energy project that will pay off within five years, and what ever project wins gets the money to make their project become a reality.

As previously discussed in class, I already expressed my interest in being apart of an outsider group. This means that I, personally, believe it is better to be on the outside of the government looking in and trying to influence the policy makers. The main advantage being that you are able to work towards your goal without making compromises. When working inside of the government one must seek consensus with all of government to retain their status, and one must always make compromises to get what they want. Divestment is not something that the government will do for their citizens; it is up to the students and members of the community to fight for justice. This approach is the most effective solution to achieve divestment. Because there is not a government insider working with the students it takes a while to accomplish goals, such as this, but it is the most powerful achievement when the goal is accomplished.

Lastly, a large part of the statewide divestment meeting, was whether we want an interest group, such as 350 Maine to be apart of our campaign. 350 Maine is an outside of government organization, but they try to change or influence the government, just like this new Maine student coalition is trying to do. The group decided that we want 350 Maine’s support with advertising and advice, but we want this coalition to be student led, because it will get the best results. Interest Groups have the power to influence decision makers and is also closely related to the policy makers, therefore, it will undoubtedly look fantastic to the board of trustee’s that 350 Maine supports our divestment campaign.