COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK

REPORT FROM THE COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY COMMITTEE ON RESEARCH FUNDING FROM FOSSIL FUEL COMPANIES

JUNE 2026

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I. OVERVIEW

This report begins with an overview of the Committee on Research Funding from Fossil Fuel Companies ("the Committee") and its process. It then covers critical considerations identified by the Committee in its discussions, followed by Committee findings and, finally Committee recommendations. **Recommendations begin on page 11.** The report includes an appendix of relevant policy excerpts and other supporting information.

II. THE COMMITTEE AND ITS PROCESS

A. Origins of the Committee

The Committee was convened in summer 2024, by President Minouche Shafik, under the auspices of Jeannette Wing, the Executive Vice President for Research, and the Senior Advisory Group on Research Risk and Policy (SAGRRP). President Shafik and EVP Wing were motivated to convene this Committee by several factors. Chief among these was former President Lee Bollinger's abiding goal of having Columbia play a part in combatting the climate crisis. President Bollinger founded the first Climate School, committed the university to ambitious sustainability goals, established a non-investment policy for the University's endowment in thermal coal companies, and in oil and gas companies that lack credible net zero plans, and adopted a policy to avoid new fossil fuel connections in campus construction. With these actions, President Bollinger had set a strong climate agenda for the University, which has continued under his successors.

Members of the University community, including some student groups and some faculty, have asked that the University take a further step in fully disassociating from fossil fuel companies, including the elimination of research funding from fossil fuel companies. President Shafik recognized, however, that rules regarding external research funding are an entirely different matter from investing the university's endowment funds. In considering whether to restrict the funding of research by fossil fuel companies, the President noted that there are many complex issues involved, and requested that a distinguished committee be created, comprising a multitude of views and strong expertise, to study the issue in depth and develop recommendations to be offered to the SAGRRP and to herself.

With this remit, the Committee was convened. The President invited Keren Bergman, Charles Batchelor Professor of Engineering and Scientific Director of the Columbia Nano Initiative, and Sarah Cole, Dean of the School of the Arts and Parr Professor of English and Comparative Literature, to co-chair the Committee. The Committee was staffed by Naomi Schrag, Vice President for Research Compliance, Training and Policy, and Daniel Zarrilli, the University's first ever Chief Climate & Sustainability Officer. In consultation with EVP Wing, this group

worked in spring 2024 to assemble an extremely distinguished and diverse committee, with great expertise in a range of relevant disciplines, drawn from multiple schools across Columbia. The Committee was constituted in late spring 2024, and began its work in earnest in fall 2024.

B. Membership

Name	Title(s)
Keren Bergman, **Co-Chair**	Charles Batchelor Professor of Electrical Engineering; Scientific Director, Columbia Nano Initiative
Sarah Cole, **Co-chair**	Dean, School of the Arts; Parr Professor of English and Comparative Literature
Ruth de Fries	University Professor; Denning Family Professor of Sustainable Development in the Department of Ecology, Evolution and Environmental Biology; Chief Academic Officer for the Climate School; Co-Founding Dean Emerita of the Climate School; University Senator (Education Committee); member of Institutional Conflict of Interest Committee
Michael Doyle	University Professor of SIPA, Law and Political Science
Michael Gerrard	Andrew Sabin Professor of Professional Practice, Director of Sabin Center for Climate Change Law, Columbia Law School; University Senator (Committee on Rules of University Conduct)
David S. Goldberg	Paros Lamont Research Professor in Climate Science Research and Carbon Management and Deputy Director, the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory; Director, Lenfest Center for Sustainable Energy
Julie Herbstman	Professor of Environmental Health Sciences, Director of Columbia Center for Children's Environmental Health, Director and Career Development Program Director of the Columbia Center for Environmental Health and Justice in Northern Manhattan
Harrison Hong	John R. Eckel Jr. Professor of Financial Economics
Robe Imbriano	Ira A. Lipman Associate Professor of Journalism; Director, Ira. A. Lipman Center for Journalism and Civil and Human Rights
Kate Orff	Professor of Architecture, Planning & Preservation and of Climate; and Director, Urban Design Center, Graduate School of Architecture, Preservation and Planning (GSAPP)
Bruce Usher	Professor of Professional Practice, CBS and CCS; Elizabeth B. Strickler '86 and Mark T. Gallogly '86 Faculty Director of the Tamer Institute for Social Enterprise at the Columbia Business School; former chair, Advisory Committee on Socially Responsible Investing
Jennifer Wenzel	Professor of English and Comparative Literature and Professor of Middle Eastern, South Asian and African Studies; Co-Director and Board Co-Chair, Society of Fellows and Heyman Center for the Humanities.
Alan West	Samuel Ruben-Peter G. Viele Professor of Electrochemistry and Professor of Earth and Environmental Engineering; Co-Director, Columbia Electrochemical Energy Center.

C. Committee Charge

The Committee was charged with considering the following questions:

1. Going forward, should Columbia receive support from fossil fuel companies for its research and research-related activities?
2. What are the potential risks and benefits of future acceptance of research funding from fossil fuel companies at Columbia?
3. Are there dimensions specific to the nature or discipline of the research in question (e.g., basic scientific or engineering research vs policy or legal research vs ethics) to be considered in answering these questions?
4. Do all fossil fuel companies warrant the same approach, or are there differences among them that should be considered?
5. What criteria should be used to assess opportunities for research funding from fossil fuel companies as they arise, and whether they should or should not be accepted by the University? Can broad guidance be developed to supplement or eliminate case-by-case evaluation?
6. Are there other questions concerning research funding from fossil fuel companies that the University should consider?

The full charge to the Committee, including key definitions, is in the Appendix, Section A.

Importantly, the charge to the Committee differs from that of the Advisory Committee on Socially Responsible Investing (ACSRI). ACSRI's purpose is "to advise the University Trustees on ethical and social issues that arise *in the management of the investments in the University's endowment*." (emphasis added)

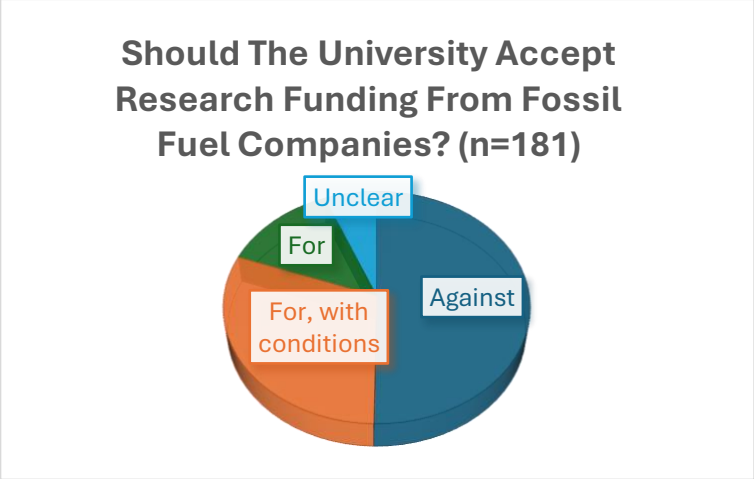
In contrast, the charge to the Committee addresses direct support for University research from fossil fuel companies. As discussed further below, the support may be provided through a variety of mechanisms, such as gifts, grants or contracts. Regardless of the mechanism, however, the funding is provided to the University for support of research and other academic activities and is not derived indirectly from University endowment investments. Therefore, the considerations may be different.

D. Survey and Outreach

Two overarching values of the Committee were transparency and the desire to listen to multiple viewpoints. To that end, the Committee began its work by publishing a website that described its efforts and by developing a survey, made up of the questions in the Committee's charge. The Committee invited any member of the Columbia community to submit responses. The survey was publicized through university-wide communications platforms and through targeted outreach to vice deans for research, who forwarded the link to their research communities. The survey was launched in September 2024 and closed on April 30, 2025.

In total, 374 individuals responded to the survey. Of these, 193 provided partial responses to demographic questions only and 181 individuals provided responses to the survey's substantive questions regarding research funding from fossil fuel companies. The analysis below focuses on these 181 respondents. Approximately 38% identified themselves as students; 25% as officers of instruction; 20% as officers of research; 11% as officers of administration; and 6% as other. The students came from 37 different units, with the most from the Climate School; similarly, officers of instruction and research came from 38 different units, again with the Climate School the most highly represented.

The results of the survey showed that approximately 50% of respondents opposed acceptance of research funding from fossil fuel companies; 30% would accept research funding from fossil fuel companies with certain conditions; 13% would accept such funding unconditionally; and 6% provided responses that were unclear.



E. Research, Discovery Process, and Discussion

The majority of the Committee's meetings were spent in conversation with a variety of individuals and groups. These included faculty and researchers with deep and widespread knowledge of the fossil fuel industry, funding mechanisms, research in areas potentially funded by fossil fuel companies, and related topics; faculty with expertise in aspects of Columbia's processes, structures, policies, and history that cover relevant topics; groups with an avowed position on this topic; the co-chair of the University Senate's Committee on External Relations and Research Policy; and faculty members from peer institutions who have recently convened similar committees with similar charges. A list of these individuals and groups is included in the Appendix, Section B.

The chairs selected two student liaisons through a competitive application process, including one undergraduate, Ian Segall, and one graduate student, Kevin Frankenfeld. These liaisons were charged with helping to gather student input and met with a variety of student groups and

individuals to discuss the Committee's questions and gather feedback. They convened multiple conversations with small groups and reported back to the Committee on their findings. These findings are included in the Appendix, Section C. The student liaisons also fully participated in the majority of the Committee's meetings and discussions.

In addition, the Committee read a swath of materials, including materials on Columbia's relevant rules, practices, and guidelines; academic papers on the subject of fossil fuel funding of university research[1]; Congressional and other public reports and documents on the subject; two reports from a student group, Sunrise Columbia; a report from the Center on Global Energy Policy; survey results from our posted survey; summaries of student focus groups led by the student liaisons; and other materials.

Finally, the Committee also reviewed institutional funding data concerning research funding from fossil fuel companies provided by the Office of Sponsored Projects Administration and the Office of Alumni and Development. The Committee wishes to note that the data from these offices had to be manually gathered, insofar as there is no data element for tagging fossil fuel companies.

The Committee's discussions were uniformly high level and participatory. Committee meetings were very well attended; the discussions were searching, respectful, and deeply considered, and the members of the Committee were invited to ask the hardest questions and to think together about multiple possible solutions. Importantly, the Committee members together represented tremendous knowledge and expertise, with great heterogeneity of background and field. They were never asked to develop conformity of views. Rather, consensus began to develop on the Committee as a result of the Committee's profound engagement with the topic in its many manifestations, the data studied, learning from the visitors and from the materials read by the Committee, including the experience of peer institutions.

[1] D. Almond et al., Favourability towards natural gas relates to funding source of university energy centres, *Nature Climate Change* 2022;12; 1122–1128, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-022-01521-3 ("Almond Paper"); S. Hiltner, et al., Fossil fuel industry influence in higher education: A review and a research agenda, *WIREs Clim Change.* 2024;15:e904, https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.904; Heal, Geoffrey M. and Bordoff, Jason, Funding Sources and Research Conclusions (September 01, 2025). Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=5477366 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5477366 ("Heal and Bordoff Response").

III. CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

From early in the proceedings, several critical points emerged for thought and discussion. These complex issues were central to our discussions and are key to our recommendations. They include:

- *Academic freedom*: Academic freedom is a fundamental value and priority of the University. See Appendix, section D, for relevant policy excerpts. In many disciplines, funding is inherent to academic freedom. That is, researchers require funding to conduct the research they choose to pursue. For this reason, unrestricted access to potential funding sources, as an element of academic freedom, became an essential consideration for the Committee. [2]

- *Recognition of the essential need to mitigate the risk of bias and the appearance of bias in research*: a critical question discussed at length was of the risk of funder influence in research supported by fossil fuel companies at Columbia. The Committee reviewed literature regarding this issue and also relevant Columbia policies and procedures. The Committee recognized and reaffirmed the importance of mitigating the risk of bias and appearance of bias in University research.

- *Exceptionalism (or not) of the fossil fuel industry*: while the Committee took seriously the specific reasons why the fossil fuel industry might be considered as exceptional, bearing in mind the University's endowment divestment policy, stated goals of fostering sustainability and aiming to contribute to energy transition and climate solutions, nevertheless the comparison with other industries was unavoidable, including tech companies, the pharmaceutical industry, the agriculture and food industries, weapons manufacturers, and more. While the Committee charge is specific to the fossil fuel industry, the Committee recognizes that its work could have relevance for considering other industries and that the principles at issue could be considered across various industries. Defining a single industry as uniquely unfit to support research raises many "what about" questions.

- *Reputational risk:* The Committee discussed the reputational risk associated with accepting research funding from fossil fuel companies as well as that associated with not accepting such funding. Continuing to accept these funds for research could be seen as insufficiently committed to combatting climate change, which is primarily caused by the burning of fossil fuels, contrary to the University's stated mission to support a sustainable

[2] The Committee notes that Stanford University's policy addresses this explicitly: "individual scholars should be free… to seek support from any source for their work." Stanford University Research Policy Handbook, Ch. 1, Principles Concerning Research, last updated in 2007, https://doresearch.stanford.edu/policies/research-policy-handbook/conduct-research/principles-concerning-research (last accessed Aug. 17, 2025)

future. Additionally, many of these firms, directly and indirectly, have contributed to a decades-long campaign of deception and denial about this reality, even as their own scientific research was clear on the links between fossil fuels and climate change. Taking these industry funds also runs the risk of helping to entrench fossil fuels by enabling fossil fuel companies to influence the terms of the debate on energy and climate solutions, and at the same time, burnish their own reputations through an association with Columbia.

On the other hand, the Committee also noted that the University itself still currently uses fossil fuels for its operations, and accepts research funding from other sources that some might view as problematic (see bullet above regarding "Exceptionalism"). Rejecting fossil fuel funding also could be perceived as signaling that the University is biased against certain research pursuits.

- *Changing funding landscape:* over the course of our year of meetings, the science research funding landscape changed dramatically, with significant reductions in federally funded research. Although the Committee was not charged with helping to create alternatives to federal research funds, it spent time, in spring 2025, considering in depth the history, nature, and scale of industry funding of research at Columbia, and learned about some University efforts to increase industry funding in general. The committee discussed the possibility that these challenges were likely to make ethical and reputational questions about research funding sources even more pertinent in the future.

- *Potential benefits to students and faculty*. The Committee discussed the ways that students and faculty may benefit from access to the robust research enterprise connected with fossil fuel companies. Through collaborations, professional contacts, employment opportunities and more, students can expand their opportunities for their future after they leave Columbia, and faculty may gain access to data and information that is important for their teaching and research.

IV. FINDINGS

A. Classifying "Better" and "Worse" Fossil Fuel Companies is Not Practicable

In 2021, Columbia announced its decision to divest its endowment from fossil fuels with this language:

> The University does not hold any direct investments in publicly traded oil and gas companies, and is formalizing this policy of non-investment for the foreseeable future. *Recognizing that certain oil and gas companies aim to transition their businesses to net zero emissions by 2050, the University may make an exception to its non-investment policy when a credible plan exists for a company to do so.* Together with its 2017 decision to divest from thermal coal, the University's current investment approach aligns with its considerable academic and research commitment to this essential cause, including the creation in 2020 of the Columbia Climate School.

Columbia University Investment Policy on Fossil Fuels, https://www.finance.columbia.edu/content/relevant-investment-policies (last accessed Sept. 5, 2025). At other schools, and in Columbia's own ACSRI reviews, this type of highlighted language has proven difficult to implement and raises important questions about the ability of Columbia to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' fossil fuels companies.

For instance, many firms do a range of things, including oil, gas, or coal extraction and development but may also have units that develop or own renewable energy assets. Others are pursuing technologies that are beneficial to climate mitigation or adaptation, such as carbon capture and sequestration, direct air capture of carbon dioxide, or hydrogen-based fuels. And while there are many credible arguments for how some of these technologies are being used to support the continued use and reliance on fossil fuels, they may, in fact, substantially contribute to advancing climate solutions if they live up to their promise. This complicates the classification of 'good' and 'bad' companies.

Another challenge, as discussed above, is the engagement by many of these firms, directly or indirectly, in a lengthy campaign of deception and denial about the scientific consensus around the role that burning fossil fuels plays in heating our planet and changing our climate. Assessing consequences for these actions has proven difficult. Many cities, counties, and states have sought to litigate this responsibility. However, so far, none of these court cases have gone to trial, so the outcome is uncertain.

B. Funding from Fossil Fuel Companies for Columbia Research Is, in General, Limited

The Committee sought data from the University's central offices to understand how much research funding Columbia has received from fossil fuel companies. Columbia's systems do not include consistent industry-specific identifiers that may be used to generate comprehensive reports on specific industry funding sources. For this reason, much of the data was manually

compiled by the Offices of Sponsored Projects Administration (SPA) and Alumni and Development (OAD).

These data show that funding from fossil fuel companies has historically made up a very small proportion of research funding at Columbia. Looking at the data for the five-year period of FY19- FY24, and thus before the 2025 federal funding environment, funding from fossil fuel companies made up **0.1%** of the total sponsored research funding received. With respect to gifts that support research and other academic activities, funding from fossil fuel companies has made up about **3%** of the total. While this is small overall, we note that funding from fossil fuel companies is not evenly distributed across the university (see Section IV.E).

The Committee learned that this fossil fuel funding is used for a variety of purposes. In some cases, it is used to fund graduate students who are studying geological or other phenomena that may be relevant to the fossil fuel industry and/or its impact. In the past, Columbia received research support from fossil fuel companies to conduct unprecedented carbon dioxide sampling in the oceans and fundamental atmospheric climate modeling. In another example, a fossil fuel company funded public health activities related to COVID 19 overseas.

C. The University Has Policies and Procedures that Mitigate the Risk of Undue Industry Influence

The Committee discussed a number of University statutes, policies and procedures that protect University research against the risk of undue industry influence. These are summarized in the Appendix, section E. The Committee determined that, in general, existing policies and processes at the University are sufficient to manage that risk in relation to funding from fossil fuel companies for research, but that the institution should make these processes more visible to the University community and the broader public. Transparency of funding sources for Columbia research projects enables readers to identify the risk of bias, and enables the University to make certain such transparency is in place. As discussed in the recommendations, certain scenarios should mandate more transparency than is currently the practice.

D. Conflict of Interest Risks Associated with General-Purpose Gifts are Greater than with Sponsored Projects

The Committee observed that research funded by general-purpose gifts is subject to less oversight and transparency than research funded by sponsored projects. This difference results from the nature of a general-purpose gift, which may be used for general purposes that further the mission of the University or specific unit, including but not limited to research, education, or operations. Sponsored projects, by contrast, are awarded to fund a particular research endeavor. Sponsored projects are subject to individual and institutional conflict of interest review on a project-by-project basis and, typically, research publications and presentations of results funded

by such projects acknowledge the funding so readers are aware. General purpose gifts, on the other hand, cannot be identified with any particular research project. For this reason, project-by-project conflict of interest review and funding disclosures in publications are not routine. More information regarding distinctions between gifts and sponsored projects is included in the Appendix, section F.

E. The Center on Global Energy Policy Is the Largest Columbia Recipient of Fossil Fuel Funding

As described on its website, the Center on Global Energy Policy (CGEP) at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs conducts independent, evidence-based research on global energy and climate challenges. It informs policymakers and the public through analysis, education, and convening to advance global energy solutions. CGEP is the largest recipient of funding from fossil fuel companies, receiving significantly more funding from fossil fuel companies than all other recipients combined. CGEP reported that in FY2025, roughly 15% of its funding came from fossil fuel companies. CGEP receives this funding as gifts rather than as sponsored projects. Most of these gifts are general-purpose gifts and therefore pooled with other unrestricted funding that is allocated to support CGEP's many activities.

CGEP's activities are similar to those of an independent policy think tank. As a result, they differ from the activities of many research units at Columbia in several ways:

1. Much of CGEP's research output consists of policy papers and other products such as briefings and updates that are self-published by the Center in real time and may be relied upon by policymakers in responding to current events. This approach enables CGEP to be effective in responding to policymakers' real-time needs for information and analysis.
2. CGEP does not, in general, compete for peer-reviewed research funding; and
3. Whereas most academic disciplines publish or present research results primarily in peer-reviewed journals or conference proceedings, CGEP publishes and presents its work in a mix of outlets, including some that are peer reviewed and some that are not.

Since 2014, Columbia's Institutional Conflict of Interest (ICOI) Committee has reviewed certain, large gifts to CGEP from fossil fuel companies. As detailed in the Appendix, Section H, the ICOI Committee has required CGEP to create and maintain a webpage that lists certain donations from fossil fuel companies and to include a disclosure of the largest fossil fuel company donors on all CGEP publications.

CGEP opted to develop a more comprehensive disclosure webpage that included gifts of all magnitudes from all donors received, rather than only those from fossil fuel companies.

The Committee discussed the Almond Paper, cited in note 1 above, that reported a "sentiment analysis" comparing the output published by CGEP and other energy centers that receive significant funding from fossil fuel companies versus those that did not, and reported that centers receiving significant funding from natural gas companies were more favorable toward that

industry than those that did not receive such funding. The Committee also considered CGEP's criticisms of Prof. Almond's methodology published in the Heal and Bordoff Response cited above. The Committee does not opine on these methodological concerns but observes that the Almond paper illustrates the risk of bias and perception of bias that can be associated with acceptance of significant research funding from fossil fuel companies.

F. The University Community Did Not Express a Consensus on This Issue

Although 50% of respondents to the Committee's survey expressed the view that fossil fuel funding should be restricted, a large minority of respondents disagreed and believed that funding should not be restricted or at least should be allowed under certain circumstances or for certain suggested uses. Similarly, in small group conversations with undergraduate and graduate students, a variety of opinions were expressed (See Appendix, Section C) that did not indicate a consensus on these questions. Faculty who met with the Committee also expressed varying views. While these may be considered small samples of the entire university community, the Committee felt that it accurately portrayed the extent of opinions at the university and the lack of consensus on the matter.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee makes the following recommendations:

A. *Fossil fuel funding of research should not be prohibited at Columbia.*

- The Committee concluded that the selection of funding sources and the development of collaborative research relationships is essential to academic freedom and therefore, should not be restricted in ways that go beyond preexisting University policies and procedures.

- The Committee concludes that the positive benefits of allowing collaboration with units or researchers within fossil fuel companies, along with the support for research in important topics such as carbon capture, utilization and storage, managing the energy transition and other issues of great import for the future of a sustainable planet, are significant and should not be eliminated.

- The Committee concludes that it is neither practical nor coherent to differentiate among fossil fuel companies, to select some as eligible to provide funding and others not. The practical challenges of adjudicating companies and research projects, both of which change over time, weighed against a restrictive approach that might allow certain fossil fuel companies to fund certain types of projects. However, in the event that a court issues an adverse decision concerning one or more fossil fuel companies that is directly relevant to Columbia research, SAGRRP should consider whether specific reputational safeguards are warranted with respect to the affected company(ies).

- Because of the challenges of adjudicating research projects described above, the Committee does not explicitly recommend requiring that all fossil-fuel funded research should be undertaken with the goal of working toward sustainability and renewable energy sources. However, we note that these values are very widely held among researchers at Columbia and drive many of the current, and likely future, projects. The Committee strongly shares the University's stated goals of marshalling our research enterprise towards a future of sustainable energy and environmental protection.

B. *Transparency is an essential value and must be reinforced at all levels.*

- The scale of research funding from fossil fuel companies remains extremely small. Over the past five years, a mere **0.1%** of our sponsored research and **3**% of gift funding for research is funded by fossil fuel companies. However, the Committee

recognizes that these numbers may not be well understood by our community, are not evenly distributed, and may change in the future. In any case, every funded project must uphold Columbia's standards of ethics and integrity.

- The Committee notes that the University's Policy on Individual Financial Conflict of Interest and Research states that with respect to conflict of interest, "transparency is paramount," and requires individual researchers to disclose all personal financial interests and relationships they may have that relate to their research in publications and presentations of such research, regardless of whether it is externally funded or not.

- The Committee further notes that, across disciplines, it is a scholarly norm to disclose funding sources for research in publications and presentations of that research. As an international nonprofit dedicated to publishing ethics has stated, "Declaring funding sources transparently contributes to the integrity of the published record…. It allows readers to assess possible conflicts of interest relating to funding, and gives grantees the opportunity to demonstrate how the grant money was spent."[3]

  The Committee recommends that the University reinforce this norm and reiterate that all publications and presentations of Columbia research should disclose any external funding for the research that is the subject of such publication or presentation, whether from private or public sources. In general, this requirement should be limited to sponsored project funding. However, where a particular gift from an organization, whether for-profit or non-profit, may be identified with a particular publication or presentation, the gift should be disclosed as funding for the project. While acknowledging that there may be unique circumstances that warrant an exception to this norm, the University should encourage researchers to err on the side of transparency in disclosing the funding sources for their research.

C. *Columbia's preexisting rules and protocols around conflict of interest, risk of bias, transparency, and research integrity should be given stronger institutional visibility.*

- Examples of our existing and robust mechanisms for ensuring the integrity of research are described above and in the Appendix. The University should consider ways to make these policies and procedures more visible to the University community and the public, as they provide important safeguards to protect the integrity of Columbia research, and context for the environment in which Columbia research is conducted. For example, the website of the Office of the Executive Vice President for

[3] COPE, https://publicationethics.org/topic-discussions/declaring-funding-sources-research (accessed on Aug. 18, 2025).

Research could include a section regarding important University policies governing academic freedom and research integrity, which could link to these important overarching University policies. To the extent that the University provides more general information concerning the composition of its portfolio of research funding through a website, such website could include links to the University's conflict of interest policies and other relevant policies.

D. ***Additional transparency is warranted for units at Columbia that have certain characteristics with respect to research funding from fossil fuel companies and the nature of the research undertaken.***

- The key characteristics of such entities are:

  a. The entity receives funds from the fossil fuel industry.
  b. Such funding is provided largely through general purpose, unrestricted gifts that cannot be identified with particular projects or research products, and thus are subject to less project-specific compliance oversight; and
  c. A portion of the entity's output consists of work that is not subject to peer review.

- CGEP is currently the only such unit at Columbia, and therefore these recommendations should apply to CGEP.

- The Committee recommends the following steps for any such entity, including CGEP:
  a. In a prominent location on the landing page of its website, the unit should describe itself as receiving funding from fossil fuel companies. This up-front disclosure is in addition to any already-existing documentation of funding sources elsewhere on the website.
  b. Research or policy papers published under the entity's name, including CGEP, should include a link to the unit's funding page where the details of its funding sources are spelled out, in addition to any other requirements imposed by the ICOI Committee.
  c. The University should consider obtaining an annual report to confirm compliance with these transparency obligations. Placing the responsibility of compliance reporting on the entity in question is an important principle.
  d. SAGRRP should continue to follow literature concerning risk of bias in research funded by fossil fuel companies. The University may return to this issue after the scientific community has further assessed the issue.

E. ***Better data could enable broader transparency at the University level.***

- In order to enable regular University-wide reporting regarding the quantity of funding from fossil fuel companies received, the Committee recommends that the University update the Alumni and Development and Sponsored Project Administration databases to include a data element specific to this industry. These offices might consider employing industry-standard codes (ie. NAICS or similar) for all industry gifts, contracts, and sponsored research. Such data elements would enable reports on the composition of the University's portfolio to, e.g., SAGRRP and University leadership. Such monitoring may provide useful insights as the University seeks more broadly to diversify funding for its research.

- The University should consider making publicly available information about the amount of research funding received from fossil fuel companies, along with the overall composition of its research funding portfolio.

Appendix

A. Charge to the Committee

The University has made a significant commitment to environmental sustainability, demonstrated through many University actions. These include the establishment of the world's first Climate School; the establishment of Columbia's Office of Sustainability; Columbia's Plan 2030 to achieve net zero emissions by 2050; tracking and reporting progress toward this goal through the Climate Registry Reporting; the plan to build a new biomedical research building that will be one of the first net zero buildings of its kind in New York City; and the University's commitment to sustainable investment and its position of non-investment in publicly traded oil and gas companies.

Important as these policies and actions are, they do not directly address the question of the University's acceptance (or not) of research funding from fossil fuel companies. Concerns about the potential undue influence of the fossil fuel industry on academic research have been reported in the press and in scholarly publications. Columbia's conflict of interest policies address these concerns to some degree, but they do not answer the question of whether funding from fossil fuel companies should receive special scrutiny.

The Senior Advisory Group on Research Risk and Policy has therefore appointed an ad hoc committee of faculty to consider the following key questions:

1. Going forward, should Columbia receive support from fossil fuel companies for its research and research-related activities?
2. What are the potential risks and benefits of future acceptance of research funding from fossil fuel companies at Columbia?
3. Are there dimensions specific to the nature or discipline of the research in question (e.g., basic scientific or engineering research vs policy or legal research vs ethics) to be considered in answering these questions?
4. Do all fossil fuel companies warrant the same approach, or are there differences among them that should be considered?
5. What criteria should be used to assess opportunities for research funding from fossil fuel companies as they arise, and whether they should or should not be accepted by the University? Can broad guidance be developed to supplement or eliminate case-by-case evaluation?
6. Are there other questions concerning research funding from fossil fuel companies that the University should consider?

The committee is expected to produce a report and suggest a set of guiding principles that may be used by the University in relation to future decision making about fossil fuel funding for research.[1]

The committee will be appropriately staffed and may include non-voting members from relevant administrative offices.

The committee will use the following definitions:

Research funding from fossil fuel companies: funding used for research and research-related activities, whether through a grant, contract, or unrestricted gift, from a company whose primary business is: (a) the exploration and production of fossil fuels, or integrated oil and gas companies whose business includes the exploration, production and refining and marketing of oil and gas; or (b) the production of thermal coal. (See CU Investment Policy on Fossil Fuels).

Research: all basic, applied and demonstration research in all fields of knowledge (See CU Policy on Misconduct in Research).

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[1] Such reviews could be carried out by, e.g., the University's Gift Review Committee or by the Senior Advisory Group on Research Risk and Policy.

B. Committee Meeting Summary (2024-25)

1. Prof. Bruce Usher, Faculty of Business and Faculty of Climate; Co-Director of the Tamer Institute for Social Enterprise and Climate Change; former chair, Columbia's Advisory Committee on Socially Responsible Investing
2. Prof. Fola Kolawole, Earth and Environmental Sciences
3. Prof. V. Faye McNeill, Chemical Engineering and Earth and Environmental Engineering
4. Prof. Douglas V. Almond, Economics and International and Public Affairs
5. Sunrise Columbia
6. Prof. Jason Bordoff and members of Center on Global Energy Policy
7. Prof. Paul Brest, Stanford University Law School
8. Prof. Peter Schiffer and Hilary Parker, Princeton University (Co-chairs and staff only)
9. Prof. Howard Worman, Medicine and Pathology and Cell Biology; Chair, External Relations and Research Policy Committee, University Senate
10. Michelle Cass, Office of Alumni and Development
11. Orin Herskowitz, Office of Columbia Technology Ventures
12. Student Liaison presentations

C. Student Feedback

On top of survey responses, feedback was solicited in small groups from both undergraduate and graduate students. Undergraduate student engagement was led by Ian Segall '27. Graduate student engagement was led by Kevin Frankenfeld, '25G. Both student liaisons organized engagement meetings along a common agenda and approach. A summary of that engagement and feedback is below.

1. Undergraduate Student Engagement

In Spring 2025, engagement meetings were organized and facilitated with undergraduate students at Columbia identified as having specialized insight into the issues. Four separate engagement meetings were conducted with the Student Union for Sustainable Development (SUSD), members of student government, and two separate groupings of undergraduate researchers. A total of six undergraduate researchers recommended by the Undergraduate Research and Fellowships (URF) office attended the two meetings. SUSD was solicited as a logical connector of sustainability students on campus. A variety of themes emerged in these discussions.

<u>Academic Freedom</u>

Participants generally recognized that fossil fuel companies should have the ability to fund research at Columbia, although that came with concerns about the nature of that relationship and the kinds of research. SUSD and student government participants had a clear perspective about the type of "return on investment" that could come about from these types of financial relationships. Students did not think that greenwashing was a risk. Instead they proposed that research funded at Columbia should support sustainable solutions, rather than further environmentally harmful activities. Participants in these discussions cited Columbia's divestment from fossil fuel companies as an indication that the university does not want to support problematic activities. Princeton's example of controlling the impact of the research was seen as a potential solution to allow fossil fuel companies to participate in research but ensure that research is focused on sustainable solutions.

Discussions with undergraduate researchers took a slightly different approach that centered around researcher autonomy within the current funding environment. Undergraduate researchers viewed any restriction to the ability of a researcher to seek support for their work as a gross infringement on the research process. One note is that the undergraduate researchers solely used examples of research that sought to improve sustainable energy sources (the mention of new battery types, solar cells, etc.) so it was

unclear whether or not they would approve of the Princeton approach that would restrict certain types of research.

Risk of Bias

Initially, there was an overwhelming rejection of the notion of increased bias within fossil fuel funded research, with most discussion groups acknowledging the potential for bias to be inherent in the research process and that existing conflict of interest policies and regulations serve as a reasonable check.

Federal Funding

Referencing the announcement of federal funding cuts, one undergraduate researcher stated: "Now we have a federal situation where there's no public funds. If researchers can't accept private funds because Columbia says so, then there's no research". This was followed by a suggestion that Columbia itself should support its researchers financially if all other avenues are cut off. This would additionally alleviate any preoccupations surrounding research bias or ROI concerns that initially motivated this committee. In all discussions, this idea gained unanimous support, while recognizing that it is not sustainable.

As the discussion evolved to include current events, there was a concern that Columbia would not stand up for and maintain the codified safeguards and regulations within research. The undergraduate researcher discussion groups acknowledged this concern as well, elaborating on sentiments of insecurity and desperation that many researchers find themselves in. The students wanted to hear from Columbia a continuing commitment to the existing standards of research integrity.

These engagement meetings conducted with undergraduate student stakeholders revealed a generally unified student perspective on the complex issues before the committee. While participants were cautiously open to accepting fossil fuel funding for research—particularly when focused on sustainability—there was consistent emphasis on the need for ethical boundaries and alignment with the university's stated values. These principles were seen as essential conditions for any future relationship with fossil fuel funders. As the committee begins to formulate its final recommendations, a reaffirmation of policies that protect the integrity of research should be considered as a potential avenue to respond and recognize these student concerns.

2. Graduate Student Engagement

Between late Fall 2024 and early Spring 2025, meetings were held with seven different student groups across Columbia's graduate schools, engaging a total of nearly 40 students. These sessions sought to reveal both principled perspectives on the role of fossil fuel companies in academia and practical considerations tied to funding structures, research opportunities, and academic freedom. A variety of themes emerged in these discussions.

Academic Freedom

The strongest and most consistent feedback was opposition to a blanket ban on fossil fuel funded research. Students emphasized that cutting off an entire category of funding poses risks to academic freedom and narrows Columbia's ability to explore diverse climate solutions.

Comparisons were drawn to precedents at peer institutions. Stanford's explicit protection of academic freedom and decision not to prohibit fossil fuel funding was cited as a counterpoint, while Princeton's experience illustrated the unintended consequences of broad dissociation, particularly the uneven impact on research capacity and ensuing correction following Princeton's decision.

Graduate students directly involved in scientific research were largely concerned with the issue of academic freedom; feeling that top-down declarations of what was "approved" to investigate violated core values and principles of discovery.

These students also stated that the perceived "influence" of financial sponsors on scientific research was significantly overblown, either due to a lack of familiarity with Columbia University's conflict of interest policies or a general ("and understandable, not to mention relatable") activist-oriented desire to drive change.

Graduate researchers also emphasized that losing access to corporate funding would not harm the fossil fuel industry itself, but would serve to only weaken Columbia's capacity to retain and attract graduate researchers moving forward (particularly in light of the political and financial pressures facing the school at time of survey).

While several cohorts of students less directly involved in research expressed serious concern around impropriety and influence, these cohorts were in the minority of groups surveyed.

Transparency & Guardrails

Graduate students expressed close to unanimous support for greater transparency with respect to funding. Students want clearer disclosure of which projects are funded, how funds are allocated, and what safeguards exist to prevent conflicts of interest. The student liaisons to this Committee recognize that these safeguards are already in place, but to the point regarding transparency – it seems that greater efforts could be made to market these safeguards.

With respect to marketing and messaging, many students expressed the sentiment that more proactive and intentional University policies around disclosure would benefit all fossil funded research organizations. Several students highlighted that while CGEP's work and research is not "nefarious", the lack of proactive disclosure allows other members of the student body to characterize CGEP's efforts as they see fit.

Suggestions included annual public reports, pooled corporate contributions to dilute direct influence, robust disclosure requirements for researchers, research tagging with funding source, and intentionally lowering the financial thresholds for disclosure to close loopholes and more accurately reflect donor activity.

Perceptions of Influence & Bias

While some graduate students argued that all corporate funding inherently introduces bias (even if funders are not involved in shaping outcomes), these students represented a minority of those surveyed. Others stated firmly that in technical fields, corporate sponsors provide resources to staff research and contextual data as requested to extend that research without influencing results.

That said, roughly half of students surveyed distinguished between applied, technical research and policy-oriented work; vocalizing a trend that fossil fuel funding intended for directly scientific research (e.g. fluid dynamics of critical mineral extraction) felt slightly different and less politically-motivated than fossil funding in research intended to shape policy discussion.

Precedent & Broader Implication

The potential for this Committee's remit to "set unintended precedent across other industries" was a sentiment articulated almost as frequently as the issue of academic freedoms with surveyed graduate students.

A recurring concern was where to draw the line. If fossil fuels are excluded, should similar restrictions apply to technology firms, minerals, pharmaceuticals, or other industries? If not them, why fossil industries? One graduate student went so far as to ask "Are rising sea levels worse than the rising teen suicide rate, driven largely by social media induced depression? Are we as a University supposed to decide which issue is more important? Why target Chevron but not Facebook? Should we prioritize one and not the other? Who makes that call?"

While most graduate students surveyed were not as direct with their feedback on this issue, many worried that restricting funding based on industry category would set a precedent that could narrow academic inquiry and freedoms in unpredictable ways.

Federal Funding

While we believe the findings of this Committee should stand on their own merit, separate from the recent political moment, many students highlighted the current political and financial realities faced by Columbia in 2025.

Many students couched their sentiment around the issue within the reality that now is not an appropriate time for the University to be cutting off funding sources while jobs are on the line.

Several students expressing this sentiment also noted the political shifts of the past several months are a prime example why academic freedom should be Columbia's guiding principle – stating that codifying ideological stances on issues may leave the University exposed to political volatility while the pure pursuit of academic discovery (in whichever direction that may take) acknowledges the complexity of the world's problems and best positions Columbia for the long term.

Other Considerations

Students directly involved in research stressed that fossil research funding supports not only current projects but also future pipelines for researchers. Terminating this support could reduce opportunities for doctoral candidates and postdocs, as well as weaken employment pathways after graduation

Privately funded grants were noted as more accessible to international students, since federal grants often come with citizenship requirements. Restricting fossil fuel support could inadvertently limit opportunities to international students

> Some graduate students expressed frustration with what they saw as the outsized influence of undergraduates on institutional decision-making, particularly when the consequences of funding decisions fall most directly on graduate researchers.

Graduate student feedback underscores that issues of institutional integrity, disinformation concerns, conflicts of interest, and academic freedom are interdependent rather than separable issues. Students concerned with reputational risks stressed the need for strict transparency measures and clearer communication about how Columbia manages corporate ties. While some insisted that fossil fuel companies do not influence technical research, others argued that even indirect relationships create the appearance of conflict. Most students defended the right of researchers to pursue projects regardless of funding source, warning that categorical bans could stifle innovation and diversity of approaches to climate solutions while introducing unintended consequences.

D. University Policies on Academic Freedom

The University's foundational policies include robust commitments to academic freedom. The University's governing statutes describe academic freedom afforded its officers of instruction as:

> freedom in the classroom in discussing their subjects; that they are entitled to freedom in research and in the publication of its results; and that they may not be penalized by the University for expressions of opinion or associations in their private or civic capacity; but they should bear in mind the special obligations arising from their position in the academic community.

(University Statutes, Sec. 70) The Rules of University Conduct further state:

> [T]he University cannot and will not rule any subject or form of expression out of order on the ground that it is objectionable, offensive, immoral, or untrue. Viewpoints will inevitably conflict, and members of the University community will disagree with and may even take offense at both the opinions expressed by others and the manner in which they are expressed. But the role of the University is not to shield individuals from positions that they find unwelcome. Rather, the University is a place for received wisdom and firmly held views to be tested, and tested again, so that members of the University community can listen, challenge each other, and be challenged in return.
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> * * *
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> Just as all members of the University community have the right to speak, to study, research, to teach, and to express their own views, so must they allow others in the community to do the same.

(University Statutes, Sec. 440)

E. University Statutes, Policies and Procedures Protecting Research from Conflicts of Interest and Other Risks

The University has a number of longstanding policies and procedures that protect Columbia research from undue influence from sponsors, conflicts of interest, and risky research engagements. Some of these are summarized below:

1. Section 430 of University Statutes: No Third Party Right to Censor or Veto Columbia Research Results

   Section 430 of the University Statutes prohibits the University from granting a funder the right to censor or veto reports of research results. This section states that Columbia may not enter into any agreements for the support of research, instruction, or other academic activities, that would confer power upon any external party, public or private, either to censor or to exercise effective veto on:

   a. the contents of instruction, or

   b. the publication or other dissemination of results and conclusions arising from research or instruction, or to require delay for an unreasonable time before such publication or dissemination of results is permitted.

   Columbia University Statutes, Section 430(a). This provision applies to any agreement, whether in the form of a contract, grant or gift. Section 432 of the Statutes describe an exception process that has, to our knowledge, never been implemented.

   All University agreements must be negotiated and signed by a central University office. Each of these offices has in place skilled professionals and standard operating procedures that help ensure that the thousands of University agreements signed each year comply with the University Statutes and many other requirements. Complex agreements raising legal concerns may also be reviewed by the Office of the General Counsel.

2. Policies Governing Conflict of Interest in Research

   The University has substantial policies and procedures in place that govern all University research and protect its objectivity from, among other things, individual and institutional conflicts of interest. These policies align with applicable U.S. regulations. They include:

   a. Policy on Individual Financial Conflict of Interest and Research
   b. Policy on Institutional Financial Conflict of Interest in Research
   c. Statement of University Policy on Conflict of Interest
   d. CUIMC Policy on Conflict of Interest in Clinical Care and Education

In accordance with these policies, researchers must report their own personal financial interests related to their Columbia responsibilities to the University at least annually, and must also disclose such financial interests in publications and presentations of related research. The Office of Alumni and Development and Columbia Technology Ventures similarly disclose potential institutional conflicts, including but not limited to gifts from companies that are over $500,000. As required by these policies, the University has appointed interdisciplinary faculty Committees that meet regularly (generally, monthly) to review potential research conflicts and determine how such conflicts may be managed or eliminated.

3. Compliance with Federal Regulations on Restricted Parties

   The University has a well-established program to ensure compliance with restricted party regulations, such as entities that have been debarred from receipt of federal funding, are subject to economic sanctions or otherwise restricted.

4. Reputational and Other Risk Management Procedures

   The University's Senior Advisory Group for Research Risk and Policy (SAGRRP) is charged with addressing research issues that may present particular reputational risk to the University. Its charge includes consideration of:

   > The risk to the Columbia community of providing support for actions that run counter to Columbia's core values, or that are not aligned with its academic mission, or that might lead to discrimination between members of our community, or that would permit undue external influence over the direction of Columbia research or education, or that would tarnish Columbia's reputation.

   The Committee determined that this charge encompasses the risk presented by funding from fossil fuel companies for research. SAGRRP meets regularly as needed in response to particular issues.

   The University's Gift Review Committee and International Gift Committee similarly review potential gifts to the University for potential regulatory or reputational concerns.

F. Gifts vs. Grants

The University secures funding for research through different mechanisms, including grants, contracts and cooperative agreements ("sponsored projects"), on the one hand, and gifts, on the other. In both cases, the University vets the sponsor or donor to ensure compliance with restricted party regulations and respond to potential reputational or other risks. However, these

funding mechanisms also differ in important ways, as explained in the University's Policy on Distinguishing Gifts from Sponsored Projects.

1. Sponsored projects
    a. Sponsored projects are generally competitively awarded. Proposals include a specific scope of work and are typically peer reviewed.
    b. Sponsored project funding is heavily regulated. Researchers must follow regulations and University policies that govern how such funding is spent and documented.
    c. Compliance with these requirements is monitored and enforced centrally. For example, awards cannot be set up until individual conflict of interest matters are resolved.
    d. Results of sponsored projects are typically published or presented, including an acknowledgement of the sponsor.

2. Gifts
    a. Gifts are not competitively awarded through a peer-reviewed process.
    b. Solicitations for gifts may include a general outline of what the gift might support, but by definition, gifts must grant the University discretion and control over the funding and how it is used.
    c. Professionals in OAD ensure that gift agreements comply with legal requirements. The agreements are much simpler than sponsored project agreements.
    d. In general, once a gift transaction is concluded, the relevant unit has access to the funds without additional central compliance requirements.
    e. Because gifts, by definition, are not tied to specific projects, publications and presentations supported by gift funds may be less likely to acknowledge such funding.

G. Other Institutions' Approaches

Princeton University has been working to dissociate itself from certain fossil fuel companies since 2021. Their experience in attempting to dissociate has been enlightening insofar as they experienced very negative, unintended consequences for research. In September 2022, Princeton announced that its Board of Trustees had approved a complete fossil fuel divestment of its endowment and a partial dissociation, including refusing research funding, from 90 specific fossil fuel firms, including Exxon-Mobil, Dominion Energy, Peabody, Suncor, NRG, Total, and Xcel, who are involved in thermal coal or tar sands extraction. According to Princeton, dissociation includes:

> "reevaluating purchases or gifts, partnerships, and facilitating employer recruitment activities. Dissociation permits, however, continued engagement of other kinds, including

> partnerships aimed at improving a company's conduct or standards so that dissociation is no longer necessary."

This Fossil Fuel Disassociation website was set up to describe more about their work and process.

However, after less than two years, Princeton made a major revision of this plan. The key change is that Princeton abandoned the idea of maintaining a list of companies from which it would not receive funding. Instead, it shifted to allowing receipt of research funding from these and other fossil fuel companies, provided that the research funding be directed toward 'environmentally beneficial' projects. No changes were made to their acceptance of gifts from fossil fuel companies.

The Committee met with representatives from Princeton University to understand these dynamics and learn firsthand about the challenges of creating and maintaining a list of restricted fossil fuel companies.

Stanford University undertook its own analysis of this issue in 2024. The decision followed upon an announcement of a $1.1 billion gift from John Doerr to start a School of Sustainability, declared in the New York Times that they still intended to accept fossil fuel money.

> "Mr. Majumdar, who currently holds a chair at Stanford named for Jay Precourt, a businessman who made his name in the oil business, also said that the new school would work with and accept donations from fossil fuel companies."

Following the backlash to this declaration from their students and faculty, Stanford's President initiated a task force to look into the question. That task force quickly concluded that principles of academic freedom were paramount and fully encompassed a faculty member's ability to accept money from any source to pursue their research.

The Committee met with representatives from Stanford University to understand how their specific university statutes and guidance about academic freedom informed their conclusions.

H. Columbia Institutional Conflict of Interest Committee Review of CGEP

Since 2014, Columbia's Institutional Conflict of Interest ("ICOI") Committee has reviewed gifts over $500,000 to CGEP from fossil fuel companies, in accordance with the University's Policy on Institutional Conflict of Interest in Research. The ICOI Committee has required:

1. creation and maintenance of a webpage on the Center's website that lists all donations over $500,000 from fossil fuel companies;
2. on that webpage, separately identifying any donations from a single fossil fuel company greater than or equal to $1 million in the aggregate over the past three years ("million-dollar donations");

3. for those gifts below $500,000 from fossil fuel companies, disclosure of aggregate amounts received over the past three years;
4. disclosure of million-dollar donations in (2) in publications issued by CGEP, in both the webpage version and the PDF version, if any; and
5. inclusion in all CGEP publications of a link to the disclosure webpage on CGEP's website.

In implementing the required webpage, CGEP opted to develop a more comprehensive disclosure webpage that included gifts of all magnitudes from all donors received in the past 12 months, rather than only those from fossil fuel companies, and an additional report of all gifts received over the past two fiscal years.