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Opinion

# Opinion: Lewis & Clark's Wim Wiewel calls on higher ed to lead battle against climate change

**"And as dispiriting as it might be having to contend with the head-in-the-sand crowd, all great social and political movements have fought uphill, against the status quo," Wiewel writes**

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*(Editor's note: When talking to Lewis & Clark College's Wim Wiewel for this week's PBJ Interview, he mentioned he was attending the summit referenced below. Wiewel submitted his thoughts on the importance of the trip in the following opinion piece.)*

When denialist politicians aggressively undermine U.S. commitments to fight climate change, it is up to local jurisdictions and independent institutions like ours to lead.

That's why, at the 2019 Higher Education Climate Leadership Summit, my fellow college and university leaders made a public pledge: that we will collaborate, work harder, faster, and smarter to drive climate action forward.

And as dispiriting as it might be having to contend with the head-in-the-sand crowd, all great social and political movements have fought uphill, against the status quo.

So we will work more closely in partnership with cities, states, businesses, and civic groups on climate resilience. And we will ensure that our sustainability and climate efforts are rooted in equity, the basis of a just transition to a low-carbon future. That's what we in higher education are doing, and I am proud to join in a sector-wide call to action, in response to the recent scientific reports that strongly advise unprecedented action in the next decade to avoid the worst impacts of climate change.



Wim Wiewel says all colleges and universities should strive to mitigate effects of climate change.

At my home institution, Lewis & Clark College, we take sustainability seriously. The accolades and validation we get from data-driven third-party groups like the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education and the Sierra Club are appreciated, but they're also a reminder that we can't afford to become complacent, as an institution or as a society.

That's why last year, our board of trustees voted to divest from fossil fuels and make fossil-fuel-free investing a part of our fiscal policy moving forward.

It was a decision that aligned our investments with our intentions. I want to underline three important points about our decision to divest from fossil fuels, because it is a perfect microcosm of the climate action movement writ large.

First, we did our homework. We acted systematically. (The college first adopted an environmental, social, and governance policy in 2014.) And ultimately we determined that fossil fuel divestment would not harm our endowment returns. Quite the opposite. Our research indicated the move would likely boost performance, as fossil fuels became what is known as "toxic assets." That insight turned out to be a deciding factor in the board's unanimous vote.

Second, our decision to divest was a collaborative effort. We worked with, not at cross-purposes to, our student-advocates. Our then-CIO, Carl Vance, coached the students, advising them that a moral argument was necessary but would not be sufficient without an equally compelling financial argument.

And third, the new investment strategy had substance — steak, not just sizzle. We looked at how other colleges approached divestment, where their rhetoric outpaced their realities, and what tangible changes looked like. And then we pushed for the maximum amount of course correction.

And that is what I mean by a perfect microcosm. Successful climate action (which, at this stage in the game, is as much about adaptation as it is about mitigation) is the result of countless people doing the homework, acting systematically, working together, and assessing the costs and benefits.

I call on all universities and colleges to do everything they can — as institutions, as influencers, and as educators of the generations that will be saddled with the enormous climate challenges ahead.