Dear President Faust,

As a fellow leader of a large institution, I sympathize with your concerns around fossil fuel divestment. But I must disagree with your conclusion that divestment is not warranted or wise. Just as you have a duty to look out for Harvard's academic mission, the City of Seattle must look out for our employees, who rely on our pension system for a secure retirement. We also share a greater and overlapping responsibility -- one to our planet and to future generations.

The moral dimension of climate change, as well as its financial implications, require us to find solutions that make divestment feasible. Over time fossil fuel investments will prove to be highly risky and, ultimately, continued investment in this sector will have strong negative impacts for investors as well as society. You argue that engagement with fossil fuel companies will yield greater benefits than divestment. These companies, with their corrosive influence on politics, funding of climate-deniers, and abhorrent human rights records, will "engage" on climate change, while continuing to extract fossil fuels that we cannot burn if we wish to avoid the worst impacts of climate change. Their valuation is based almost entirely on their carbon reserves -- reserves that must remain untapped for the sake of our climate and our future. It's wrong to wreck the planet, and it's wrong to profit from the business model that is driving that wreckage.

We have the opportunity to map out a strategy for divesting from fossil fuels in a phased manner that protects our financial interests and meets our moral obligation to future generations to stop the devastation of climate change. I am hosting the Seattle Divestment Forum this month, on Oct. 17-18, to help local governments and large institutions begin to develop financial tools that allow us to divest from fossil fuels without putting our pensions and other investments at risk. I invite you to join us for this conversation.

With the largest academic endowment in the world, one that rivals the size of the economies of many countries, Harvard is uniquely positioned to lead on this issue. And yes, this would mean using the endowment as an instrument of political and social change. Harvard has done this before. In 1990 when Harvard divested from the tobacco industry, Derek Bok, then president of the University, said in his letter that Harvard's
decision to divest "was motivated by a desire not to be associated as a shareholder with companies engaged in significant sales of products that create a substantial and unjustified risk of harm to other human beings." Surely causing what the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change calls "unprecedented changes throughout the climate system" creates a substantial and unjustified risk of harm to human beings.

Divestment is not only about addressing the actions of fossil fuel companies, particularly in the near term. It's about stating that it's unacceptable to have your whole business model and financial value be predicated on the extraction of resources that are detrimental to human life and the planet. It's about refusing to be part of the problem, and hopefully finding investments that are part of the solution. It's also about significantly reducing risk to those who rely on these investments.

The City of Seattle is a leader on addressing climate change on many fronts, and our investment strategy is only one of the avenues we are pursuing. We are implementing a Climate Action Plan that aims to make the city carbon neutral by 2050 by making our buildings more energy efficient and putting more of our people into vibrant neighborhoods with easy access to transit, walking and biking. Our city-owned electric utility, Seattle City Light, has been carbon neutral for over eight years, strategically investing in conservation and renewable energy so that the city no longer relies on coal fired power. All of these incremental actions add up to significant reductions in carbon emissions, but we also have to tackle the big, game-changing decisions. That's why I've brought together over 75 leaders from four states to fight proposals in our region for new coal export terminals that would result in more carbon emissions than the Keystone XL pipeline.

I urge Harvard and other large institutions to take a similar approach, tackling climate change from all angles. The role Harvard plays in teaching, research and scholarship, as well as the action being taken on campus, is necessary and important. But it is no longer sufficient. The impacts of climate change are real, we are experiencing them today and they will continue to worsen. We're the first generation to see the effects of climate change, and the last generation who can do anything about it. To refuse to use every tool at our disposal in this fight -- to embrace inaction -- is to endorse a trajectory that will lead to suffering, privation, and calamity. We owe it to those who our institutions and investments serve and will serve in the future to do everything we can to prevent this crisis.

Sincerely,

Mike McGinn

Mayor