

Student X
ENVS 001
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Reflection on Climate Activist Panel

On November 30th I attended a panel of climate activists, featuring Wen Stephenson and including Maeve McBride, river scientist and coordinator for 350 Vermont, Gideon Commey, an a renewable energy entrepreneur at Ghana Youth Environmental Movement (Mensah-Commey), and Jay O’Hara, known for his action to block the delivery of 40,000 tons of coal to a power plant in Massachusetts.¹ They spoke of climate change as being radically unacceptable, and of actions and inactions that further the warming of the planet as being equally (radically) unjust. When the norm, it was said by one panelist, is radically wrong and logically incompatible with any semblance of a healthy future for the planet, and has failed to be addressed constructively enough through traditional channels of change, radical action to push society to correct itself (more specifically, to push certain, more culpable groups to correct themselves and help non- or less culpable groups deal with the issues created by the culpable group) is not just valid, but necessary.²

I’ve heard this view before, and believe in it, but I more often hear it espoused as vaguely “bringing down the man” or a general distrust of the government/authority. The former is often valid, but the argument is made much stronger when backed up with

¹ Brief introduction of subject of reflection

² Presentation of content in writer’s own words, distilling main idea(s) of topic of reflection

evidence and justification. So it was different and interesting for me to see adults well into their careers declare so clearly the rationality of radical action.³

Another surprising aspect of the panel was some of the panelists' assertion of the failure of the environmental movement to address climate change. The panelists presented action to mitigate climate change and action to bring about justice as irrevocably intertwined, a feature unique to the climate justice movement over the environmental movement. The more I learn about the traditional environmental movement and the new climate justice movement, the more differences I realize exist, though at the same time I recognize the progress of the environmental movement as being essential to the position the climate justice movement is in now.⁴

During the question and answer period, I raised my hand to ask a question. I wasn't called on, but I wanted to know: Did the panelists think that universities, as places of learning, have a role in actively fighting climate change? Or just creating the conditions and providing support for its community to take action to mitigate climate change?⁵ UVM in its official vision offers a "comprehensive commitment" (University of Vermont) to the environment, and has a goal to impart on its students a commitment to ethics. Does that mean the institution of the university should be activist, vigorously doing all in its power to mitigate climate change? If yes, does that just apply to what can be logically, and without sacrificing its main function, done within the institution of the university, or does it include taking a stance or even action in the larger world? Can a

³ Reflection strategy: writer's own ideas about what was presented/personal reaction, comparison to how ideas were presented to writer in past

⁴ Reflection strategy: connecting to class material, commenting on how the writer's own ideas and beliefs are evolving

⁵ Reflection strategy: using the ideas presented to develop a line of questioning, applying ideas presented to writer's own experience (in this case as a college student involved with campus activism)

university be an actor for a cause? Should it? Universities see themselves and are seen by others as leaders, and though I think their first responsibility is to provide an education to its students (they wouldn't be universities without doing so), they are embedded in the world in multiple ways that allow the university to be activist outside its own institution while strictly performing the function of the university, like through the investment of the school's endowment.

I think a panel format is an apt choice for a presentation on climate justice, with different views and experiences represented, and an avenue for the audience to participate as well.⁶

Work Cited⁷

"Gideon Mensah-Commey." *Gideon Mensah-Commey*. IREX, n.d. Web. 02 Dec. 2015.

"University of Vermont." *Office of the President*. University of Vermont, n.d. Web. 02 Dec. 2015.

⁶ Brief conclusion. A more formal assignment would need a more developed conclusion.

⁷ Reflections don't always need reference material, but if any were used, include citations.