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Forum response – commentary

The myth of institutional neutrality: A dangerous climate obstruction strategy

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Abstract

Promoting the idea of institutional neutrality is a misleading and dangerous climate obstruction strategy. Within the financialised universities of the United States, institutional neutrality is a myth because it fails to acknowledge how research institutes and climate research agendas, have been - and continue to be, heavily influenced by corporate, military and political interests. This myth conceals how powerful interests have invested in universities to legitimate climate denial, delay fossil fuel phaseout, and distract away from climate concern. Corporate capture of universities has not only limited what kind of climate research is conducted and dampened societal responses to the climate crisis. It has also contributed to growing mistrust in scientific research and eroded the public good mission of higher education institutions. Instead of reinforcing the myth of institutional neutrality, higher education institutions need to reclaim their public good mission and recommit to engaging directly with urgent community needs to collectively prepare society for the turbulent times ahead.

Keywords

academic capture, climate obstruction, universities, higher education, fossil fuel industry

The myth of institutional neutrality: a dangerous climate obstruction strategy

Universities have always been institutions defined by complex societal interconnections among knowledge, wealth and power (Stephens, 2024). From their colonial roots (Stein, 2022) to their current vulnerabilities to authoritarian regimes (Healy et al., 2026), the kinds of knowledge generated and disseminated in universities have been influenced by wealth and power. Not only do funding and politics shape what research is conducted but – perhaps more importantly – funding and politics also play a role in determining what research is not conducted in universities (Baldwin, 2021; Ó Maonaigh et al., 2025).

Knowledge, wealth and power in climate science

Among climate research institutions in the United States, this influential agenda-setting role of powerful interests in setting the research agenda is particularly pronounced (Healy et al., 2026; Westervelt, 2021). An expanding body of research has exposed

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how fossil fuel interests have been strategically investing in academic research to promote climate denial and to delay climate policies (Hiltner et al., 2024; Oreskes and Conway, 2023).

The premise of Burgess' recent article advocating for institutional neutrality in climate change science is that '*scientific institutions face public trust challenges amid political polarisation*' (Burgess, 2026). While there is no doubt that climate science has been politicised and used as a polarising issue, the suggestion that polarisation could be reduced by promoting so-called 'institutional neutrality' ignores the political forces fuelling polarisation. While Burgess claims that left-leaning, political agendas of 'liberal ideologies' are responsible for the lack of trust in climate research institutions, the corporatised influence of fossil fuel interests on climate research is also eroding trust in climate science (Stone et al., 2026).

The myth of institutional neutrality

By promoting the idea of institutional neutrality, Burgess fails to acknowledge how knowledge, wealth and power have shaped climate change science institutions in the United States for decades. In his article, Burgess reiterates and reinforces misleading narratives about why climate science has been politicised and how public trust in climate research is low (Burgess, 2026). Instead of acknowledging that the politicisation of climate science results from failures of governance and political attacks on climate science and climate scientists, he claims that climate science institutions are the problem.

The myth of neutrality in climate research has been debunked by multiple other climate scientists who point out that science is never neutral; subjectivity and values are part of all science and research (Douglas, 2009; van Eck et al., 2024). Yet, rather than engaging with these arguments Burgess instead reiterates the false dichotomy between scientific objectivity and advocacy (Büntgen, 2024). Just as no research is neutral, institutions are never neutral. Institutions are shaped by both the funding landscape and the political context within which they operate.

Burgess' claim that politicisation of climate science can be reduced by promoting institutional neutrality distracts away from the governance failures in US politics that has created public mistrust in science. His claims also ignore the role that donor influence in universities has contributed to the public's loss of trust in universities (Healy et al., 2026). By ignoring these critically important factors, Burgess is constraining the societal power of science and scientific institutions by discrediting certain kinds of societal engagement. In a reinforcing cycle, this further contributes to the mistrust of science and the politicisation of climate science.

Institutional neutrality as a climate obstruction strategy

Promoting the myth of institutional neutrality is also a climate obstruction strategy. Climate obstruction refers to intentional efforts to slow or block climate policies that would reduce the societal risks of climate change (Roberts et al., 2025). Despite accelerating climate disruptions and intensifying climate suffering all around the world, climate obstruction is stronger than ever. Burgess' call for institutional neutrality during this time of rapidly deteriorating ecological health is aligned with efforts to slow or block climate policies. If scientific institutions are discouraged from engaging in public discourse about climate policy, then political debates will be further disconnected from the science, allowing disproportionate influence of powerful interests with financial motivations to block climate policy.

Climate obstruction research reveals how power imbalances have led to an expansion of fossil fuels rather than a phaseout over the last 30 years (Brulle et al., 2024; Carroll, 2021; Desai et al., 2026; Ekberg et al., 2022; Kelly et al., 2024; Kinol et al., 2025). The term petro-pedagogy describes how fossil fuel interests have constrained student learning about the role of corporate power in climate inaction (Eaton and Day, 2020), and the scale and scope of fossil fuel interests shaping climate research has been revealed as large and broad (Ceccon et al., 2026; Eaton and Stephens, 2024; Hiltner et al., 2024).

Academic capture and financialisation

One of the biggest dangers associated with promoting the myth of institutional neutrality is that it

conceals the corporate capture of climate science and denies the realities of academic capture in financialised universities. The term 'academic capture' has been coined to describe how special interests have constrained how higher education institutions have contributed to the societal challenges of the worsening climate crisis (Lachapelle et al., 2024). Academic capture involves powerful minority interests, that is, wealthy donors and corporate interests, exerting influence to derive their own private benefits from strategically funded academic initiatives, including research, education, outreach and policy engagement that do not prioritise the public good (Lachapelle et al., 2024). Academic capture is not only dangerous in how it has constrained climate research; at a more fundamental level, it is also dangerous because it erodes academic freedom and contributes to authoritarian rule and/or democratic breakdown (Panaro, 2026). Academic capture has led to claims that instead of evidence-based policy-making, there is a rise in policy-based evidence-making (Torrito, 2010).

The idea of institutional neutrality also fails to acknowledge how financialisation of universities constrains academic inquiry. Discourse surrounding institutional neutrality largely focuses on university rhetoric and posture. This fixation obscures the partiality inherent in modern universities' financial entanglements. Although universities - in their public communications - may attempt to present the institution as neutral in its position on controversial, political issues, universities' conduct, i.e. how the institution acts and what academic areas are prioritised in terms of research and teaching – is anything but neutral.

Given the financialisation of higher education, the academic activities of universities are increasingly 'captured' by powerful interests and determined by the financial relationships of the institution. Financialisation of higher education refers to the ever-expanding role in universities of finance and debt, including the expanding influence of financial markets, financial elites and financial institutions. Not only does financialisation constrain how universities operate and who has access, but it also narrows intellectual inquiry because of the constant pressure to improve the financial status of the university and promote the individual success of its students, faculty, staff, administrators and alumni. By focusing on financial success, financialisation discourages academic inquiry that prioritises collective action, civic engagement and ecological health.

Even the Kalven Report (the 1967 report from the University of Chicago that Burgess references to justify institutional neutrality) acknowledges that institutional neutrality is not possible when the university 'must act as an institution in its corporate capacity'. In the corporatised landscape of higher education in 2026, making claims of institutional neutrality provides cover for and a distraction from the decline in academic freedom resulting from the worsening financialisation of universities. In the current marketplace of academic inquiry, it is billionaires, corporate donors and other funders who are now dictating which ideas are worth supporting on US campuses. Claims of institutional neutrality conceal how the flow of money shapes academic inquiry, reinforcing a deceptive cycle that gives more power to influential financiers.

While the fossil fuel industry has been involved in academic capture and climate obstruction for decades, big tech, with its expanding influence and strategic investment in educational institutions, is now obstructing climate action (Singer, 2026).

Neither science nor institutions can be neutral

Fundamentally, promoting the idea of neutrality in science or among scientific institutions is an attempt to detach from the political landscape within which all science and all scientific institutions are embedded. And given the importance of climate science in policy-making, the idea that climate science institutions should be neutral and not engage and contribute to policy advocacy fails to recognise how social, ethical and political values are critical to scientific reasoning (Douglas, 2009).

Given humanities failure to respond to three decades of climate science (Stoddard et al., 2021), more scientists are getting involved in advocacy and activism (Messling et al., 2025; Perrin et al., 2025;

Theirry, 2026). Participating in civil disobedience is viewed by some as part of their duty to warn the public and defend their science (Anguelovski et al., 2025).

Those promoting the idea of institutional neutrality have not only limited climate research and dampened societal responses to the climate crisis but they have also contributed to growing mistrust in scientific research and eroding the public good mission of higher education institutions. The sweeping political effort currently underway to dismantle and reshape higher education in the United States is waekening academic integrity and normalising climate obstruction throughout society (Healy et al., 2026).

Instead of reinforcing the dangerous myth of institutional neutrality, higher education institutions need to reclaim their public good mission and recommit to engaging directly with urgent community needs to collectively prepare society for the turbulent times ahead.

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