One aspect of a student’s moral education lies not in the curriculum but in the behavior of the faculty, staff, and administration and in the policies of the institution.
—Harold Shapiro (president of Princeton University, 1988–2000)

The divestment from Israel campaign on the Princeton campus—like similar campaigns elsewhere—has drawn upon precedents and traditions, vocabularies and tactics of earlier student movements to build support for dissociation from a regime that has been condemned by the international human rights community. We trace the campaign’s history, from earlier campus movements concerning socially responsible university policy, through the early planning and organizing of the campaign, to the responses of both the local and national communities to the campaign, and the campaign’s impact. At its core, the impetus has been to locate the university as a worldly institution, a place of people in interaction with each other and with the world, that must recognize its role as an ethical actor in relation to the local and global community.

Precedents

In March 2002 Princeton alumnus Larry Hamm returned to campus to speak about past and current struggles for social justice, his activism at Princeton, and current struggles around which he organizes as the current chairperson of the People’s Organization for Progress, a Newark-based civil rights group. Hamm, a charismatic student leader who graduated from Princeton in 1978, had led over two hundred students in a famous twenty-seven-hour sit-in of Nassau Hall, the Princeton administration building, as a part of a protest calling for divestment from South Africa.

Divestment protests, and even sit-ins, calling for divestment from South Africa had started in the late 1960s, and the issue roiled several generations of Princeton students. The last major mobilization took place in the spring of 1985. The Princeton Coalition for Divestment organized a petition that gained 3,000 signatures from the university community in a week, including those of 150 faculty members. Jesse Jackson came and
spoke in support of divestment to a crowd of more than 2,500. In a demonstration that blockaded Nassau Hall, ninety protestors, including fifty-eight undergraduates, twenty graduate students, and four junior faculty members, were arrested for trespassing and obstruction. The next fall, the faculty voted 114–96 to support a resolution calling on the board of trustees to “adopt a policy of total divestment of university holdings in firms doing business in South Africa.”

Hamm had been invited back to Princeton by a network of organizations, among them the Workers’ Rights Organizing Committee (WROC), a successful effort to organize university maintenance and dining hall workers and support their demands for a living wage. WROC was itself the offshoot of an earlier antisweatshop campaign that began in 1998, ending several years of relative quiet from students at Princeton. The sweatshop campaign received the unanimous support of the student government, was supported in the campus newspaper, and even gained praise from university administrators for students’ “active participation . . . in encouraging the adoption of anti-sweatshop standards . . . and in helping to raise public awareness of these concerns.” The campaign highlighted—for a new generation of students and activists—that there were new political possibilities to be envisioned in challenging the morally questionable behavior of universities, in regard to both their place in society and the allocation of their resources.

Rumblings

In his March 2002 remarks, Larry Hamm had raised the situation in the occupied Palestinian territories as an example of a struggle for social justice that called for the kind of solidarity activism that had surrounded the antiapartheid movement during his time at Princeton. In response to this challenge, a number of students who had attended the talk informally gathered to discuss Hamm’s remarks and eventually focused on the lack of attention given to the plight of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Much of the discussion focused on how uncritical of Israel the Princeton campus community was, how many other campuses (especially in California) had groups drawing attention to Israeli policy, and the possibilities for organizing similar campaigns at Princeton.

There had been Palestine-related activism on the Princeton campus, as there had been on many campuses. Occasional vigils were organized along with educational events. However, these efforts always retained a low profile on the campus political stage, receiving little press attention and generally being ignored by the student body.
Over the next several days, the ideas of what would become the divestment movement were refined. Several participants started to look at what was happening on other campuses in terms of Palestinian solidarity organizing. Articles were circulated about activities at the University of California–Berkeley, where a group called Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) had started to organize around divestment. The Berkeley campaign was calling on the University of California system to divest from companies supplying weapons to the Israeli military and large investors like General Electric and Intel, but also from U.S. media companies such as the parent companies of the major television networks because of perceived pro-Israeli bias.

SJP was encouraging other campuses to form “chapters” that would adopt its organizing style, demands, and tactics. Its campaign actions included staffing an information table every day, setting up a mock check-point, collecting 3,000 signatures on a divestment petition, and occupying a university building. Although at first the Princeton divestment effort toyed with the idea of using the name Students for Justice in Palestine (and some initial literature produced actually did use this name), the decision was made not to associate ourselves too closely with the Berkeley campaign.

On Monday, 11 March, we applied for permission to hang a banner over McCosh Walk—the main campus pedestrian thoroughfare—during the first week after break. It was only then that we noticed that this would be the first week of Passover, and our banner would be hanging next to the Center for Jewish Life’s banner inviting Jewish students to attend special events that week. The text of our banner—which was approved by Tom Dunne, Assistant Dean of Undergraduate Students—read “1100 Palestinians Murdered with Princeton’s $ / Stop Israeli Apartheid — Divest Now!”

The decision to replace “Stop Israeli Apartheid” with “End the Israeli Occupation” was taken a few days later, after it was clear that some people strongly felt that the term *apartheid* was not only polarizing but ambiguous: Were we talking about the treatment of Palestinians within pre-1967 Israel, in the occupied territories, or both? This was the first step in calibrating the rhetoric of the campaign. Perhaps because of the Princeton campaign’s genealogy in university ethics campaigns, the focus became how to make “Palestinian human rights” a mainstream issue. The tension between rhetoric that was tempered and tactical, as opposed to forceful and provocative, would reemerge over the coming months.

Obtaining information about how much of the university endowment was invested in companies doing business in Israel was surprisingly easy. Princeton provides a list of companies in which its endowment dollars are
invested, and the Israeli embassy in Washington provides a list of U.S. companies with substantial investments in Israel on their Web site. By cross-checking the lists, we discovered that a total of just over $100 million of Princeton endowment funds were invested in companies doing substantial amounts of business in Israel. This is a remarkably small figure: In 1985 the divestment from South Africa campaign estimated that Princeton had $306 million invested in companies doing business in South Africa or banks supporting the South African government.

The Palestinian solidarity movement in Europe had started introducing boycotts into its campaigns. The Boycott Israeli Goods (BIG) campaign had compiled information on Israeli companies, as well as multinational corporations doing business in Israel, and provided information about the consumer products these companies produce so that concerned consumers can make a political statement against the Israeli occupation by avoiding them. The BIG campaign aims to discourage companies from doing business in Israel until the occupation ends, international law is obeyed, and human rights are respected. BIG has been explicit in making the analogy with South Africa and uses the slogan “Be BIG. Help Stop Apartheid.” Among academics, a petition was circulated calling for the suspension of research and cultural links between Europe and Israel. The Arab League has been supportive of these efforts, calling them a “noble, peaceful” means of expressing support for Palestinians.

The Princeton divestment campaign organizers felt that neither a consumer boycott nor an academic boycott would be effective on the campus. Divestment allowed for participation of the entire university community: students, staff members, faculty, and town residents, and it raised the institutional issue of how university endowment dollars were invested.

The divestment campaign crafted a statement built around four criteria that should govern Princeton decisions to invest in Israel. This was a model used successfully by WROC. These demands were derived primarily from reports recently issued by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, and each demand made reference to a provision of international law, or the international consensus that Israel was challenging. On the divestment campaign Web site there was a hyperlink in each demand to the document produced by an international organization stating what the demand called for.

The first three demands were straightforward: compliance with U.N. Resolution 242 (ending the occupation), compliance with U.N. Committee against Torture recommendations that Israel stop torturing Palestinian prisoners, and compliance with the Fourth Geneva Convention’s call for occupying powers not to “deport or transfer parts of its own civilian pop-
ulation into territories it occupies.” The fourth demand—concerning the right to return of refugees—was more contentious. Originally, the wording explicitly affirmed the rights of all Palestinian refugees to return to their homes. While all of the campaign organizers fully supported this, some raised questions about the tactical benefit versus cost of adding this demand, since the most pressing objective was to end the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. However, other organizers felt that this goal was critical, so the compromise wording is less explicit: There should be no investment until “Israel acknowledges the applicability of United Nations Resolution 194 with respect to the rights of refugees.”

Another decision that had to be made was whether the campaign would call for total divestment—divestment from any company doing any amount of business in Israel—or some form of partial divestment, like that which had been achieved in the case of South Africa on the Princeton campus during the 1980s. The call for total divestment was deemed to be the preferred course of action, since it was a clear, simple goal that could be easily explained, and the task at hand was to educate and mobilize.

Organizing

The divestment campaign organizers continued to follow the example of WROC, seeking to build faculty support while at the same time planning to circulate a petition listing the four demands among the student body. The initial approach was to professors who had been involved in the South African divestment campaign and others who we thought would be sympathetic. Robert Tignor, a history professor serving as chair of the history department, was the first faculty member approached. He was extremely supportive, and while we were discussing the campaign with him, Arno Mayer, a distinguished Jewish historian of modern Europe, stopped by. Mayer was also enthusiastic about divestment and immediately signed on. Both had been active in South African antiapartheid movements, especially in the 1960s and 1970s. Other faculty members were less willing. But within a month, more than thirty faculty members had signed on to the divestment demands, and by the end of the spring semester the number topped forty. (During the spring semester of 2002, there were 994 permanent faculty members at Princeton.)

We decided that the first major public move we would make would be to run an editorial on the first day of Passover. The editorial would make the argument that Passover was a particularly appropriate time for the Jewish community on campus to remember Palestinian suffering—and take action in the form of supporting divestment. The Passover message
had been similarly appropriated in support of campaigns for divestment from South Africa two decades before. 9

The divestment campaign also set up and staffed a literature table at the student center. It featured a poster display illustrating Israeli human rights abuses, violations of international law in the occupied Palestinian territories, and the condemnation of these abuses by the international community. We also handed out articles and information about the divestment campaign to passersby. On the first day of tabling, the Center for Jewish Life had reserved the adjacent table, where they were passing out free matzoth in celebration of Passover. When passersby stopped to pick up matzoth and inquired what the divestment table was, they were told that it was the “anti-Semitic table.” On this day all three people manning the divestment table happened to be Jewish and were enjoying some matzoth themselves. The allegation of anti-Semitism would surface again and again in the coming months.

There were many aggressive and confrontational visitors to the table, challenging the information and opinions being put forth. There had not been this kind of challenge from within the student body while organizing earlier campaigns. Dealing with this was difficult for some of the thirty people who staffed the divestment table in two-hour lunchtime and dinner shifts during the first week. Many of them, though they had been active in other progressive causes, were new to the Palestinian cause. Some quickly read up on the conflict, while others were discouraged and didn’t come back.

Another break with earlier patterns of mobilization was the initial lack of support from the campus religious communities. On 15 April 2002 the divestment campaign sent an e-mail to Reverend Steven White, the Episcopal chaplain who in 2001 had preached a sermon (unprompted) in the university chapel in support of WROC. The e-mail, with the subject line “Human Rights & Princeton Investing,” referenced the living wage campaign of the previous year and also stated, “We realize that this [divestment] is a difficult issue, especially for religious communities. However, we were encouraged by Desmond Tutu’s recent remarks on this conflict, calling on students across the country to work on behalf of Palestinian human rights in the same way they struggle for the human rights of blacks in South Africa.” A copy of an article from the Boston Globe of the previous day, discussing Tutu’s call for support of divestment from Israel efforts, was appended to the e-mail.

Reverend White’s same-day response was typical of the sentiment expressed by a good proportion of the center-left community on campus—the community that was so successfully mobilized in support of the living
wage campaign. White wrote that although he would leave the final decision as to whether or not to support divestment efforts to the student board of the chaplaincy, he would share his recommendation to them: “Any statement from us must oppose both the actions of the Israelis and the actions of the Palestinian suicide bombers, and those who support and encourage them.”

In mid-April the Princeton divestment campaign held a rally in front of the Frist Campus Center in support of divestment. Over the previous two years, there had been vigils in support of Palestinian human rights, but this was the first event to bill itself as a rally—a term that had been used exclusively over the past several years by anti-sweatshop and living wage organizations. The rally was announced far enough in advance that divestment opponents, coordinated by the Princeton-Israel Public Affairs Committee, were well prepared. They announced a counter-rally to “Stand with Israel” and appeared holding posters with slogans such as “Arafat is no Mandela.”

The encounter revealed important tensions among the students and for the first time brought the university into the act. The divestment rally, with more than one hundred students attending and several faculty speakers from both Princeton University and Princeton Theological Seminary, was on one side of the main path leading into the front of the Campus Center. Around fifty divestment opponents gathered on the other side of the path. Nearly all of the staff of the Student Life Office were in attendance to supervise, along with numerous campus policemen (including one who told us that he had arrested students protesting for divestment from South Africa two decades earlier). Many more students came to watch the rallies. The campus police officers forced spectators to choose whether or not they were going to “participate” in the protests, and if they chose not to they had to stand far away from “participants.” One freshman, who wanted to observe both rallies, sat down in the middle of the sidewalk leading into the Campus Center, between the two groups. He was asked to leave by campus police.

After the rally in front of the Campus Center, the divestment group marched to Nassau Hall and tried to deliver the divestment petition, which had more than three hundred student and thirty faculty signatures. The staff of Princeton University president Shirley Tilghman said that she—and every other administrator in the building—was unavailable, so the divestment petition was left with her receptionist. Meanwhile, the antidivestment group sang Israeli and American patriotic songs, including “God Bless America.”
Responses

President Tilghman has not responded to the petition calling for divestment from Israel. In this she reflects a long tradition at Princeton. In 1978 William Bowen, then president of Princeton and now president of the Mellon Foundation, responded to a petition calling for divestment:

If the university is to serve well the purposes for which it exists, there must be a continuing commitment to the freedom of each individual to think freshly and independently, to be as free as possible of every form of coercion, of every pressure to join a position because others—even a substantial majority—happen to hold it. Required too is a large measure of forbearance on the part of students, faculty and alumni, who will naturally and properly feel strongly about a great many causes which are extremely significant to them. The university itself advances important causes by assuring that both their champions and their opponents have a full opportunity to argue their cases. This requires institutional restraint and a willingness to differentiate between the right of the individual to argue vigorously for what he or she believes and the obligation of the institution to remain open in fact and in appearance to different points of view.10

Bowen invoked the same reasoning and language in May 1985 when he made the university’s argument against divestment from apartheid South Africa in front of a packed campus forum: “What may be right action for an individual may not be right action for this kind of university” (emphasis in original).11 Bowen also suggested that some trustees “believe that the quest for ‘clean hands’ is an impossible one, in a world so full of imperfection.”

But in the face of student pressure, the trustees finally agreed to a policy of selective divestment from South Africa, stating: “The purpose of any policy of selective divestiture should not be to make political statements. . . . Rather, selective divestiture should be considered only when such action seems required to prevent the university from being associated, as a holder of securities, with a company whose behavior has been found to represent . . . a clear and serious conflict with central values of the university.”12

The closest that the university has come to a response to calls for divestment from Israel was an essay, “Exploring the History of University Divestment Policies,” written in the campus newspaper, the Daily Princetonian, by Vice President for Public Affairs Robert Durkee.13 He cites a 1978 statement saying that there is a “strong presumption against the University as an institution taking a position or playing an active role with respect to external issues of a political, economic, social, moral, or legal

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character.” Durkee characterizes as “one exception” the 1969 decision by the university not to invest in companies whose primary business was in South Africa. But there have been other exceptions; in 1978, 1985, and in 1987 when the university changed its policy.

While the divestment campaign takes for granted that the university’s distance from the world has been and can be modified in direct response to pressure from students and faculty, it is now also recognized and codified by the university. In 1978 President Bowen suggested that if divestment happened and was “seen as the result of student protest, [it] would suggest that the trustees of the university had not in fact made a judgment on the merits of the case . . . but instead were simply trying . . . to appease a student group.”14 But the 1992 “Guidelines for Resources Committee Consideration of Investment-Driven ‘Social Responsibility’ Issues” notes that before the university will consider divesting, there must be “considerable, thoughtful, and sustained campus interest in an issue . . . over an extended period of time, say two academic years.” Once this sustained interest has been evidenced, the university must make its judgment based on whether “central University values are found to be at stake,” as well as whether it is “possible for the University community to reach a consensus on how the University should respond.” This seems to imply that it would consider divesting only if it were pressured by sustained student protest.

While it took weeks for the Princeton campus media to pay attention to the divestment campaign, stories began to appear in the local and national press and television.15 Support for the divestment campaign had grown at other campuses, feeding from and back into Princeton. On 16 April MIT cognitive science professor Nancy Kanwisher e-mailed the Princeton divestment campaign, indicating her support and inquiring about starting a similar campaign on the MIT campus. Shortly thereafter, a group of Harvard and MIT faculty members launched a joint campaign, calling on their two universities to divest from Israel until the four demands that the Princeton campaign had formulated, with slight wording changes, were met. On 6 May the campaigns held a teach-in on the MIT campus, featuring, among others, Noam Chomsky, and attended by 350 people.16

The Harvard-MIT campaign swiftly received media attention, with an article in the Boston Globe appearing on the day of the teach-in; at the time there had already been forty faculty members from MIT and thirty-nine from Harvard who had signed on to the divestment demands (by September 2002 fifty-six MIT faculty and seventy-four from Harvard had signed on).17 Over the next several weeks, the Princeton campaign received more than a dozen inquiries from students on campuses across the country, from Rutgers to Washington University, inquiring about how
to start divestment campaigns on their campuses. By October 2002 more than seventy campaigns had been started or were in the process of formation. Even Students for Justice in Palestine at UC–Berkeley has now adopted a divestment petition based on the four demands of the Princeton petition.

There have been efforts to organize responses to divestment among the Jewish community. Hillel’s “Stand with Israel” campaign has organized nationally on campuses against divestment. On the Princeton campus, there have also been recent efforts to form a group of Jews for Justice and Peace, and some activists have attempted to stake out territory for the “Jewish Left” that is critical of Israel but does not support divestment—similar to the position of the national Tikkun Community—suggesting, for example, that the Jewish community should rally behind more measured actions, such as boycotts of products from settlements, rather than divestment. This has started to restrict the space for Jewish voices among divestment organizers, who now find themselves excluded from both the mainstream of the Jewish community (beginning with their families) and from the Jewish Left.

However, the response has been more moderate on Princeton’s campus than elsewhere. Harvard University president Larry Summers has associated the divestment movement with a rise in anti-Semitism on campuses, claiming that “serious and thoughtful people are advocating and taking actions that are anti-Semitic in their effect if not their intent.” In an effort organized by the American Jewish Committee, an ad was run in the New York Times on 7 October 2002, condemning intolerance and intimidation of Jewish students, and signed by more than three hundred college presidents. Princeton president Tilghman refused to sign the statement; a university spokesperson said Tilghman did not feel that the statement was inclusive enough because “it just mentions intimidation against Jewish students, and they are not the only students who might face intimidation.”

On campus, there have also been efforts to solidify antidivestment sentiment. A petition opposing divestment received approximately one hundred student signatures, and forty-three faculty members signed a letter to the Daily Princetonian opposing divestment. This letter was signed by some faculty members considered to be quite moderate or even sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, such as politics professor Maurizio Viroli and religious studies scholar Peter Schaefer. The statement that these faculty members signed focuses on the “incomprehensible” analogy between South African apartheid and Israeli oppression of Palestinians. But it is careful to state, “We recognize the political and moral necessity of an Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories.” Some students who
initially were supportive of divestment began to have doubts as time went on. One Princeton student who zealously supported the divestment movement in the spring of 2002 had a change of heart over the summer. In September he was quoted in the *Boston Globe* saying, “I came to the realization not only that it was impractical, . . . but that it is divisive in that the tactic isolates one group—Jews and Israeli people. . . . Many Jewish, Israeli, and Palestinian people are interested in the same things.”

There has been some support for divestment among the Israeli academic community. Rachel Giora of Tel Aviv University circulated a letter of support for the Princeton divestment petition, and a few faculty members at Hebrew University and Technion also sent letters of support. The Israeli media took some interest in the divestment campaign at Princeton and later elsewhere, primarily as somewhat of a curiosity, with articles in the *Jerusalem Post* and *Ha’aretz*, among other papers.

The American Arab Anti-Discrimination Network has signaled its support, as has the Middle East Research and Information Project, a left-wing Washington, D.C.–based think tank. But there has been no word from any representatives of the Palestinian Authority or other Palestinian organizations concerning support for U.S. divestment efforts.

**Reflections**

Divestment from Israel in spring 2002 was the right tactic at the right time. With the public debate in the United States on “Israel/Palestine” viewing the conflict in terms of two opposing forces, divestment was able to bring the debate home and shift its framework to human rights violations, individual and institutional responsibility and choices, and the larger international consensus.

Divestment was able to gain traction on campuses by pointing to earlier divestment campaigns and more recent antisweatshop and campus labor movements. These succeeded in organizing and mobilizing student opinion on grounds of justice and responsibility by focusing locally on an international or national problem. The divestment movement has been able to force students to think about Israeli human rights abuses—because it matters to them, on their campus, with their endowment dollars.

Although antiapartheid activists, especially by the 1980s, viewed them as ineffective, the Sullivan Principles—guidelines drawn up for companies that were doing business in South Africa to act responsibly by not supporting the apartheid regime—were at least a step in the right direction. A serious effort to draft analogous principles for companies doing business in Israel has not yet been attempted, perhaps because the divestment
movement has not yet gained enough widespread support. However, it is important to encourage mainstream organizations that have traditionally been concerned with socially responsible investing to write a document on divestment and Israel, calling on U.S. companies to stop supplying weapons to the Israeli Defense Forces while the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip continues. Furthermore, U.S. companies should be urged to stop doing any business whatsoever in the settlements.

Calls for complete divestment from South Africa spawned a number of new and creative ideas for Princeton to try to effect positive change in that country. For instance, the board of trustees recommended that the university use its strengths in research and teaching to counter apartheid with long-term academic partnerships and to support South African organizations working toward a nonracial society. The trustees also supported expanding opportunities for faculty sabbatical leaves and research projects in South Africa, as well as programs to bring (nonwhite) South Africans to study at U.S. universities.23 Considering that, of the entire student population at Princeton, there is only one student of Palestinian descent, and that there are absolutely no exchange programs currently offered, any moves in this direction that could be a potential side effect of divestment efforts would be a substantial improvement.

The divestment campaign has been informed by the memory of previous generations of activists on the Princeton campus. These predecessors shared a common goal: to see the university community as a place of connected individuals grounded in the specificity and particularity of a time and place, but one that was not limited to the campus. Such a vision of the university necessitated institutional engagement with social issues affecting the larger community locally and globally.

Equally consistent with the activists’ invocation of their vision, the university administrators have held firm to their own vision of the university as a space for the expression and nurturing of difference, even if this means foreclosing the possibility of institutional social responsibilities. At the same time, however, university administrators seem to recognize that the ideals of a liberal education mean that there must be more to the place than classrooms, students, teachers, and ideas. President Harold Shapiro, who had resisted demands from the antisweatshop and WROC campaigns, for instance, argued, “One aspect of a student’s moral education lies not in the curriculum but in the behavior of the faculty, staff, and administration, and in the policies of the institution.”24 The challenge to the academy is to practice this moral education in a globalized world dominated by the United States.
Notes from the Princeton Divestment Campaign