

REPORT OF THE RESOURCES COMMITTEE OF THE CPUC
ON THE FACULTY PETITION TO DIVEST FROM WEAPONS MANUFACTURERS

On January 7, 2013, President Tilghman received a petition signed by 113 faculty members calling on the university to renounce “current and future investment in companies involved in the manufacture and distribution of multiple, rapid-firing semi-automatic assault weapons and the bullets that equip them” (petition attached). She promptly referred this petition to the Resources Committee (RC) for consideration. On March 1, the RC met with Professors Caryl Emerson, Simon Morrison, and Marie-Hélène Huet, the petition’s authors, to discuss the goals of the petition in more detail. A few days later, the RC Chair received an e-mail message from Joshua Stadian ‘16, co-founder of the Student Anti-Violence Effort (SAVE), asking if students could sign onto the faculty petition. She agreed and just recently received a Student Statement of Support for the petition, with 351 signatures (petition attached).

On April 26, 2013, the RC met to consider the petition, following the process outlined in the committee’s guidelines. Those guidelines specify a 4-step process: (1) The RC must determine if there is “considerable, thoughtful, and sustained campus interest” in the issue. If the committee judges that campus interest is sufficient, it proceeds to step 2. (2) The committee must then determine whether or not there is a central University value clearly at stake. If there is a central value at stake, the committee proceeds to step 3. (3) The RC must then determine whether it is possible for the University community to reach “a consensus on how the University should respond to the situation.” The guidelines go on to describe the nature of such a response as follows:

“Such a response must be both general and specific; i.e., any recommendation for a University response on such an issue must make a clear and explicit connection between the general core values of the University and the specific corporate policies and practices. In this process we should seek ways to respond that are genuinely affirmative, that offer at least some possibility of constructive impact, that are consistent with the fundamental character of the University as an academic institution, and that can merit broad support throughout the University.”

Finally, if the University can reach consensus on the general issue and the specifics of the proposed action, the RC proceeds to Step 4. (4) The RC must then attempt to apply the judgment to the actions of a specific company in the University’s portfolio.

Regarding the first criterion, the committee judged that the petitioners have demonstrated considerable and thoughtful campus interest in the general issue of reducing gun violence. Although the interest has not been sustained over an extended period, the committee nonetheless felt that the breadth and depth of interest demonstrated by the petition and other recent activities on campus warranted further examination of the issue.

Regarding the second criterion, the committee judged that there is a central university value clearly at stake. As the student petition notes, the University has “a core commitment to the security of its students and [a] basic interest in ensuring that the classroom remains a safe space for learning and growth.”

Regarding the third criterion, the committee did not find the course of action proposed by the petition to be sufficiently well-defined to pursue at this time. The petition calls on the university to divest from companies involved in the manufacture and distribution of multiple, rapid-firing semi-automatic assault weapons and the bullets that equip them. In the committee's discussion with the petition's authors, however, it became clear that the manufacture of such weapons does not itself represent a direct and serious contradiction of the central value of security. Indeed, in the hands of police and military personnel, such weapons are used to promote security. Instead, as Professor Huet argued in a follow-up e-mail message, the violation occurs when companies participate in gun shows and sell semi-automatic assault weapons to civilians. If the petition were amended to focus on the marketing, rather than the manufacture, of this class of weapons and ammunition, the committee would seek clarification on questions like the following:

- Are rapid-firing semi-automatic assault weapons easy to identify and distinguish from other kinds of weapons? The committee's initial investigation suggests that weapons exist on a continuum of firing speed and capacity, and that these features can also be modified once a gun is purchased. Any divestment directive would need to be able to specify exactly what products should not be marketed to civilians.
- How are assault weapons marketed to civilians? Are gun shows the primary venue? Or would other marketing activities also need to be included? Any divestment directive would need to be able to specify exactly what marketing to civilians entails.

In short, the petition needs to be more specific in identifying the actions of companies that the university should find objectionable – that is, the actions that violate core university values – to make a strong case for divestment. Indeed, the identification of specific, objectionable actions is at the heart of the University's framework for considering proposals for divestment. As the RC guidelines note: "For Princeton, the purpose of selective divestiture is to separate the University from companies whose conduct contravenes the values of the University; the purpose is not to make political statements, to censure governments, or to pressure either companies or governments to adopt particular policies."

Two additional points are worth noting. First, the RC learned from Princo that, at present, the University does not have any direct holdings in companies that manufacture weapons. Second, the RC continues to question whether divestment is the most effective way for the petitioners to achieve their aims. In their meeting with the committee, the petition's authors said that their goal was for the university to make a statement, to take a stand on the issue of gun violence. Note that the pursuit of that goal through divestment is explicitly ruled out by the RC guidelines. However, given that there is broad, campus interest in this issue and a core university value at stake, the petitioners might consider other ways in which the university could put its resources on the line, perhaps involving the commitment of resources, rather than the withdrawal of resources. For example, the administration might create an Anti-Violence Fund to support teaching and research on ways to reduce gun violence. The University could also support appropriate legislation at the state and federal levels. Measures such as these represent a constructive way for the University to take a stand against gun violence.