Campus Environmental Advisory Committee Annual Report

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This year the Campus Environmental Advisory Committee (CEAC) considered the complicated and contentious issue of carbon offsets, which Williams has committed to buying as part of its strategy to become carbon neutral by 2020. Carbon offsets are arrangements that allow one to compensate for one's own greenhouse gas emissions by investing in a greenhouse gas reduction or sequestration project somewhere else in the world. These arrangements can take many forms, from forest conservation to renewable energy development to landfill methane capture. In theory, almost any method of reducing greenhouse gases can be traded as an offset. Offsets can also happen just about anywhere, from Williamstown to West Africa. But most so-called "verified" offsets—the ones traded on the market that Williams will enter very soon—take place in the Global South, where the price per ton of carbon is lowest.

In their 2015 response to the campaign for fossil fuel divestment, president Adam Falk and the Board of Trustees publicly committed to buying carbon offsets as part of their strategy to achieve carbon neutrality by 2020. Acknowledging skepticism about offsets, they said,

> We are sensitive to the impression that the college will be 'buying' some portion of its way to carbon neutrality. However, the purchase of high-quality, audited carbon offsets enables projects that represent true and immediate net reductions in global carbon emissions, and we will always prioritize lowering our own energy use above purchasing carbon offsets and RECs on the market. Indeed, the most important reason for postponing the purchase of carbon offsets until 2020 is so that we *first* challenge ourselves strenuously to reduce our own consumption of fossil fuels. Ultimately, though, with current technology it is not possible for the college, or any similar institution, to achieve full carbon neutrality without the contribution of such offsets and credits.

Like most colleges and universities that are using offsets to claim carbon neutrality, Williams is now faced with some thorny ethical, economic, and ecological questions, which CEAC began to explore this year, and which it hopes will become the basis of a broader campus discussion in the coming years. For example, are the methods of verifying the effectiveness of carbon offsetting schemes reliable? In other words, can we be confident that we will in fact get what we pay for, either in terms of carbon reductions or so-called "co-benefits" such as sustainable development? What kinds of projects have the greatest risk of failure? From an ethical perspective, is it right to ask people in the developing world to compensate for emissions that we cannot or will not cut ourselves? On all of these questions and many more, experts disagree. The members of CEAC agreed that the campus community needs to understand these debates better as we enter this complex market.

To that end, and with funding from the Center for Environmental Studies, we invited two experts to campus to give public lectures on offsets: Alex Barron, Assistant Professor of Environmental Science and Policy at Smith College, a former EPA and Congressional staffer who is conducting research on offsets in higher education; and Lisa Barron, Chief Operating Officer & General Counsel at The Gold Standard Foundation, one of the leading offsets registries. As part of his visit, Barron taught a Class of 1960 seminar on carbon pricing to a small group of Environmental Studies majors and concentrators. Both speakers met with CEAC and with Provost Dukes Love to share their expertise and discuss how Williams

might build its carbon offset portfolio in ways that advance its educational mission. In addition to hosting these visiting speakers, CEAC members Nick Howe and John Kleiner gave a Log Lunch presentation that gave an overview of offsets and the major questions surrounding them.

CEAC's goal this year was not to issue recommendations for offset purchasing, but to gather information and explore competing viewpoints with an eye toward developing an offsets policy for the 2020 goal and beyond. The Committee disagreed on many questions about offsetting, sometimes quite strongly. Two things we did not disagree on were the need to engage in a more vigorous public conversation about carbon offsets at Williams, and the need to link offsets to our educational mission. Indeed, much of our discussion centered on the different ways in which offsetting projects might be integrated into coursework, independent research, and service learning. For example, we discussed whether would it be worthwhile for Williams to pursue local offsetting projects in the Northern Berkshires region, and how such projects might be integrated into our environmental curriculum. We also discussed whether offsetting projects in the developing world might be tied to our educational mission, and how research on offsets might be used to inform our purchasing strategy. (In fact, students are already engaging in this work. Students in Assistant Professor of Environmental Studies Laura Martin's class, "Biodiversity and Climate Change," wrote a collaborative research report on the biodiversity implications of offset purchasing, which included recommendations to the college.) In many ways, offsets provide an ideal opportunity to teach students about the complex trade-offs, sacrifices, and scientific challenges that we all must face when devising solutions to climate change.

Although carbon offsets took up most of our time, CEAC also worked on a proposal to re-organize the committee, which we hope to implement next year. Finally, we discussed a proposal by the Zilkha Center to study a possible shift away from fossil fuels in the college's central utility infrastructure.