

Persuasive Campaign: Pepperdine Climate Action Initiative

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Cover Page Footnote

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Pepperdine Climate Action Initiative: Persuasive Campaign

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Abstract

What does it do to a university's credibility if they do not believe in science? 97% or more climate scientists agree that climate warming over the last century is due to anthropogenic activity (NASA, 2022). However, Pepperdine University is a climate denier in the face of a scientific consensus (Levens, 2022). The Pepperdine administration has refused to admit that anthropogenic climate change is real with the reasoning of "encouraging debate" on the topic (Levens, 2022). Students are upset at this claim due to the implication that climate change is negatively affecting vulnerable populations around the globe, and Christians are biblically prompted to serve these communities (Pepperdine YECA Fellows). While Pepperdine has a Center for Sustainability, the center's website includes no acknowledgment of anthropogenic climate change (Pepperdine University). This campaign aims to mobilize the student population on environmentalism and push the administration to formally and effectively address anthropogenic climate change in university policies.

Keywords

persuasive campaign, social action, climate change, environmentalism

What does it do to a university's credibility if they do not believe in science? 97% or more of climate scientists agree that climate warming over the last century is due to anthropogenic activity (NASA, 2022). However, Pepperdine University is a climate denier in the face of a scientific consensus (Levens, 2022). The Pepperdine administration has refused to admit that anthropogenic climate

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change is real with the reasoning of "encouraging debate" on the topic (Levens, 2022). Students are upset at this claim due to the implication that climate change is negatively affecting vulnerable populations around the globe, and Christians are biblically prompted to serve these groups of people (Pepperdine YECA Fellows). While Pepperdine has a Center for Sustainability, the center's website includes no acknowledgment of anthropogenic climate change (Pepperdine University). This persuasive campaign aims to mobilize the student population on environmentalism and push the Pepperdine administration to formally and effectively address anthropogenic climate change in university policies.

In the past, Pepperdine students have utilized social media and the Pepperdine Freedom Wall to influence administration decisions. In 2020, students created an Instagram account, @blackatpeperdine, that documents stories of racism at Pepperdine. This account had significant agenda-setting effects in that President Gash released a statement that Pepperdine would add a Chief Diversity Officer position to the steering committee to address racial inequalities within the university (Levens & Shaw, 2020). This campaign will utilize an Instagram account similar to @blackatpepperdine to showcase student support for climate change mitigation at Pepperdine. The Freedom Wall was also utilized in the past to spark administrators' discussion of racial inequalities that urged then-President Benton to acknowledge racial-profiling issues (Levens & Shaw, 2020). We will encourage student participation in posting climate testimonies to the Freedom Wall to showcase overwhelming student support for the issue so that the administration can no longer ignore it. Our campaign aims to utilize the agenda-setting technique of this environmental and social movement at Pepperdine.

The campaign's objectives are to garner student support for climate change mitigation efforts on campus and, in turn, get the Pepperdine administration to take a public stance in favor of

anthropogenic climate change mitigation. Student support would take the form of at least 20% of Seaver College students following the @pepperdineclimateaction Instagram campaign account. This is 692 students (*Pepperdine University - profile, rankings and data*). Additionally, at least 50 student climate testimonies would be posted on the Pepperdine Freedom Wall. For the Pepperdine administration to issue a formal stance on climate change, the Pepperdine Center for Sustainability website would include the importance of mitigation efforts for “anthropogenic climate change” as a core value for Pepperdine sustainability practices. Furthermore, all university investments in fossil fuels would be released, and future donors would be vetted for their support of climate change mitigation policies.

The campaign takes the form of a social reform movement. A social movement is defined as “struggles on behalf of a cause by groups whose core organizations, modes of action, and/or guiding ideas are not fully legitimated by the larger society” (Borchers, 2022, p. 337). More specifically, a reform movement seeks to change the policy of the current system in place (Borchers, 2022, p. 339). The student’s “guiding ideas” are that anthropogenic climate change is significant and must be recognized by our institution to remain consistent with the Christian ideals of Pepperdine. The “larger society” not legitimizing said guiding ideas is climate-denying Pepperdine administration and donors.

The theoretical framework for the campaign is the agenda-setting theory that says problems, solutions, and political dynamics are brought together to create opportunities for altering the agenda. This phenomenon is termed a “policy window” (Goncalves & De Santo, p. 208). We will create a policy window by bringing attention to the climate-denial problem in Pepperdine administration and present the solution of robust student advocacy and participation in the campaign to push for a formal stance on anthropogenic climate change. The political dynamics of Pepperdine create a perfect

opportunity for ensuring a policy window. Pepperdine faculty and staff engaged in a 2022 Graphic survey that found that about 88% of respondents of “97 students and faculty said climate change is a serious issue and 83% said addressing climate change is important to them” (Levens, 2022). The survey results highlight the potential support for our campaign, which prompts a political dynamic of the people, or faculty and students, calling for a climate change acknowledgment amidst university climate denial. In traditional agenda-setting circumstances, large media corporations employ policy windows. However, in today’s media age, the agenda-setting theory has been critiqued to include consumers, or citizens, as possible agenda-setting agents due to the public participation aspect of social media (Matei et al., 2021, p. 9). The critique is essential for considering the agenda-setting effects of our campaign, as it is Pepperdine's citizens, or students, who will have the power to influence policy through the media.

One of the most crucial components of an effective persuasive campaign includes recognizing one’s audience, including their beliefs and attitudes. In this campaign, aimed at raising awareness for environmental action at Pepperdine university, multiple audiences need to be targeted through different strategies. In our campaign, the audience we want to activate and encourage support from includes Pepperdine students and staff that acknowledge the dangers of climate change. The target audience for our campaign includes Pepperdine students, staff, administrators, and donors. Research conducted by Thigpen and Tyson (2021), demonstrates that, “Gen Z and Millennial social media users are more likely than older generations online to engage with climate change content on social media and to express a range of emotions when they see climate-related content there.” This leads us to assume that a significant portion of the Pepperdine student body is relatively informed on climate change and more likely motivated to take action. Through our campaign, the audience that we intend to inform includes students and staff, but primarily

Pepperdine administrators persuading them to recognize anthropomorphic climate change and take action against it explicitly. Lastly, the audience that we aim to neutralize includes Pepperdine administrators and donors, who are actively against climate change and criticize environmental advocacy movements.

Research has also displayed how attitudes regarding climate change differ based on party affiliation and income status. The research shows that individuals with a higher income and a more Republican-leaning affiliation express less support for climate change initiatives and proposals. In a Pepperdine graphic article, journalist Mowreader (2021) revealed the top 10 earners that make up some of Pepperdine's administration, all receiving an income over \$400,000. Based on this research, as Pepperdine was founded and established as a Christian university, influenced by politically conservative ideology, an assumption can be made about our audience of Pepperdine administrators and donors, and therefore allow us to utilize strategies aimed at neutralizing specific audiences while informing and activating others in efforts to produce an effective campaign.

The Pepperdine climate action initiative aims to utilize both digital media platforms and print media platforms to raise awareness of anthropogenic climate change. Our use of digital media will include social media platforms, including creating an Instagram account titled @PepperdineClimateAction, aimed at spreading awareness and informing the Pepperdine community. Social media proves to be a relevant platform for college students; as research by, Tighten and Tyson (2021) found, "younger adults have taken on prominent roles in efforts to stop climate change...among U.S. social media users, 45% of Gen Z adults and 40% of Millennials have interacted with content on social platforms that focuses on the need for action on climate change." In addition to our Instagram account, we intend to employ print media platforms, primarily through the placement of posters around campus to attract audiences with our message. Posters are both an

efficient and affordable tool for informing audiences on a particular subject. The campaign aims to create a clear and succinct poster referencing our Instagram account to gain more support and a larger following.

Additionally, as social media is a prominent tool exercised by college students, we aspire that campaign supporters may use other platforms, such as Snapchat, Twitter, Facebook, and YikYak, to spread awareness across Pepperdine's campus. We plan to use the Freedom Wall to protest climate change denial once we have activated enough support by reaching a following of 346 students, 10% of the Pepperdine undergraduate population. We hope that through both our social media and print campaigns that once our Instagram account is followed by 20% of the Pepperdine Seaver College student population, which is 692 students, our campaign has gained traction across campus and caught the attention of administrators.

Through public participation, we can measure the success of our Pepperdine Climate Action Initiative campaign. Suppose we reach the desired number of followers on the @pepperidneclimateaction Instagram account and 50 participants in the Freedom Wall climate testimony demonstration. In that case, we will know that our target audience has been effectively reached. In class, we will ask the audience to follow our Instagram account and sign the petition to ensure a base following. Moreover, suppose Pepperdine takes a formal stance in favor of anthropogenic climate change mitigation. In that case, we can directly link the statement to the success of our campaign, seeing that there is currently no campaign of this magnitude at Pepperdine. The campaign will ultimately succeed if Pepperdine begins to divest from fossil fuels and refrains from climate-denying donors in the future. Our objectives will ultimately be reached when the university begins to take action to mitigate anthropogenic climate change after implementing a student-wide social movement that advocates for these specific administrative changes.

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