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# Louisiana's flagship university lets oil firms influence research – for a price

## Louisiana State University allowed Shell to influence studies after a \$25m donation and sought funds from other fossil fuel firms

This story is co-published with the Lens, a non-profit newsroom in New Orleans



📷 The director of LSU's Institute for Energy Innovation said being able to work with oil and gas companies is 'really a key to advancing energy innovation'. Composite: The Guardian/Getty Images/Alamy

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**Sara Sneath** *in New Orleans*

Sun 21 Apr 2024 06.00 EDT

For \$5m, Louisiana's flagship university will let an oil company weigh in on faculty research activities. Or, for \$100,000, a corporation can participate in a research study, with "robust" reviewing powers and access to all resulting intellectual property.

Those are the conditions outlined [in a boilerplate document](#) that Louisiana State University's fundraising arm circulated to oil majors and chemical companies affiliated with the Louisiana Chemical Association, an industry lobbying group, according to emails disclosed in response to a public records request by [the Lens](#).

Records show that after Shell donated [\\$25m](#) in 2022 to LSU to create the Institute for Energy Innovation, the university gave the fossil fuel corporation license to influence research and coursework for the university's new concentration in carbon capture, use and storage.

Afterward, LSU's fundraising entity, the LSU Foundation, used this partnership as a model to shop around to members of the Louisiana Chemical Association, such as [ExxonMobil](#), Air Products and CF Industries, which have proposed carbon capture projects in Louisiana.

For \$2m, Exxon became the institute's first "strategic partner-level donor", a position that came with robust review of academic study output and with the ability to focus research activities. Another eight companies have discussed similar deals with LSU, according to a [partnership update](#) that LSU sent to Shell last summer.

Some students, academics and experts said such relationships raise questions about academic freedom and public trust.





The ExxonMobil oil refinery in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Photograph: Barry Lewis/In Pictures/Getty Images

Asked to comment, the Institute for Energy Innovation's director, Brad Ives, defended the partnerships, as did the oil majors. Two more companies have since entered into partnerships with the Institute for Energy Innovation, said Ives. But **Shell** is the only company to have donated at the level that gave the company a seat on the advisory board that chooses the institute's research. The head of the Louisiana Chemical Association and the Louisiana Mid-Continent Oil and Gas Association also sit on the advisory board, which can vote to stop a research project from moving forward.

Ives said being able to work with oil and gas companies is "really a key to advancing energy innovation".

A spokesperson for Shell said: "We're proud to partner with LSU to contribute to the growing compendium of peer-reviewed climate science

and advance the effort to identify multiple pathways that can lead to more energy with fewer emissions.”

An ExxonMobil spokesperson said: “Our collaboration with LSU and the Institute for Energy Innovation includes an allocation for research in carbon capture utilization and storage, as well as advanced recycling studies.”

LSU has long had a close-relationship with oil majors, the names of which hang from buildings and equipment at the university. Nearly 40% of [LSU funding](#) comes from the state, which received a good chunk of its revenue from oil and gas activities until the 1980s. In recent years, oil and gas revenue has made up [less than 10%](#) of the state budget.

***I have a hard time seeing a faculty member engaged in legitimate research being eager for an oil company ... to vote on his or her research agenda***

**Robert Mann, political commentator and former LSU journalism professor**

But the new, highly visible partnership with Shell took the closeness a step further, promising corporations voting power over the Institute for Energy Innovation's research activities in return for their investment.

“I have a hard time seeing a faculty member engaged in legitimate research being eager for an oil company or representative of a chemical company to vote on his or her research agenda,” said Robert Mann, political commentator and [former LSU journalism professor](#). “That is an egregious violation of academic freedom.

“You don't expect to see it written down like that,” Mann said, after the Lens asked him to review [the boilerplate document that outlines](#) what companies

asked him to review [the boilerplate document that outlines](#) what companies can expect in return for their donations to LSU's Institute for Energy Innovation. It is not appropriate, Mann said, for faculty research to be driven by the decisions of the dean of a university, let alone an outside industry representative. "If you're a faculty member in that unit you should know that the university is fine with auctioning off your academic freedom," he said. "That's what they're doing."

Ives of LSU said its Institute for Energy Innovation is no different to similar institutes across the US, including the Texas Bureau of Economic Geology, which performs research supported by corporate donors. "I think researchers saying that somehow having corporate funding for research damages the integrity of that research is a little far-fetched," Ives said.

Research performed at the institute is subject to the faculty's individual ethics training and subject to peer-review, he said. "A donor that provided money that goes to the institute isn't going to be able to influence the outcome of that research in any way."

Asked about the relationship with the institute and industry, Karsten Thompson, the interim dean of the College of Engineering at LSU said: "To me, it's not a conflict at all. It's a partnership because they're the ones that are going to make the largest initial impacts on reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions."

Some observers, noting that fossil fuel companies have previously shown a vested interest in obscuring scientific conclusions, question the reliability of academic studies sponsored by fossil fuel companies. Exxon, for example, denied the risk of human-caused climate change [for decades](#), noted Jane Patton, an LSU alumna and the US fossil economy campaign manager for the Center for International Environmental Law.

***It's just disheartening to find that the state's***

## *Flagship institution is allowing industry to determine the research agenda*

### Jane Patton of the Center for International Environmental Law

After the Lens asked her to review LSU communication on the matter, Patton said she suspected that fossil fuel companies have had a say in what does and doesn't get studied in relation to risky endeavors, such as carbon capture, which involves chemically stripping carbon dioxide from industrial emissions and piping it underground. For her, the LSU documents basically proved her fear. "This is the first time I've seen actual evidence of it," Patton said. "This is a gross misuse of the public trust."

To Patton, the perceived blurring of academic objectivity could not come at a worse time in Louisiana, as the climate crisis makes the state less habitable and housing more expensive. "It's just disheartening," she said, "to find that the state's flagship institution is allowing industry to determine the research agenda. No wonder it's so hard to find peer-reviewed research about how bad this is."







The Shell oil refinery in Norco, Louisiana. Photograph: Luke Sharrett/Bloomberg via Getty Images

Records show that Shell helped to tailor what LSU students would learn in the six courses offered under the institute's carbon capture, use and storage (CCUS) concentration that debuted a couple years ago. The LSU alumnus Lee Stockwell, Shell's general manager of CCUS, sat on the [search committee](#) for the Energy Institute executive director, served on the petroleum engineering advisory board, and was [very involved](#) in shaping the carbon capture curriculum.

Stockwell directed questions about Shell's partnership with the university to LSU.

Stockwell was not the only oil representative to help design the curriculum. BP, Chevron, ConocoPhillips and ExxonMobil also had representatives on the ad hoc advisory committee that designed carbon capture coursework within the petroleum engineering department, according to a [July 2022 email from Thompson](#). At least one cohort of students took two elective courses at LSU designed by the oil majors and another 10 students were expected to take the full concentration beginning in 2022.

LSU is not alone in this practice, Thompson said. At most engineering departments in the country, an active Industrial Advisory Committee (IAC) weighs in on curricula, so that degrees evolve as technology changes, helping students land internships and jobs.

LSU faculty has not been similarly engaged with renewable energy companies, because oil and gas companies have the resources to tackle the climate crisis now - and are not reliant on future technology, Thompson said. “Renewable energy is much more abstract,” he said. “So, I think that’s the difference. It’s not that we don’t care as much.”

Fossil fuel companies have been finding their way into classrooms for decades, in part [to help the industry](#) retain a positive public image in the face of a heating planet.

Some students do not approve of the university’s partnerships with fossil fuel companies, or any financial ties with them.

For a decade now, students across the nation have filed complaints and demanded divestment from fossil fuels and [hundreds of institutions](#) have agreed. Locally, the LSU Climate Pelicans, an interdisciplinary group of students, have [called for the university to divest](#) endowment funds from the fossil fuel industry.

Inspired by the Climate Pelicans’ work toward divestment, the LSU graduate student Alicia Cerquone, who sits on the LSU’s student senate, sponsored a divestment resolution. The measure passed in a 37-2 vote last year, according to [LSU’s student newspaper](#). Though investment in fossil fuels amounts to only 2 to 3% of the endowment, it’s an important philosophical step, Cerquone said.

Cerquone is also troubled by the influence that industry has on the [Institute for Energy Innovation](#) and fears other corporations could control other departments’ curriculums. “These entities are going to have a say in what we pay to learn here,” she said.

The fossil fuel industry has made forays into academia beyond Louisiana. ExxonMobil and Shell have both helped fund a similar Energy Initiative at

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where the highest-level donors can have an office on MIT's campus, according to [Inside Climate News](#). In 2021, Exxon funded and co-wrote a [research paper](#) with MIT researchers with conclusions that supported the argument for federal subsidies for carbon capture and use.

*This story is co published with the Lens, a non-profit newsroom in New Orleans and part of its Captured Audience series, which is supported by a grant from the Fund for Investigative Journalism*

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**Betsy Reed**

*Editor, Guardian US*

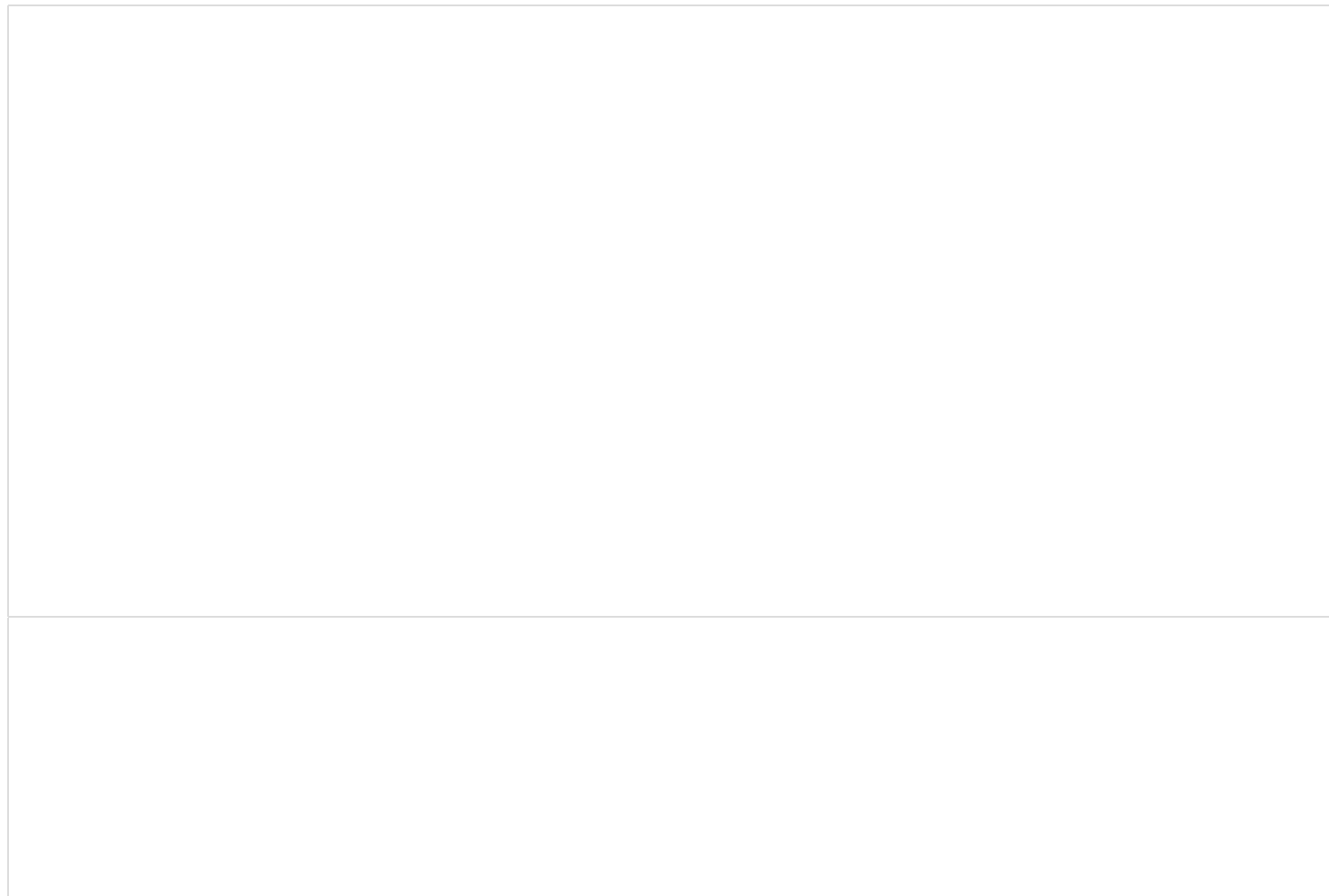


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