



## Dispatch

# Collegial or Contentious? Reflections on an Interdisciplinary Panel Discussion about an Oil Pipeline

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### Introduction

This dispatch explores the dynamics of a campus panel discussion at the University of Oklahoma (OU) about the construction of the Diamond Pipeline in 2016-2017 to transport crude oil from Cushing, Oklahoma, to Memphis, Tennessee, in the south-central United States of America (USA). A student environmental group and a student petroleum engineering group co-organized the panel, drawing together representatives from the fields of petroleum engineering, environmental engineering, environmental law, natural resource law, Native American studies, and environmental activism. Our reflections take an ethnographic approach and rely upon participant observation during the panel discussion and in-person interviews with panel participants, organizers, and audience members after the event.

The Diamond Pipeline was built during 2016 and 2017 by Plains All American Pipeline LP for Valero Energy Corporation (Smith, 2017). The pipeline stretches 440 miles (708 km) from Cushing, Oklahoma to the Memphis, Tennessee area, across three states and four Oklahoma tribal jurisdictions, including the lands in Oklahoma (from Cushing east) of the Sac

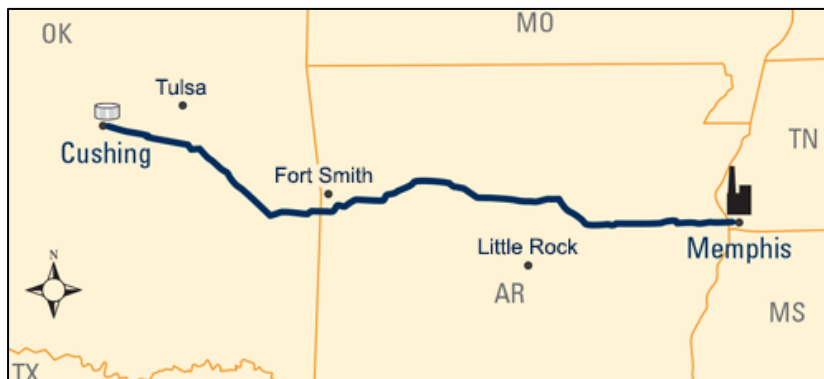
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and Fox, Muscogee (Creek), Cherokee, and Choctaw Nations (see Figure 1). The path of the pipeline crosses through several potable water sources, making the hazards associated with its construction and ongoing maintenance an environmental and human rights issue for local communities. Capable of transporting up to 200,000 barrels of crude oil a day, the pipeline supplies a Valero refinery near Memphis. Cushing, an oil boom town located 69 miles (111 km) north of Oklahoma City, was the location of a prosperous oil field in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century before becoming a depot for several major pipeline projects, including the Keystone Pipeline System. Before and especially during construction, numerous Indigenous and environmental groups publicly protested the Diamond Pipeline and the corporations responsible for its construction. This opposition took place against the backdrop of several other high profile pipeline protests, including those against TC Energy's Keystone XL Pipeline project and the demonstrations at Standing Rock against the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016. The Dakota Access Pipeline protests received considerable media coverage as Indigenous youth activists and local Native American communities rallied against the development plan, particularly regarding the threat that the pipeline's construction would pose to regional water supplies. Student activists at OU took note of these protests and began organizing events to raise awareness locally.

*Figure 1.* Path of Diamond Pipeline from Memphis, Tennessee, to Cushing, Oklahoma (image courtesy of Sbinns, CC-BY-SA 4.0).



While it was under construction, the Diamond Pipeline became the topic of a panel discussion co-organized by two student organizations at OU, a research-intensive university that draws significant funding from the oil and gas industry. The panel, organized by OU Green Week and the OU Society of Petroleum Engineers, and hosted by the College of Architecture and Department of Geography and Environmental Sustainability, was intended to allow the university community to listen to experts from several academic departments and an environmental activist discuss and debate the project and

its implications (see Figures 2 and 3). The panel consisted of experts in the fields of Petroleum Engineering, Earth and Energy, Environmental and Indian Law, Energy Law, Native American Studies, and Water Quality, as well as a spokesperson from a local chapter of a national environmental organization that seeks to defend natural resources and wild places. The discussion took place during the university's annual Green Week event, a week-long campus-wide sustainability and environmentalism initiative, on 11 April 2017. A room-capacity crowd of about 125 people attended the event.

Figure 2. Promotional flyer for the discussion panel event (image courtesy of OU Green Week).

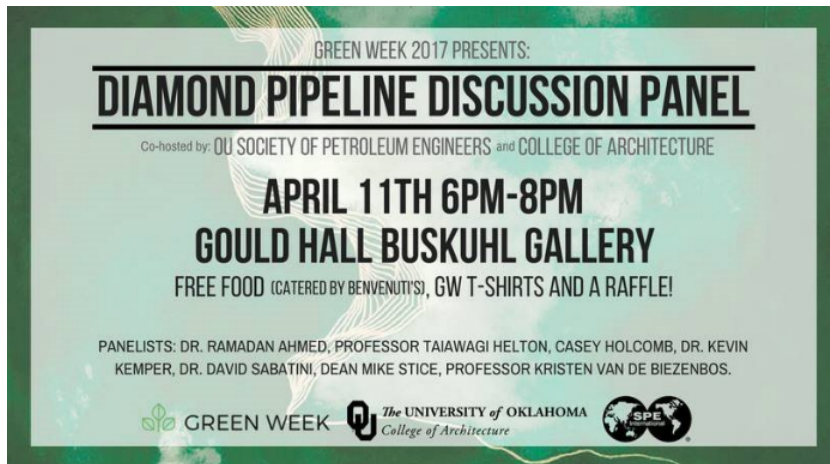
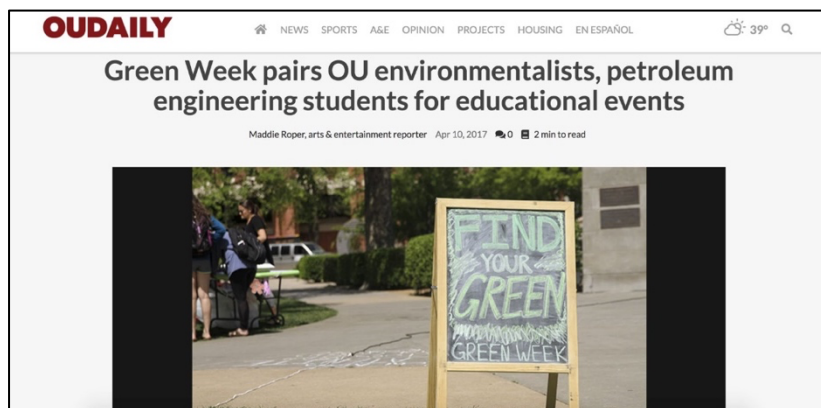


Figure 3. Student newspaper article promoting the panel discussion event (image courtesy of OU Daily; Roper, 2017).



The reflections reported here developed because of the interactions between the panelists, which quickly devolved into contentious debate and disagreement throughout the course of the event. Based on first person recollections and interviews conducted before and after the event, this dispatch provides reasoning as to why the panel conversation did not result in constructive conversation or collegial understanding. It did, however, result in greater understanding between the student groups involved in planning the event and suggests the practice of “slow activism” (Martin et al., 2007) as one way to achieve progress when considering such topics. We reflect on the interactions between the panelists and the interactions between the student co-organizers as a means of exploring cross-disciplinary understandings of social justice activism in a collegiate setting.

### **Forms of Activism**

At the University of Oklahoma, where activism is traditionally student-led, the student organizers realized that neither individualism nor contact activism would be effective in their context. In alignment with the students’ instincts, civic engagement and social justice researchers are beginning to understand the importance of cultivating informal social networks in the quest for social change. This form of slow activism (Martin et al., 2007) revolves around community involvement and development, and the way that actively listening to and empathizing with diverse voices within the community can make it stronger and more capable of achieving positive social change. Unlike the stereotypical definition of activist action, slow activism calls for a more subtle, gradual form of community outreach that stems from a desire to understand and connect with those of diverse backgrounds or beliefs.

The idea of slow activism is built upon two foundational components: effective communication, and community-centered outreach. To effectively communicate with a broad range of people, activists must be able to engage with others in a way that is collaborative and encouraging. In essence, slow activism is meant to encompass the development of social networks and a resulting shift in power dynamics built on a foundation of strategic, empathetic, and dynamic communication. Teaching slow activism as an approach to general communication and interpersonal relationship building could also have a positive impact on students’ abilities to engage with people in the workplace. Students who actively engage with the larger local community during their time in college develop stronger critical thinking skills, communicate more easily, and have a firmer grasp on the nuances of complex, real-world issues (Cantor et al., 2015). In the University of Oklahoma setting, this translated into student organizations engaging in community-centric activities, such as raising campus awareness of environmental concerns among students and university administrators, organizing an annual “Green Week” series of events, and engaging in local volunteer opportunities like tending the campus’ hydroponic


farm, trash cleanups, and composting. These forms of collective action are deepening learning among students and encouraging faculty and staff support.

Nevertheless, environmentalist sentiment is still viewed by many in the USA as extremist, and the stereotype of an activist as intense and unyielding can make sustainable progress difficult, both within the collegiate sphere and in the outside community. In Oklahoma, where OU is located, less than 30% of registered voters identify as Democrats (Oklahoma Election Board, 2022). And, at OU, there was a recent instance of university administrators and oil and gas businessmen attempting to suppress science on the human-made cause of an “earthquake swarm” in the mid-2010s (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Compilation of images from a local exposé on efforts to suppress science on the cause of an earthquake swarm in Oklahoma caused by the hydraulic fracturing practices of the oil and gas industry (Riley, 2015; montage provided by Randy Pepler).


## Report: Politicians and Energy Execs may be trying to cover up the cause of Oklahoma’s earthquakes

March 4, 2015 · 28 Comments · by Patrick



Here's some shocking, earth-rattling news.

Yesterday, through interviews, open records requests and something called “research,” [Energy Wire released a somewhat terrifying report](#) that exposes how the Oklahoma political elite, energy industry and Oklahoma Geological Survey have conspired together to mislead the public on what’s causing the earthquake outbreak. <https://www.thelostogle.com/2015/03/04/boom-politicians-and-energy-execs-really-are-trying-to-cover-up-the-cause-of-oklahomas-earthquakes/>



From: Holland, Austin A.  
Sent: Monday, November 18, 2013 5:18 PM  
To: Smith, Connie G.  
Subject: RE: Odd call to me just now

I have been asked to have “coffee” with President Boren and Harold Hamm Wednesday.

Here's was Connie's reply.

Date: Monday, November 18, 2013 9:20 PM  
To: Austin Holland <austin.holland@ou.edu>  
Subject: RE: Odd call to me just now

Gosh. I guess that's better than having Kool Aid with them. . . I guess. Will see you tomorrow if you're int? OK?

In complex contexts like OU’s, we observed that slow activism can be used to build bridges between differing groups and work towards understanding. In practice, slow activism’s focus on communication and community building can be used to find common ground between groups that disagree on issues related to environmental sustainability. We observed that the students who planned the Diamond Pipeline panel were more successful at communication and collaboration than the professionals who made up the panel, and inadvertently utilized slow activism methodology as a means of understanding one another

and enacting practical change. These young students have begun to grasp the importance of setting aside ideological debate and the goal of “winning” to prioritize the greater good.

### Gathering Observations

Here, we reflect on participant observation during the panel discussion and subsequent interviews with willing organizers, panelists and audience members (see Tables 1 & 2). In a preamble at the beginning of the panel discussion, the moderator opened with a description of the purpose of the panel and background information on the Diamond Pipeline project, introduced each panelist (who then introduced themselves and their backgrounds), and posed a series of broad questions as a jumping-off point for conversation. Each panel member then gave their thoughts on the broad questions. A lively discussion ensued as each panelist spoke. The moderator and panel organizers took notes throughout the event for later assessment.

*Table 1.* Description of the panelists.

Panel Participant	Description
Moderator	University administrator and Adjunct Professor of Geography and Environmental Sustainability (Note: Randy Peppler, a co-author of this paper.)
Panelist 1	University administrator with 35 years of petroleum industry experience and an energy expert
Panelist 2	Associate Professor of Law, with a focus in oil and gas law and environmental law
Panelist 3	Professor of Law, with a focus on environmental law, property law and Native American law
Panelist 4	Associate Professor of Petroleum Engineering, with a focus on drilling engineering
Panelist 5	A Lecturer of Native American Studies and volunteer for the Water Protectors Legal Collective
Panelist 6	Local organizer for a national environmental organization
Panelist 7	Professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering and a water expert

*Table 2.* Interviewee codes.

Interviewee Code	Description
Moderator	See Table 1
Panelist 1	See Table 1
Panelist 2	See Table 1
Event Organizer 1	A third-year Petroleum Engineering major and executive member of the OU Society of Petroleum Engineers
Event Organizer 2	A third-year Environmental Sustainability major and chair of the OU Green Week Student Group (Note: Event Organizer 2 is Allyson Wiley, lead author of this paper.)
Audience Member 1	A fourth-year Environmental Sustainability major
Audience Member 2	A third-year Petroleum Engineering major

The broad questions included: Why pipelines? How do pipelines end up where they do? What are the potential impacts of pipelines in general, and this particular pipeline, on our environment, and especially water since recently at Standing Rock we heard prominently “Water Not Oil?” What is the role of environmental groups regarding the pipeline? What is the stance of Oklahoma tribes and nations regarding the pipeline? Topics that arose during the initial panelist remarks included the construction of modern oil pipelines, how their paths are plotted, their economic impacts, and potential water supply contamination. Panelists also discussed the role of Oklahoma tribes and nations, and environmentalist groups, in protesting the pipeline’s construction, the role of tribal jurisdictions along the pipeline path, and potential environmental degradation that could occur as a result of the pipeline’s construction (ecosystem disruption), operation (oil spills), and afterlife as a decommissioned pipeline. Some of the discussion between participants on these points became contentious, and at one point the lead student organizer felt compelled to stop the proceedings and admonish the panelists and the attendees.

Shortly after the event, interviews were scheduled with two event organizers, the moderator, two panelists, and two attendees. Distinct sets of interview questions were prepared based on the participants’ differing roles – moderator, panelist, event organizer, and event attendee. As part of the interviews, each person was asked to describe their perspectives on the petroleum industry and on environmental sustainability, as well as recall any noteworthy episodes that occurred during the panel discussion.<sup>1</sup>

### Themes and Reflections

We identified four emergent themes in interviewees’ perceptions of the communication methods of the panelists. We view three of the themes – *defensiveness*, *stereotyping*, and *ideological attachment* – as key barriers to effective communication, while a fourth – *desire for collegial space* – is positive.

Interviewees noted that both environmentalist and oil and gas panelists offered examples of *defensiveness* including dismissal of differing opinions, personal attacks on the opposing side, and unwillingness to discuss a topic collegially. For example, Audience Member 1 observed that “it was like there was a very distinct line in the middle... between the environmental side and the petroleum side.” The Moderator of the panel stated: “I think that at least one of the oil and gas representatives knew exactly what he could say and get away with... [by] trying to provoke the environmental representative with

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<sup>1</sup> This study was approved by the University of Oklahoma Institutional Review Board (No. 8252).

some of his comments, which caused the environmental representative to get really defensive.”

Another interviewee described the panel as a competition: “[one panelist] said something that very clearly implied that it was a competition or a debate. He said something along the lines of ‘they [the environmentalists] don’t know what they’re up against’...” Although defensiveness was observed in most panel participants, multiple interviewees suggested that the environmental panelists were more dismissive of opinions or facts stated by others on the panel. In an instance recalled by all but one interviewee, Panelist 6 stated, “if you voted for Trump, you will be drinking shit [instead of water].” Audience Member 2 reflected on this statement, saying, “one of [the international environmental organization representative’s] comments were more of an attack on the person and was completely false.”

The panelists also engaged in *stereotyping* one another, as well as fit stereotypes common to their respective groups. Some interviewees reported that the environmentalists appeared fanatical or overzealous, while members of the petroleum industry appeared arrogant. Panelist 1 said that environmentalists often “take unsubstantiated, frankly unprecedented positions that lead the industry in a very polarized, very adversarial dialogue, like the Sierra Club.” Another interviewee, Audience Member 1, said “the comments that [an environmental panelist] made were very anti-conservative... [which] makes it seem like conservatives, for whatever reason, can’t be environmentalists.” Audience Member 2 reflected on the aforementioned “drinking shit” comment, saying that “a statement like that creates this whole train of thought that if you are this [political party], then you think like this.”

Stereotyping in the panel discussion appeared to influence defensive behavior and hinder the communication of panelists’ knowledge about the subject. Ultimately, the audience members observed the panel devolve from a substantive, factual discussion into a petty argument and personality contest. This was summarized by Audience Member 2, who said that “parts of the panel were extremely frustrating,” specifically citing the lack of civil discussion. Panelist 2 offered that there was a “lack of communication between the two sides which I think is problematic for a lot of reasons, and I think that popular rhetoric has...deepened the divide.”

Contentious behaviors also appeared to stem from *ideological attachment*. One audience member specifically pointed out that the panelists gave the impression of being fully attached to their ideals, and this influenced their lack of receptiveness during the discussion panel. The panelists seemed not to focus on the pipeline, but instead on taunting each other and making unnecessary or unprofessional comments. Here, we noted that the social justice debate was refocused around trying to forcibly change personal opinions, rather than advancing justice outcomes and seeking shared solutions. Audience Member 1 said that “it seemed like they clung to their own personal ideologies, and I feel like that was bolstered by the fact that they are [kind of] niche groups.” These ideological attachments are based on prior self-beliefs. This connection hinders

receptiveness, while also influencing people to become more emotional with their statements and judgements. Audience Member 2 said that, because of the “blanket statements” panelists made, they did not appear open to others’ viewpoints. It became clear that the panelists framed this as a debate, rather than a collaborative discussion.

Panelist 1 described the panelists’ collective approach: “you had to come and represent your side, in the case of the [environmental organization] guy, he had to come and represent [the organization’s] position... and in my case, I was there as an industry advocate.” This us versus them mindset suggests that a person must stick to what he or she is attached to – your “side” – without question. Thus, it closes off opportunities for productive listening, discussion, and perspective-taking.

Despite the divisiveness of the panel event, it became apparent from the interviews that both sides – environmental and oil and gas – wanted to find a *collegial space* within which to discuss these topics. This desire was expressed by student audience members who were interviewed or provided anecdotal comments after the fact, who shared that they attended the event and learn about the different issues involving the pipeline. In the University of Oklahoma context, degree programs are arranged in highly disciplinary silos, where upper-level students often have limited interaction with students from other disciplines and different disciplinary perspectives. For example, under normal circumstances, petroleum engineering students at OU would not encounter environmentally focused coursework. Organizer 1 mentioned that making space for open discussion across disciplines was a motivating factor for creating the event. Specifically, this person believes that having a “very open room... is the primary reason why every single one of the petroleum engineers that did not have class at the time was there. It is not often that we have an open discussion like that [discussion panel].” However, the tone of the discourse during the event hindered any opportunity for collegial space due to some panelists clinging to their ideological attachments, furthering the enhancement of stereotypes.

These reflections suggest that failing to appropriately account for stereotypes, defensive behaviors, and ideological attachments prevented collaborative discussions about a complex environmental issue. When other people are perceived as adversaries rather than potential partners who could work toward achieving a common goal – such as clean water for all – it is impossible to identify a shared, fact-based solution. Panelist 2 notes that “especially in a state like Oklahoma that has very traditional views of fossil fuels... cutting out the perspective of those who might see fossil fuels as not an entirely bad thing doesn’t actually create a dialogue.” Notably though, collegial space was present before the event during its organization because of the student groups working collectively to put aside their beliefs about this subject to present a well-rounded forum. Why would these students choose to “defy” traditional disciplinary and ideological boundaries? While we don’t have a clear answer to this question, it appears that the student organizers came to the

table with a sincere interest in expanding beyond their social and educational “echo chambers.”

### **Closing Thoughts**

The panel has helped us reflect more on how ideological pushback and other psychological barriers tend to prevent social groups with beliefs or values that are at odds with one another from finding common ground. Rather than opening the conversation, the panel reinforced echo-chambers, and did little to advance constructive communication between opposing groups.

During their interview, Audience Member 2 reported very little interaction with environmental sustainability students in his day-to-day life, saying that “it is hard to interact because environmentalists are [treated as] polar opposites.” This ideological division is pervasive both within and beyond the academic sphere at OU. With limited interaction, reducing barriers to communication will be difficult; however, one set of circumstances that resulted from the panel discussion suggests a viable way forward. Recall that the panel was co-organized by environmental sustainability and petroleum engineering student groups, bringing them into a collaborative space with the “other side.” In organizing the event, the groups got to know one another as individuals and cultivated respect for each other’s beliefs. They began to break down those barriers that might have otherwise kept them from communicating and organizing the event.

The development of positive communication and cooperation between two student groups, along with the individual connections that formed because of this joint project, constituted a nascent form of *slow activism*. By developing mutual respect for their differing ideological standpoints, both student organizations – Green Week and the Society of Petroleum Engineers – began making incremental changes. As an example, the Society of Petroleum Engineers chose to add an environmental chair to its board of officers after collaborating with Green Week on this project. While working together, getting to know one another, and thus choosing to question stereotypes and ideological attachments, the student groups were able to create a platform for open communication despite prior conditioning to be wary of one another and after witnessing the behaviors of some panelists.

This experience taught us that implementing slow activism and the main components of the dialogic communication approach may allow environmentalists and extraction industry representatives to better empathize with and understand one another on an interpersonal level. These reflections have highlighted the importance of active and empathetic communication as a means of bridging ideological gaps and finding common ground within contentious environmental issues.

## Acknowledgements

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