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Students for Climate Action

Welcome to the first annual conference of one of the most exciting student movements in history—the nationwide coalition of high school and college students known as “Students for Climate Action (SCA).” It is February 2009, and governments around the world, including the United States, are beginning to focus on the details of a global climate change treaty to be negotiated in Copenhagen, Denmark later this year. In the last few months, student groups focused on environmental and social justice issues at high schools and colleges across the country have joined forces to make sure the voices of America’s youth are included as government officials create important laws and policies.

So now that you are all together, you have some decisions to make. There are many different student groups in attendance. **Your challenge will be to rank the top three strategies for your Students for Climate Action organization to work on. This will also mean eliminating some strategies — either because you disagree with them or because you decide that these are not priorities.**

Note Taking Assignment (on a separate piece of paper)

Your class’s 1 st priority	Why is this strategy in this position?
Your class’s 2 nd priority	Why is this strategy in this position?
Your class’s 3 rd priority	Why is this strategy in this position?

First Issue: Helping Climate Refugees

- **Should the SCA start a campaign to relocate climate refugees in the United States, with the U.S government responsible for finding homes and/or jobs for climate refugees?**

Arguments: Some in your organization argue that the plight of climate refugees is one of the most urgent issues facing humanity and should be a top priority of your organization. People in island nations like Kiribati and Tuvalu are living proof of the threats posed by climate change. Some of these people have already become the first climate refugees as they are forced to abandon flooded homes and relocate their families to a new country. Students who see this as a priority argue that as the largest emitter per capita of greenhouse gases, the United States needs to accept responsibility for these refugees. The SCA needs to organize to make sure that the U.S. grants these refugees “climate passports” that would give them free entry to the United States and rights for housing and money for a certain period of time. This is a moral obligation, they argue. Others agree that climate refugees is a legitimate moral issue, but because only a

relatively few people on some islands in the Pacific are affected, this should not become a major priority of the SCA. And besides, why should this be the responsibility of the United States? Isn't this a global problem? Shouldn't this be the responsibility of the United Nations? There is more urgent work that our organization should be engaged in.

Second Issue: Lobby Congress

- **Should the SCA focus its energy on lobbying the U.S. Congress to ensure the passage of a responsible and fair climate policy in the next few months? This policy would call for “capping” (putting a definite limit on) greenhouse gases, and investing in non-CO₂-polluting alternative energy, like solar and wind.**

Arguments: The mantra repeated over and over at this conference is: “Now is the time. Now must be the time. 2009 is *the year* of climate change.” If there is any hope of negotiating a global climate change treaty in Copenhagen this year, the work must start here in the halls of the U.S. government. For too long, the U.S. sat on the sidelines, ignoring its responsibility to lead the world in creating real solutions to climate change. But that can change this year. In his inaugural address, Barack Obama said, “To all the other peoples and governments who are watching today . . . know that America is a friend of each nation . . . and we are ready to lead once more.” Many students of the SCA believe that the President will support climate change policy this year that will set an example for the rest of the world. Many of you argue that the SCA can have a huge effect on the type of legislation passed in Washington D.C. While some of you may not even be old enough to vote, you do have the power of numbers—tens of thousands of students willing to storm the halls of Congress. Imagine thousands of students, filling the offices of Congresspersons and Senators in Washington D.C. and in state capitols across the country, week after week until a responsible and fair climate change policy is passed that shows the world that America is serious about dealing with climate change.

Others of you say that this is naïve—that change has never come from Congress, it first comes from the streets. Look at the Civil Rights Movement. The first major struggle was the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott. This was followed by marches, protests, civil disobedience, and arrests. Change does not come from those in Congress, these students argue, it comes from direct action, from thousands of people demonstrating in the streets, not begging Congresspeople for this or that law to be passed. Yes, eventually Congress will vote for change, but only after people have made their lives uncomfortable through demonstrations.

Third Issue: Civil Disobedience

- **Should the SCA plan national days of civil disobedience, in which participating students would non-violently break the law to bring attention to the urgency of climate action?**
 - One example is the March 2009 civil disobedience that was planned by climate activist Bill McKibben and others to trespass on the property of a coal plant in the middle of Washington D.C. The idea was to draw attention to how burning coal contributes tremendously to carbon dioxide pollution, a greenhouse gas.

Arguments: Many SCA members believe that now is the time to increase the pressure on the government to take dramatic action, and say that civil disobedience is the perfect tactic and coal

the perfect target. They are concerned that the U.S. government, including the new Obama administration, isn't acting fast enough or bold enough to reduce carbon emissions. They argue that big energy corporations, like ExxonMobil and the North American Coal Corporation, still have too much power to influence the government, and that things won't change until the people act. One way that the people of the U.S. have exercised their power in the past is through civil disobedience — breaking the law in order to bring attention to a particular injustice. Civil disobedience was most famously practiced during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, by people like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to protest racial injustice. Many students at this conference are calling for widespread civil disobedience to bring attention to the injustice caused by the U.S. government's failure to act quickly to deal with climate change—but especially the injustice caused to your generation, which will bear the largest burden of slow action.

Other SCA members agree that coal is a huge problem and that these issues are urgent, but believe that civil disobedience is exactly the wrong thing to do. Why should we break laws and alienate people all over the country at the very time that more and more people are coming to agree that global warming is a serious problem? They argue that we'll look like a bunch of extremists or crazy people if the police take hundreds, or even thousands of us to jail. And at the very moment that we finally have a president who agrees that climate change is real and needs to be dealt with, why would we choose a strategy of breaking the law? That would be nuts.

Fourth Issue: Education and Outreach

- **Should the SCA focus its energy on education and outreach in schools, churches and other community organizations around the country?**

Arguments: Many SCA members argue that this is the most logical and effective use of our energy: to teach more people about the causes of climate change and the dangers it poses to life on earth. A recent national poll conducted by the respected Pew Research Foundation found that of the twenty issues Americans are most concerned about, global warming comes in dead last—in 20th place. This is shocking. These people obviously don't get the fact that global warming threatens the future of civilization. It demonstrates to many of our members that we need to educate, educate, educate. And who better to teach America the truth than our country's students? If only people understood the dangers, they would act. Other members agree that teaching people about the causes and consequences of climate change is important, but they argue that the best way to teach people is not through schools, churches, or other community organizations, but through direct actions like civil disobedience at coal plants, demonstrations, and physically blocking more coal and oil development. And besides, they point out, all schools care about these days is getting students to pass the tests. We're in a race against time; we have maybe ten years to begin to seriously cut greenhouse gases. If we're going to get the country's attention, we can't adopt a quiet policy of education, they argue; we have to be more like Martin Luther King, Jr. We have to *block* injustice, not just speak out against it.

Fifth Issue: Build coalitions with Climate Action Groups in China and India.

- **Should the SCA work to build coalitions with similar groups in countries like China and India, to bring attention to the need for financial help and green technology in poorer nations?**

Arguments: Climate activists all agree that no matter what climate laws are passed in the U.S., we're all doomed if the world can't convince China and India to participate in a global climate treaty and agree to start cutting their CO₂ emissions. The problem is that both countries are experiencing rapid economic growth—adding millions of new cars, and hundreds of new coal plants to power new homes and other buildings. And while it's easy for people in wealthy countries like the U.S. to argue that China and India should stop building new coal plants, what gives us the right to say that poor people in those countries don't deserve basic amenities like electricity and hot water that the coal plants provide? But there is a solution, and this is where the SCA comes in. Many students argue that we must convince people in the U.S. that it's not only fair, but also in our best interest, to help places like China and India develop in a way that doesn't threaten the climate and the rest of the planet. It will be difficult to convince people in such difficult economic times that the U.S. government should send the necessary amount of money – the Chinese have suggested one percent of the U.S. annual GDP—but it's our job to help them realize that it's the right thing to do.

Others argue that yes, the Chinese and Indians can use our help in these ways, but this can't be our priority. Per person, we in the United States produce *ten times* the amount of CO₂ as people in China or India. *We* are the problem, not the Chinese. Let's not support any plan that looks outside of the borders of the United States. Let's stop our coal plants *here*. Let's stop our automobile pollution *here*. Let's stop consuming so much stuff *here*. Let's not worry about the Chinese and Indians. Let's be model climate citizens in the world and not run around trying to convince other countries to “do good.” The world will follow our lead, if we set a moral and ecological example.

Sixth Issue: Stopping Consumption!

Should the SCA work to stop people from using greenhouse gases by consuming so much “stuff”?

Arguments: When Bill Clinton was president, there was a slogan: “It's the economy, stupid.” The idea was that no matter what people talked about, the most important thing was the economy. These days, you might change this slogan to: “It's your stuff, stupid.” Many in the SCA argue that no matter what actions you take, unless you can get Americans to stop buying so much stuff, all is lost. Everyone talks about recycling. But recycling is not the solution to greenhouse gas production. The solution is to get people to stop buying things that are produced with energy from burning coal, oil, or gas. No one likes to hear this, but the root of the climate crisis is simply that people in the U.S. are buying too many things – cars, flat screen TVs, iPods, computers ... *stuff!* Get Americans to stop buying so much stuff, these SCA members argue, and the world will follow. This should be the main focus of the SCA: *Get people to buy less*. Others argue that this mostly blames the victim. It's not the consumers who produce stuff, it's the corporations. Corporations produce stuff — some stuff that's needed, but most that's not — and then they advertise to consumers to make them feel that they need things to feel satisfied. These people say that if you want to stop greenhouse gases, don't start with the consumers, start with the producers. Limit the amount of greenhouse gases that companies can use and people will have to consume less. They say put a “cap” on greenhouse gas production by big producers. That's the root of the problem, not consumers.

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Your Evaluation of the SCA Conference

1. How do your own personal priorities compare to the group's results? Explain the similarities and differences.
2. Evaluate the group's decision-making process. What worked well? What interfered with the process? Was it fair? Did everyone contribute? Was anyone excluded? Any other observations positive or negative?
3. Based on your answers to questions 1 and 2, will you continue to be supportive of the SCA in the future?
 - a. If yes, why do you think this organization is worth supporting? Why do you support its priorities and decision-making process?
 - b. If no, why do you think this organization is heading in the wrong direction? What's wrong with its priorities and process?

Global Studies

Weiner

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