

GSA Climate Emergency and Technology Committee (CLEAT) Recommendations

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1. Introduction

As you can hear in [the podcast series from the 40th anniversary](#) linked on the German Studies Association (GSA) website, the GSA has seen a remarkable growth over its brief history. Thanks to a small number of dedicated Germanists, the GSA went from an idea in a backyard in Tempe, Arizona in 1976 that launched the “Western Association for German Studies (WAGS)”, to the “German Studies Association” in 1983. Eighty Germanists attended 11 sessions at the first conference, where hotel rooms cost \$28 a night. By the 2000s, the cost of hotel rooms had increased tenfold, and the GSA’s 1500 active members now attend over 300 sessions at the annual conference where scholars come to meet the people whose books they’ve read, to share their work, and find collaborators for intellectual enterprises. The vast majority of GSA members are coming from small programs, attracted to the conference by the opportunity to mingle with peers. Many credit the GSA conference with their academic success. Today, an increasing number of scholars from Europe, South America, and Asia have come to rely on the GSA for their professional networking.

From the beginning, the GSA was committed to interdisciplinary work, to help build a bridge to people in other disciplines with interests in German art and culture, history, politics. Innovation, too, has been an important part of GSA history: inclusion of graduate

students, young scholars, and independent researchers or those from small institutions without graduate programs or others involved in German Studies has been important to the organization from the start. Young people have continuously changed the organization, bringing new topics and entire new areas of research to the organization's agenda.

In short: innovation driven by membership interests is in the GSA's DNA. So it should come as no surprise that the Climate Emergency and Technology committee (CLEAT) was also born out of a membership petition in the summer of 2020. We are very grateful to the GSA leadership for responding so promptly to the petition and for creating this committee, which envisions a bright future for the GSA as it continues to evolve successfully beyond the fossil fuel age.

The Coronavirus pandemic has catapulted the GSA into the digital age and the climate emergency demands that we take this warning seriously. Since there is no vaccine for climate change, our organization must adapt quickly to meet the needs of our time. **With the help of technology and innovative new forms of communication, interaction, and mentorship, we must "future-proof" the organization and combine climate protection and resilience with a more accessible, welcoming culture for a diverse membership, as spelled out in this report.**

The GSA has signed contracts with hotels including and up to 2028. These contracts lower the cost. It would cost tens of thousands of dollars to cancel these contracts, which is why we are recommending that we use the years 2021-2028 until our existing hotel contracts end to re-imagine the GSA, so it can continue to provide the wealth of intellectual engagement that its members cherish while also serving the needs of all - far beyond the fossil fuel age.

In this report we show how this can be achieved.

2. CLEAT urges the GSA to adopt the following *Basic Principles*:

1. The German Studies Association (GSA) acknowledges the urgency of the climate emergency. In the executive summary of the Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5 Degrees Celsius, the (notoriously conservative) Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) calls for "rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society." The GSA and GSA membership will review all aspects of their activity from that standpoint.
2. The GSA recognizes the many ways in which German-speaking peoples, institutions, and traditions have contributed and continue to contribute to

progressive environmental policy, climate awareness, and the transition to renewable energy, while also maintaining critical awareness of the shortcomings in this area including those of German-speaking governments and policies, banks and industries (e.g. the automobile industry) that continue to fall short of urgent climate goals, causing progress to stall while other issues take priority.

3. The GSA embraces the challenge of holistically re-imagining the operations and services of the society as a response to the climate emergency.
4. The GSA is committed to securing and extending equal access to the professional and academic benefits of the GSA to graduate students, postdocs, non-tenured faculty and instructional staff, and others disadvantaged by the effects of the climate emergency and other economic and cultural circumstances.
5. The GSA believes that striving for decarbonization, specifically, and sustainability in general, must go together with maintaining a flourishing and resilient German Studies Association.
6. The GSA recognizes that virtual and hybrid conference models provide greater levels of access to GSA members than conventional conferences where participation can be hindered by lack of institutional support, precarious employment, childcare, eldercare, mobility impairments, visa restrictions, etc.
7. The GSA's plans for rapid and unprecedented change will involve both a phased-in set of changes over the period leading up to 2030 (the IPCC interim deadline for nations to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 45% over 2010 levels), so that contracts can be honored and adapted as required while laying the groundwork for sustainable, carbon-neutral conferences by 2030, and commit to a set of changes focused on the long-term, that is, beginning in 2029.
8. For the reasons above, and until affordable, fully decarbonized travel becomes possible, the annual GSA conference as we now know it must be completely reimagined beyond 2030.
9. The GSA commits to a multidirectional, multimedial infrastructure of communicating scholarship and professional content. This infrastructure does not merely translate the GSA conference from its current state into a virtual format but rather introduces new models of dispersal that brings its members of all ranks together, celebrates knowledge production at different levels (e.g. including community colleges and K-12 educators and students), engages with local communities and stakeholders, and provides new models of networking and mentorship, thereby increasing access.

3. Making the Case for Ending the In-person Conference

Air travel for conference attendance is neither sustainable nor ethical. CO2 emissions from air travel have been rapidly rising, and although air travel is becoming more efficient, it is also rapidly becoming more frequent. In 2019, nearly 3% of global CO2 emissions came from air travel.¹ As a recent article in *Nature* writes, “[t]he sum total of travel associated with attendance at one large academic conference can release as much CO2 as an entire city in a week.”² As Ken Hiltner cites in his guide to nearly carbon-neutral conferences, it is common for some scholars to log over 100,000 miles flying each year.³ To respond to the climate emergency, the GSA must end in-person conferences that require members to travel by air to attend at least until such travel is entirely decarbonized.⁴ The carbon cost of air travel is well documented and programs claiming to recuperate that carbon through carbon offsets have been shown to be [ineffective](#).⁵

Further, in-person conferences impact more than carbon emissions. Members who have child-care or other care-taking duties in a household may be excluded from conferences that require travel. It is important to recognize that these care-taking roles disproportionately, though not exclusively, impact women.

An important additional cost to attending the GSA conference in person is the large financial burden. Especially as the number of tenure-track positions decline, conference attendees will have fewer opportunities to receive financial support from their institution. While the GSA is rightly concerned about seeing reductions in membership and conference fees, conference attendees are required to spend money on countless other items in order to attend the conference in person, including transportation to and from the airport, accommodation, meals, wardrobe, child-care coverage, and more. Conference attendees might indeed still have to pay to register for a virtual conference, but they save money on these additional costs.

Alternatives include holding the annual conference as a virtual conference, which was successfully achieved out of necessity in 2020. Although there is a carbon footprint associated with online meetings as well, it is roughly 1% of the carbon footprint of an in-person conference involving air travel. Costs, which were initially quite high, will likely

¹ <https://www.iea.org/reports/aviation>

² Klöwer, M., Hopkins D., Allen M., & Higham, J. (2020) “An analysis of ways to decarbonize conference travel after COVID-19” *Nature* vol. 583. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-020-02057-2>

³ Ken Hiltner’s extensive guide to nearly carbon-neutral conferences:

<https://hiltner.english.ucsb.edu/index.php/ncnc-guide/#top>

⁴ <https://climateaction.app.swapcard.com/event/transport-transition-summit/planning/UGxhbm5pbmdfNDE1ODkx>

⁵ As climate researcher Kevin Anderson writes in *Nature*: “Offsetting is worse than doing nothing. It is without scientific legitimacy, is dangerously misleading and almost certainly contributes to a net increase in the absolute rate of global emissions growth.”

go down over time, as more technological options become more widely available and normalized. There are considerable side benefits to holding academic conferences virtually (see “4 DEI” and “6 Technology and Communications” portion of this report).

Becoming a climate protective organization that takes the science of climate change seriously and aligns itself with climate justice has to mean that the costs must be distributed fairly. Given that the climate crisis is a generational crisis, with older generations from privileged backgrounds responsible for the bulk of the carbon emissions, while younger generations and vulnerable populations confront the bulk of the consequences, CLEAT proposes that academic organizations like the GSA must model how this dynamic can be reversed. In order for future generations and vulnerable populations to be shielded from the worst effects, those of us who have flown to conferences for decades must stop flying and attend remotely while sponsoring (and mentoring) young scholars in need of building their networks.

By ending the in-person conference, the GSA can lead the way to a more sustainable model of intellectual exchange for organizations of a similar size. Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, concerned scholars have collected extensive resources for hosting successful virtual conferences. The following is a list of websites and links of such resources:

Reducing Air Travel in Academia

- [Flying Less in Academia: A Resource Guide](#)
- [Flying Less: Reducing Academia’s Carbon Footprint](#)
- [No Fly Climate Sci](#)
- [Reducing Academic Flying](#)

Virtual Conferences

- ASLE’s A Nearly Carbon Neutral Virtual Symposium at UCSB
 - <https://www.asle.org/conference/affiliated-symposia/>
 - http://ehc.english.ucsb.edu/?page_id=20002
 - Ken Hiltner’s overview/practical guide:
<https://hiltner.english.ucsb.edu/index.php/ncnc-guide/#ack>
 -
- [Energy Humanities](#)
 - [White Paper on E-Conferences](#) full of great examples and cost

breakdowns

- [ASEH](#) (American Society for Environmental History Graduate Student Caucus)
 - [Twitter presentation guide](#)
- [SCA/SVA Biennial Conference: Distribute 2020](#) (Society for Cultural Anthropology & Society for Visual Anthropology)
- [Moving Ideas without Moving People: University of Alberta E-Conference Guide](#)
- [Virtual Conference: A Guide to Best Practices](#) (ACM--Association for Computing Machinery)
- [Stay Grounded: Virtual Meetings to avoid flights](#)
- [The Oxford Principles for Net Zero Aligned Carbon Offsetting](#)

4. Diversity, Equity and Inclusion & International Participation

One view about climate emergency is that “we’re all in this together,” and this view emphasizes a common fate and common need, accentuating the human species-wide responsibility for urgent solutions. But the reality is that the climate crisis now kills and injures some people, while other people are fortifying their own resources and borders against such effects as best they can. White supremacist environmentalism, for instance, is premised on finding ways to insulate predominantly white societies and people from damage already seen in Black and Brown communities, states, and regions. Environmentalism can become conscripted into racist agendas, as it had been conscripted into Nazi racism in the 1920s and 1930s.

Climate emergency response within the German Studies Association (GSA) can thus not be pursued as a separate matter from diversity, inclusion, equity and anti-racism, and from the work of dismantling white supremacy. The GSA’s Climate Emergency and Technology (CLEAT) committee intends not only to work in collaboration with the GSA’s Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) committee but also to ensure that our committee’s work supports and does not contravene the guidance that our colleagues in the DEI committee share with us.

Since CLEAT is also a technology-oriented committee, we are committed to developing long-term strategies for the GSA that build equitable and generative communication among scholars from the global North and South, taking care that GSA’s platforms for sharing such work do not entail hidden burdens or exorbitant costs for colleagues beyond Central Europe and North America. We cannot wait for our African, Latin American, Asian, and Indigenous colleagues to complain about

exclusionary practices; we must foresee and remove them peremptorily.

We further believe in “strong objectivity” (Harding 1995)⁶, which tells us that no question in German Studies is adequately answered without the evidence and insights that only colleagues who come from historically marginalized or colonized settings can offer. These colleagues will often espouse views on environmental and ecological questions that are not considered self-evident in Germanophone or North American discourses. It is our intention to foreground those views, lest we make the mistake of construing European environmental discourse as the better, more critical, or more ethical kind.

Yet as we heard at the 2019 GSA Membership Meeting from members, travel is not only an environmental question, it is also a labor issue; how we meet determines who we meet at conferences. For many, the costs of in person conferences make them prohibitively expensive.

Fees, hotel bills, and plane tickets can easily amount to more than a month’s rent while reimbursements are often unavailable, partial, or late, pushing stress and debt onto graduate and precariously employed scholars. At the GSA membership meeting, it was also expressed that time is also a scarce resource for scholars with multiple jobs or carework responsibilities, be they childcare, eldercare, partner care or someone else in our families or communities. And it was stated that the presumption that we can all easily physically travel to a North American hub city further excludes many international scholars - especially those from countries subject to the U.S. Muslim ban - as well as scholars with disabilities and non-normative gender presentations. The many pressures of the pandemic stand to worsen this problem in the coming years.

In short, the GSA board’s decision to move entirely online in 2020 is commendable, not only for epidemiological reasons and environmental reasons, but also to be more inclusive of scholars at the margins. Covid-19 presents the opportunity to make significant and permanent environmental and equity gains.

5. Mentoring and Labor

Part of what draws scholars to conferences like the GSA is the opportunity to meet and reconnect with colleagues from across the world. This is especially important for graduate

⁶ Sandra Harding: “Strong Objectivity: A Response to the New Objectivity Question.” In: *Feminism and Science*, Vol. 104, No. 3, Sep., 1995

students who are emerging in the field and learning about lines of inquiry not present in their graduate coursework. To ensure that the GSA continues to offer a space for scholars to connect and learn, CLEAT suggests creating a strong mentorship program within the organization that extends well beyond the conference.

Creating a robust mentoring program within the GSA will allow for sustained meaningful connection between graduate students, emerging scholars, and members of the GSA with more substantial experience in the field. Instead of a brief meeting once a year at a conference, we propose a model that allows meaningful relationships to form and grow over time with monthly meetings that take place online. It is important for graduate students and emerging scholars to establish connections with people outside of their home institution, especially when it comes to navigating the “hidden curriculum” of higher education and the job market. The mentoring partnerships could be facilitated through the networks of the GSA, providing both small-group mentoring and then further connections to the larger group of the network itself. The GSA’s Environmental Studies Network has already created a mentoring program and the co-organizers of the network have pooled together useful resources for mentors and mentees (attached in [Appendix](#)). GSA members who do not yet belong to a network would be paired through a pool of members.

To encourage caring, supportive, and practical mentoring relationships, we also suggest that the GSA create mentoring awards that highlight advisors and mentors who excel in their role and who can provide a model for other partnerships. Graduate students and mentees could nominate their advisor or mentor for such an award and explain what made the advising beneficial. We also encourage promoting the practice of “mentoring up,” in which mentors and advisors learn from their partners about the lived reality of the changing job market and precarity of contingent faculty positions.

Finally, taking into account the success and praise that writing support groups in other organizations have received (Women in German, DDGC), we also suggest creating GSA-sponsored writing groups. Beyond providing support and feedback on various projects, sharing works-in-progress is an important aspect of both mentoring and scholarly development. When younger GSA members see the work of more established colleagues at different stages, it reveals how larger academic projects develop over time and demystifies the processes of reading, writing, and publishing.

In order to support the work it takes to establish and organize mentoring groups, we also suggest that the GSA create a paid position for someone to oversee all mentoring programs.

6. Technology and Communications

Reimagining the GSA in the ways outlined above is possible now, because of technology. The following list of recommendations would bring the GSA fully into the 21st century and enable us to realize many of the proposed changes:

Action Items:

- **GSA website** update: add images; create monthly mailchimp etc. newsletter comparable to MLA (links, images, prizes, CfPs, German Studies news from around the country, etc.); improve blog feature to promote news and provide input year-round. Goal: make GSA a node for information and interesting content beyond the conference
- **On the existing GSA youtube channel**: create topic-specific playlists of members' talks (request mp4s) at GSA conference or from other venues to make content available to community and use for research, teaching, promotion
- **Renew podcast** and move beyond history of GSA: find podcast editor to create content together with guest co-editors (annually) on publications, teaching innovation, current events related to German Studies; this should very much involve grad students
- **Webinars**: NEH style mini-seminars, focusing first on GSA networks (1 webinar for each network), then moving beyond to highlight interdisciplinary relevance of German Studies in connection with other disciplines and topics
- **Digital scholarship**: add page to GSA site linking digital scholarship projects so that variety of scholarship production becomes visible and publicly accessible (public humanities included)
- **Advocacy/public humanities**: collaborative events and media, connecting the GSA with other associations and units, e.g., symposia, workshops, pop-up scholarship/interviews/ in combination with adjacent institutions in politics, education, the arts, science, law, etc. (how do we want the GSA and its members' work to interact with the public? With institutions? With non-profits? With national and international conversations? With specific causes?)
- **Technology AT the GSA conference**: any virtual attendance can be recorded (release forms) and added to youtube
- **Virtual lightning talks**

Scholarly Communication:

- Print + platform template/model for *German Studies*

Review: <https://modernismmodernity.org/> (also at Johns Hopkins)

- GSA website update (samples aplenty, from [MLA](#) to [AHA](#) to [CAA](#) - specs to be discussed, depending on scope and support); pictures, please!
- Update existing Youtube channel (sample design I created for [HCPL project](#))
- Podcast with authors of German Studies/GSA members to discuss books and other media (public humanities)
- Use existing mailing list for monthly newsletter (like [this one](#), or MLA, etc.) with newsletter software (current newsletters are too long, no hypertext, variable information that needs dispersing at different moments in the year)
- Cross-promotion with other German Studies-related units/institutions/organizations (cross-promote events, publications, etc.) using mailing list

Multimodal

- Integrate images, links, video, etc. with any GSA communication
- Book audio recordings (author reads 15-20 min excerpts from books) - spotify or other
- Teachhacks: blog about best-practice teaching ideas
- Digital storytelling
- Blog or other communication outlet specifically for interdisciplinary networks
- Display of and access to Digital Humanities/multimodal scholarship in German Studies (comparable to <http://mediacommons.org/>)
- Host and record virtual unconferences that link German Studies with other units locally (how is German Studies networked/layered/integrated in different institutions?)
- Tips to promote German Studies at different institutions

7. Divestment and Investment of the GSA Endowment

Background on Fossil Fuel Divestment:

Fossil Fuel Divestment is the removal of funds from fossil fuel stocks in order to stop fossil fuel companies from actively preventing the decarbonization of our economy. Harvard University's Naomi Oreske and NASA's Erik Conway's [book *Merchants of Doubt*](#) (2011, turned into a documentary film in 2014) first raised the issue of the outsize and detrimental influence that fossil fuel companies exert on public discourse about climate change, spreading misinformation. Author Bill McKibben's seminal article "[Global Warming's Terrifying New Math](#)," published in *Rolling Stone Magazine* on July 19, 2012, and [350.org](#), the climate organization he co-founded at Middlebury College,

started the fossil fuel divestment movement, which has since been embraced by over 1200 institutions. In just nine years, the fossil fuel divestment movement collected commitments to divest over \$14.56 trillion (see [gofossilfree](#)).

Why divest?

Whereas divestment was initially envisioned as an attempt to withdraw the social license from fossil fuel companies, the speed at which the movement succeeded has changed this viewpoint. Banks and investment managers now agree that divestment is hurting fossil fuel companies financially. More importantly, fossil fuel investments have been underperforming divested portfolios for several years. Given the urgency of climate action, it is highly unlikely that fossil fuels will regain their position as a reliable hedge. A good overview of arguments in support of divestment was recently provided by [this panel discussion “Why Divesting is a Good Investment organized by Divest Princeton”](#) in February of 2021.

In short: Although the GSA only has a small endowment of less than \$1 million, divesting from fossil fuels is not only in line with our principles. It also makes financial sense.

Recommendations for divestment

As part of the organization’s ongoing discussions about endowment growth, CLEAT urges the GSA Executive Board and Finance Committee to transition its endowment funds away from TIAA management and seek out low-carbon investment opportunities in partnership with like-minded organizations within the Responsible Endowments Coalition: https://www.intentionalendowments.org/responsible_endowments_coalition.

TIAA offers only one mixed-asset, low-carbon fund, known as the TIAA Social Choice Low Carbon Equity Fund. [TIAA Low Carbon Equity Fund](#). The company describes this fund as one that “favors companies that demonstrate leadership in managing and mitigating current carbon emissions and have limited exposure to oil, gas and coal (i.e., fossil fuel) reserves.” It has performed reasonably well, achieving a Morningstar Rating of 4/5 stars. However, the fund receives a sustainability score of “C” from Fossil Free Funds ([Fossil Free Funds ratings](#)) due to its relatively high investment in the fossil fuel sector, totaling almost \$21 million (between 3.5 and 5% of its holdings).

Of greatest concern is the fund’s investment in Devon Energy, a leading US-based energy producer that is not aligned with the 2015 Paris Agreement’s goals. According to the climate risk reporting site As You Sow ([As You Sow--Devon Energy](#)), the company is not transparent in its GHG emissions reporting and has a large carbon footprint due to heavy reliance on oil and natural gas to fuel its power plants. As the website states: “The energy

industry is one of the largest contributors to climate change, and Devon's emissions are significant. Devon's future investment choices matter." The TIAA Low Carbon Equity Fund also contains 18 additional holdings in the oil and gas sector as well as 5 more in fossil-fired utilities. While the fund's overall exposure to the oil, gas, energy, and utility industries is low, CLEAT affirms As You Sow's formulation as a guiding principle for future investment: "Every dollar invested in fossil fuel resources that are not aligned with Paris goals increases risk to the economy and investor portfolios."

Banking:

CLEAT applauds the GSA for responding decisively to a preliminary list of requests and ending our relationship with Chase Bank this past summer. Given JP Morgan Chase's position as the #1 funder of fossil fuel projects (see [Rainforest Action Network Report](#)), banking with Chase is incompatible with our values and principles. CLEAT recommends that the Finance Committee explore moving all GSA funds into zero carbon banks. For possible resources: <https://stopthemoneypipeline.com/move-your-money/>.

Literature:

<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/07/190711114846.htm>

8. Interim Actions to be Taken at the GSA Conference

While we are locked into our contracts we should do all we can to reduce our carbon footprint at the conference. These actions could include the following:

- incentivize rail and bus travel over air travel and personal cars;
- provide an online tool for GSA members to organize carpooling and ridesharing to/from the conference;
- work closely with the hotel catering service to reduce food waste;
- reduce significantly meat and dairy at the conference banquets;
- get rid of plastic folders and plastic lanyards;
- use reusable lanyards;
- ban plastic bottles, straws, bags, etc.;
- provide paper programs only on demand (encourage use of virtual programs);
- advocate for fair labor and sustainable practices with our partner hotels, restaurants, caterers etc.; and
- encourage research on the climate emergency among GSA members.

9. Taking the Principles Beyond the Conference

GSA members have always brought their inspiration back to their campuses. To inform their own thinking and writing, their undergraduate and graduate teaching, their research, their cooperation with colleagues on joint publications, and their advocacy for German Studies with university administrators, parents, alumni, and funders.

The current moment will be no different. As we embrace changes that will ensure our long term survival as an organization and positive impact for our profession, we must do all we can to translate these changes at our home institutions as well: As members of the GSA we are its ambassadors on our own campuses and in our region. That is where we can also use the principles and goals articulated in this report and further its mission.

We can do the following:

- talk about the principles and goals and how they influence our work
- interrogate our own teaching and research in light of these principles
- integrate them into our learning objectives, our outreach efforts, our undergraduate program requirements, our departmental gatherings, our committees, our service work in our institution
- feel empowered to articulate them clearly in conversations with colleagues, administrators, funders, partner organizations, alumni etc.
- require funders to change their funding criteria to prioritize climate protection, for example by offering more support towards costs such as childcare or remote conferencing and less towards flights and long distance travel
- articulate the principles and values statement visibly on our websites/ in our social media accounts.

10. Executive Recommendations

CLEAT recommends that the GSA do the following:

1. Approve the proposed “Basic Principles” (section 2)
2. Do not sign any further hotel contract beyond 2028
3. End the in-person conference (section 3)
4. Understand climate emergency under the broader critical lens of anti-racism, decolonization, and diversity, rather than as a separate thematic imperative. Assess GSA’s climate-related operational decisions from the perspective of marginalized, racialized, and Indigenous colleagues first
5. Develop long-term strategies that build equitable and generative communication

among scholars from the global North and South

6. Invest in communications technology (section 6) to allow for year-round networking activities
7. Implement new initiatives in communications as outlined under 6. above
8. Create a mentorship program and mentoring awards (section 5)
9. Create GSA-sponsored writing groups
10. Divest GSA from fossil fuels: Transition its endowment funds away from TIAA management and seek out low-carbon investment opportunities
11. Move all GSA funds into zero carbon banks.
12. Decarbonize the in-person aspects of upcoming GSA conferences