

Documents reveal the vast influence of Koch brothers in US universities and public schools

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Last month, the George Mason University protest group “UnKoch My Campus” released documents to the public through a Freedom of Information Act request detailing how the Charles Koch Foundation and the Federalist Society, groups dedicated to the promotion of ultra-conservative “free market” public policy and ideas, maintain control over the appointment of law school and economics professors at the college, a public university in northern Virginia, as part of a nationwide campaign to promote ultra-right politics.

The ideological activities of Charles and David Koch, with a combined net worth of \$96.6 billion, extend to universities, colleges and even high schools. Taking advantage of the deficits caused by the decades-long bipartisan assault on public funding for both K-12 and university education, groups like the Koch brothers, the Walton Family Foundation and the Gates Foundation use their grotesque wealth, squeezed from the working class, in an attempt to inculcate young people with libertarian and other right-wing, pro-capitalist ideologies.

In 2016, George Mason University (GMU) received the largest donation in its history, a \$30 million gift to its law school. \$10 million came from the Koch Foundation and \$20 million from the BH Fund, whose president is Leonard Leo, executive vice president of the Federalist Society. The BH Fund’s secretary and treasurer is Jonathan Bunch, vice president and director of external relations at the Federalist Society, a right-wing organization that lobbies for the appointment of ultra-right judges.

Leo played an instrumental role in getting Federalist Society member and far-right Justice Neil Gorsuch a seat on the US Supreme Court in early 2017, suggesting nominees to the Trump administration and meeting personally with the president. Top donors to the society include Koch Industries, David Koch, and the Charles Koch Foundation. Through the BH Fund, the Federalist Society is intimately involved in faculty hiring, gaining admittance for prospective right-wing law students, and suggesting law graduates to clerk for right-wing judges.

Numerous emails between the Federalist Society’s Leo and GMU law school dean Henry Butler show that the society played a role in hiring new professors. In October 2015, for example, Leo emailed Butler about a potential adjunct professor. A few minutes later, Butler replied, “We’re on it.” Other hiring suggestions from Leo came in May 2016 and November 2016.

The released documents also reveal that GMU officials, including University President Ángel Cabrera, law school dean

Butler, and University Provost S. David Wu misled faculty about the nature of the Koch brothers/Federalist Society gift. Shortly after the law school donation was made, Butler circulated a memo to law school faculty claiming that “there are no conditions tied to this gift other than creating scholarship programs.” On April 6, 2016, at a faculty senate meeting, Wu similarly stated that the donation came with “no strings attached, and the scholarship decisions are made by GMU. The entire \$30M is for scholarships for students and nothing else.”

On April 27, just days before the release of the documents by “UnKoch My Campus,” Cabrera claimed, absurdly: “[s]ince I arrived at Mason in 2012, I have made it a priority to have all gift agreements clearly uphold our commitment to academic independence. As I have stated before, gifts may be earmarked for programs, scholarships or faculty support, but donors may not determine what is taught, what student is funded, or what professor is hired. If these terms are not acceptable to donors, the gifts are kindly declined.”

The direct influence on hiring of professors by right-wing forces is even more explicit on GMU’s undergraduate campus. From 2003 to 2011, a number of agreements for hiring professors were entered into with the university that allow donors to determine who is selected for the jobs. In a 2007 agreement, for example, the Koch Foundation, along with another donor, each provided \$1.25 million to fund a professorship in the economics department. The agreement provided for a five-member selection committee which would determine, by majority vote, who to hire. Two of the five members of the committee were determined by the donors.

Additionally, donors for the professorships also potentially had a direct role in determining whether professors hired through these agreements could keep their jobs, pending a specially-appointed advisory board’s “determination (based on the individual’s performance or otherwise) that the professor filling the Professorship is no longer qualified” to remain at the university.

Cabrera acknowledged that the “gift agreements ... raise questions concerning donor influence in academic matters ... [T]hese agreements fall short of the standards of academic independence I expect any gift to meet.” He also conceded that the agreements granted “donors some participation in faculty selection and evaluation.”

In the wake of the revelations, the GMU faculty senate passed a motion calling for the release of donor agreements for public review within 30 days of formal enactment. Bethany Letiecq, a

faculty senator, told reporters “We want all gift agreements to be made public so we can discern the full extent of the academic violations that have been occurring here ... It’s now abundantly clear that the administration of Mason, in partnership with the Mercatus Center and private donors, violated principles of academic freedom, academic control and ceded faculty governance to private donors.”

Letiecq was also justifiably bothered by the potential power exerted by donors over hiring and firing of professors, stating, “These are all gross violations of academic freedom. Faculty hiring and faculty retention are not the business of donors, in any way, shape or form.”

Koch brothers influence at George Mason extends far beyond the financial backing, hiring and firing of professors. According to the *Fairfax County Times*, the Koch Foundation has donated over \$95 million to the University since 2005. The Kochs provided millions of dollars to GMU in the mid-1980s to set up what is now known as the Mercatus Center (Mercatus means market in Latin), which plays a large role in setting Congressional legislative policy. Over the years, at least \$30 million of the Kochs’ donations have gone directly to this Center. Charles Koch and several Koch Industries associates sit on the Center’s Board of Directors.

The Koch brothers influence does not stop at George Mason. Over the past few decades, the Charles Koch Foundation has given over \$200 million to hundreds of US colleges and universities, usually targeted at economics departments. In 2012, the Kochs spread more than \$12.7 million among 163 colleges and universities. A year later, their foundations spent another \$19.3 million, spread across 210 college campuses in 46 states and the District of Columbia. In 2014, the Koch Foundation donated \$25 million to the United Negro College Fund.

In addition to GMU, the Koch brothers exert substantial control over the economics department at Florida State University (FSU), giving millions to the department since at least 2007.

In a November 2007 memorandum, revealed through a prior FOIA request, Bruce Benson, then-FSU’s economics department chairman, explained to fellow economics department faculty that the Koch brothers would not just “give us money to hire anyone we want and fund any graduate student that we choose. There are constraints.” He added, “Koch cannot tell a university who to hire, *but they are going to try to make sure, through contractual terms and monitoring, that people hired are [to] be consistent with ‘donor Intent.’...We cannot expect them to be willing to give us free rein to hire anyone we might want...If we are not willing to hire [libertarian economics] faculty, they are not willing to fund us*” (emphasis added).

In Arizona, twenty percent of new funding for universities will go to two Koch-backed “economic freedom” schools (at Arizona State University and the University of Arizona). While providing millions to fund Koch brothers’ initiatives, the state government has slashed K-12 school funding by more than \$1 billion since 2008, with the state currently ranking 48th in per-pupil spending. In April, educators went on strike throughout Arizona to oppose such conditions.

The Koch brothers’ influence also extends to the high school level. Charles Koch funded EDvantage, an online curriculum for

high school teachers that criticizes government spending and promotes so-called free market economic principles. EDvantage provides economic “lessons,” including explaining why the Environmental Protection Agency is bad for the environment; why sweatshops are good for third-world workers; and how the minimum wage leads to unemployment.

Another Koch brothers’ venture into the mis-education of youth is the “Youth Entrepreneurs” (YE) program. As with EDvantage, YE’s curriculum promotes libertarian notions, such as the conception that the minimum wage hurts workers and slows economic growth; that public assistance harms the poor; while fostering such ruling class ideas as low corporate taxes and little government regulation.

The goal of the YE program, according to publicly available emails from a Google group set up by high school students who were part of a 2009 pilot program, is to turn young people into “liberty-advancing agents” while inoculating students against left-wing ideas by assigning them to read passages from free-market economists like Friedrich Hayek. “We hope to develop students’ appreciation of liberty by improving free-market education,” the Koch associates wrote during the program’s initial planning stages. “Ultimately, we hope this will change the behavior of students who will apply these principles later on in life.”

The YE program is now in schools in Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, Texas, Arizona, California, Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, Georgia, Kentucky, and North Carolina. The program will begin in Montana next school year.

The Koch brothers’ growing influence over education is a byproduct of the deliberate and conscious defunding of public education by the Democratic and Republican parties over the last few decades. With growing inequality comes the increasing dominance of the wealthy over all aspects of social life, including the funding of education. As the example of the Koch brothers shows, the ruling class is using its ill-gotten wealth to promote in high school and university students the bankrupt ideas that have led to the unending crises of the capitalist system.



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