

Professors to Koch Brothers: Take Your Green Back

By Donald L. Luskin

Times are tough for state-funded colleges like Florida State University. After four years of budget trimming, FSU now faces an additional \$19 million in cuts and a \$40 million deficit. So it's an inopportune moment to raise a stink over private donations of \$1.5 million made three years ago.

But that's just what two FSU professors—Ray Bellamy of the College of Medicine and Kent Miller, professor emeritus of psychology—did earlier this month in an op-ed in the Tallahassee Democrat, arguing that the donations are "seriously damaging to academic freedom." The piece set off a firestorm of warring newspaper editorials, blog posts and online petitions.

What's the beef? Like many large private gifts, the \$1.5 million to FSU was given to endow programs in a designated subject specified by the donors. The professors' problem in this case is the subject, the strings attached, and, most important, who the donors are.

The subject being endowed, as described by the two protesting professors, is the "political ideology of free markets and diminished government regulation." That's an inflammatory way to describe a program which, according to its founding documents, is to study "the foundations of prosperity, social progress, and human well-being." Such a program would seem to fit right into its home at FSU's Stavros Center for the Advancement of Free Enterprise and Economic Education, which was founded in 1988.

Then there's the donors. One of the donors, according to the two professors, is known for his "efforts to influence public policy, elections, taxes, environmental issues, unions, regulations, etc."

Whom might they be referring to? Certainly not George Soros—there's never an objection to that billionaire's donations, which always tend toward the political left. No, it's Charles and David Koch, owners of Koch Industries. With revenue estimated at about \$100 billion, the energy and chemicals conglomerate is America's second-largest privately held company. The Koch brothers tend to give to right-leaning and libertarian causes. Koch money was instrumental, for example, in founding the Cato Institute and the Libertarian Party.

As for the strings attached, there's really only one of any substance. An advisory board, selected by the Koch brothers' charitable foundation in consultation with the FSU economics department, reviews and approves professors chosen for the program before funding is released.

A story two weeks ago in the St. Petersburg Times claimed that "Koch rejected nearly 60 percent of the faculty's suggestions" in the first round of hiring in 2009. But according to FSU President Eric Barron in a subsequent op-ed for the same newspaper, what really happened was that the board—two of whose three members are themselves FSU faculty—approved for further interviews

16 out of 50 faculty suggestions, which had been culled by faculty from 500 applicants. Neither of the two professors ultimately hired was from among the 16, and the board was fine with that.

But the left won't be satisfied as long as the Kochs are involved. An editorial in last weeks' St. Petersburg Times called FSU "For Sale University." Progress Florida, a leftist online organizing group opposing the Koch-funded program, is pushing a petition claiming that FSU has agreed to "sell off the hiring decisions of the university's economics department to a radical ideologue." The ultimate aim, according to Progress Florida? To turn it into an "incubator for extremist propaganda."

Good academic results won't change their minds. The two professors who started all this complained in their op-ed that "George Mason University received over \$23 million from Koch brothers foundations to hire seven libertarian professors," as though "libertarian" were a term of opprobrium. David Rasmussen, dean of FSU's College of Social Sciences, in a letter to the Tallahassee Democrat, countered that "these 'libertarian' professors are among the nation's leading experimental economists. The research group's leader, Professor Vernon Smith, was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics while at George Mason."

No matter. Succumbing to the pressure from organizations like Progress Florida with their petition to "Stop the Koch Brothers," FSU President Barron announced this week that the Koch gift would be reviewed. He also said that processes would be put in place to allow faculty to vet gifts that might impinge on academic freedom.

The issue at FSU isn't that the university has bargained away its academic freedom. The problem is that FSU has exercised its academic freedom in a way that the political left disapproves of. As Mr. Rasmussen put it to the St. Petersburg Times: "If somebody says, 'We're willing to help support your students and faculty by giving you money, but we'd like you to read this book,' that doesn't strike me as a big sin. What is a big sin is saying that certain ideas cannot be discussed."

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