

Regional

When higher education gets put up for sale

The Renaissance took place, among other reasons, because a number of wealthy patrons, such as the Medicis, bankrolled artists like Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Donatello. Thanks to their generosity we all enjoy many of the benefits of western civilization.

Since its inception, higher education in this country has also benefited from philanthropy. From the time of the great industrial expansion in the U.S. in the last part of the 19th century, great industrialists such as Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller fully funded universities named after them. Many others have also had their names associated with particular schools, professorships, or buildings. The intent of those donors was – for the most part – to support higher education without imposing a particular ideological slant.

However, in recent years, we have seen a new wave of funding in higher education where the motives seem to be much more ideological while attempting to exert a direct influence on the day-to-day operations of those institutions.

After the famous picture accompanying this article became widely publicized worldwide, alarmed conservatives such as John Olin, a multimillionaire and a former trustee of his alma mater, Cornell University, directed his foundation to act aggressively at Ivy League schools to promote conservative ideas on their campuses. His basic strategy – soon mimicked by other conservative donors – was to fund a conservative movement on campuses by supporting scholars with a conservative ideology and by creating conservative “beachheads” at those institutions.

The expectation was that a number of programs would be created in those institutions that would counter the movement of ethnic- or environmental-based ones seen as portraying “liberal” ideals, even Marxist ones. The programs would not be named specifically after a particular person or creed that could unmask their real ideological aim. As detailed by Jane Mayer in her recent book “Dark Money,” most of these “beachheads” were established at law and economics schools, such as those at Harvard, Yale, The University of Chicago, Columbia, Cornell, Georgetown and the University of Virginia. And their strategy worked. As they expected, many of the graduates from these programs went on to occupy positions in academia and in government furthering conservative ideals.

Since the 1980s the conservative movement

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

started a much more aggressive approach by funding programs and institutes on campuses. They became bolder in their aims, going as far as supporting ideas such as that slavery was actually consensual, that the real slavery was created by unions, that the doctrine of supply-side tax cuts for the rich was beneficial for the economy and that taxes were actually “theft” to support “immoral” welfare. George Mason University, in Fairfax, Va., (which just renamed its law school after the late Justice Antonin Scalia) became a hotbed for those ideas. Many of the initiatives supporting such ideas were funded directly or indirectly by the Koch brothers and other conservative advocates.

Of course, the more money conservative donors have poured into these institutions, the more control they have exerted over them. In some cases these donors go so far as to dictate the content of courses, no matter how unsubstantiated some of the information they want passed on to students is. They are also having a direct input on faculty hires. Needless to say this has created a very bad environment in academia because many, particularly faculty, feel that the names of their institutions and their mission to educate students in an open and transparent manner is being betrayed.

This funding has flouted the principles that have been in place to ensure freedom of thought and innovation since universities were founded in medieval Europe. One such principle is that faculty decide on matters of curriculum and in the selection of who will be hired as their colleagues. It is true that this system does not always work as it should. After all, we are all humans and make mistakes, but the problem that we are facing now is that the system is being subverted by money backing ideological agendas.

Historically nobody saw anything wrong with naming professorships, endowed chairs, even a whole school after a major donor. Most institutions of higher education have specific policies that require a minimum donation for naming rights, as well an understanding that the academic freedom of choosing the person for the named position, as well as what is taught, is up to the



Pulitzer Prize for News Photography 1970

Associated Press

This picture ignited the the conservative movement to establish beachheads in academia. On April 19, 1969, members of the Afro-American Society (AAS) occupied Willard Straight Hall at Cornell University to protest perceived racism and a poor black studies program. The photo of the students marching out of the Straight Hall carrying rifles and shotguns and wearing bandoliers made the national news and won a Pulitzer Prize for AP photographer Steve Starr.

college or university, not the donor.

In many ways the violations of these principles have been the result of the thirst for money and prestige by administrators who feel compelled to take cash from dubious sources. By doing so they can claim they are responding to the financial needs of the institution while touting their fundraising abilities.

The problem here is a lack of integrity. Institutions of higher education are supposed to be teaching ethics and moral principles besides the contents of subjects, not providing their own bad examples. But the issue is not just an ethical one, but also a

practical one. Universities that sell their parts for a little bit of money are risking that supporting certain ideas, such as tax cuts for the rich, will in turn result in misguided public policies that will hurt those same institutions, including fewer tax dollars to support their endeavors.

It also means losing one of the main tools they have to attract good students and faculty: prestige.

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