

Maxwell: Intimidation from the right

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I always have been troubled that instead of public policy being generated at our public universities, too much policy is created and controlled by powerful think tanks, organizations in which well-paid experts give advice and ideas on specific economic and political issues. They are funded mainly by large businesses and major foundations and they provide customized agendas and playbooks for elected officials and others who influence public policy.

With the rise of conservatism, our universities increasingly are being weakened in their role as leaders in solving the nation's most pressing problems. Universities, with professors out front, best serve taxpayers by helping government establish equitable, sensible public policies and by assisting in improving quality of life in general. Professors' primary job was never to create ideologically expedient studies and talking points that serve special interests and politicians on either side of the aisle.

Professors must be free to disseminate their research and observations without fear of reprisals from elected officials and others. But if recent efforts by conservative think tanks and other Republican-affiliated groups in Michigan and Wisconsin to obtain the e-mails of public university professors they find objectionable turn into a national trend, "academic freedom" will be eroded even more.

In Michigan, the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a free-market-oriented think tank, has used the Freedom of Information Act to request the e-mails of professors at three of the state's largest public universities. Likewise, the Republican Party of Wisconsin is insisting on obtaining the e-mails of a prominent scholar at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, the state's flagship university.

The Wisconsin FOIA request is of special concern. As Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker advanced his campaign to limit collective bargaining rights by state employees, including university professors, William Cronon, the Frederick Jackson Turner and Vilas Research Professor of History, Geography and Environmental Studies, took issue. In his blog and most notably in a New York Times op-ed, he challenged the wisdom of what he referred to as "Walker's assault on collective bargaining rights." In his blog post, Cronon said that

Wisconsin's labor politics are not homegrown but are the product of organized out-of-state forces bankrolled by conservatives.

"The most important group, I'm pretty sure, is the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), which was founded in 1973," he wrote. "Its goal for the past 40 years has been to draft 'model bills' that conservative legislators can introduce in the 50 states. Its website claims that in each legislative cycle, its members introduce 1,000 pieces of legislation based on its work, and claims that roughly 18 percent of these bills are enacted into law. (Among them was the controversial 2010 anti-immigrant law in Arizona.)

"ALEC is an organization that has been doing very important political work in the United States for the past 40 years with remarkably little public or journalistic scrutiny. I'm posting this long note in the conviction that it's time to start paying more attention. History is being made here, and future historians need people today to assemble the documents they'll eventually need to write this story. Much more important, citizens today may wish to access these same documents to be well informed about important political decisions being made in our own time during the frequent meetings that ALEC organizes between Republican legislators and representatives of many of the wealthiest corporations in the United States."

Republicans struck back. Many professors and most legal scholars say that Wisconsin's GOP and the think tanks have a right to request Cronon's e-mails through FOIA. I agree. The problem is that the reason given for the requests -- protecting the interests of taxpayers -- is disingenuous at best. Clearly, the aim of conservatives, with ammunition provided by their favored think tanks, is to muzzle professors.

Administrators at Wisconsin-Madison did right by agreeing to comply with the FOIA request. But Carolyn A. Martin, the chancellor, offered a caveat for Republicans:

"Academic freedom is one of the university's greatest contributions to a democratic society. No other institution is charged specifically with protecting the pursuit of knowledge, wherever it may lead. Individual faculty, staff and students inevitably consider and advocate positions that will be at odds with one another's views and the views of people outside of the university. It is the university's responsibility both to comply with state law and to protect our community's right to explore freely and freely express their points of view."

Now we turn to Florida, where the GOP rules, where Gov. Rick Scott has shunned the universities and has turned to conservative think tanks for advice and policies. According to a St. Petersburg Times article, Scott has aligned himself most notably with the Cato Institute, Reason Foundation and Heritage Foundation.

How long, then, will it be before Scott and his think tank advisers start going after the e-mails of Florida professors with whom they disagree?

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