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Some thoughts on academics, politics and 'hire' education

By **TBO.com**

If I were a conspiracy theorist, I'd probably be thinking there is no end to the Libertarian, tea party incursion in Tallahassee. Now we have learned that the billionaire Koch brothers are behind the funding of some economics department positions at Florida State University. What's next? Rick Scott as an adjunct prof? Is there no governor on ideological encroachment?

But the Koch compact is surely a coincidence, even if one Koch brother, Charles, co-founded the conservative Cato Institute, and the other brother, David, started the Americans for Prosperity Foundation, which is quite simpatico with the tea party movement. It's surely a coincidence that Florida Gov. Scott is an ardent tea totaler whose ideology includes Cato Institute talking points.

But, seriously, it's no coincidence that the Brothers Koch are represented on a college campus. It's part of what they do with their money, estimated at more than \$40 billion. They are staunchly anti-regulation free-enterprisers and look at academic departments — at universities known to be receptive to a diversity of economic views — as opportunities to advance their agendas.

And keep in mind, most universities define diversity in terms of their student bodies, not in terms of their faculties. Aside from Liberty University, Bob Jones University and the military academies, there aren't many institutions of higher education with ideologically diverse faculties. Fostering free-market principles is the Koch cause.

Several other points.

- The Koch-FSU deal was consummated in 2008. The conservative-driven, GOP election tsunami of 2010 was still two years away. It was mid-reign of Gov. Charlie Crist, an ideological virgin. So much for conspiracy.
- It's their money. The Kochs care passionately about unfettered free enterprise. To that end, the Charles G. Koch Charitable Foundation funnels grants — some a lot more than others — to more than 100 universities across the country. It includes the underwriting of the Mercatus Center at Virginia's George Mason University, where faculty focus on "how institutions affect the freedom to prosper."
- It's FSU's call. While there are those in Tallahassee who actually turn down donor money, cash-strapped

public universities — as opposed to cash-strapped states — don't have that luxury. In this case, FSU gets \$1.5 million — over six years — for economics department positions that promote "political economy and free enterprise." Then it's up to the university and the donor to hash out the details.

- Speaking of FSU's call, the Koch deal candidly smacks of a sell-out. Whereas most donors, no matter how prestigious and how appreciated and how generous, are limited in influence, Koch is accorded virtual veto power for its \$250,000 per year.

Too little money for too much input. A classic lose-lose.

As for those donor details, they include a Koch-appointed advisory committee that, in effect, vets candidate applicants. Moreover, Koch can opt out if it doesn't like the results, or if those hired don't pass muster with Koch's annual evaluations. Suffice it to say, not everyone agrees that the deal is compatible with viable definitions of academic freedom and university credibility.

- Not surprisingly, among those fervently defending the Koch-skewed relationship is Bruce Benson, who chairs FSU's economics department and sends annual progress reports to Koch. He's also an ardent free-marketer. He's satisfied, he says, with his department's resultant diversity spike and additional course options for students.

"I agree with what they believe," explains Benson, "whether they give us money or not."

Chances are, the Kochs didn't have to sign off on that comment.

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