



Organizing against Koch influence on college campuses

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Charles and David Koch, the billionaire brothers behind the Kansas-based Koch Industries oil and chemical conglomerate, are not the only wealthy donors to fund colleges and universities to further their own ends. But they have uniquely leveraged their astronomical wealth to use the higher education system to push their conservative anti-regulatory agenda.

Between 2005 and 2014 alone, the Charles Koch Foundation and three other Koch-associated groups gave over \$100 million to 366 colleges and universities nationwide, with most of that going to schools in Southern states, as Facing South has reported. Much of that money has been used to fund academic programs and centers that operate with little oversight compared to other campus programs.

But in 2013, students at schools including George Mason University (GMU) in Fairfax, Virginia — the top university recipient of Koch money — joined together to found the advocacy group UnKoch My Campus to address the undue influence of big money in academia.

Facing South recently spoke with Samantha Parsons, who co-founded UnKoch My Campus when she was a student at GMU and currently serves as the group's campaigns director. She explains how students, faculty, and community members nationwide are joining forces to build power, promote transparency, and limit corporate influence at the university level.

Tell me about your background and how you became involved with UnKoch My Campus.

I attended George Mason University from 2012 to 2016 and while in a student organization — the Environmental Action Group — I learned about who the Koch brothers were and learned from a faculty advisor of the university's relationship with the Charles Koch Foundation.

As we were discussing that in the student organization, our advisor told us about how the year prior, in 2011, the faculty senate at GMU had opened an investigation into GMU's relationship with private donors sparked by concerns that were raised at Florida State University. Faculty there had exposed their gift agreement with the Charles Koch Foundation and were able to reveal that the university gave the Kochs influence over hiring, curriculum, and research in exchange for that funding.

Knowing that GMU had received way more money than FSU ever had, these faculty members opened this investigation. The university refused to work with them and refused to give the gift agreement to the faculty senate to review to make sure there wasn't a conflict of interest.

As the faculty member was telling us this story, a friend of mine in the student organization — an economics major (the program at GMU is primarily funded by Koch) — told us about how he was taking environmental economics that semester. His professor, who was Koch-funded, was using a textbook called "Global Warming and Other Eco Myths" and had told students that if they wanted to debate climate change they could leave and not come back.

Those two moments were really powerful for me and inspired me as well as the other students in the organization to do more digging to understand why the Koch brothers are so active on our campus. We were not in Kansas where they are from, we did not have a big oil or fossil-fuel engineering-focused department. We were just really trying to understand what that relationship looked like.

We started a campaign on campus for transparency on those gift agreements. From there, we got connected to other students at Florida State University and the University of Kansas who were doing the same investigation. That was ultimately the birthing story of UnKoch My Campus. With the support of Lindsey Berger, UnKoch's first executive director, we founded UnKoch through those initial student efforts.

What have you learned in recent years about the influence of Koch brothers all across the country, and specifically in the South?

The Kochs have funded over 400 universities across the country, including over 170 in the South alone. They set up university programs all across the country.

We see a trend where the Koch Foundation will go to a campus and give a small amount of funding — perhaps for a lecture series — where they will bring in guest speakers to talk about the free market or the big program they fund on the concept of Western civilization, which is oftentimes paired with political science departments or philosophy departments and is focused on what it sounds like: studying the contributions of Europeans and primarily the contributions of white folks and Christian folks.

They'll start with a lecture series and, if it goes well, they'll give a bit more money to fund an endowed professorship. The intention behind the fellowship is to fund someone with an interest in free-market economics. If that goes well, they might give that professor a large gift to produce a center on campus. That is what I have been following most closely — the role of these centers that they are developing on campuses. We have been able to prove that these centers operate outside of the regular oversight mechanism of your average department or university program. That is how they are able to influence who's getting hired and what's being produced through those centers. The centers are not always monitored or provided the oversight that your regular department would be, but then they'll hire professors through those centers who will teach within the regular department.

George Mason has definitely been the university that has received the most Koch funding. Since 2005, the Charles Koch Foundation has donated over \$129 million to GMU, over half of all of the foundation's giving to all 489 schools they've donated to combined. Koch funding has supported GMU's economics department, law school, and two affiliate think tanks: the Mercatus Center and the Institute for Humane Studies, which provides the much-needed talent pipeline of professors, researchers, and politicians who staff Koch's state and national networks. The

Mercatus Center, a free-market think tank, then produces the research those networks rely upon to achieve their political objectives across the country.

In February 2017, GMU students filed a lawsuit against the university and its fundraising foundation to obtain access to Koch gift agreements. Today, the students are awaiting a decision as to whether that lawsuit, which they lost at the local level, will be heard by the Virginia Supreme Court. In the past year, student and faculty activism has helped expose the fact that GMU provided the Koch Foundation influence over the hiring of faculty within their economics department, which was covered by the New York Times. The Washington Post's editorial board even came out in support of greater transparency over private donations at GMU.

By attending the Association of Private Enterprise Education annual conference in 2017, UnKoch My Campus was able to record Professor George Crowley of Troy University (in Troy, Alabama) bragging about many aspects of their Koch center. This included references to how the center was able to take over several departments and ram through curricular changes. It also included a story about how their political fights in the state included an effort to take down the state pension system of Alabama.

Not long after the conference, UnKoch was contacted by the Professional Firefighters of Alabama, a network of 45,000 public employees, who were running a campaign to save the state retirement system. The firefighters were able to use UnKoch's recordings to coordinate grassroots resistance to Troy's Koch-funded center and their attack on their state pensions. Crowley was removed as chair of Troy's Department of Economics and administrators proceeded to censure the center with the intention of reshaping its mission statement. This appears to have destabilized the pension reform efforts in the state, with the number of lobbyists pushing pension reform on behalf of these interests dropping from 20 in 2016 to zero in 2017.

Some of the most egregious evidence of the Koch network's anti-democratic agenda comes from their involvement at Southern universities. But, as history has shown us, some of the most successful, determined resistance to attacks on democracy has also come from those campuses in the South.

The Charles Koch Foundation funds a Philosophy, Politics, and Economics program in North Carolina, known as PPE. Nationally, the PPE is part of the seven-campus F.A. Hayek Program run by the Mercatus Center at George Mason University, of which Charles Koch remains a founding director. In North Carolina, the PPE program is an inter-university certificate program with UNC Chapel Hill founded in 2005. The program is a donor-created minor at UNC, and a certificate program at Duke. Michael Munger is the director of the undergraduate political science program at Duke University, and the director of Duke's PPE program.

A textbook used for PPE courses, "Philosophy, Politics, and Economics: An Anthology," was written in 2015 by four NC PPE faculty; Munger (Duke), Jonathan Anomaly (a former Duke professor who recently started a PPE program at the University of San Diego), Geoffrey Brennan (UNC/Duke), and Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (UNC). It includes essays against voting by Brennan and Sayre-McCord, as well as essays by anti-democracy theorists like Jason Brennan and David D. Friedman. Anomaly served as core PPE faculty at Duke and UNC between 2010 and 2017 before leaving for the University of Arizona. His publications promote what he calls the "truth and explanatory power" of eugenics research. His "Defending Eugenics" is a provocative

attempt to describe a positive eugenics, which portrays the eugenics movement as a well-founded discipline led by prominent scholars.

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I understand the Koch brothers are now attempting to influence grade schools even more. Can you tell us about that?

We are interested in pursuing their interest in K-12 because at their most recent donors' summit at the end of 2018 they announced that they would be focusing and putting more of their energy behind K-12 education. Obviously, that sparked our interest mostly because they have historically been a funder and proponent of charter schools and the privatization of K-12 education.

To me, the charter school movement and what we are seeing with these university centers and donors having influence in universities is very similar because the whole goal is to privatize education. If they're able to establish these centers that aren't being monitored or aren't held to the same standards as your average academic department or research program, then it becomes run by the private donors. There just seems to be some obvious parallels and overlaps to those agendas.

The University of Arizona also has a Koch-funded center that has turned into a new department. The executive director of the department which now houses the center recently published a textbook and has partnered with different school districts in Arizona to create a dual enrollment high school class. That's another interesting layer to what we are seeing develop with their K-12 strategy: They are proponents of charter schools and completely privatizing K-12 education, and they are also leveraging these centers to have some influence over the curriculum in the public school system.

Through your work, what have you found to be some of the biggest threats that the Koch brothers pose?

I am very concerned about the concept of the production of knowledge in our country, whether it's at the K-12 or the higher education level. I am concerned about the production of knowledge being controlled only by those who can pay for it. If the wealthy 1 percent is able to use that wealth to define the priorities of our K-12 education and our higher education agendas, that's essentially giving very few people control over our country's production of knowledge — at least in the formalized institutions. I also think that the production of knowledge happens everyday through beautiful conversation and community work, and I don't want to discredit that.

That to me is a huge threat. Why I'm most concerned about that is because Koch has been very clear that their interest in the controlling of knowledge is to benefit their policy agenda. Their control over the production of knowledge is really a primary strategy to have those impacts, in terms of the threats that they are proposing to climate change, posing to our democracy, to voting rights, to pensions for workers. I would say the biggest threat they are posing is the ability to use their wealth to reshape the culture of our country and the priority conversations of our culture in a way that justifies their policy agenda and is also undemocratic.

How has UnKoch My Campus been working to combat the threats of the Koch brothers?

UnKoch My Campus really started with research. One of the primary strategies is doing research into what the Koch brothers are funding. The reason why I think we are a valued voice in the movement against the Koch brothers is because historically there has been attention given to their funding of think tanks like the Cato Institute or the Heritage Foundation and their funding of groups like Americans for Prosperity. And of course there's beautiful work being done around money in politics — Koch Industries has been a leader in funding legislatures directly — but there hasn't been much attention given to what academic programs are funded.

UnKoch's analysis really starts at that level of researching what they're doing. From there, we make that research publicly available in the hopes that folks on campuses — whether they are students, faculty, staff, or community members — recognize that what happens at the university is impacting us at the policy level. We hope that our research can be used by community members and campus stakeholders to resist the ability of Koch and any other corporate donor to leverage their university to their private benefit.

As campaign director, I work with faculty who are using the investigation into their university's relationship with Koch to build up their faculty union and really agitate and get their faculty senate to be engaged in the decision-making process of the university, so they have the final say over what a donor can and cannot expect from their school. I also work with students, who are so passionate. They do amazing organizing by educating their peers about the ways in which the Kochs are using their university to push their policy agenda. They oftentimes show up in support of faculty when faculty are putting their jobs on the line to stand up to this type of corruption.

We organize with those faculty and students to bring in community members, who also have a say in this fight. Because what we really want to demonstrate is the connections to the ways in which education is being used to impact the policy conversations that impact every single one of us.