

Students defend information request

By Schuyler Kraus
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*“The creative man is motivated by the desire to achieve, not by the desire to beat others.” —
Ayn Rand*

The number of universities on the other end of the Kochs’ \$50 million investment in academia has skyrocketed from just seven in 2005 to about 250 in 2012. Thanks to individuals utilizing open records legislation, several of these secret contracts and related correspondence have been made public. Former national American Association of University Professors president, Cary Nelson, explicitly condemned the Koch contracts for containing “language (that) violates academic freedom and poses problems because of its unspoken agenda.”

That aside for the moment, I wish to respond to an assertion in Art Hall’s Your Turn column on Dec. 9 that our request was based on a disagreement with his testimony in favor of repealing the renewable portfolio standards. We have never indicated our position on Hall’s testimony nor do we believe it is relevant. I cited that testimony in the open records request because it was made in favor of an ALEC model bill alongside Jeff Glendening and Mike O’Neal, both of whom have significant ties to the Kochs.

I am disappointed that Hall framed our reasoning as an ideological attack rather than a question of undue influence. Unfortunately, this important qualification has been drowned in an unnecessarily polarizing debate. If it’s unclear why we are using Koch funding as our example, please take a few minutes to read documents produced from similar requests at other universities (I particularly recommend Florida State University’s); we have every reason to be concerned. Our questions are grounded in sincerity and justice, not partisanship and deceit.

Per my correspondence with the national AAUP, the second part of our request lists “all contracts/memorandums of understanding and correspondence regarding donations/payments/contributions, including all restrictions associated with these, given to (KU, Dr. Art Hall) . . . from any single or combination of the following entities: (Koch family foundations), (ALEC), Cato Institute, Heartland Institute, Koch Industries, (KPI) (and its former name Flint Hills Research Institute), or Reason Foundation, between January 1995 to present.”

This does not violate anyone’s rights to academic freedom. The organization’s position regarding the application of academic freedom to other items that were requested is less clear because there is no formal differentiation between types of email correspondence. SSF maintains we have the right to view these documents under the KORA because they are of administrative and professional nature.

In accordance with a deep commitment to academic freedom and open debate, we did not request records related to Hall's research or private life. In the interest of intellectual integrity and a commitment to truth, we requested documents related to the circumstances under which Hall was hired and his center operates. If found to be an unethical appointment that compromises the integrity of the university, Hall's claim to academic freedom is nullified.

I understood that our decision to focus exclusively on Koch funding would be controversial and that right-leaning folks potentially would write us off as bigoted and unreasonable due to our appearance and beliefs. We have consistently challenged ourselves to be objective and reasonable. Nevertheless, we are accused of going on a "witch hunt" and asked why we aren't going after liberal donors who do this, as well. The answer is twofold: (1) the Kochs' infiltration of academia is more strategic and expansive than any other donors, making them the best example of the overarching issue, which means (2) there is no need to go on a "witch hunt" and expose all examples of this sort of activity. I believe that once a problem is identified, continuing to point fingers wastes time better spent working toward solutions.

I opened this letter with a quote from Ayn Rand that, though seemingly incongruous, is particularly relevant to this issue. Creativity is vital to achievement in academia. It animates academicians' search for truth as ideas emerge, compete and are refined or rejected until the most resilient coalesce into theories and, perhaps, paradigms. Our vision of the university as striving to be a source of objectivity and truth is premised on the intellectual integrity ensured by this rigorous process. Leveraging wealth to bypass it not only is lame because it's taking the easy way out, but also because it's a dogmatic pursuit with no interest in creativity or academic achievement, only in winning.

This is not a partisan battle for ideological domination, but a manifestation of a conflict between the utilitarian and intrinsic value of higher education. Neither is inherently bad, nor must they be mutually exclusive. When out of balance, though, one is sacrificed at the expense of the other. If we accept the corporatization of public universities, let's call them what they are — trade schools — and officially revoke their status as sources of truth and reason.