

# Academic Freedom Sold Off Cheap

May 26, 2011 by [Mary Ellen Flannery](#)

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By *Mary Ellen Flannery*

What's the price of academic freedom? At Florida State University, it looks like \$1.5 million – or the amount donated by a right-wing billionaire who, in return, gets a final say in faculty hiring.

The contract between the Charles G. Koch Charitable Foundation – and yes, that is the same Koch who bankrolled the [anti-union agenda](#) in Wisconsin – calls for two endowed positions to “promote political economy and the free enterprise” in the FSU economics department. And, according to *The St. Petersburg Times*, the agreement gives Koch's representatives the power to reject candidates that a faculty panel has recommended.

“This is an egregious example of a public university being willing to sell itself for next to nothing,” said Jennifer Washburn, author of the book *University Inc.: The Corporate Corruption of Higher Education*, who has received dozens of similar contracts, to *The Times*.



Charles Koch

But it's not the only example. Over the past two years, state higher education funding decreased in 35 states. Forced to cut majors, programs, and full-time faculty positions, an increasing number of institutions are willing to meet on the crossroads with politically motivated donors, who clearly hope their money will buy influence in a university's classrooms and curriculum.

The risks for universities and faculty are high, noted Tom Auxter, president of the [United Faculty of Florida](#), an NEA affiliate that includes Florida State faculty among its membership.

“The larger issue is, do we let outside interests shape what is going to be the curriculum we teach students?” he asked. “If you want to protect the integrity of academic institutions, you defend the right of faculty to determine curriculum and determine the faculty hiring process.”

With those questions like those in mind, FSU's Faculty Senate will investigate the Koch contract, said FSU-UFF chapter president Jack Fiorito. The local union also will consider the issue during bargaining.

Since 1928, when NEA adopted its first (but not last) resolution on academic freedom, saying, “We believe there should be more genuine freedom for the teacher, freedom in mind and spirit to achieve and create...” the Association has maintained that [academic freedom](#) is essential to teaching. It has vigorously opposed legislation that would limit faculty, such as the so-called “Academic Bill of Rights,” which failed to pass in 11 states in 2006.

But the best defense of academic freedom often is a well-negotiated contract. In its advice to local faculty unions, NEA suggests contract provisions that guarantee academic freedom, specifying there should be no limits on study, investigation and presentation by faculty, and that faculty should retain the privilege to choose their own classroom methods and materials.

(You know what would violate a contract like that? The BB&T deal at Florida State, also reported by *The St. Petersburg Times*, that requires a libertarian Ayn Rand novel be taught to students.)

Most contracts also make clear that the process of faculty evaluations, tenure, and other promotions must be free of politics or personal opinions.

Nonetheless, despite such provisions, as well as decades of major court rulings in defense of academic freedom, there's a long list of cash-strapped universities that have made deals like Florida State's. In fact, many have made them with Koch for programs or faculty that specifically promote deregulation and free markets.

At George Mason University in Virginia, Koch invested millions to create [the Mercatus Center](#), a think tank credited for much of the Bush administration's anti-environmental regulation policy. And, while one Koch-funded professor at West Virginia University has argued that fewer mine-safety deregulations would make mines safer, [AlterNet reports](#), another at Brown University produced a paper claiming bank deregulation helped the poor.

And it's not just Koch. The Walton Family Foundation spent \$800,000 to set up a [pro-voucher, pro-charter school education center](#) at the University of Arkansas. Similarly, the conservative Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation in Milwaukee has invested heavily in the [anti-public school agenda](#) with Harvard University's Paul Peterson.

And it's not just foundations with a political purpose – it's also corporations with economic goals. In a piece entitled "[Big Oil goes to College](#)," Washburn shows how ExxonMobil, BP and other oil corporations have turned to universities to do their research. The problem is, she shows, in nine of 10 agreements, universities failed to retain academic independence. Four went so far as to turn over control of research direction to the industry.

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