

Neoliberal Philanthropy and Academic Freedom

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Abstract

Neoliberalism redefined a college education as a private good; reduced state funding for public higher education; emphasized graduation rates, postgraduation employment outcomes, and institutional metrics; and used performance-based funding to force reform measures. As philanthropic foundations adopted neoliberal principles, they promoted these reform measures in higher education, undermining the autonomy of colleges and universities as well as academic freedom. Neoliberal philanthropic foundations used direct and indirect approaches to reshape higher education, with conservative foundations seeking and exerting undue influence on colleges and universities. Recently, their work, particularly Project 2025 by the Heritage Foundation, has guided the Trump regime's broad assault on higher education.

The neoliberal movement in this country has transformed societal values, policies, and practices and greatly impacted societal institutions, if not entirely transformed them (Baradaran 2024). The popular ideology has emphasized radical individualism, small government, deregulation, and flexible labor; its implementation has promoted the development of entrepreneurial subjects and environments. This emphasis on entrepreneurialism has brought considerable changes in higher education, including state divestment, which has pressured and incentivized faculty to pursue external funding for their research and creative projects. Additionally, tenure in public schools and higher education has been under open attack since the 1980s. Post-tenure faculty reviews are used to threaten tenured faculty members with nonretention, while contingent faculty members now provide the majority of teaching. The status of contingent faculty members effectively eliminates tenure for them and maintains a flexible academic labor system. These changes present serious challenges to academic freedom (AAUP 2024a; Calhoun 2009).

In addition, funding cuts and performance-based funding have been used to force changes in colleges and universities. Legislation such as the Bayh Dole Act of 1980 and the Cooperative Research Act of 1984 led to the establishment of technology transfer offices and research parks at research universities. These units institutionalized metrics that have been used to promote organizational change (Colyvas and Powell 2009) and have contributed to administrative bloat. The changes have led some scholars to assert that higher education has been corporatized, with transactional educational services substituting for educational substance (Saunders 2010;

Washburn 2011; Alibašić, Atkinson, and Pelcher 2024), and knowledge commodified (del Cerro Santamaría 2019).

Neoliberalism has given rise to neoliberal philanthropy, sometimes characterized as advocacy or venture philanthropy, which is today a principal segment in the sector. Following its interventions in public education, philanthropy has played a major role in bringing about changes in higher education (Barnhardt 2017). Indeed, as Callahan (2017) has pointed out, philanthropists have more power than ever in shaping society's agenda, often working behind the scenes to shape institutional and public policy agendas (see Hall 2011).

Studies of philanthropy have noted the shift from traditional grant making to proactive changemaking approaches in higher education involving, among other things, outcomes-based grant making and public policy engagement, often through intermediary organizations (Haddad 2021; Reckhow and Snyder 2014). Intermediary entities include nonprofit organizations, smaller foundations, as well as legislators. Foundations use both direct and indirect approaches to influence higher education. Alnoor Ladha and Lynn Murphy (2022, 1) have pointed out that philanthropy "encompasses the full political spectrum from conservative to progressive ideas on one continuum, and 'passive' (i.e. funding research work) to 'active' (i.e. funding direct action) on the other." Lobbying legislators through intermediary organizations is a major way in which change-oriented foundations have indirectly reshaped higher education.

Of late, there has been increasing scholarly interest in the relationship between philanthropy and academic freedom. Some donors unintentionally have a negative impact on academic freedom and others intentionally seek undue influence through the programs and faculty positions they fund.¹ This essay examines neoliberal philanthropy's impact on academic freedom. While foundations have both positive and negative influences on higher education, the negative influence is of principal concern. The essay first provides a brief overview of the philosophy and purposes of philanthropy, followed by those of academic freedom. It then turns to the rise of neoliberal philanthropy and its influence on academic freedom in higher education, recognizing that such an influence is tricky, multidimensional, and difficult to document absent an intensive large-scale study. Examples of undue influence are provided to highlight how neoliberal philanthropy undermines academic freedom.

Both philanthropy and higher education seek to promote the public good, albeit understood differently within the sectors, but most certainly overlapping. They constitute different societal sectors with a long history of being intertwined through donations, grants, and initiatives.

¹ See Miller and Bellamy (2012) for Koch's undue influence at Florida State University and the memorandum of understanding between the Charles G. Koch Charitable Foundation and the Florida State University Board of Trustees, dated July 7, 2008. <https://www.aaup.org/NR/rdonlyres/A25AD711-9F2A-49A5-9551-6C09638F290C/0/fsucontract.pdf>.

Purposes of Philanthropy

The etymology of the term *philanthropy*, literally the “love of humanity,” underscores the intended beneficence of philanthropic foundations (Ladha and Murphy 2022). Organized philanthropy has a long history in this country, beginning with elite donors and then foundations. The major foundations were established by white wealthy businessmen in the first third of the twentieth century. First was the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Knowledge (founded in 1905), followed by the Rockefeller Foundation (1913), the W. K. Kellogg Foundation (1930), and the Ford Foundation (1936), all of which have historically made substantial donations and grants to institutions of higher education.

According to Ernest Hollis (1940, 177), these and other early foundations—such as Kresge (1924), Danforth (1927), and Sloan (1934)—became “the most powerful external influence these institutions had known.” Another generation of major foundations developed at mid-century—such as Esso Education Foundation (1955; today the ExxonMobile Foundation), Hewlett (1966), Eli Lilly (1968), Mellon (1969), and MacArthur (1970)—and still another generation emerged at the turn of the twenty-first century, including the William H. Gates Foundation (1994; today the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation), the Lumina Foundation for Education (2000), and several others established by young billionaires and financial entities. Additionally, several influential conservative foundations have been established over the last fifty years, including the Heritage Foundation (1973), the Charles Koch Foundation (1980), and the Mercer Family Foundation (2004). Today there are over 100,000 private nonoperating (grant-making) foundations.

In the early years, foundations focused on setting standards, and their grant making centered on capital outlay, endowments, scholarships, and new programs such as “dental education, forestry, architecture, engineering education, library schools, legal education, and professional work in the fine arts” (Hollis 1940, 179). Over time, foundations shifted toward supporting ideas and institutions considered to be at the cutting edge of culture rather than supporting traditional areas of influence (Hollis 1940). They began promoting new social values and using institutes, accrediting bodies, special commissions, and research and learned societies to form scholarly networks and support their research (Hollis 1940). In the current period, philanthropy is “about ideas and values as well as about action, about doing things” (Payton and Moody 2008, 4).

Purposes of Academic Freedom

According to Ralph Fuchs (1963), academic freedom is grounded in intellectual freedom, autonomy, and the Bill of Rights. It includes the responsibility of scholars to participate in public life as public intellectuals. They should be free not only to criticize the institutions of which they are a part but also to shed light on the hierarchical structure of “power-relations and the political and social institutions that embody them” (MacIntyre 1960, 223) without fear of retribution (Schrecker 2012). In this country, academic freedom emerged as a value after the Civil War (Metzger [1955] 1961) and spread through the turn of the century, becoming institutionalized in the nation’s colleges and universities following the establishment of the AAUP in 1915. Founding

leaders were John Dewey and Arthur O. Lovejoy, prominent scholars concerned with the political dismissal of faculty members at several universities and the undue influence of business through boards of trustees. Despite its institutionalization, academic freedom as a value has advanced and lost ground during different political and economic periods and contexts. Today, it is under direct attack, along with freedom of speech, by the Trump regime and followers of the “Make American Great Again” movement.

At the institutional level, academic freedom refers to the freedom of faculty to teach and to pursue truths about the world without intervention by external entities. It is an ideal to be universally protected, especially during times of political threat. Students, too, are to be free to study and learn about subjects of their own interest without political interventions and constraints. According to Robert MacIver ([1955] 1967), academic freedom, while applying to special groups, is ultimately about the freedom of the mind to think independently about the world and humanity. Perhaps the strongest statement on the importance of academic freedom is that by Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren, who wrote in *Sweezy v. New Hampshire* (354 U.S. 234 (1957), 250), “To impose any strait jacket upon the intellectual leaders in our colleges and universities would imperil the future of our Nation. . . . Teachers and students must always remain free to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding; otherwise our civilization will stagnate and die.”

In a democracy, government, trustees, administrators, faculty, students, and the public have the responsibility to protect and advance academic freedom, although historically, members of each group have sought to restrict it on political grounds. That freedom, like liberty and democracy, has had to be vigorously defended several times in the last century. Faculty and academic administrators such as Edward Bemis, Angela Davis, Henry Giroux, Clark Kerr, Staughton Lynd, Scott Nearing, Bertell Ollman, Edward Ross, Joel Samoff, Paul Sweezy, Howard Zinn, and other notable scholars who were subjected to political attacks are reminders that academic freedom has suffered at the hands of forces internal and external to universities (Ollman 1984). Some faculty members were investigated during World War II and during McCarthyism after their universities were identified as having communists in their faculty ranks. This occurred at New York City’s municipal college system (today the City University of New York), the University of Washington, Sarah Lawrence College, and many other campuses across the country (Ollman 1993).

In 1951, Louis Budenz, in “Do Colleges Have to Hire Red Professors?,” published in the *American Legion Magazine*, alleged that Sarah Lawrence College had communist faculty members who were at the beck and call of the Kremlin and who served in communist front organizations that were out to destroy the federal government. The virulence of Budenz’s perspective is made clear by his statement, “Uncover a red doing his stuff on a college faculty and a hue and cry is raised over ‘academic freedom,’ as though these people had a God-given right to infect our children with their made-in-Moscow virus” (11).

Historically, not only have faculty been directly attacked but college and university courses and academic programs have been cut and books banned and burned during moral panics and movements of political hysteria in this country. Today, these activities occur amid a right-wing authoritarian movement that is supported by conservative foundations and claims the mantels of freedom and patriotism. When it comes to academic freedom, it is important to remember the words of presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson (1952, 4), who stated in a speech to the American Legion that “to strike freedom of the mind with the fist of patriotism is an old and ugly subtlety.”

Neoliberal Philanthropy and Education

While a shift in philanthropic grant making to universities had already begun by the middle of the twentieth century, the more recent shift reflects the neoliberal movement that took firm institutional hold with the election of Ronald Reagan as president and that is being extended by the Trump regime. The imposition of market logic on higher education has consisted of the commodification of knowledge, entrepreneurialism, vocationalism, metrics, and demands for accountability as the mechanisms of control and corporatization of universities. Universities have been reshaped, albeit unevenly, as engines for economic growth and development. This has distorted their mission, which is generally understood as the education of students, the unfettered pursuit of knowledge, and professional service to communities and society.

The shift noted by Hollis (1940) continued as boldness characterized grant making among the largest foundations by the mid-1950s (Whyte 1955). Amid the prosperity of the post-World War II years, they promoted research and sought opportunities for “massive demonstrations” such as the Rockefeller Foundation’s reform of medical schools (Whyte 1955). By the 1980s, the foundations had witnessed major societal changes, including the rapid growth of colleges and universities to meet baby boomer demand, the civil rights movement, college student rebellions, and political pressures for reform, particularly in “governance, administrative machinery, curriculum, and pedagogical behavior of higher education” (Crossland 1983, 51). Questions of standards were raised, however, as enrollments increased. Political concerns that arose during the 1980s about the quality of education launched the intrusion of neoliberal ideas in education generally. Some foundations adopted and began promoting neoliberal principles and practices through reform-oriented funding. This shift in the sector was evident in the practices of new advocacy foundations like the Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation, which have sought to influence public policy (Hall and Thomas 2012). While public policy advocacy by philanthropy foundations is not new, the neoliberal framework in which advocacy is nested is different.

For example, Cassie Hall and Scott Thomas (2012, 4) quote the president of the Lumina Foundation as stating in his keynote address at the 2010 Association for the Study of Higher Education’s annual conference, “We’ve learned very quickly that Lumina is—and must be—more than just a grant-making organization. . . . As an independent foundation pursuing a vital mission, we must also be a leadership organization. . . . Yes, we follow the traditional but extremely important approach of identifying and supporting successful practices and meaningful

research. But we also engage in public policy advocacy, and we use our communications and convening power to foster partnerships and to build public will for change.” Hall and Thomas (2012, 2–3) also quote a former administrator at the Gates Foundation, who wrote in *Inside Higher Ed* in 2011, “The idea is to encourage state leaders to enact real change and lasting impact by helping them take on big ideas, like performance funding, revamping developmental education, and exploring new delivery models—even in these tough economic times.”

In this regard, philanthropic foundations were key players in the charter school movement and key in the establishment of charter management organizations. They promoted not only performance-based funding but also the idea of going to scale and convened exclusive events for “educational entrepreneurs” (Quinn, Tompkins-Stange, and Meyerson 2014), favoring leaders with managerial and entrepreneurial backgrounds. These activities promoted the imposition of neoliberal principles in both public education and public higher education.

Neoliberal Philanthropy and Higher Education

In higher education, student success was a principal focus of the foundations in the early years of intervention, but their influence broadened over time. They became policy influencers that promoted performance-based funding as a big idea (Hall and Thomas 2012). Recently, conservative foundations have promoted a mix of state legislation to prohibit teaching of critical race theory, end tenure, ban unionization, eliminate sociology courses and programs, and demand employment preparation of students. These foundations are part of a broad, well-organized, neoliberal political movement that is supported by interlocking directorates of libertarian think tanks, movement advocacy organizations, wealthy donors, and political evangelicals. The research centers funded by extreme right-wing donors and foundations influence the public image of universities through research conducted on campuses (Kamola 2024a, 2024b). But the influence of neoliberal foundations on academic freedom is often indirect, occurring through networks of conservative organizations and small foundations that support selected candidates for state legislatures who, if elected, can help enact laws that limit what is taught in schools and universities.

For example, in North Carolina, the influence of William “Art” Pope is felt not only in the political arena but directly in higher education. A former legislator and former state administrator, Pope chairs the board of the John William Pope Foundation (founded in 1986), a conservative family foundation that “advances ideas of limited government, individual freedom, personal responsibility, and strong communities” (John William Pope Foundation 2022, para. 1). Pope has served on multiple boards of conservative organizations and foundations, including Americans for Prosperity, the Koch network’s primary political advocacy group. The network has funded several conservative organizations and initiatives over several years.

A libertarian, Pope supports a network of think tanks and advocacy groups in North Carolina (Kamola 2024a). He also serves on the board of the Institute for Humane Studies at George Mason University, the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the UNC Board of Governors, Advancing

American Freedom, and other conservative organizations. Advancing American Freedom was founded by former Vice President Mike Pence. It is a conservative advocacy and policy group that, through its directors, interlocks with the directorates of other conservative advocacy organizations and philanthropic foundations, including the Heritage Foundation, the State Financial Officers Foundation, Susan B. Anthony Pro-Life America, the American Legislative Exchange Council, and many others. Several of these organizations have led the attack on critical race theory and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives and contribute to proscriptive legislation that undermines academic freedom.

According to Isaac Kamola (2024a), Pope was unable to get appointed to the UNC Board of Governors in 1995 due to his clear partisanship. He turned to funding legislative races in 2010, with eighteen of twenty-two candidates he supported getting elected and flipping the General Assembly. He also supported the RedMap project, which influenced the redistricting process by which Republicans gerrymandered the state. In 2020, Pope was appointed to the UNC Board of Governors, and in 2021 four conservative members were appointed to the board of governors and six to the board of UNC-Chapel Hill, where the School of Civic Life and Leadership was established in 2023 to “promote right-of-center views” (cited in Kamola 2024a, 332). That same year, H.B. 715 was introduced with a new subdivision section that stated its purpose as “to ensure efficient use of institutional resources, including regularly evaluating and eliminating unnecessary or redundant expenses, personnel, and areas of study” (cited in Kamola 2024a, 332). Had it been enacted into law, tenure for incoming faculty would have been eliminated and the board of governors would have considerable voice over the curriculum, thereby diminishing academic freedom.

In Florida, a state that leads conservative attacks on universities, their programs, and faculty, Republicans control the offices of governor, secretary of state, attorney general, and both chambers of the state legislature. In January 2023, Governor Ron DeSantis, who is funded by conservative donors and corporations, targeted New College, a tiny liberal arts college, in his antiwoke cultural war, appointing six conservative trustees out of a thirteen-member board in his effort to transform the college. Among the new trustees is Christopher Rufo, a conservative activist and leader in smearing critical race theory who pushed to eliminate diversity programs at his first trustee meeting. Rufo is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, a think tank funded by corporations and conservative foundations, where he directs the anti-critical race theory initiative. He is a contributing editor at *City Journal*, a right-wing publication. With New College deemed a “woke campus” by conservatives, its new board of trustees quickly fired the president and eliminated DEI programs and the Gender and Diversity Center. In August 2024, New College was found emptying its gender diversity library by dumping hundreds of books on LGBTQ issues. The AAUP (2024b, 44) reports that what is happening in Florida “reflects not only a blatant disregard for academic standards of governance and academic freedom but also a discriminatory and biased assault on the rights of racial minorities and LGBTQ

communities.” The American Civil Liberties Union of Florida called it a deliberate act of censorship and an attack on free speech and academic freedom.

A year after conservatives took over the board of trustees at New College, Florida’s board of governors, which sets academic standards for the state’s university system, dropped Principles of Sociology as a general education course. According to Florida Commissioner of Education Manny Diaz Jr., a proponent of charter schools and antiwoke legislation, “Higher education must return to its essential foundations of academic integrity and the pursuit of knowledge instead of being corrupted by destructive ideologies. . . . We will not spend taxpayers’ money supporting DEI and radical indoctrination that promotes division in our society” (Florida Department of Education 2024, para. 3).

A major university that has been partially captured by conservatives is George Mason University, where Charles Koch, the libertarian billionaire who espouses neoliberal principles, and his Charles Koch Foundation provided nearly \$100 million to the university’s economics department, the Law and Economics Center, the Mercatus Center, and the Institute for Humane Studies (Letiecq 2019). All of these units promote neoliberal ideas and principles. According to Bethany Letiecq (2019), the economics department is controlled by libertarian-leaning economists. The Law and Economics Center provides economic analysis workshops to judges and policymakers; the Mercatus Center promotes research on law, regulation, and economics while maintaining a connection to the American Legislative Exchange Council, which provides templates of legislation for conservative legislators and policymakers; and the Institute for Humane Studies promotes a network of scholars to advance free-market fundamentalist principles. After years of effort, GMU faculty and students finally succeeded in making public the Koch-GMU gift agreements, which revealed undue donor influence on academic freedom, and led to a new gift-agreement policy by the university’s foundation.

In addition to the direct and indirect influences of foundations on higher education, support for the science and technology disciplines has advantaged academics in those fields over those in the humanities and social sciences (Mars and Metcalfe 2009), engendering divisions and competition among faculty members. The result is support for the potential market applicability of research in science and technology that aligns these disciplines with neoliberal principles while the humanities and social sciences suffer, in increasing numbers, the elimination of programs and departments. This imbalance not only distorts the mission of universities and higher education but also diminishes the academic freedom of faculty and students at individual and institutional levels. It invites the question, “What constitutes a college education in today’s society?”

Perhaps the most harmful indirect influence on higher education occurs today through *Project 2025* (2023), a broad conservative leadership demand by the Heritage Foundation. The Trump regime is implementing it in a broad assault on higher education and federal research funding. *Project 2025* alleges hostility toward American exceptionalism in higher education, claims higher education has been captured by woke “diversicrats” and a federal accreditation cartel, asserts that the Department of Education is not needed, and calls for the preparation of students for jobs.

It also calls for the federal administration to use the “full force of federal prosecutorial resources to investigate and prosecute all state and local governments, institutions of higher education, corporations, and any other private employers who are engaged in discrimination in violation of constitutional and legal requirements” (Heritage Foundation 2023, 562). Columbia University and Harvard University have been the first targets whose freedom of speech and academic freedom have been directly threatened by the Trump regime.

Conclusion

Philanthropy in the form of big foundations has historically been supportive of higher education (Beckmann 1964). Foundations promoted the public good by funding new schools and programs, promoting standards, and supporting students and research without diminishing academic freedom. The neoliberal movement of the last six decades, however, has given rise to neoliberal philanthropy that imposes free market fundamentalist principles on social institutions. For higher education this means corporate management practices that radically reshape curricula, teaching, and research.

Both traditional and neoliberal foundations, especially second- and third-generation ones, have directly and indirectly influenced the work of universities. They have constrained academic freedom and hindered student learning and the production of knowledge, intentionally or unintentionally, by reshaping colleges and universities. They have corporatized colleges and universities, funded libertarian units, supported the elimination of courses and programs, and promoted indoctrination by excluding critical views of American society, thereby diminishing academic freedom. Perhaps most insidious have been the “attacks on academic freedom as part of a broader political strategy, one funded by deep-pocket donors who want to discredit higher education” (Kamola 2024a, 337). At the forefront has been the Heritage Foundation. Given this context, notwithstanding the work of the AAUP’s Center for the Defense of Academic Freedom and Yale Law School’s Center for Academic Freedom and Free Speech (both receive funding from foundations), it is time for progressive foundations to fund a large-scale study of academic freedom in this country, much like the philanthropist Louis M. Rabinowitz funded the American Academic Freedom Project in the early 1950s.²

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² Project materials are at the Archival Collections of Columbia University. The principal authors of the project’s volumes are Richard Hofstadter ([1955] 1961), Walter Metzger ([1955] 1961), and Robert MacIver ([1955] 1967).

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