

Private Money in Academia

Universities are increasingly accepting private money to fund academic centers, programs, and faculty. Often, this money comes from sources that have clear political agendas. For example, the Charles Koch Foundation has donated money to George Mason University and several of its affiliated centers, including the Mercatus Center and the Institute for Humane Studies, both of which promote market-based and classical liberal ideas.¹ Similarly, Michael Bloomberg has donated to the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research, which produces research on the public health effects of widespread gun availability that is then used for gun policy advocacy purposes.² In light of these developments, academics have begun debating the moral permissibility of accepting private money from sources such as these.

Critics claim that money from these sources introduces political agendas into academic research, which should be carried out in a free and unbiased way. Similarly, critics worry that, even when these donors get no official say over faculty hires, their political goals inevitably influence who is hired because the continued availability of the funds may depend on donor approval. Apart from hiring decisions, this process threatens to give powerful, politically-motivated individuals or groups additional power, by influencing which topics academics explore in their research and teaching, and, ultimately, which ideas are made more visible to policymakers and the broader public. Finally, critics worry that, at least in the case of public universities, legislators would feel less incentive to continue funding public universities at high levels as more and more private money becomes available to them.

Proponents of private funding in academia argue that as long as the supported research and teaching meet the standards of acceptable scholarship, it doesn't matter how it is funded. Some funding clearly has biased hiring, research, or teaching, but by no means all; and when the unacceptable influence is absent the funding often plays a crucial role in making intellectually and academically valuable programs possible. As long as the supported programs actively meet high standards of academic quality and intellectual freedom, and as long as worries about unacceptable influence are carefully addressed, seeking and accepting such support is morally permissible and may well be morally important. Private money might make possible important research and teaching that otherwise would not happen (or would happen much less than would be good). Finally, proponents note that academics, university administrators, and, for public colleges and universities, state legislators, like everyone else, have their own political views that can influence hiring, research, teaching, etc., so private donors are hardly the first or only sources of possible partisanship.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. To what extent is it appropriate or inappropriate for private donors to have an influence over faculty hires, assuming that the faculty meet the relevant academic standards?
2. Is there any morally significant difference between ideologically-driven private funding for empirically-based research (such as in the sciences and social sciences) and non-empirically-based research (such as in the humanities)?
3. What value, if any, is there in political diversity in academia? How, if at all, should universities promote this type of diversity?

¹ <http://polluterwatch.org/charles-koch-university-funding-database>

² <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/aug/26/george-soros-tom-steyer-michael-bloomberg-koch-bro/>

