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University: Koch grant 'fully consonant' with Catholic teaching

Joshua J. McElwee | Dec. 16, 2013
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Acceptance of a $1 million grant by The Catholic University of America from a conservative group known to back Republican causes is "fully consonant with Catholic social teaching," the university said in a statement Monday.

Catholic University, which is using the gift to support research into "principled entrepreneurship" at its business school, will control "the search, recruitment, and selection process for all positions funded in the agreement," the statement reads.

Likewise, the university states, it will "independently select all faculty and staff" hired in relation to the agreement.

Catholic University, which is located in Washington and is the only U.S. college or university founded by the nation's bishops, was responding Monday to a letter from some 50 academics criticizing [1] their acceptance of the gift from the Charles Koch Foundation.

The grant, the university said in a release [2] Nov. 12, will allow the school to hire three new visiting professors and one expert from the business world to teach and conduct research.

In their letter Monday, addressed to Catholic University president John Garvey and business school dean Andrew Abela, the academics said the Charles Koch Foundation has "an ideological agenda when it comes to shaping the national debate over economics and politics that is not simply academic in nature."

The Charles Koch Foundation is one of several headed by the sons of Fred C. Koch, a deceased Texas chemist who founded an oil and gas conglomerate that is now the second-largest private company in the United States.

David and Charles, Fred's sons, have grabbed headlines in recent years for their support of Republican causes, particularly Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker's efforts to hamper the ability of unions to bargain collectively in that state.

In its statement, Catholic University says the academics' letter was "an unfortunate effort to manufacture controversy and score political points."

The academics, the university states, "seek to instruct The Catholic University of America's leaders about Catholic social teaching, and do so in a manner that redefines the Church's teaching to suit their own political preferences."

"We created a school of business and economics for the express purpose of promoting respect for the human person in economic life, based on the principles of solidarity, subsidiarity, human dignity, and the common good," the statement reads.

"The aim of the Charles Koch Foundation grant -- to support research into principled entrepreneurship -- is fully consonant with Catholic social teaching."

The Catholic University statement also criticizes the signers of the academics' letter, saying many of the institutions they work for also receive money from the Charles Koch Foundation.

Citing a list provided by the Charles Koch Foundation [3] of the colleges and universities it has donated money to, Catholic University says 15 individuals who signed the academics' letter criticizing the university have affiliations with institutions that also have accepted Charles Koch Foundation money.

"So widespread and, on balance, non-controversial has been the Foundation's support for higher education that we wonder whether the 15 signatories realized, before they endorsed the letter, that their institutions are 'guilty' of the same association they chastise The Catholic University of America for," the statement reads.

"And if they were aware of this, we wonder why they apply a different standard to The Catholic University of America than they do to their own institutions," it states.

"The Catholic University of America welcomes constructive input from all who share an interest in advancing and supporting its mission," the statement concludes. "It has no intention of revisiting its decision to accept the grant from the Charles Koch Foundation."

While it is unclear exactly how much money the Koch brothers gave to Walker's 2010 campaign and his successful effort in 2011 to fight a recall election, Koch Industries' political action committee gave at least $1 million to the Republican Governors Association in 2010.

Americans for Prosperity, a right-wing political advocacy group the brothers back, also donated an estimated $3 million to Walker.

Catholic University's business school, formally known as its School of Business and Economics, was created in January from a department formerly housed in the university's department of arts and sciences.

Among signers of the academics' letter criticizing Catholic University are four Catholic university faculty members, three former senior staffers at the U.S. bishops' conference, two former presidents of the Catholic Theological Society of America, and the president of the Jesuit-run University of San Francisco.

Statement from The Catholic University of America on letter protesting Charles Koch Foundation grant [4] by National Catholic Reporter [5]

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