When higher education gets put up for sale

Poetry Out Loud

The Renaissance took place, among other rea- sons, between a number of wealthy patrons, such as the Medicis, bankrolled artists like Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Titian. Thanks to their generosity we all enjoy many of the benefits that result.

Since its inception, higher education in this country has also benefited from philanthropy. From the time of the great industrial expansion in the U.S. in the last part of the 19th century, great industrialists such as Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller fully funded university named after them. Many others have also had their names associated with particular schools, dormitories, or buildings. The intent of those donors was — for the most part — to support higher education with- out imposing a particular ideological stand.

However, in recent years, we have seen a new wave of funding in higher education. The reasons these seem to be much more ideological while the motivations of its attendees are less clear. Some donors are funding the day-to-day operations of those institutions.

After a fashion, many of these donors are choosing to fund programs that are specifically designed to support these authoritarian strategies. These programs are often supported by conservative donors who have funded academic institutions on campuses by supporting scholars with a conser- vative ideology and by creating conservative “beachheads” at those institutions.

The expectation was that a number of programs started a much more aggressive approach by hire those who are more sympathetic to the right side of the political spectrum. This has been seen in many cases, but the problems that we are facing now have been in place to ensure freedom of thought and innovation since universities were founded in medieval Europe. One such principle is that faculty decide on matters of curriculum and in the selection of who will be hired as their colleagues. It is true that this system does not always work as it should. After all, we all have bad days and make mistakes, but the problem that we are facing now is that the system is being subverted by money.

Historically nobody said anything wrong with naming professorships, endowed chairs, even a whole school after a major donor. Most institu- tions funding education have specific policies that require a minimum donation for naming a particular fund or position. Even now, with the information they want passed on to students is left up to the college or university, not the donor.

In many of the violations of these principles have been the result of the third for money and prestige by administrators who felt compelled to take back cash from discouraged donors. By doing so, they are also able to claim they are responding to the financial realities of the institution while retaining their fund- raising abilities.

The problem here is a lack of integrity. Institutions of higher education are supposed to be teaching others and moral principles because an open and transparent manner is being betrayed.

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In 1979, she was honored with the Paul Harris Fellow by Rotary Clubs International. She sat on the board of directors for several non-profits, including the Illinois Federation of Business and Professional Women.

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