



Alumni pour millions into midterms, College

By **Avery Ellfeldt** - November 1, 2018

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Two of St. Olaf College's most generous alumni donors have left their mark – and their millions – on both the College and the 2018 midterms, a consequential election for the balance of power in Congress.

With less than a week before election day, Dean Buntrock '55 and Karen Wright '74 donated a combined \$3,038,367 in the 2018 election cycle. The majority of that money has gone to Republican candidates and conservative advocacy organizations, according to the Federal Election Commission (FEC).

Buntrock and Wright have both given large sums to the College throughout their careers. Buntrock, the former CEO of Waste Management, donated \$26 million in 1997 for the construction of Buntrock Commons – “the largest single gift ever made to St. Olaf or any other Lutheran college in the United States,” according to the St. Olaf website. Three years prior, the Presidential Scholarship Award was expanded and renamed the Buntrock Academic Scholarship Program. The scholarship provides recipients a renewable award of \$25,000 per year.

Wright, the CEO of Ariel Corporation, which makes natural gas compressors, gave \$1 million to the Institute for Freedom and Community in 2015, a College organization that promotes political discourse. In 2011, she gave the same amount to the Great Conversation Program, a popular course sequence that studies many facets of Western culture.

“I HOPE THE COLLEGE WILL CONTINUE TO BE A COLLEGE WITH THE MIDWESTERN, RURAL VALUES OF OUR IMMIGRANT FOREFATHERS WHERE PEOPLE HAVE FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND EXPRESSION,” – DEAN BUNTROCK ’55

Both alumni have opened their wallets to some of the most influential right-wing political groups. Over the past year, Wright has given \$375,000 to America First Action, a Super PAC aligned with the Trump administration. Both she and Buntrock have also given substantially to Freedom Partners Action Fund over the years – a Super PAC linked to the Koch brothers, the conservative billionaire oil magnates who run one of the most influential political fundraising networks in the nation.

Koch network groups have opposed climate change legislation, labor organizing laws, the Affordable Care Act, gay marriage and corporate and individual taxes, among other causes.

Heavy donation to ideological groups by college donors can raise concerns about the motivations behind their gifts to the college, said Brendan Fischer, director of federal reform, at the Campaign Legal Center (CLP). CLP is a nonpartisan organization that supports strong campaign finance regulations.

“University officials will understandably look for private sources of funding in order to ensure that the university can remain viable,” Fischer said. “But money can buy influence. A wealthy donor might give to a university for entirely philanthropic reasons, or they might give in order to directly or indirectly promote an ideological agenda.”

Top Donor

Wright, in particular, has been active this campaign cycle. At press time, she has given a total of \$2,344,867, according to the FEC. She is also ranked as the 62nd largest individual political donor to outside spending groups in the country, according to data from the Center for Responsive Politics (CRP), a nonpartisan research group. All of that money went to conservative congressional candidates or organizations, according to the CRP.

Wright currently resides in Ohio, but has supported the re-election of Rep. Jason Lewis (R) of Minnesota’s 2nd Congressional district, which includes Northfield and St. Olaf. Wright contributed \$5,400 – the maximum amount an individual can give to a candidate each election cycle – to Lewis in

2018, according to the FEC. A battleground district in 2016, Lewis' seat will be critical in determining which party gains control of the House of Representatives.

Wright also gave the maximum amount to 19 other Republican candidates, including conservative favorites such as Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.) and vulnerable GOP candidates like Sen. Dean Heller (R-Nev.).

In regards to her involvement in politics, Wright told the *Manitou Messenger* she believes in personal responsibility, personal rights and representative government.

"Understanding history, and the long, and mostly not so great, impact of elitist group rule, is important for every American," Wright wrote in an email. "Participating in the national discussion, and in choosing who represents me in local, state and federal government is a wonderful right."

Koch brothers

Buntrock has also given heavily – \$693,500 – to mostly conservative causes and Republican politicians during this election cycle. For instance, he gave \$5,400 to Montana Republican Senate candidate Matt Rosendale. Rosendale faces incumbent Montana Sen. Jon Tester (D) in another of 2018's competitive races.

Buntrock also gave \$650,000 to Freedom Partners, a Koch network Super PAC, this year. While Wright did not donate to Freedom Partners in the 2018 election cycle, Mother Jones reported in 2011 and later in 2014 that Wright was a guest at the Koch brothers' annual fundraising retreats with other prominent conservative CEOs and philanthropists.

The Koch network spearheaded the proliferation of outside money in national politics after the 2011 *Citizens United vs. FEC* Supreme Court ruling loosened political spending limits.

In a 2018 interview with NPR, journalist Jane Meyer described the Koch network as "something like 500 of the richest conservatives in the country who pour money into this joint project that they've got to take over politics." The Kochs have reportedly prepared to spend up to \$400 million on the 2018 midterms, according to the BBC.

The Institute

Regarding College donors with clear ideological commitments, Vice President of Advancement Enoch Blazis said when individuals donate to a non-profit organization, there can be an agreed upon purpose for that money, but that "the donor cannot dictate specifically how the funds are spent."

Some college faculty raised concerns, however, about the 2014 creation of the Institute for Freedom and Community. The Institute was made possible by “a donor and friend of the college,” according to remarks made by President David Anderson ’74 at the April 10, 2014 faculty meeting. The Institute would aim to teach St. Olaf students “how to have informed, respectful, productive discussions about the key issues,” Anderson wrote in a Sept. 26 2014 email to faculty and staff.

While a donation from Buntrock to the Institute has not been publicly disclosed, at the Nov. 13, 2014 faculty meeting, Anderson said he had a conversation with Buntrock regarding “deep concern for what he sees as a fairly desperate state of American discourse on the big issues that divide,” in December 2013.

“Mr. Buntrock added that he would like to focus his philanthropy on addressing this problem, and more particularly, that he would like to do it through a college or university,” Anderson said.

Wright made her gift of \$1 million to the Institute in 2015. Buntrock was, and remains, an original member of the Institute Advisory Board established in 2015. The Board aims to ensure the Institute honors the “agreements made with the donors who support its work,” according to the Institute website.

Some faculty members questioned the Institute’s funding, curricular implications and overall governance, according to the Nov. 13, 2014 faculty meeting minutes. The inclusion of the word “freedom” in the Institute’s title was also a point of contention.

“The name sounds like a right-wing donor has convinced the college to live out his (almost always his) political agenda,” wrote Associate Professor Matthew Rohn in an Oct. 23, 2014 email to faculty and staff. At the time, Rohn was a member of the Curriculum Committee.

Professor Dan Hofrenning, the first Institute director, addressed these concerns in a Feb. 11, 2015 email to the St. Olaf faculty. Hofrenning wrote that the Institute “Task Force disagrees and instead sees the terms ‘freedom and community’ as central contested concepts in the discourse of public affairs.”

Donors of the Institute have no hand in determining programming, Edmund Santurri, Morrison Family Director of the Institute for Freedom and Community, said.

“Programming decisions are made by the Institute Director in consultation with the Institute Director’s Council, which consists of faculty and students,” Santurri said.

“I hope the college will continue to be a college with the midwestern, rural values of our immigrant forefathers where people have freedom of thought and expression,” Buntrock told the *Manitou*

Messenger in an email. "With that in mind, I have some hope that the Institute for Freedom and Community will be the catalyst for accomplishing the goals of learning the wants and needs of others not like themselves through civil discourse."

Fischer noted the importance of tracking wealthy college donors' political contributions.

"The university community has a role to play in monitoring whether wealthy donors' dollars have strings attached," Fischer said. "Students will be better equipped to monitor the influence of donors over their university if they know who those donors are and where they are coming from politically."

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5