

For Immediate Release

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Students File Lawsuit Against George Mason University for Donor Records

Transparent GMU Seeks to Make GMU Foundation Comply with Freedom of Information Act

Fairfax, VA - This morning, George Mason University students filed a lawsuit against both George Mason University and the George Mason University Foundation in hopes of obtaining grant and gift agreements between private donors and the Foundation, which serves as the University's fundraising arm. Transparent GMU, the student organization that filed the suit, is concerned about the potential for private donors to influence their education.

"We believe the public has a right to know the details of our university's operations, including its relationship with private donors. The GMU Foundation is doing work for our public school, so it should be held to the same disclosure standards as the university itself. The only way we can make sure the university and its Foundation are acting in the interests of the public is by making all agreements with private donors transparent," said student Gus Thomson.

Students at GMU launched a campaign for donor transparency in 2014 after learning the university's largest donor, the Charles Koch Foundation, had entered into a grant agreement with Florida State University that gave the Koch Foundation influence over hiring and curriculum decisions at the university.

To ensure similar agreements were not influencing decisions at their own school, Transparent GMU's members filed a Virginia Freedom of Information Act request for GMU's agreements with the Charles Koch Foundation, but the University and the GMU Foundation claimed the records weren't covered by the Act.

After being denied access to the records, Transparent GMU worked with attorneys at Appalachian Mountain Advocates, a public interest law firm, to explore other options.

"It's disappointing to see the Foundation turn away students who are justifiably concerned about donor influence at their university—especially when Virginia's open records law is so clear," says Appalachian Mountain Advocates attorney Evan Johns, who is representing Transparent GMU in its lawsuit. "The law simply does not allow a public university to conceal its records by outsourcing its public business to a private company."

Contact Gus Thomson or Adam McKiernan for more information about Transparent GMU.

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