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Michigan Think Tank Asks 3 Universities for Labor Professors' E-Mails

By Peter Schmidt

A free market-oriented think tank in Michigan has sent the state's three largest public universities open-records requests for any e-mails from their labor-studies faculty members dealing with the debate over collective bargaining in Wisconsin.

The [Mackinac Center for Public Policy](#), based in Midland, Mich., sent the requests on Friday to labor-studies centers at Michigan State University, the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, and Wayne State University. The boilerplate wording on the [requests](#), as first reported on Tuesday by the blog [Talking Points Memo](#), asks the universities to provide all e-mails from the employees and contractors of their labor-studies centers containing the words "Scott Walker," "Wisconsin," "Madison," and "Maddow," in reference to Rachel Maddow, the liberal commentator on MSNBC. Mr. Walker is the Republican governor of Wisconsin.

The records requests, covering the faculty members' correspondence from January 1 through March 25, also ask for "any other e-mails dealing with the collective-bargaining situation in Wisconsin."

The requests resemble one the Republican Party of Wisconsin sent this month to the University of Wisconsin at Madison seeking [any e-mails that a professor on that campus, William Cronon](#), had sent in reference to the state's volatile labor situation or several prominent Republican lawmakers, including Mr. Walker.

That open-records request has been [denounced in statements](#) issued by the American Association of University Professors and the American Historical Association as likely to have a chilling effect on the academic freedom of university faculty members.

The Mackinac Center's open-records request was sent by a research associate at the direction of Ken Braun, managing editor of one of the center's newsletters, [Michigan Capital Confidential](#). In an interview on Tuesday, Mr. Braun refused to discuss exactly why his center had sent the letter, saying it does not comment on its investigations in

progress. But, he said, "there is a very specific type of discussion that I am looking for, and that is why it is targeted at these three unique departments at these three universities."

"I hope the universities respond to our requests as fast as they sent them out to bloggers," he said.

Mr. Braun denied being on a fishing expedition intended to expose faculty members' political beliefs or activities. "If I were going on a 'politics of professors' search, I would have cast the net much wider," he said.


The requests were directed at the Douglas A. Fraser Center for Workplace Issues at Wayne State, the Labor Studies Center at the University of Michigan, and the School of Human Resources and Labor Relations at Michigan State.

Rick Fitzgerald, a spokesman for the University of Michigan, confirmed on Tuesday that it had received the open-records request. He said the university would process it in accordance with its usual procedures pursuant to the Michigan Freedom of Information Act. Officials at Michigan State and Wayne State have yet to comment.

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 **denadavis** 1 hour ago


Is there some way we could overwhelm this process? I realize that the request mentioned in this article is time-limited, so it's too late, but I am wondering if people more tech-savvy than I could suggest ways in which, e.g., we could all send each other messages with phrases like "collective bargaining," so as to overwhelm these kinds of requests in the future.

7 people liked this. [Like](#)

 **nebo113** 1 hour ago in reply to denadavis

I had a similar thought.

[Like](#)

 **Tom Birkland** 1 hour ago in reply to nebo113

Interesting. This is sort of a twist on what's called a DDOS (distributed denial of service) attack on a web site, although this sort of works in a different way. But these FOIA requests aren't

intended to collect "data," but, rather, sound bites and tidbits that would embarrass the sender when taken out of context--which they most assuredly will be.

6 people liked this. [Like](#)



crankycat 1 hour ago

Use the keywords in the automatic email signature. That would do it pretty quick.

4 people liked this. [Like](#)



blithespirit 58 minutes ago

The academics have said things they regret?

[Like](#)



wilkenslibrary 48 minutes ago

You can try ccing Michigan Capital Confidential, where Ken Braun, who made the request, is managing editor (micapcon@mackinac.org) on anything you'd like to share with them.

Betsy Smith
Adjunct Professor of ESL
Cape Cod Community College

1 person liked this. [Like](#)



wmartin46 45 minutes ago

> so as to overwhelm these kinds of requests in the future.

Depending on the email system being used, a clever IT tech would write a script that would pull the emails with any given word(s) in the body-of-text. Again, depending on how the specific email system archives its traffic, the time to retrieve any/all emails in question would not take that long, given a specific time frame to search, and that the backup/archive files were readily available.

[Like](#)



rjuhl 38 minutes ago

Sounds like its time for a group of concerned citizens to request from the governor and his staff, all emails and printed or hand-written communications related to the University and relevant appointment logs and telephone records beginning with his state funded transition activiites - including communications with politically allied organizations and individuals.

3 people liked this. [Like](#)



nacrandell 30 minutes ago

Several items are worrisome:

1) "A free market-oriented think tank in Michigan..."

The Mackinac Center for Public Policy is conservative in origin and purpose. Recently anyone with a website call themselves a think tank, just like stalkers with tele-photo cameras can call themselves "Paparazzi".

2) "Mr. Braun denied being on a fishing expedition intended to expose faculty members' political beliefs or activities..."

He is correct. A fishing expedition would suggest a broad search to "expose faculty members' political beliefs." These requests are targeted to only liberal faculty member's beliefs.

3) The requests were for, "all e-mails from the employees and contractors of their labor-studies centers containing the words "Scott Walker," "Wisconsin," "Madison," and "Maddow..."
Odd choice of keywords for the request, what's next? "M*AS**H" had several episodes that were anti-war - are Alan Alda and Wayne Rogers security risks?

4) "Mr. Braun refused to discuss exactly why his center had sent the letter, saying it does not comment on its investigations in progress."

I understand why local, state and Federal police agencies do not comment on an ongoing investigation - civil rights, but why a "think tank"? Are they worried about a person's civil rights or just looking foolish?

If the state wants to process the requests, then let them do it. Process the requests made by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy and any other group, that might use other keywords and "target" the business school professors. What's fair for the goose is fair for the gander, but it will cost money and the taxpayer will eventually have to pay the bill for this bullyism.

2 people liked this. [Like](#)



Thomas Polaczek 23 minutes ago

walmart society

where are your values

[Like](#)



eudaimon 0 minutes ago

Hopefully we are not about to enter an era of FOIA wars. If both sides of the political spectrum decide to bombard universities with FOIA requests, and professors decide to send out decoy e-mails (which would make it more burdensome to answer the requests), the administrative overhead of universities will increase. I can envision a new position title, VPFC (Vice President for FOIA Compliance). Free market advocates will then complain about the increasing administrative costs, and, ironically, everyone will have trouble keeping an eye on spending and corruption because the public records request line will wind around the block.

[Like](#)

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