



Opinion - Editorial Column

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## **Bryant: The colleges' secrecy fetish**

BY KEVIN BRYANT - Guest Columnist

The University of South Carolina recently paid \$890,000 to a felon to get out of a deal with him for buildings that he never built at Innovista. One might chuckle at that sort of spending in a government bureaucracy — but it could be your money.

The \$890,000 adds only a drop to the bucket of \$58 million in direct state aid to Innovista. The \$58 million in state money has been nearly doubled by local taxpayers. For more than \$100 million, we now have two empty buildings down by the river.

Keep that in mind the next time you talk to a laid-off teacher. The average teacher makes \$58,000 per year in salary and benefits.

USC claimed in a press release that its Development Foundation paid off the felon and that therefore “no taxpayer or donor funds are being used.” Federal Form 990s, however, reveal that the USC Development Foundation received \$3,093,934 in 2007 and \$4,439,918 in 2006 in “Direct Public Support,” which means contributions or gifts from donors. USC does not give us the identity of those donors.

The fact is that the public colleges in South Carolina fight tooth and nail to prevent you from knowing how they spend your money.

The colleges pushed legislation this year to reduce the paperwork requirements in their procurement practices. They claimed that it would cut down bureaucracy and save them money (it really would save you money, but they never actually phrase it that way).

I agree with the legislation, but I also insist that when public entities spend your money without strict oversight, they must post that spending online in order to foster accountability.

I made the same demand last year when the Department of Education asked for spending flexibility in local schools, and the school districts agreed. Now everyone can see for themselves how a school district spends your money.

The colleges, however, said no. They refused to add transparency to their spending flexibility legislation. I refused to let the legislation pass. Their reluctance to open their

books to the public has evolved over this legislative session into an unprecedented resistance to any attempt at sunshine.

The colleges decided to walk away from their legislation instead of opening up their books.

A few days before that, the president of a research university literally chased Sen. Lee Bright down a hallway imploring him not to request a Legislative Audit Council review of the school.

The culmination of the stonewalling by higher education came during the budget debate on the Senate floor. Sen. Mike Rose offered a budget amendment to force a college board of trustees to conduct a public vote on fee or tuition increases.

The amendment in no way precluded such increases. The amendment set no extraordinary bar for passage of such increases. The amendment simply required a public vote on such increases. The amendment was ruled out of order.

Sen. Rose immediately then offered an amendment to require that all colleges post online all transactions of more than \$100. Defeated. That second action confused me inasmuch as the Senate passed the very same amendment last year to require public schools to post their transactions online. The very same provision that requires transparency in your local school district, which remains in the budget today, was defeated when proposed for the colleges.

The colleges have something to hide. I have been lobbied by lots of people for lots of things. I have seen special-interest groups and their hired guns grease the rails for one pet bill and then turn around and kill another bill dead in its tracks. The colleges are particularly good at it.

But I have never before seen the maniacal resistance that I have seen to transparency in higher education. And do not forget that you are paying for the lobbying efforts that keep you from knowing where your money is being spent. The colleges have \$1.9 million budgeted in this fiscal year alone just for lobbying.

That's right. The colleges this year are spending \$1.9 million not on dorms or professors or keeping tuition low but on preventing you from knowing exactly where they spend the rest of your money.

Something definitely is rotten in Denmark, and Clemson, and Columbia, and Charleston. I will not stop until we will discover what stinks.

*Sen. Bryant is an Anderson Republican.*