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GOVERNMENT

Inside a Stealth Plan for Political Influence

To fight campus liberalism, a right-wing group is funneling thousands of dollars to student-government campaigns

By Michael Vasquez MAY 07, 2017 PREMIUM



André Chung for The Chronicle

A slate on the ballot for student government at the U. of Maryland at College Park withdrew after its outside funding — against campus rules — was discovered.

For Charlie Kirk, higher education is a political battleground — a place where

his "Team Right" has been losing for too long.

The rising young conservative star uses his frequent Fox News appearances to blast college campuses as "islands of totalitarianism" filled with liberal students and faculty members who force their worldview upon those around them. So Mr. Kirk's nonprofit political-advocacy group, [Turning Point USA](#), launched a secret counteroffensive. The goal: getting young conservatives elected to student government at universities around the country.

Campus-based groups of all political stripes have long encouraged their members to pursue leadership roles, and so have fraternities and sororities. What makes Turning Point unique, student leaders say, is that its outside parent organization provides critical manpower — and thousands of dollars — to help win elections.

Critics say Turning Point has taken on the role of a "super PAC" for student government.

Evidence of Turning Point's influence in student elections can be found from coast to coast. *The Chronicle* identified at least a dozen colleges that featured candidates who were either Turning Point members, were endorsed by Turning Point, or received campaign assistance from Mr. Kirk's group.



Getty Images

Charlie Kirk, founder of Turning Point USA: "You're not going to get teachers fired. But the only vulnerability there is, the only little opening, is student-government-association races."

"It might seem like kind of a silly thing to try to take over student-government associations," Mr. Kirk, 23, said during a public appearance before a conservative group in 2015. But he noted that at large universities, student-government budgets can be as much as tens of millions of dollars. And student leaders increasingly have the bully pulpit to champion certain causes — whether progressive issues like divesting college endowments from fossil fuels, or conservative priorities like the elimination of free-speech restrictions.

"We're not going to change the professor's mind. You're not going to get teachers fired," Mr. Kirk told the group. "But the only vulnerability there is, the only little opening, is student-government-association races and elections, and we're investing a lot of time and energy and money in it."

Turning Point's student-government push, he told the audience, is a "rather undercover, underground operation." The organization has been much more outspoken in promoting its [Professor Watchlist website](#), which lists faculty members who the conservative group believes have a "radical" agenda. Turning Point was founded in 2012 and says it has a presence on more than 1,000 college campuses.

Some of Turning Point's election candidates have been victorious. At a couple of other colleges, the organization's contributions eventually leaked out — leading to front-page student-newspaper scandals and the abrupt withdrawal of the affiliated candidates.

In elections this spring, candidates at Ohio State University and the University of Maryland at College Park dropped out after they were caught violating spending rules and attempting to hide the help they received from Turning Point.

The group's interest in University of Maryland elections appears to go back to at least 2015, when Breyer Hillegas, then president of the campus's College Republicans chapter, sent a message to the club's email list.

"Anyone who wants to run for SGA president, Turning Point is offering to pay thousands of dollars (literally) to your campaign to help get a conservative into the position," Mr. Hillegas wrote. "If you are interested in being one of these candidates, let me know!"

There are potential off-campus perks to stacking student government with conservatives. In state capitals and in Congress, the support or opposition of student leaders can help determine the fate of education legislation. If student-body presidents rally behind a proposed law, that boosts its credibility. A student-body president at the University of Colorado at Boulder, Marcus Fotenos, helped persuade state lawmakers this year to pass a bill outlawing "free-speech zones" on campus. Conservatives have

long complained that free-speech zones are a way for liberal administrators to stifle unpopular points of view.

“You spend \$5,000 on a race, you can win. You could retake a whole college or university.”

Gov. John W. Hickenlooper of Colorado, a Democrat, signed the law last month. Mr. Fotenos previously pushed for his student government’s legislative council to pass a resolution supporting free speech — a resolution that Turning Point [praised](#) as a "heroic stand" on the issue. Mr. Fotenos declined to comment to *The Chronicle* about any connection to Turning Point.

"I’m not sure what you’re referring to," Mr. Fotenos said before hanging up. "I’ve got to go now though, so I’ll talk to you later."

Mr. Fotenos’s victory last year was marred by bribery allegations — his "Revolution" slate of candidates was accused of trying to buy votes by giving away pizzas and cookie cakes to students. The college’s election commission voided Mr. Fotenos’s win and tossed him off the ballot.

Then something strange happened. A prominent Denver elections lawyer, Ryan R. Call, surfaced to argue on behalf of Mr. Fotenos and the other Revolution candidates. Mr. Call is a former chairman of the Colorado Republican Party and last year served as treasurer for a pro-Donald Trump super PAC called Rebuilding America Now.

After Mr. Call got involved, the University of Colorado’s chancellor, Philip P. DiStefano, decided to reinstate Mr. Fotenos as the winner. In an interview with Charlie Kirk, *The Chronicle* asked if Turning Point paid for Mr. Call’s legal services.

"I’m not at liberty to comment on that at this time," Mr. Kirk said.

Mr. Call told *The Chronicle* he would not reveal who paid him, because it is a "matter of attorney-client privilege."

Student government is where many future politicians get their start. Hillary

Clinton was a former **student-body president**. So were Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon, among others.

But even though college can be a political breeding ground, some student-government presidents say their roles have a tradition of being nonpartisan. The emphasis should be on helping students, they say, not on some proxy battle between left and right.

And they argue that Turning Point's aggressive involvement is the wrong way to build a pipeline of young conservative leaders.

"It is kind of shocking that they would turn to trying to corrupt student-government elections to try and do that," said Griffin Thomas, who was elected Rice University's student president last year. This year, after the Rice student newspaper revealed that Turning Point was actively recruiting students to run for office, Mr. Thomas pushed for legislation that prohibits students from accepting donations from outside groups. Student leaders at Rice approved Mr. Thomas's new rule unanimously.



André Chung for The Chronicle

The Diamondback student newspaper at the U. of Maryland at College Park obtained emails showing that Turning Point USA had designed the logo of the Unity Party slate of student candidates.

The largest public universities have the population of a small city, but student-government campaigns are clearly amateur affairs. College-office hopefuls might spend as little as a few hundred bucks on their campaigns. Even if they spend more, the purchases are modest items designed to raise name recognition: signs, T-shirts, or novelties like stickers, key chains, and beer koozies.

In that type of small-scale environment, a flood of outside money and manpower can make a big difference. In his 2015 public appearance before the David Horowitz Freedom Center, which describes itself as a group that "combats the efforts of the radical left and its Islamist allies," Mr. Kirk said the Turning Point staff provides a professional suite of campaign services to its chosen students.

"They wake up every single day, just as if you're running a congressional or mayoral race or senate race, trying to develop messaging, fliers, banners, Twitter profiles, to try to get that student-government-association person elected," Mr. Kirk said.

With student races, the strategy of outspending the competition comes relatively cheap.

"You would be amazed," Mr. Kirk said. "You spend \$5,000 on a race, you can win. You could retake a whole college or university."

Turning Point's assistance often continues right up to election day, when the organization will provide on-the-ground campaign workers who flood the university's hallways, rounding up students and collecting their electronic votes using iPads.

Email records obtained through a request to the University of South Florida show that the "leadership directors" within Turning Point's Campus Leadership Project can function as unofficial campaign managers for sponsored students. The project bills itself as a provider of scholarships, networking, and leadership training.

“Turning Point in general has a huge reputation for being really conservative. They're starting to call us the alt-right.”

One such leadership director, Alex Chorak, cared enough about the details of USF presidential candidate Ryan Soscia's campaign that he discussed T-shirt designs with him.

"Let me know what you think about this logo on the blue background. I like the lighter blue t shirts better and think people would love rocking that color especially in the spring," Mr. Chorak wrote. "Also I would love to get on a call with the campaign manager and just talk about some things I believe are extremely important."

In an interview with *The Chronicle*, Mr. Kirk rejected the idea that Turning Point is in charge of student campaigns.

"Giving T-shirt color advice, I think, is hardly running campaigns," he said. Mr. Kirk said that while Turning Point encourages its members to be student leaders, that can include getting involved in athletics or becoming the heads of fraternities or sororities.

If those students decide to run for office, Mr. Kirk said, it is a "bottom-up, grassroots, organic" decision. Mr. Kirk denied that his group is engaged in a stealth effort to get students elected — contradicting his statements from two years ago.

"Absolutely not," he said. "That's completely ludicrous and ridiculous, that there's some sort of secret plan."

The USF emails show the conversation between Mr. Soscia and Mr. Chorak went beyond just T-shirt colors, however. In December, shortly after he attended a Turning Point USA event, Mr. Soscia sent the organization an itemized spreadsheet with a proposed budget for his presidential campaign: \$19,537.

"Item quantity and event frequency is certainly up for discussion," Mr. Soscia wrote. "Please let us know what is available to be sponsored on your end."

A couple of weeks later, Mr. Chorak wrote that he was "working hard" to approve the USF budget.

"The reason it is taking so long is because it is roughly 3 times what the majority of schools are," he wrote. "I'm trying to explain that it is due to the importance, competition, and the relative size of the school."

In mid-December, hundreds of conservative college students descended on South Florida, courtesy of Turning Point USA. They had been chosen to attend the Winter In West Palm Beach Activist Summit, where the speakers included Donald Trump Jr.,

the conservative commentator Tomi Lahren, and Senators Ted Cruz of Texas and Ben Sasse of Nebraska.

"West Palm Beach was a blast," said Kadin Llewellyn, an Ohio State student who was until recently president of the university's Turning Point USA student chapter.

In between the speakers and training sessions, Mr. Llewellyn said he was introduced to Mary Honaker and Carla Gracia.

They were Ohio State students, too. And they were running for student-government president and vice president. Mr. Llewellyn said it was a Turning Point leadership director, Kennedy Copeland, who made the introduction.

During that conversation, Mr. Llewellyn said, Ms. Honaker talked openly about how Turning Point's financial assistance could be hidden from university administrators by simply underreporting how much the candidates had spent. Students at Ohio State aren't allowed to spend more than \$4,000 on their campaigns.

A couple of months later, the campaign was in full swing at Ohio State, but Mr. Llewellyn and many other members of his student chapter were upset. They harbored deep doubts about whether the "Mary and Carla" ticket was truly conservative.

"I felt I was manipulated and lied to during the process," said Mr. Llewellyn, who complained that Turning Point chose to back a candidate it thought could win, even if it meant abandoning its values.

Things would get worse for Turning Point at Ohio State. When the group's staff members attempted to recruit another student as part of their slate of election candidates, the student hit the "record" button — and leaked the audio to *The Lantern* student newspaper.

"A huge part of what Turning Point does, that's really important to the donors, is running these student-government races," Alana Mastrangelo, Turning Point's heartland regional director, said in the recorded phone call. She also emphasized the importance of secrecy.

"Keep it, like, on the DL," Ms. Mastrangelo told the student. "Like hard-core on the DL, because Turning Point in general has a huge reputation for being really conservative. They're starting to call us the alt-right."

Ms. Mastrangelo declined to comment to *The Chronicle*.

A text message sent to the Ohio State student, also leaked to *The Lantern*, explained part of Turning Point's motivation for keeping things hush-hush:

"Liberals consistently dominate campus student government and our goal is to take them out secretly without them knowing what's coming," wrote Kennedy Copeland, a leadership director for Turning Point USA. Ms. Copeland did not return a call from *The Chronicle*.

The leaked communications — combined with a photo showing the presidential candidate Mary Honaker attending the West Palm Beach activist retreat — doomed the Turning Point ticket.

The breaking point came when a rival campaign filed an elections complaint alleging that the "Mary and Carla" campaign had violated Ohio State's \$4,000 cap on spending, and then lied about it. The complaint alleged that the two students had "falsified and misrepresented numerous elements" of their fund raising and expenses, including the \$871 that the pair said they spent on campaign-related clothing.

In reality, the complaint said, the campaign had spent more than \$7,600 on campaign T-shirts. The complaint included receipts in that amount from a T-shirt vendor, billed to Mary Honaker.

Ms. Honaker and Ms. Gracia [dropped out](#) the same day.

Reached by phone, Ms. Honaker told *The Chronicle* that her campaign wasn't connected to Turning Point.

"They didn't end up being involved in our campaign, but they did approach us," Ms. Honaker said. Asked about Mr. Llewellyn's statement that her campaign was not only supported by Turning Point but that she had personally discussed strategies to hide the money, Ms. Honaker replied, "I don't recall that conversation happening."

Then she hung up. Ms. Gracia did not return calls seeking comment.

On March 21, Mr. Llewellyn submitted his resignation letter as president of Ohio State's Turning Point chapter.

"For what it is worth going forward, I have a few parting pieces of advice," he wrote. "Number one is to avoid the student election scene, as even politics on a micro level bring out the worst in people."

Turning Point USA is perhaps best known for its controversial [Professor](#)

[Watchlist](#) website, which identifies hundreds of college faculty members who, according to the group, "advance a radical agenda in lecture halls."

Mr. Kirk's larger goal, as outlined in a book he wrote last year, is to make Turning Point "the MoveOn.org of the right." In *Time for a Turning Point*, he praises MoveOn's influence in all 50 states and its strong campus presence, even as he blasts the progressive group for promoting "anti-American propaganda." Mr. Kirk's political vision calls for a greater emphasis on the principles of the Founding Fathers and shrinking the size of government.

Since founding Turning Point roughly five years ago, Mr. Kirk has enjoyed a rapid rise, buoyed by frequent media appearances and deep-pocketed donors who include Gov. Bruce Rauner of Illinois, a Republican, and Foster Friess, an evangelical philanthropist. In 2012, Turning Point had a budget of less than \$52,000, according to the group's tax returns. Last year, it was \$5.5 million, Mr. Kirk wrote in his book.

Bloomberg News called Mr. Kirk a "[Conservative Boy Wonder](#)" in 2015. A year later, he was delivering a speech at the Republican National Convention and campaigning with Donald Trump Jr. for the Republican nominee.

In mid-October, Mr. Kirk appeared at Fox News's Millennial Town Hall, in Las Vegas, seated next to Donald Trump Jr. and Lara and Eric Trump. Tax experts told *The Chronicle* that Turning Point's connection to the event may have violated federal rules prohibiting 501(c)(3) charities from engaging in political activity — the event had a pro-Trump tone, and a Turning Point staff member promised on Facebook that "expenses will be covered" for students who attended.

Mr. Kirk responded by saying Turning Point funds were not used to transport students to the town hall. Sally Wagenmaker, a lawyer who represents Turning Point, said, "This was a town-hall forum put on by a news outlet, not a political campaign event."

Back in 2015, when Mr. Kirk spoke about his student-government plans with the David Horowitz Freedom Center, he boasted that Turning Point's strategy to "retake student-government associations" had "never been done on a broad scale" before.

But in recent conversations with *The Chronicle*, Mr. Kirk described his group's role much differently. Turning Point, he wrote in an email, isn't doing anything different

than other campus organizations that encourage their members to be leaders, including athletic teams, Christian youth groups, Jewish student clubs, and Greek-life organizations.

"As you know, fraternities and sororities in most cases completely control the student-election process on campus," Mr. Kirk wrote. "Are they also a part of your story or is this story just about Turning Point USA?"

“Liberals consistently dominate campus student government and our goal is to take them out secretly without them knowing what's coming.”

In a phone interview, Mr. Kirk struck the same tone and said there have been Turning Point members who ran for student government without the parent organization's knowledge.

Mr. Kirk provided a copy of a thank-you email he'd recently received from a student who had just become SGA president at a liberal-arts college in New England. The student wrote that she was naturally a shy person but had gained the confidence to run for president after hearing Turning Point USA speakers encourage students to run for office at the West Palm Beach retreat.

"She ran completely on her own," Mr. Kirk said.

But records show that in many other cases, student campaigns are being supported by Turning Point in a way that typically doesn't happen with fraternities, student clubs, or other campus-based organizations.

Candidates backed by Turning Point have received professional campaign advice from its employees, who are willing to travel to campus for in-person, sit-down strategy sessions. In the recorded phone call at Ohio State, a Turning Point employee said the group would pay student campaign workers "\$20 to \$50 a day." When Turning Point provides a campaign with T-shirts, yard signs, or other essentials, that assistance can be worth thousands of dollars.

Next month, the National Campus Leadership Council will hold its Presidential Leadership Summit, which includes 200 incoming and departing student-body presidents. Andy MacCracken, the council's executive director, said one of the items

to be discussed is how to strengthen the election process — a decision partially prompted by reports about Turning Point in student media.

"There's a need to better understand best practices and really implement sound policies," Mr. MacCracken told *The Chronicle*. "Otherwise it could be easily sort of manipulated for outside political interests."

The University of Maryland's student government last year changed its election rules to prohibit donations from outside nonprofit groups, A.J. Pruitt, the student-government president, said the change was "somewhat in response" to Turning Point's interest in elections.

"That was new, and people were uncomfortable with that," Mr. Pruitt said in an interview. "It was not necessarily the political ideology of the organization but just the fact that an outside group was coming in and trying to meddle in a process that is really supposed to be student-centric."



André Chung for The Chronicle

Caroline Larkin (left) and Jon Ciavolino, shown here with Katie Albert, their campaign manager, were Unity Party candidates for student government at the U. of Maryland. They dropped out after the student newspaper disclosed their failure to mention Turning Point USA support in disclosures required by the university.

Despite the new rule, Turning Point became an issue in this year's student election at Maryland. *The Diamondback* student newspaper [obtained emails](#) showing that the Unity Party slate of student candidates had its campaign logo designed by Turning Point. That logo was then used for the campaign's T-shirts, yard signs, and social-media posts. The Unity Party never disclosed the help it received from Turning Point in campaign-finance reports filed with the university.

Less than 12 hours after the student newspaper published its article, the Unity campaign withdrew from the race. Mr. Pruitt and other members of the opposing One Party cruised to victory.

The secrecy that surrounds Turning Point's activities speaks volumes, Mr. Pruitt said.

"If you were comfortable with what you were doing, why wouldn't you just come out and do it?" he said. "If they really believe this was 100-percent right, why wouldn't they put their name on it?"

W

hen Alycia Hester, Turning Point USA's former campus coalitions

director, talks about student governments, she expresses frustration at the dominance of left-leaning students, whom she blames for the rise of "safe spaces" on campus. Ms. Hester, whose job at Turning Point focused on helping student-government campaigns in the Big 10 Conference, also says it's "weird" that some colleges don't allow Christmas trees to be displayed.

"Those little things are what student government controls," she said.

But Turning Point-backed candidates typically don't talk about safe spaces or Christmas trees on the campaign trail. What's striking about their campaign platforms is how generic and conventional they are. Combating sexual assault is a common theme, as are reducing student fees and encouraging diversity.

Yet there is one policy proposal that almost always shows up with Turning Point's candidates: promoting Uber.

The ride-sharing service has long been touted by conservative politicians as an example of free-market innovation. Student government can push for Uber in two important ways: lobbying local municipalities to allow Uber service on campus, and setting aside student-government funds for late-night "safe ride" programs that provide free or discounted Uber service to students.

In Mr. Kirk's book, a group of "Turning Point USA activists" are credited with helping the University of Southern California's student government reach its free-ride arrangement with Uber. Mr. Kirk's book mentions Uber 42 times.

This spring, when the "Mary and Carla" campaign started at Ohio State, it included an "Uber/Lyft" free-ride proposal, and the candidates cited USC's program as a model.

Where Student Elections Involved Turning Point

WON

U. of Colorado at Boulder

Election Date: April 2016

Candidates: Revolution slate of candidates, including for president

Turning Point praised winning candidates, declined to say whether it paid for their lawyer

U. of Wisconsin at Madison

Election Date: March 2017

Candidates: Maxwell Goldfarb and Dylan Resch

Turning Point paid for signs for legislative candidates

LOST OR WITHDREW

Ohio State U.

Election Date: March 2017

Candidates: Mary Honaker and Carla Gracia (withdrew)

Turning Point secretly backed slate of candidates accused of violating spending rules

Pennsylvania State U.

Election Date: March 2017

Candidates: Sammy Geisinger and Jorge Zurita-Coronado (lost)

Turning Point provided campaign advice and election-day volunteers

U. of Maryland at College Park

Election Date: April 2017

Candidates: Unity Party ticket of candidates, including for president (withdrew)

Turning Point provided campaign-logo design

U. of Oregon

Election Date: April 2016 Candidates: One Oregon slate of candidates, including for president (lost) Turning Point paid for campaign T-shirts

U. of South Florida

Election Date: March 2017

Candidates: Ryan Soscia and Logan Holland, candidates for president and vice president (lost)

Turning Point provided campaign guidance and discussed paying some expenses

U. of Virginia

Election Date: February 2017

Candidates: Kelsey Kilgore, candidate for president (lost)

Candidate said Turning Point employee was “helping me out with my campaign”

At the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa last year, the student-government president at the time, Lillian Roth, was an outspoken supporter of bringing Uber back

to campus. She even met with Tuscaloosa city officials on the issue, and the city allowed Uber to resume service last summer.

Ms. Roth was endorsed by Turning Point's student chapter at Alabama. Her father, Toby Roth, has long been active in Alabama politics and is a registered lobbyist for Uber. Mr. Roth said his daughter didn't have a conflict of interest in advocating for Uber.

"She was not a decision maker in the process," he said. "Whether or not Uber came to campus was not in her discretion. If she was on the City Council in Tuscaloosa, if she was the mayor of Tuscaloosa, then yes, I think recusal would be in order."

At the University of Oregon, a petition drive last year sought to bring back Uber, which left Eugene in 2015 after a dispute with the city. The petition surfaced at around the same time that a Turning Point-backed slate of candidates started campaigning for student government, according to Max Burns, a former Student Senate president. The slate was called One Oregon, and the candidates made the return of Uber one of their signature campaign promises.

Mr. Burns said he was suspicious of One Oregon's large amount of spending, which included buying half-page ads in the student newspaper for an entire week.

So he confronted the One Oregon candidate for student-government president, Zach Rentschler, in front of Mr. Rentschler's campaign tent. It was a heated conversation.

"Zach, are you getting your money from outside sources?" Mr. Burns demanded.

Mr. Rentschler admitted that he was.

The "Students for Uber" petition drive, meanwhile, was accused of sending out text messages that promoted One Oregon's campaign, and the [student newspaper reported](#) that the petition was linked to Turning Point USA.

The Turning Point connections proved fatal to One Oregon's campaign. Despite a fund-raising haul of nearly \$23,000 — more than double what two other student campaigns raised, combined — Mr. Rentschler lost his bid for the presidency. Students were bothered by Turning Point's involvement; in an interview, Mr. Rentschler acknowledged that the issue had hurt his candidacy.

But Mr. Rentschler, who describes his political leanings as "center right," said the importance of Turning Point was exaggerated. Bringing back Uber was his own idea, he said, and he was motivated by a desire to see students "getting home safe." He argued that Turning Point was never promised anything in return for its support.

What kind of support, exactly, did Turning Point provide? Mr. Rentschler declined to say.

The finance reports for One Oregon list Webfoot Screen Printing as the campaign's T-shirt vendor. Wayne Hench, the store's owner, says it was a somewhat unusual transaction.

For one, Mr. Rentschler wanted a total of 3,500 T-shirts and 100 sweatshirts, considerably more than the typical student-government campaign orders.

One Oregon wanted its shirts designed more elaborately, too. Campaigns normally ask Mr. Hench for a single color on the front and a single color on the back. Occasionally they'll splurge for two colors on the front.

"These guys had a three-color front with a three-color back," Mr. Hench said. The total bill: \$14,950.

Mr. Hench took a \$7,500 deposit, which became a hassle because the store's credit-card processor wasn't used to such large amounts. It was flagged as possible fraud, and Mr. Hench had to talk with the credit-card holder a couple of times on the phone to get the payment processed. The man paying the bill was understanding about the inconvenience.

That man, Mr. Hench said, was in Chicago. His name was Charlie Kirk.

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