

US news

# US ‘university’ spreads climate lies and receives millions from rightwing donors

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## **PragerU is not accredited but has become a key tool in pushing false claims to youngsters - and raked in \$200m from 2018 to 2022**

A rightwing media outlet promoting climate-crisis denialism and other “anti-woke” staples to young students and adults via social media has become a fundraising Goliath, raking in close to \$200m from 2018 to 2022 with big checks from top conservative donors, tax records reveal.

Founded in 2009 by the conservative talkshow host Dennis Prager, the eponymous Prager University Foundation is not an accredited education organization. But via online media its PragerU Kids division has become a key tool in spreading false claims to young people with short videos aimed at undercutting widely accepted science that climate crisis disasters are accelerating due, largely, to fossil-fuel usage.

PragerU’s influence in pushing false narratives about climate change and other far-right shibboleths such as airbrushing the brutal reality of American slavery gained ground when the Florida board of education in July gave the green light to using its videos and other materials in classrooms, a move that PragerU is trying to capitalize on in Texas and other states. On Tuesday, Oklahoma’s school system also approved the use of PragerU’s materials.

But some of PragerU’s expansion plans ran into trouble in August, when it was condemned by Texas education officials for announcing prematurely that Texas schools had approved the usage of its advocacy materials, generating new scrutiny and criticism of PragerU’s operations.

Prager’s website trumpets its mission and its niche in the conservative ecosystem.

“PragerU is the world’s leading conservative non-profit, focused on changing minds through the creative use of digital media.”

That sweeping mission has been fueled by big conservative money and slick marketing, and has led to PragerU’s rising influence on the right.

Among PragerU’s leading financiers are the oil and gas fracking billionaire brothers [Farris and Dan Wilks](#), who have ponied up at least \$8m over the past decade, according to Texas financial records.

Other top conservative donors to PragerU, which styles itself as alternative to the “dominant leftwing ideology in culture, media and education”, include the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the National Christian Charitable Foundation and the Dick and Betsy DeVos Foundation.

Tax records also reveal that PragerU has flourished financially in recent years as the Prager University Foundation raised \$196m from 2018 through 2022. That growth is underscored by revenues rising from \$17.9m in 2018 to \$65.1m in 2022.

Prager's chief executive, Marissa Streit, whose biography on LinkedIn says she once served in Israeli military intelligence, boasts on its website : "PragerU is redefining how people think about media and education. We produce edutainment – an intersection of education and entertainment. Our content is essential to shaping culture and preserving American ideals."

Streit's vision of "edutainment" seems to be reflected in PragerU cartoons and videos, including one about Christopher Columbus and the discovery of America, in which Columbus tries to downplay the horrors of slavery.

"Slavery is as old as time, and has taken place in every corner of the world, even amongst the people I just left. Being taken as a slave is better than being killed," the cartoon Columbus said. "I don't see the problem."

Other PragerU videos about the climate crisis make various false claims : they depict solar and wind power as environmentally dangerous, liken environmental activists to Nazis and claim recent record-breaking heat is just part of the natural weather cycle.

But the edutainment being peddled by PragerU has drawn widespread criticism from academic experts and watchdog groups, who fault its videos and teaching materials for children on the climate crisis, slavery and other issues as erroneous, and unworthy of state approval for classroom usage.

*Betsy DeVos and her husband, Dick DeVos Jr, in Washington in 2017. Photograph : Bloomberg/Getty Images*

"Prager University is not a university," said Naomi Oreskes, a Harvard professor of the history of science and the co-author of *Merchants of Doubt*. "By their own self-description, they are an advocacy group promoting conservative viewpoints on various political, economic and sociological topics.

"It is completely inappropriate for any state to grant them any influence, much less authority. over educational matters.

"For an American state government to authorize misleading, false and overtly biased materials for use in classrooms really crosses the Rubicon. It's a new and alarming low."

Other academics express related concerns.

"PragerU may be able to take advantage of overworked teachers in the classroom who are under time crunches to prepare climate-change lessons for their students, and therefore might turn to these inaccurate videos," said Max Boykoff, an environmental studies professor at the University of Colorado.

Boykoff added that boosting public funding of education could help "keep such unsafe and menacing weapons out of the classroom".

PragerU did not respond to a Guardian request to talk to Streit or Prager.

Critics notwithstanding, Prager, speaking at a Moms for Liberty conference in Philadelphia this summer, was blunt about PragerU's goals, boasting that "we bring doctrines to children", adding :

“What is the bad of our indoctrination ?”

Similarly, in a PragerU promotional video, Prager said : “We are in the mind-changing business, and few groups can say that.”

PragerU annual reports tout its success in spreading conservative doctrines to young people and adults. According to its most recent annual report, PragerU “edutainment” videos scored more than 1.2bn views in 2022 and over 7bn since its launch in 2009.

Until recently, PragerU content and its fight against what it labels the “woke agenda” depended mainly on Facebook and YouTube, but that is poised to expand with PragerU’s access to Florida classrooms, and other states potentially opening their classrooms too.

To keep growing its audience and operations, PragerU’s website showcases several ambitious fundraising programs. In September, PragerU is hosting a “founders’ retreat” in Nashville that seems geared to wooing more checks from major donors who give at least \$100,000 a year.

The event is slated to be “an exclusive three-day experience with our innermost circle of supporters”, and will feature Dennis Prager, the conservative Daily Wire’s editor-in-chief Ben Shapiro, and other Daily Wire “personalities”. The event is “open to Donor Club members at the founders level (total annual giving of \$100k or more)”.

Like PragerU, the Daily Wire has benefited mightily from billionaire and evangelical preacher Farris Wilks, who gave it \$4.7m in 2015 to launch its operations. Wilks remains a co-owner.

PragerU’s fundraising and marketing success in spreading its climate crisis denialism and other misinformation is alarming watchdog groups.

“Prager U plays a significant role spreading well-packaged propaganda about numerous issues, including attacks on efforts to mitigate climate change, through promoting the disinformation peddled by notorious climate-change deniers, and more,” said Lisa Graves, executive director of the progressive watchdog group True North Research. “ It has always targeted younger adults, but in recent years it has added a massive program targeting children with its slick and deceptive videos.”

Other environmental advocates raised broader concerns.

“The danger of the Prager climate misinformation is how quickly it can spread in this era where a lot of people, including children, are being trained not to trust media sources or scientists,” said Kert Davies, who leads investigations at the Center for Climate Integrity. “That it would be in schools as curriculum is even scarier.

“The Prager YouTube library on climate change features a who’s who of career climate deniers and discredited contrarians. These folks will never admit they are wrong, and never change their minds no matter the weight of scientific evidence.”

Davies added : “Prager climate disinformation is dangerously out of step with reality. It is being disseminated just as the global consensus on the climate crisis grows stronger, as extreme weather events seemingly try to outdo each other.”

More broadly, Oreskes sees the spread of PragerU advocacy materials into Florida classrooms and possibly other states as harmful to educational values.

She said : “Every student has a basic right to an education that, as much as possible, is truthful, and,

as much as humanly possible, objective. This is the opposite.”

**Peter Stone** *in Washington*

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**P.-S.**

- The Guardian. Wed 6 Sep 2023 11.00 BST :

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/sep/06/prageru-climate-change-denier-republican-donors>

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