Ohio State to open new drug policy center

By Jennifer Smola
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Ohio State University will create a new Drug Enforcement and Policy Center thanks to a $4.5 million gift from the Charles Koch Foundation, the university announced Wednesday.

The center will be established within the Moritz College of Law and will promote interdisciplinary research, scholarship, education, community outreach and public engagement on societal impacts around drug laws and enforcement.

The center will serve as an independent source for researchers, policymakers, media and others about drug enforcement and reform, the university said. Research would include how the “war on drugs” and other enforcement policies have affected Americans over the last 50 years, examination of ongoing efforts in various states to legalize and regulate marijuana and other drug enforcement-related analysis.

The center comes at a time when thoughtful, independent analysis on drug laws and enforcement are desperately needed, said Douglas A. Berman, a professor at the Moritz College of Law who will lead the policy center.

“I’ve been persistently annoyed that the advocacy and oftentimes even the legal reforms (in the drug enforcement realm) have gotten ahead of the data and the analysis,” Berman said.

Independent, academic research and analysis is necessary, especially as advocates, policymakers, community leaders and others consider how to tackle major issues such as the opioid epidemic and marijuana legalization,” said Berman, who specializes in criminal justice and sentencing.

“It’s not just the advocates who sometimes can struggle with being objective and independent ... there’s also pressure, whether it’s the politicians or other folks working in this space to sometimes have to claim they have an answer when they might not,” Berman said.

Berman said academic freedom and independence have been front and center in creating the policy center.

That’s not always the case in drug policy research, he said, pointing to some research funded by the pharmaceutical industry interested in protecting its bottom line.

“The (drug policy) space desperately needs folks who are going to come to this material ... without the same kind of institutional pressures that a lot of other folks necessarily have,” he said.

In addition to the college of law, the center will draw on institutional expertise from the John Glenn College of Public Affairs, the College of Social Work and other university departments. The center will make three initial hires, with administrative and researcher needs determined over the course of the next year, Berman said.

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