ACTA
Higher Ed Now
2016 Year In Review

Christine: You are listening to Higher Ed Now, ACTA's podcast on issues and higher education. I'm your host, Christine Ravold.

00:00:13
Christine: It's hard to believe it but 2016 is coming to a close and it's been a tumultuous year in higher education and a very successful for ACTA. To reminisce and reflect, ACTA's president, Michael Poliakoff, is back on the show. Michael, welcome back.

Michael: Thank you, Christine. It's wonderful to be at ACTA every day and always wonderful to talk with you on Higher Ed Now. You're absolutely right. It's been a year of challenges, a turbulent, tumultuous year, but our nation is a nation that overcomes challenges and ACTA's very birthright is to identify and face what we need to improve. I don't think too manty people ever think about the acronym that is behind ACTA, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. Not the self-evident acronym but the one that goes all the way back to Latin, to classical Latin. ACTA are things that are done, that are accomplished, and that's what ACTA is about: getting things done.

As we often point out, America has traditionally called itself the envy of the world for higher education. ACTA's focus is to make sure that really remains true.

Christine: And this year, we've done our utmost to make sure our values and principles are the ones that we're putting forward that really promote the quality and the rigor that we look for in higher education.

So then, Michael, can you tell me what you think the biggest moments of this year were in higher education? I know it's hard.

00:01:52

Michael: That's like asking me to tell you which of my five children I love the most. [*Laughs.*]

Christine: How about two? You get one for ACTA and then one for the nation at work.

Michael: So, okay. [*Laughs.*] I think our work in civic education has been absolutely crucial. And I will give ACTA a lot of credit. We did it well. Our reports, as always, are documented carefully, footnoted. But this time we drew the attention of the nation by asking questions in a survey that led up to the release of a crisis in civic education, questions that any reasonable person would be shocked to know that college students, college graduates, can't answer. This was the kind of wakeup call that the nation needed and it rather went viral.

Christine: It certainly did. I was monitoring the Twitter account that day. [*Laughter.*] We got tremendous coverage and reached a whole bunch of new audiences through the success of that report and really branched out.

Michael: Popular opinion is often correct opinion and that one is pretty straight forward that when we have the students who graduate and are supposed to be taking up their roles as informed citizens, unable to even to answer as basic a question as that, we've got a problem. And even worse was the finding that so many college students were unable to identify, again, in a multiple choice survey the term lengths of members of Congress. If they go into a voting booth at all, do they even know how long they are sending the people that they vote for to Washington, D.C.

So yes. A crisis in civic education. Unimaginable amounts of money that have been spent since we first in the year 2000 issued our report Losing America's

Memory. But money that's been misspent that hasn't gotten to the basic issue of making sure that students understand that they have the requirements in college that will lead them to that knowledge, how we are a self-governing people.

00:04:08
Christine: A couple of other things we've dug into this year, it was a year of civic education for us, looking at history requirements even for history majors, which would bring us to our report: No U.S. History.

Michael: Again, absolutely shocking to see how many of our most prestigious institutions, and we covered the top twenty-five, as it were. Liberal Arts colleges, Public Flagship universities, National universities, and found….

Christine: And it wasn't according to us. It was according to U.S. News, so we looked for other sources.

Michael: That's right. We took the popular opinion of the ones that are considered the most eminent, the most elite, and we found that they really were betraying the public trust, that within the ten, eleven, twelve required courses for history majors, so many of them, and that was all but eleven did not have a legitimate U.S. history requirement. And some of the push-back we got that tried to justify this was even….

Christine: I think Colby College was one of those institutions that felt they didn't really need to require it.

Michael: It's so much more important, they said, to give students an opportunity to understand the world. We're not for a moment saying that world history is not of vital importance. But for a history major never to have a focused course on this nation's history is really an abdication of academic leadership. Even for

understanding global history, it's impossible to do that without knowing well the United States' story.

Christine: Absolutely. It influenced so much moving forward from that point, including global history and geopolitics. So that's some of the academic excellence work we've been doing. I know there's more because we've been working on it so hard. What do you think, Michael?

00:06:10
Michael: It was a good year for "What will they learn?", our core curriculum study. Two new schools emerged as A schools requiring six or seven of the core requirements that we identify. And even more heartening was the number of schools, dozens, that contacted us asking us how they could create better core curricula. This was the goal of the project.

Christine: Which schools got the A's? Which ones got A's, Michael?

Michael: That was St. Katherine's College, now St. Katherine's University in California and the Merchant Marine Academy. It is, of course, a very heartening thing to see that all of our U.S. service academies have very rigorous core curricula and not just in the STEM fields, which would be expected for such a career, but also in the liberal arts more broadly. The preparation of an officer requires that kind of vision – would that our elite liberal arts colleges would follow that lead.

Christine: Absolutely. I think all of them except for the U.S. Naval Academy gets A's, which mean the midshipmen need to work on their football as well as adding one more requirement.

Michael: But I will say, they were very close.

Christine: It was close. Looking at academic excellence, we also focus on accountability as part of our main mission. This year, we had a couple of successes in that department.

00:07:36
Michael: We did, indeed. We launched our administrative cost project. We take it as a sign of serious problem when the growth in administrative expenditure exceeds that of instructional expenditure, and we found quite a number of schools that were falling into that category. We've written to Boards of Trustees and Presidents informing them of our findings, and I will say that it has been gratifying to see that a number of schools have said, "Yes, we have to do better." And that's, after all, the sacred trust that educators hold, to deliver high quality education at the lowest possible cost.

Christine: Our findings were enough for people to start doing their own research into their accounting practices and the University of Wyoming, even though they didn't like what they found, agreed that they had to do something different.

Michael: Well, exactly right. Good practice is to diagnose and to take action on the basis of the findings. And University of Wyoming deserves a great deal of credit for doing that. It's much easier to deny, to look for excuses, but to be able to say that, "We have to improve our procedures." That's a sign of real educational leadership.

Christine: It should be fair to note that not always is that a red flag, but it does bear looking into.

Michael: Exactly. There are sometimes quite legitimate reasons for administrative growth. But it is the kind of thing that we call upon Boards of

Trustees to examine. As our letter said, “No metric is in and of itself just positive, but it is always a sign to take a serious look at the findings and see what lies underneath.”

00:09:32
Christine: All right, Michael. So those are the moments in accountability, and that moves us over into academic freedom.

Michael: I’m so glad you asked because you had asked me for the two most important things and I pushed back and said, “That’s impossible to answer.” But I really will say that academic freedom is just at the very top of that list. There is no such thing as great or even good liberal arts education without academic freedom. It is the oxygen that feeds true inquiry. And I’ll go ahead and say that it is the heritage of the west to be able to debate, to engage, to argue in the pursuit of truth. Truth is often a hard thing to find but we certainly won’t find it unless we’re willing to challenge assumptions, to have our own assumptions challenged. I’m very happy to be called “logo centric,” which the post-modernist (turil?) is a term of abuse. But it is by focusing on reason that we come to good solutions.

What’s the alternative? Either the Maoist power coming through the barrel of a rifle or we might say getting back to American college campuses—the noisiest possible crowd. Those are not the ways that we pursue the truth.

Christine: No, but it’s good to follow Socrates with steps and try.

Michael: Indeed so. Indeed. To examine our lives, to examine our assumptions. This is what liberal arts education is about. And it is, indeed, disheartening to see the disinvitation.

Christine: Yes. So we had Ben Shapiro this year, Milo Yiannopoulos, Jason Riley. Regardless of what you think, they're kind of different from each other all experiencing disinvitations of the hands—usually—of students.

00:11:30
Michael: But I will respond to that by citing a real bright spot. Namely, Mitch Daniels, the President of Purdue to has repeated over and over again in convocations and in various communications that the remedy for speech you don't like is more speech, not shutting down speech. And Purdue has been a real leader in making sure that's part of the operating principle of that great university.

Christine: And Purdue was an early adopter of the Chicago Principles and I'm proud to report that, since the Chicago Principles have come out, we've been writing to Board after Board about adopting the Chicago Principles. And, to date, we know of seventeen schools that have adopted them and made them part of their policy.

Michael: That's right. And, of course, Purdue is one of the very early schools to adopt those principles. And not just to adopt them in a kind of formalistic way, but to really operationalize them. And, yes. I'm very proud that ACTA wrote to over twenty-one thousand trustees around the nation asking them to rise to this challenge and to make sure that it is fully incorporated, fully institutionalized at their colleges or universities.

And obviously the news tells us almost day after day that this is an ongoing crisis. Just this week, we've learned that a picture of William Shakespeare was taken down from the English Department at the University of Pennsylvania. Our wonderful intern from last summer, Nayeli Riano, just published an article about this. How sad it is to see the fear that the study of even some of the most important works, obvious masterpieces of world civilization, that challenge us to

deeper understanding of human experience, are avoided as threats to the dominant orthodoxy of the day.

Just taking a jump for a moment to K-12 and then I'll come back to higher education. Huckleberry Finn and "To Kill A Mockingbird" removed from school libraries in Accomack County.

00:14:02
Christine: Well, the good news is they did change their minds on that one but two vital works that explain why diversity is important being removed or found objectionable is disheartening for just about everybody.

Michael: It's so right. In this world of trigger warnings and micro-aggression hunting in higher education, we've seen everything from F. Scott Fitzgerald to Ovid's "Metamorphoses" and even, perhaps most shockingly, Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart," the Nobel Prize-winning book on the damages of colonialism in Africa. Even this book that throws down such a powerful gauntlet to imperialistic and (heterolytic?) notion.

Christine: For sure.

Michael: Exactly. But even that comes under attack. It is a beast that devours itself. And until we restore an understanding that education involves being uncomfortable, confronting ideas that are challenging, we are only going to see this awful process continue. My mind strays back to a moment when I was at the (15:22) University of (Gottingen?) in Germany, and came across the square where the Nazis burned books. And there, in a black stone plaque, were the words of Heinrich Heine ("*Dort wo man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man auch am Ende Menschen"*). "A person who burns books will eventually also burn people." And we need to remind ourselves that any attempt to persecute works of

literature is a very, very dangerous step towards a level of repression that challenges everything that we hold dear.

00:15:59
Christine: On a later note that's still related, speaking of burning books, I also found this year that students were now required to get permission slips from their parents to read Fahrenheit 451.

Michael: One was my really reels in horror at the blasted heath of illiberalism that is going to be in front of us. So, yet again, to get to the happier note, we have seen schools emerging that are saying very confidentally, "This is not the way we will behave." The University of Chicago Dean bravely, boldly and clearly with the support of his President, wrote to incoming students saying that, 'At University of Chicago, we do not disinvite speakers. We do not look for safe spaces. This is not the way we operate. And ACTA's had an important role in making sure that that message is being spread widely.

Christine: Absolutely. And that was a shining moment for 2016. Also, the push for Western Civilization at Stanford is a nice way to bridge the gap between academic excellence and academic freedom.

Michael: Indeed it is. And it's a pity it didn't go further but one—to use that wonderful Chinese phrase: "Every journey begins with a single step." And the students at Stanford did take quite a step. I'm gong to actually digress a bit since you very astutely joined Academic Freedom and Academic Excellence. We scolded Hamilton College this year.

Christine: Yes, we did.

Michael: And deservedly. Hamilton instituted it's first requirement in its open curriculum that every department had to produce a diversity course. And ACTA's response to that was, "Shame on you. You don't require even intermediate level foreign language study yet you want to talk about diversity. This is diversity on the cheap. It's lazy." If the school is serious about diversity, it ensures its students walk the walk, show the respect for another culture by learning its language.

00:18:24
Christine: Maybe they talk the talk but in someone's native tongue.

Michael: Yes. Exactly. Well said.

Christine: That's a lot of work for 2016. Also, we had amazing Merrill Award recipients this year and Niall Ferguson and Ayaan Hirsi Ali.

Michael: That moment really did crystalize all the things that ACTA holds most dear. And, I will say, they were just electrifying, energizing presentations. We were honored to have with us Professor Ferguson at the Folger's Shakespeare Library. What a wonderful setting to celebrate our Merrill Award winners. And to reflect on what the serious study of the humanities is about. Professor Ferguson talked about the crisis in the teaching of history and called for a new focus, applied history, making sure that we're not doing this in a way that's trivial or nugatory, but focuses on the things that help us understand how to live better.

And Ayaan Hirsi Ali sent us a wonder video. I should mention that this was the first time that we gave the Merrill Award to a married couple. Professor Ferguson and Ayaan Hirsi Ali are husband and wife, and what a wonderful team in advancing those crucial principles of western civilization, the openness to ideas to dialogue and debate. And Ayaan gave a very moving presentation on why

those principles have to be maintained in the university and how particularly they apply to the challenge of improving the lives of women in the Islamic world. She addressed this with her quintessential honesty and integrity and courage – being able to look at those things that have to change, things that we owe the rest of the world in order to improve the lot of women, not only in the Middle East but all over the world. It was a beautiful and moving presentation that she sent to us.

00:20:34
Christine: Well, I'll just wholeheartedly endorse that. I think there's one more moment I wanted to touch on this year. We spoke about it in last week's Podcast but we did expand the fund for academic renewal, which I think is a nice ray of hope in the landscape of higher education and gives some power back to the people.

Michael: Vey well said that alumni have been wonderfully supportive of their colleges and universities, but also increasingly frustrated that their generosity is not used for the things that advance the causes dear to their heart, causes like economic literacy and great books and academic freedom and western civilization, and a great range of other important topics. And so they look for a way to invest in their colleges future, not in the general fund, but in these very important projects. And our fund for academic renewal is intended to provide them with all the resources to do that.

Christine: So you heard it here from reforming the way you give to reforming the way students understand their own freedom and the importance of education and the informed life. We were getting to all of it this year. Unfortunately, we didn't finish all of it but there's some exciting projects coming in 2017 that should work to continue these important advancements.

00:22:11

Michael: Yes, indeed. We'll have a new report on best practices. I fear we may have been a little (dower) today, Christine, you and I, but ACTA really is an optimistic organization and one of the things we like to celebrate is the emergence of really excellent initiatives and reforms and to send those out widely to all our twenty-one thousand trustees so that they can be replicated around the country. And that'll be coming out probably in February. We're going to do a major essay on the threat to academic freedom that's come out of the boycott divest and sanction movement against Israel and the all-too-frequent examples of speakers being shouted down by anti-Israel demonstrators. We're going to be working hard on a series of guides for trustees to give them an understanding of what quality is in core subjects that should be required at their colleges and universities.

So yes. ACTA is an adrenaline rush every morning. We run on caffeine and adrenaline and the deep friendship that we have with one another.

Christine: And a little bit of Latin.

Michael: And a little bit of Latin, yes. Yes indeed.

Christine: And we'll probably be seeing more from the Fund for Academic Renewal, the Oasis of Excellence, and hopefully this program, "Higher Ed Now."

Michael: We've got some great people in mind for the coming year so please continue to stay with us and stay in touch. We really appreciate when our listeners, when our ACTA supporters, send us their ideas so that we can constantly grow in our understanding of what's happening out there in higher education.

00:24:00

Christine: And if you want to send us that feedback electronically, I'd suggest sending it to info@goacta.org. I'd say, for myself and I think you too, Michael, that we are incredibly grateful for all of our supports and an amazing 2016 and we wish all of you the best in 2017.

Michael: Absolutely. It is a joy to be part of the ACTA network, the growing ACTA network. Sometimes we even call ourselves the ACTA family and I don't think that is too much of an exaggeration.

Christine: That is not overstating it. This is Higher Ed Now signing off for 2016. I'm Christine Ravold. This is Michael Poliakoff.

Michael: It is a pleasure to be with you.

Christine: We'll see you next year.

[End]