



**ACTA**  
AMERICAN COUNCIL OF  
TRUSTEES AND ALUMNI

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## **BACKGROUNDER**

### **Founding and History**

In 1995, Jerry Martin and Anne Neal founded the National Alumni Forum (NAF). The mission of NAF was to give voice to concerned alumni across the country. NAF became the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) in 1997 to emphasize better its work with university trustees. Since then ACTA has expanded its programs and initiatives, growing to a full-time staff of 14, dedicated to ensuring that American higher education remains the envy of the world.

### **Mission**

ACTA is the only organization that works directly with alumni, donors, and trustees to improve American higher education. It focuses on the “Three A’s”: academic excellence, academic freedom, and accountability. Accordingly, ACTA advocates for rigorous liberal arts education, the free exchange of ideas, and a high-quality college education at an affordable price.

### **Academic Excellence**

America’s democratic republic is premised on the need for an educated citizenry. Our Founders deemed public education to be essential for sustaining a free society. That education must have at its core a sound foundation in the liberal arts, which uniquely prepares students for career, community, and citizenship. By requiring students to gain a broad base of core subjects, colleges prepare them to engage new and challenging ideas and viewpoints. A strong core curriculum creates a common conversation for students and builds a vibrant academic community. ACTA opposes practices that threaten or undermine academic standards and believes that the mission of higher education is teaching, learning, and the rigorous pursuit of truth.

### **What Will They Learn?<sup>TM</sup>**

What Will They Learn?<sup>TM</sup> is ACTA’s award-winning project that rates the core curriculum at over 1,100 colleges and universities. It encompasses every four-year public university with a stated liberal arts mission as well as hundreds of private colleges and universities, selected on the base of size, mission, and regional representation. What Will They Learn?<sup>TM</sup> assigns grades of “A”–“F” to institutions based on how many of the seven core subjects essential to a liberal education they require: Composition, Literature, intermediate-level Foreign Language, U.S. Government or History, Economics, Mathematics, and Natural or Physical Science. Through this project and through technical support, ACTA encourages schools to improve their curricula. The project has also served to increase awareness of curricular standards throughout higher education.

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## **Academic Freedom**

The lifeblood of academic excellence is academic freedom and free expression. A university represents a special community that must protect and foster spirited inquiry and debate, for they are the engines of intellectual progress. ACTA directs attention to free speech issues on campus and writes to boards and institutions to defend free speech and academic freedom.

## **Accountability**

Taxpayers subsidize higher education through state investment, student aid, and federally backed loans, and students and their families pay large sums for a college education. ACTA believes that colleges in return are obligated to deliver a high-quality education at an affordable cost to students and parents. America spends more money per student than any other industrialized nation in the world but overall gets lackluster results for its large investment. Colleges must be accountable for burgeoning administrative costs and wasteful management of resources. ACTA advises policymakers of strategies to control costs and monitor outcomes through its many white papers and guides and through its presentations to boards and to federal and state governments.

## **Accreditation Reform**

ACTA has long been on the frontier of higher education accreditation reform. The current system of higher education quality assurance is broken and in need of thorough overhaul. Under the current system, regional accreditors do not hold colleges accountable for learning gains or student success. Yet these organizations hold vast gatekeeping power over access to the federal financial aid crucial to individuals and institutions. Colleges with poor retention and graduation rates continue to be accredited. Underperforming institutions continue to receive federal education dollars even as national student debt climbs. ACTA has proposed a streamlined alternative system based on audited certification of student outcomes and fiscal stability. ACTA's proposals have steadily gained bipartisan support, and ACTA will continue to work to make sure that higher education is efficient and that students receive a quality education.

## **Governance for a New Era**

ACTA works with trustees through its Governance for a New Era project and the Institute for Effective Governance (IEG). Trustees are the fiduciaries of their institutions, and effective university governance requires trustees to be well informed of university business and actively engaged in policymaking. IEG provides printed trustee guides, board retreats, consultation services, and continuing education to higher education trustees to support them in their fiduciary responsibilities.

## **Donor Intent**

ACTA is a strong proponent of fidelity to donor intent. Through intentional giving, alumni and donors can help their schools. ACTA published *The Intelligent Donor's Guide to College Giving*, which has practical advice for donors seeking to support their alma maters through philanthropy. We keep alumni and donors well informed about developments in higher education

through our quarterly newsletter, *Inside Academe*, and our monthly eNewsletters. ACTA's Fund for Academic Renewal will provide direct advisement and services for prospective college donors.

### **Oases of Excellence**

ACTA assists philanthropists in making the most of their giving dollars. Targeted giving by donors and alumni have created the Oases of Excellence. The Oases are academic programs that increase intellectual diversity on their home campuses. There are over 50 such programs across the country that serve as havens for rigorous intellectual discourse *and* honor donor intent. They create lasting value on campuses and mentor dedicated students who benefit from their rich courses and programming.