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A Fight for Academic Excellence Rages in Arkansas

By David Azerrad, Senior Researcher

Generally, when a university is recognized for excellence, it takes pride in that fact. But in Arkansas, the flagship university's administration is preparing to throw away a core curriculum that is head and shoulders above the rest of the country.

You can see the proof of UA's excellence on ACTA's college guide website, *WhatWillTheyLearn.com*. There, the University of Arkansas is currently one of only eight universities to receive an "A" out of the more than 170 institutions from across the country whose curricula we have reviewed so far.

In fact, an "A" doesn't do full justice to the depth and breadth of Arkansas' core. Currently, in order to graduate from the

J. William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences, all students are required to take English composition, philosophy, math, world literature, Western civilization, American history, fine arts, science, *and* foreign language.

ACTA therefore lost no time in responding after hearing that the university was planning on gutting its stellar core by cutting away important requirements. Under a plan being pushed by senior administrators, the foreign language requirement would be eliminated, along with Western civilization, philosophy and literature. Math and science would be trimmed, too.

ACTA immediately wrote two letters to the University of Arkansas System board of

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Old Main at University of Arkansas

Register Now for 2010 ATHENA Roundtable

This year's ATHENA Roundtable, "The Purposeful University," will be held on **November 4-5** at The Union League in Philadelphia. Events will include a tour of Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell, a special wine tasting for Donor Society members, and a gala dinner at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology for the presentation of the 2010 Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education. Register online now at www.goacta.org or call us at 202-467-6787. Look for a printed invitation in the mail at summer's end!

www.goacta.org

info@goacta.org

1-888-ALUMNI-8

Editor's Note: In response to the news that the University of Arkansas planned to gut its core curriculum, ACTA reached out to friends and allies across the country, inviting them to write directly to the university. Many distinguished writers, educators, and philanthropists responded. Below are just a few excerpts from letters to the chancellor.

Louis Chandler
Associate Professor Emeritus
University of Pittsburgh

"... As someone who has spent most of his professional career as a University Professor and Administrator, I can well appreciate that there are often conflicting opinions, arising out of ideological, social, political, and economic concerns, that drive decisions that should be, as much as possible, academic ones. In spite of those pressures, I do believe those who truly care about the soul of education must stand up and argue for the importance of maintaining the academic heritage we have managed to acquire in this country...."

Marvin R. Murray
former Rector
George Mason University

"...Having served a term as Rector (Chairman of the Board) at George Mason University in Virginia, I learned that administrators sometimes take the easy or politically correct path to administrative challenges rather than protecting the quality of the curriculum and the reputation of the institution. Fortunately, state universities have boards that represent the citizens and are charged with the responsibility of providing guidance and direction to the administration and faculty...."

James Bradfield
Elias W. Leavenworth Professor of Economics
Hamilton College

"...The faculty here abolished our core curriculum several years ago in favor of an 'open curriculum.' Consequently, the quality of the education that our students receive has suffered, as they avoid both the breadth that good citizenship in a republic requires and the challenges that are required to sharpen one's intellect...."

Editor's Note: The following from Professor Kors was in response to For the People, ACTA's report card on higher education in Illinois.

Alan Charles Kors
Henry Charles Lea Professor of History
University of Pennsylvania

"... there was one question (among many, but one in particular) whose answers appalled me deeply. In response to the question, 'On my campus, there are courses in which students feel they have to agree with the professor's views on the topic at hand in order to get a good grade,' **44.3 percent** said yes. The answers, of course, don't prove that such agreement with a professor is in practice essential to being graded fairly, but the very **fact of that perception** should be of the most urgent concern to all faculty who care about critical thought and intellectual diversity. Learning that students perceive that an informed, well-framed, critical argument would not be graded fairly if it disagreed with the professor's own views, any decent faculty would make the cause of such a perception the highest priority of the exercise of their obligations to students and to higher education. I hope that ACTA will keep the public informed of the response (or non-response) of colleges and universities in Illinois to that devastating finding."

Jim Hill
Louisville, KY

You and your staff are doing a wonderful job with ACTA and in spreading its very important messages. I'm proud and delighted to be a financial supporter, as modest as my contributions may sometimes be.

Editor's Note: Let it be known that we appreciate each and every gift! And we are especially grateful for those who make ACTA's work possible at the highest level by joining one of our Donor Societies. That is why we truly regret having omitted Ronald & Elaine Rich of Ohio and John & Aldyth Hutson of Florida from the listing of our President's Circle in ACTA's 2009 Annual Report. We thank all of them for their stalwart support of our efforts.

ACTA in the NEWS

ACTA's reform efforts have increasingly garnered widespread media attention. In April, *Washington Post* columnist Kathleen Parker—winner of the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for commentary—cited ACTA in a column on Americans' increasing historical illiteracy. After citing statistics from ACTA's *Losing America's Memory* that suggest students are superb at learning about pop culture but weak on history, Parker pointed out that "Students can't be blamed for not knowing what they haven't been taught," and went on to cite ACTA research showing that colleges and universities increasingly do not include history as a required course (a trend ACTA continues to track on WhatWillTheyLearn.com). The column ran in 174 newspapers across the United States and Canada, reaching a combined 14 million readers. ●



Kathleen Parker

Illinois Report Card Bears Fruit

By Charles Mitchell, Program Director



Illinois Representative Renee Kosel

Abraham Lincoln famously intoned in his Gettysburg Address that in this country, government is “of the people, by the people, for the people.” ACTA has known for years that most college students—78 percent of those surveyed for our report *Losing America’s Memory*, for instance—don’t know this. What’s even more disheartening is that our recent report card on the Great Emancipator’s home state of Illinois showed that many of the trustees there don’t seem to understand it either. Thankfully, that is changing.

The first area where our report card—understandably entitled *For the People*—has had a real impact is transparency.

Clearly, government that is “of the people, by the people, for the people” must be accountable to the people and open to their inspection. That’s why we were so appalled when the University of Illinois not only failed to post over a year’s worth of its board minutes on the Internet, but failed to turn them over to us after a Freedom of Information Act request.

The university was able to do this because of a loophole in the state’s Open Meetings Act that allowed public bodies to conceal meeting minutes they had not yet approved. The trustees essentially sat on the minutes, denying the public the ability to check on what their trustees had been doing.

As in many other states, the trustees of the University of Illinois are appointed by the governor of Illinois. And as you’ve surely seen on the news, last year, then-Gov. Rod Blagojevich was removed from office. His successor, Gov. Pat Quinn, replaced most of the trustees—and the new board released all the minutes. But when ACTA traveled to Springfield to release our report card, and when we told the story of the minutes, many legislators were concerned that it was possible to keep public information from the public.

They took action. Specifically, one of the legislators we briefed, Representative Renee Kosel, introduced a bill to close

the loophole in the Open Meetings Act, and it just passed the Illinois General Assembly unanimously. As of press time, it awaits Gov. Quinn’s signature. Given his record on transparency—in addition to replacing most of the University of Illinois trustees, he also required all public boards to post audio of their meetings online—we are confident he will add his John Hancock.

The second area where *For the People* is leaving a footprint is in the area of college costs. One of the most explosive findings of our report card was that in-state tuition and fees at Illinois’ public universities jumped by an average of 56 percent during our review period—even after adjusting for inflation. ACTA publicly stated that enough was enough, and our attention has already made a real difference: On May 13, the Southern Illinois University board of trustees voted to freeze tuition.

Considering that during our review period, this board presided over increases of 59.8 percent at SIU’s main campus in Carbondale and 57.3 percent at its St. Louis-area campus in Edwardsville, this is quite a change in direction. And given that any universities that are truly “for the people” owe it to the people not to take a penny more of their money than necessary, it’s a welcome shift indeed. ●

Campuses Participate in Patriot Week

ACTA has long documented the failure of universities to ensure historical literacy (see our *E Pluribus Unum* report for one example). But when faculty and administrators fall down, others will step up. Patriot Week is an annual collaborative project, held September 11-17 in the state of Michigan, intended to renew Americans’ understanding of their history. Already planning to participate are groups from the University of Michigan, Grand Valley State University, Oakland University, Wayne State University, and Cooley Law School. For more information, visit www.patriotweek.org.



ACTA Partners with The Aspen Institute for Trustee Seminar

By Heather Lakemacher, Senior Program Officer

“We’re expected to run this multi-billion dollar business by the seat of our pants!” This was just one trustee’s assessment of their board during a recent seminar in Chicago. The seminar—entitled *Academic Leadership and the Challenges Facing Higher Education*—was sponsored jointly by ACTA and The Aspen Institute, and brought together area trustees for a day of discussion and networking on May 21.

In classic Aspen Institute fashion, the day included several Socratic reading discussions. ACTA president Anne Neal, ACTA program director Michael Poliakoff, and Aspen Institute director of seminars Todd Breyfogle facilitated the discussions by encouraging the participants to reflect on how the articles they had read in preparation for the day related to their own experiences

as trustees. Lots of ideas were shared, and the trustees left with new resources to consider for their own campuses.

Additionally, the event provided ACTA with another opportunity to continue its partnership with the Illinois Policy Institute—with whom we released a report card last year on the state of public higher education in Illinois. Illinois Policy Institute staff graciously provided us with a venue in Chicago and handled many of the logistical details for the day.

We plan to hold similar events in conjunction with The Aspen Institute in the coming year with the aim of providing even more trustees with the training and support that they need to run multi-billion dollar organizations—and not just by the seat of their pants. ●

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trustees, calling on them to uphold the university’s excellent curriculum, while reminding them that “a thorough general education is not a matter to be left to administrative or departmental discretion; it is properly a core concern for those who govern the university.” Copies of our letters were also sent to Governor Mike Beebe.

ACTA president Anne D. Neal then published an op-ed in the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, the state’s largest newspaper—which reaches more than 400,000 readers. In it, she stressed the importance of ensuring that students receive “a well-rounded and excellent education—the type of education that imparts a love of learning and prepares graduates to become effective workers and informed citizens,” while urging the university to keep in mind the best interests of the students and reconsider its plans.

We also reached out to our friends and allies across the country, inviting them to write directly to the university. Many distinguished writers, educators, and philanthropists called on the chancellor to

its present state and worthy of your pride and careful attention ... I implore you to do all in your power to block the attempts to drag the University of Arkansas into the swamp of mediocrity.”

“Arkansas’ new Act 182, which was supposed to establish some statewide standards for student transfers, is being used to rationalize this dilution of the university’s standards. Sue Madison, a state senator from Fayetteville who voted for the act, sounded surprised: ‘It never entered [our] minds to dumb down the curriculum.’ But that’s just what happens when graduating students become more important than educating them.”

— Paul Greenberg, Pulitzer Prize-winning editorialist, on curriculum change at the University of Arkansas

Then, the university’s disappointing response arrived. The board wrote to tell us that the curriculum should be whatever the faculty wants, in effect abdicating its fiduciary responsibility. And the trustees invoked what “peer institutions across the nation” were requiring in their curricula to justify gutting the core—an argument that makes no sense when you’re at the head of the pack.

keep standards high. In his missive, Robert E. Norton II, vice president for donor relations at The Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, wrote that “we view your school’s core curriculum to be top notch in

The chancellor of the university also published a piece responding to our op-ed, in which he essentially rehashed the same unconvincing arguments put forward by the board. The same day that his

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ACTA Meets with Minnesota Trustees

ACTA's new policy director, Michael Poliakoff, met with the Academic Affairs Committee of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities Board of Trustees on May 18 at MnSCU's offices in St. Paul. With the encouragement of trustee James Van Houten and at the request of board chair David Olson, Poliakoff discussed ACTA's recent report, *At a Crossroads: A Report Card on Public Higher Education in Minnesota*, with committee chair Dan McElroy, MnSCU chancellor James McCormick, and other members of the board.

MnSCU's board and chancellor, distinguished for their transparent procedures and courage in closing 345 programs between January 2007 and December 2009, expressed deep interest in ACTA's call for greater attention to the core curriculum. Poliakoff's presentation put MnSCU's challenges in general education and graduation rates in the context of national and international trends. He underscored ACTA's

passionate commitment to a strong core curriculum with reference to the deplorable average scores of American college graduates in the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, also noting the dissatisfaction of American employers with the basic skills of degree-holding employees. The discussion focused on how a thorough core curriculum is a solution to the problem of low academic skills and that requirements in American history, economics, and literature are not a luxury. Poliakoff pointed out that a simple core requirement for literature would ensure that graduates would be better readers and writers and better equipped for career and civic responsibilities. Citing President Obama's call for rapid enhancement of college completion rates, Poliakoff answered questions on the effectiveness of academic interventions in improving retention and graduation.

MnSCU's dedicated board asked many questions, and committee chair McElroy expressed the Academic Affairs Committee's interest in examining core curricula at MnSCU campuses. ●



MnSCU trustee Dan McElroy, Michael Poliakoff, Vice Chancellor Linda Baer, and Chancellor James McCormick.

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op-ed ran, Paul Greenberg, a Pulitzer Prize-winning editor at the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, published a long column in which he slammed the move to dumb down education by appealing to what others are doing: "The lowest common denominator becomes the standard we strive for, and any hope for excellence shrivels."

At press time, the changes to Arkansas' curriculum are still pending—and the university is still losing the battle of public opinion. But what has been made clear to everyone—including boards and administrators elsewhere, some of whom are surely paying attention to this fight—is that efforts to dumb down exemplary curricula will not go unchallenged. ACTA and its supporters are on guard, ready to speak up—and we take general education seriously, especially when universities don't. Stay tuned for updates on this critical fight, in Arkansas and beyond. ●



Defending Academic Freedom in Indiana and Wyoming



Chief Justice John Roberts

Those who follow ACTA know that we consistently champion the free exchange of ideas on campus, taking the principled stand that intellectual diversity and robust debate are vital to the educational and scholarly well-being of our colleges and universities. Two recent events have made ACTA's position clearer than ever.

In March, news broke that the faculty of Butler University in Indiana had stopped a student proposal to have Chief Justice of the United States John Roberts speak at the

university's commencement. Roberts is an Indiana native and his niece was in the graduating class. When the faculty's action was revealed, there was much concern among the Butler community that politics were the reason for faculty opposition. ACTA sent a letter to the members of the Butler Board of Trustees, urging them to take immediate and concrete action. The letter included a copy of ACTA's report *Protecting the Free Exchange of Ideas* and outlined specific, proactive, steps the board could take to ensure open discourse on campus.

In April, ACTA again spoke up for academic freedom. The University of Wyoming's Social Justice Research Center invited William Ayers, the unapologetic 1960s terrorist, to speak on campus. The university was flooded with angry phone calls and emails, including threats of violence. In response to the outcry, the university cancelled the invitation and, citing safety concerns, barred Ayers from campus. ACTA, however, pointed out in a letter to the Board of Trustees and an op-ed that while Ayers' record is one that deserves profound condemnation—and that it may well have been unwise to give him such an invitation in the first place—to disinvite him on the grounds of “safety concerns” was tantamount to a heckler's veto, empowering those who would shout down their opponents instead of engaging in substantive debate. In the end, a court order allowed Ayers to speak, and there were no incidents.

In both cases, ACTA took a principled position and reminded trustees that the free exchange of ideas must be among the highest of priorities at any university. In both cases, trustees welcomed ACTA as a constructive voice amid controversy. ●



William Ayers

In the last issue of *Inside Academe*, we reported that ACTA and experts from three other higher education organizations had asked the Department of Education to address restrictive credit transfer policies and the toll they take on students. Less than 60 percent of college students graduate within six years and evidence suggests that problems in transferring credits may be a significant underlying cause—in particular when considering the fact that 60 percent of college students earn credits from more than one institution of higher learning. Unfortunately, there is a lack of information on the subject, making it impossible to assess the actual costs associated with nontransferable credits—on the students or the federal government.

We are now happy to report that the Department of Education has said it will launch a study on the subject. In a letter sent to ACTA president Anne D. Neal last month, Secretary Duncan expressed his shared concern at the “financial and human costs associated with restrictive college credit transfer policies” and his “interest in learning more about the extent of the problem and identifying conditions and interventions that advance student success.” To do so, he has commissioned a study by the National Center for Education Statistics and the Office of Postsecondary Education. Secretary Duncan expects the results to be released within a year.

As George Washington would say, huzzah! ●

It's Contagious!

Posted by Anne D. Neal on June 18, 2010

Solid curricula contribute to student success. That has been ACTA's message for some time, and it's catching on. At a conference ... at the New America Foundation, Stan Jones (president of Complete College America), Jamie Merisotis (president of the Lumina Foundation), and others drilled down on the unacceptably low graduation rates in community and four-year colleges and how student achievement and timely graduation can be enhanced through sound curricula that direct students' choices in positive ways. Evidence increasingly shows that the "do it yourself" curricula on campuses across the country—seen clearly on ACTA's college-guide website, *WhatWillTheyLearn.com*—are contributing to high dropout rates and leaving students without the skills and knowledge they will need for success after graduation. One especially promising experiment is underway at the City University of New York ... and it is showcased in our latest essay for trustees across the country. The potential cost savings offered by focused curricula in these tough economic times will also be covered in our next trustee guide, due out next month. Stay tuned!

Growing in 2010

Less than half over, 2010 has already proven to be an exciting year of growth for ACTA, with two new staff members coming on board and a major office expansion completed. In April, **Tom Bako** was hired as a program associate, working full-time on the expansion and improvement of ACTA's college-guide website *WhatWillTheyLearn.com*. Tom, a native Hungarian, moved to the U.S. to attend Towson University in Maryland. After graduating, he interned at the Heritage Foundation. Tom is pursuing American citizenship, and lives with his wife Victoria in Baltimore.

In May, **Eric Markley** joined us as a project officer. He also is working on *WhatWillTheyLearn.com*, as well as overseeing *Inside Academe* and assisting with other projects. Eric is a former college and university instructor and has also taught English in Taiwan and South Korea. In 2008, he spent seven months backpacking solo from Georgia to Maine on the Appalachian Trail.

Two other staff members have been promoted. **David Azerrad** is now a senior researcher and will be assisting the senior staff on speeches and projects. He also coordinates our media relationships, and recently had an op-ed published on the website of the *New York Daily News*. **Heather Lakemacher** now serves as senior program officer, coordinating the staff as well as managing our correspondence with trustees.



Eric Markley and Tom Bako

To make room for our growing staff, ACTA's offices recently underwent a major expansion as well, adding a new reception area, three new offices, a larger conference room, and a renovated kitchen space.

After four years as ACTA's program director, **Charles Mitchell** and his wife Charissa have decided to return home to Pennsylvania. Charles will remain involved in our reform efforts as a research fellow.

These changes, and all of ACTA's work, are made possible by the generous help of our supporters. You have our thanks for your commitment to the hard work of reforming America's higher education. ●

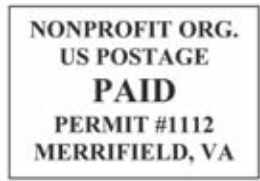
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1726 M Street, NW, Suite 802
Washington, DC 20036



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“The secret of success is constancy to purpose.”

Join us in Benjamin Franklin’s Philadelphia to discuss “The Purposeful University” at ACTA’s annual ATHENA Roundtable conference. See details inside.

Also in this issue:

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