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David McCullough Wins Merrill Award Acclaimed Historian Will Speak at ATHENA Dinner

ACTA fights to bring history to our classrooms; David McCullough brings it into our hearts. And on November 5, the author of *John Adams*, *Truman*, and eight other works of history will receive the seventh annual Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education.

Mr. McCullough, who has called history “the study of people,” has worked to restore the human drama to the center of historical writing. He can conjure the scenes of history like a great novelist: the shoeless, tattered soldiers in Washington’s army as they mass to attack Trenton, or John Adams riding with only one companion through the lonely Massachusetts winter. And he lets readers into the private minds of his subjects, so that we feel that we meet Harry Truman, whose plainspoken frankness charmed Acheson and Churchill.



Readers respond to McCullough’s human focus: millions read his books, and many more have seen the HBO series made from his biographies, proving that Americans have an appetite for history. When it is served, we devour it.

But the dish often goes unserved in today’s universities, and McCullough has warned about declining historical knowledge among American college students and young adults. “We’re raising young people who are, by and large, historically illiterate,” he recently told the *Wall Street Journal*. For 20 years he has drawn attention to reports showing historical illiteracy among the young. And he enjoys telling the story of a bright college sophomore at a “very good university in the Midwest.” After a lecture he had given at the university, this student thanked him, saying, “Until I heard your talk this

(continued on 3)

See ATHENA Roundtable invitation inside!

Join us for what promises to be an exciting and provocative ATHENA Roundtable. Speakers include celebrated historian Gordon Wood, former president of Harvard Larry Summers, president of Business Roundtable and former governor of Michigan John Engler, and Michael Crow, president of Arizona State University. **Your registration form is inside this issue.** We look forward to seeing you there!

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Core Literacies

What are the characteristics that define a core course on literature? Clearly “World Literature” or “Twentieth Century American Literature” would qualify, but when is a topic too narrow or over-specialized? What are the characteristics of a solid core course in English composition?

To answer these questions, ACTA vice president Michael Poliakoff and the What Will They Learn? team invited three eminent scholars to advise us on our standards. Dr. Mark Bauerlein, professor of English at Emory University; Dr. William Rice, director of the Division of Education Programs at the National Endowment for the Humanities; and literary historian Dr. Jonathan Rose, William R. Kenan Professor of History at Drew University, looked with us at examples of literature and English composition courses at a host of American colleges and universities. They read course descriptions, evaluated syllabi, and articulated guidelines that the research team will follow in its evaluation of these crucial requirements.

The panel was clear and eloquent in its emphasis on the fundamentals of deep reading and precise writing. They held that composition courses should emphasize the core skills of college-level writing: grammar, mechanics, sentence-structure, and stylistic elegance. They counseled us to look for evidence of both breadth and intense engagement with literary texts in setting our standards for literature courses, observing that the category properly embraces a vast range of literary eras and genres.

The researchers at ACTA hope that this panel will be only the beginning of a long and fruitful dialogue with professors Bauerlein, Rice and Rose. At the end of the meeting, Dr. Poliakoff invited our panelists to the Council of Scholars that ACTA is now forming, a group of eminent liberal-arts professors whose expertise in the fields covered by What Will They Learn? will guide our decision-making, ensuring that our evaluations accord with the highest standards and best practices in higher-education. ●

ACTA Teams with Aspen Institute for Trustee Seminar



Todd Breyfogle, Aspen Institute director of seminars, with Gerald Bland, member of the State Council for Higher Education for VA.

On July 20th, trustees from institutions around the country convened at George Washington’s Mount Vernon for a seminar co-hosted by ACTA and the Aspen Institute.

The seminar, entitled “Academic Leadership and the Challenges Facing Higher Education,” included attendees from a variety of institutions, including the University of Colorado, Pepperdine University and Macalester College. Participants shared thoughts on the purposes of institutions of higher education—referring to works varying from Plato’s *Republic* to Thomas Jefferson’s *Report of the Commissioners for the University of Virginia*.

“What kind of community do we want to create? What should we teach across the curriculum? Are we a business serving clients, or something else?” asked Janice R. Brown, trustee at Pepperdine University, of her fellow participants. Through the Aspen Institute format of Socratic conversation, attendees used their own reflections, experience, and curiosity to share ideas on how to lead their institutions to those goals.

Trustees investigated the implications of research by professors Dr. Richard Arum and Dr. Josipa Roksa, co-authors of *Academically Adrift*, showing that many college students demonstrate no four-year improvement in critical thinking, complex reasoning, or writing. **Participants shared thoughts on how trustees can improve learning outcomes at their universities.** “Trustees need measures to assess whether students are achieving the desired results,” said University of the District of Columbia board chair Joseph L. Askew, Jr.

Trustees identified specific action items to take back to their boards, which included investigating measures of student outcomes, determining what comprises their school’s core curriculum, and obtaining the institution’s financial data.

“This is the kind of dialogue I feel is most important among trustees but we rarely get,” said Dick Leslie, a trustee at Sweet Briar College. “Helping us think about the underlying issues in education and our potential role in reform is critical to the future.”

(continued on 5)

What Will They Learn? Project Expands to 1,000 Schools

College Guide to be Released in September

Summer is drawing to a close, which means new backpacks for students, fresh apples for teachers—and some much-needed accountability for America’s colleges and universities. In just a few weeks, ACTA will provide that accountability with *What Will They Learn? 2011-12*, the newest edition of our acclaimed college guide.

What Will They Learn? assigns each college a grade from “A” to “F” based on how many of the following seven core subjects it requires: Composition, Literature, Foreign Language, U.S. Government and History, Economics, Mathematics, and Natural or Physical Science. The new report offers ratings of every school based on its most recent catalog. In addition, *What Will They Learn? 2011-12* has expanded to include just over 1,000 schools: for the first time, ACTA evaluated every four-year public non-technical college and university in America, as well as every private college or university with more than 3,000 students.



ACTA’s research shows that something is rotten in the ivory tower. Fewer than 20 schools out of 1,000 will receive “A”s for requiring at least six of our core subjects; close to 90 will receive “F”s for requiring zero or one. Less than 20% of schools require students to study American government or history—even though the U.S. Department of Education recently found that 55% of graduating high school seniors lack even “basic” knowledge of the subject. Less than 40% of schools require a literature survey; only about 16% require foreign language; and in the midst of the worst economy in decades, only 5% of schools require students to take even one course in economics.

With America competing in a global economy, it is more important than ever that our college graduates receive a core of fundamental knowledge and college-level skills in areas critical to workforce participation and lifelong learning. Watch for *What Will They Learn? 2011-12* in the news and check out whatwilltheylearn.org. ●

David McCullough, *continued from 1*

morning, I never realized the original 13 colonies were all on the East Coast.”

The Philip Merrill Award, sponsored by ACTA, is named in honor of Philip Merrill, a diplomat, publisher, and philanthropist who worked tirelessly for academic excellence and a common core of learning. It is the only award in the nation to honor those who have made an extraordinary contribution to liberal arts education, core curricula, and the teaching of Western civilization. Mr. McCullough joins a distinguished group of Merrill-prize recipients, including CUNY trustee Benno Schmidt, Princeton philosopher Robert C. George, and Yale classicist Donald Kagan.

Mr. McCullough will receive the award at a gala dinner that concludes ACTA’s 2011 ATHENA Roundtable. The Roundtable brings together prominent scholars, trustees, and policymakers to shine a spotlight on the most impor-

tant higher-education issues of our time. It explores avenues for returning to first principles in academia as well as pioneering new ideas and approaches. It also emphasizes strengthening relationships between trustees and other university stakeholders: presidents, faculty members, political leaders, donors, and alumni.

This year’s Roundtable will address the topic, “Setting Priorities in Higher Education.” Celebrated historian Gordon Wood will kick off the event with a talk on “Restoring Historical Memory: The Revolutionary Origins of the Civil War.”

A panel on “Promoting Educational Excellence and the Core Curriculum” will feature John Engler, president of Business Roundtable and former governor of Michigan; and another on “Advancing Accountability and Innovation” will feature Arizona State University

president Michael Crow. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has been invited. After lunch, attendees will be

“We’re raising young people who are, by and large, historically illiterate.”

– David McCullough
Interview, *Wall Street Journal*

treated to a talk by Dr. Larry Summers, former president of Harvard University. And the conference will conclude with ACTA’s Anne Neal moderating a panel on “Rethinking Old Models.”

We at ACTA are excited about progress in higher-education reform and thrilled to recognize a gifted historian for his work in making that reform possible. Congratulations, Mr. McCullough. ●



The Remnant Trust Brings Students Original Texts

Stop by West Texas A&M one day and you may find the Declaration of Independence. Stop by Ivy Tech in Bloomington, Indiana, and you might see a first printing of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, or an incunable copy of St. Augustine's *Confessions*, printed in 1491.

All this is made possible by ACTA friend and supporter Brian Bex. Bex, who cares deeply about American historical literacy, founded The Remnant Trust to preserve important documents in the history of individual liberty and human dignity and to make those documents available to students, professors, and the public. The Trust maintains a collection of 87 rare documents related to liberty, philosophy, politics, and religion. Universities may request a collection from The Remnant Trust and display that collection on campus. Usually, a display lasts for one semester; The Remnant Trust and the university collaborate to incorporate the display into a curriculum, which may entail students viewing or even directly examining the documents.

ACTA believes that students need deep historical understanding of American history and government if they are to be informed and conscientious citizens. If students are to attain true historical literacy, access to the great documents of our history in their original form surely offers an unmatched experience. That is why ACTA friends and supporters like Bex and The Remnant Trust are doing an essential service to our students, our culture, and our nation. ●

Arum, ACTA Warn Trustees of Student-Learning Crisis

In a letter to more than 10,000 college and university trustees around the country, NYU professor Richard Arum, co-author of *Academically Adrift*, warned that “problems of learning in higher education are real, deepening, and demand urgent attention.”

ACTA coordinated the mailing, which outlined what Arum calls a “deeply disturbing set of findings” that “college students on average are learning less, even as tuition costs in many institutions have risen sharply and competition for jobs has increased.” The letter highlighted troubling findings from a major study of student learning co-authored by Arum and Professor Josipa Roksa of UVA. The authors found that, among students who have completed two years of college, 45% showed little or no development in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills. And among those who have completed four years of college,

36% showed little or no cognitive growth whatsoever. “[I]n simple language,” Arum writes, “these students were allowed to largely squander their educational opportunity and the investments made to support their college enrollment.”

Why aren't students learning? For one thing, colleges don't expect them to study. Arum found that, “Among the full-time students we studied, 12 to 13 hours of preparation was the average amount of time spent per week preparing for class. That is, as best we can estimate, half of the norm of 50 years ago.” Most students take few courses that require extensive reading and writing. In any given semester, half of students take *no* course requiring at least 20 pages of writing, and one-third do not take a single course requiring as much as 40 pages of reading per week. Is it any surprise that students spend more than half their time on

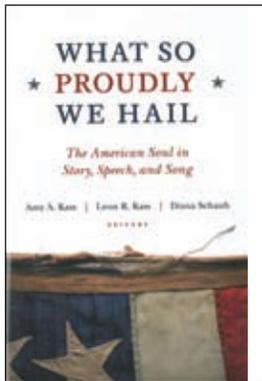
“socializing, recreating, and other activities”?

ACTA has long contended that schools must establish rigorous core curricula and meaningful measures of student learning. Arum agrees: “Institutions that fail to set meaningful expectations, a rigorous curriculum and high standards for their students are actively contributing to the degradation of teaching and learning. They are putting these students and our country's future at risk.”

Trustees play a vital role in ensuring academic standards; ACTA's research, publications, and consulting can support their efforts to reform core curricula, insist on high standards for teaching quality, and ensure that students receive the education that they deserve. As Professor Arum told the trustees, “Your leadership has never been more important.” ●

What So Proudly We Hail: the American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

by Amy and Leon Kass with Diana Schaub



If you worry that American identity is fraying at the edges—or if you just like a good read—check out *What So Proudly We Hail: the American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*. Distinguished professors—as well as ACTA supporters and friends—Amy and Leon Kass have teamed with Diana Schaub to publish an anthology of

great American stories, leavened with speeches, essays, poems, and a Declaration, with the goal of making Americans “better patriots and better citizens: men and women knowingly and thoughtfully attached to our country, devoted to its ideals, and eager to live an active civic life.”

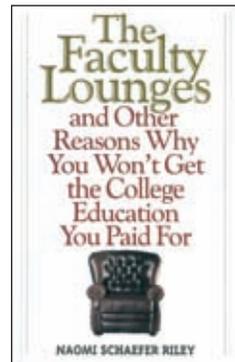
The anthology answers a dire need. The 2008 study *E Pluribus Unum*, published by The Bradley Project and coordinated by ACTA, found that 63% of Americans believe American identity is weakening. The Department of Education has found that 55% of high-school seniors lack even “basic” knowledge of U.S. History, and ACTA’s own research shows that fewer than 20% of colleges require a course in American history or government. In these circumstances, is it any surprise that students cannot answer basic historical questions, like identifying George Washington as the general at Yorktown? Or that they feel less attachment to their nation and culture?

E Pluribus Unum, to which Amy Kass contributed, recommended several measures for restoring what Lincoln called “the mystic chords of memory.” *What So Proudly We Hail* answers the report’s call to build up American identity—and

it does so through stories, songs, and important primary documents. It is one of several markers of encouraging progress.

The Faculty Lounges

by Naomi Schaefer Riley



Skyrocketing costs. Lazy teaching. Mediocre educational outcomes. ACTA has been warning about these problems for years. Now, a new book by journalist Naomi Schaefer Riley confirms and expands ACTA’s findings.

In *The Faculty Lounges*, Riley points to faculty tenure as a major cause of rising

costs, poor education, and the politicization of the university. Faculty are paid and promoted for their research, not their teaching—which leads them to neglect teaching responsibilities. Universities respond to expensive tenured faculty by hiring poorly-paid adjuncts, but research shows that increasing the number of adjuncts on the faculty decreases the quality of education and the graduation rate. Riley advocates replacing tenure with multi-year renewable contracts that compensate instructors for teaching well.

Riley’s work draws extensively on ACTA’s research regarding increasing costs and declining student learning. She cites *What Will They Learn?*, ACTA’s college guide, to demonstrate that faculty have abandoned liberal-arts teaching for narrow research and trendy political hackwork. She quotes ACTA president Anne D. Neal and vice president of policy Michael Poliakoff, who point out that current attempts to ensure faculty accountability have proven inadequate. And she suggests that the current crisis in the ivory tower provides an opportunity for much-needed reforms. We wholeheartedly agree. ●

ACTA Teams with Aspen, continued from 2

Going forward, trustees face many challenges. “We all could use continued guidance from ACTA defining our sense of responsibility, especially of public trusteeship,” Askew said.

ACTA organizes similar events during the year for trustees seeking intellectual exchanges to identify pragmatic steps boards can take to govern most effectively. For more information, please contact ACTA at (202) 467-6787 or info@goacta.org. ●



Seeking Accountability in the Lone Star State

That both Texas A&M and the University of Texas-Austin are outstanding institutions is undeniable; that the status quo is good enough is certainly not so. That's why ACTA advocates for informed trustees who take an active role in their universities.

Sometimes trustees and their associates must ask difficult questions and demand answers. Sometimes they must take unpopular stands. And sometimes they will discover that guardians of the status quo would rather shoot the messenger than acknowledge there might be a problem. So goes the story in Texas.

In March, newly appointed UT board chairman Eugene Powell tapped ACTA friend Rick O'Donnell as a special advisor to the Board of Regents to learn "how student tuition dollars and taxpayer money are being spent." O'Donnell came to the job with years of experience in higher ed, having served as executive director of the Colorado Commission on Higher Education. As requested, he began to ask difficult questions and consider new and novel metrics: Separate the research and teaching budgets; Measure faculty effectiveness by student evaluations, the number of students taught, and ability to attract federal research grants.

Were the metrics perfect? No. Was fine-tuning in order? Yes, a fact that Rick himself noted. But did he and the trust-

ees do something wrong in asking? Certainly not.

But that's not what many academic insiders would have you believe. Faculty and administrators attacked O'Donnell's proposals. Robert Berdahl, the president of the Association of American Universities, the group of 63 research universities of which Texas A&M and UT are members, decided he would no longer stay out of his members' governance issues, a long-standing association policy. Instead, he called on Texas A&M's chancellor to "resist these ill-conceived calls for 'reform'." "The linkage between teaching and research" has been "central to the success of American research universities," Berdahl wrote.

Other naysayers soon followed. And then powerful Texas state legislators got involved. After only 49 days on the job, O'Donnell was terminated.

Of course, there's more to the story, and ACTA is here to tell it. In a hard hitting article appearing in the *Austin American-Statesman*, we came to the Regents' defense, noting the woeful neglect of teaching in existing reward systems, a documented lack of productivity by a shocking number of research faculty, and the need for trustees to demand the big picture on resources and expenditures. As we've said all along: It's not easy to buck the status quo, but trustees must ask questions and get answers. The Regents offer a case in point. ●

ACTA Raises Serious Questions About Accreditation

ACTA president Anne D. Neal has outlined accreditors' misuse of power in colorful terms. In a piece appearing in *Inside Higher Ed*, she wrote, "A gatekeeping system using peer review is like a penal system that uses inmates to evaluate eligibility for parole. The conflicts of interest are everywhere—and, surprise, virtually everyone is eligible!" Federal accreditors serve as gatekeepers of federal funds. Six regional membership organizations accredit the vast majority of four-year nonprofit institutions and their stamp of approval is necessary before the schools can receive federal student financial aid. In short, accreditors hold a gun to the heads of America's colleges and universities.

And ACTA should know. Anne Neal serves on the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI), a committee established by Congress to review accreditors, whose members are appointed by the House, Senate and Secretary of Education. Neal was appointed by Sen. Mitch McConnell for a six-year term.

At NACIQI's most recent meeting in June, Neal raised serious questions about the cost and intrusiveness of the system. And she did so in the context of the American Bar Association. As it turns out, the ABA serves as an accreditor of law schools around the country and ACTA—along with Sens. Barbara Boxer and Chuck Grassley—has publicly criticized the ABA for failing to protect the taxpayer dollar and ensure academic quality. With so much at stake, Neal—and two other members of the committee—opposed renewal of the ABA as an accrediting body.

(continued on 7)

Summer of Reform

ACTA's student fellows and interns help us to support trustees, keep in touch with donors, and complete the groundbreaking *What Will They Learn?* college guide. In return, we introduce them to movers and shakers in higher-education reform. Speakers visited ACTA for lunch throughout June and July and spoke on everything from controlling university costs to restoring ROTC on college campuses.

Great universities require great presidents, and two of the finest joined us. **Arthur J. Rothkopf**, president emeritus of

Lafayette College, and **Stephen Joel Trachtenburg**, president emeritus of The George Washington University, drew on their extensive experience with higher education to suggest paths for reform and how universities can adapt to the 21st century.

Offering additional thoughts was **Dr. Richard Vedder**, director of the Center for College Affordability

and Productivity, who spoke on the connections between ACTA's mission of curricular quality and rigor and CCAP's mission of university financial reform.

Tao Tan, a recent graduate of Columbia Business School and a member of the Columbia University Senate, spoke of his work on the long



Stephen Trachtenburg and Arthur Rothkopf speak at ACTA summer seminar for student fellows and interns.

and ultimately successful campaign to restore ROTC to Columbia's campus. Mr. Tan has acknowledged ACTA's critical involvement on the ROTC issue, and he recounted mustering support for an open debate on the merits of ROTC—a debate which, we're happy to say, we won.

Sara Mead, a senior researcher at Bellwether Education Partners, also

joined us. Ms. Mead has worked on federal education policy, charter schools and preschool education. Her work has appeared in the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and *USA Today*. She helped us to understand how K-12 reformers have advocated for strong curricula and high standards, and to identify ways in which higher-education

reformers like ACTA can learn from our compatriots working on elementary and secondary education.

Entrepreneurial **Joe Malchow** concluded the series, telling us of his work on a campaign by Dartmouth

College trustees and alumni to reform the speech codes, decrease administrative bloat, strengthen the core curriculum, and assert trustees' fiduciary responsibility.

As our fellows leave for distant and exotic haunts like Thailand or Yale, we wish them much success and hope their summer at ACTA has given them food for thought. ●

ACTA Raises Questions, *continued from 6*

As ACTA sees it, the cost and intrusiveness are also two reasons accreditation must be transformed. And recent testimony before NACIQI has confirmed ACTA's concerns. Stanford University reported spending more than \$1 million to prepare for the cumbersome process. The University of Michigan was forced to foot a \$1.3 million bill. "Colleges and universities are paying obscene amounts of money for a process which, ultimately, doesn't serve the students," Neal says.

NACIQI will develop recommendations on possible legislative changes to accreditation this fall. We'll keep you posted. ●



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ACTA's What Will They Learn? project, a guide to what college rankings won't tell you, expands to 1,000 schools. The new report will be released in September.

Get a preview of our findings on page 3 inside.

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You are invited to the
American Council of Trustees and Alumni's

2011 ATHENA Roundtable

November 4 & 5
The George Washington University
Elliot School of International Affairs

REGISTER TODAY!
registration form on back

Setting Priorities in Higher Education

The 2011 ATHENA Roundtable, "Setting Priorities in Higher Education," will be held on **Friday, November 4**, and **Saturday, November 5**. We have scheduled two days of terrific discussions and activities.

On Friday, November 4, we will meet at The George Washington University's Elliot School of International Affairs for a day of stimulating panel discussions focusing on key issues in higher education. Featured speakers include **Gordon Wood**, acclaimed historian, Professor of History Emeritus at Brown University, recipient of the National Humanities Medal and the Pulitzer Prize for History, who will kick off the event with an examination of the Revolutionary origins of the Civil War. **Lawrence Summers**, Charles W. Eliot University Professor at the Harvard Kennedy School for Government, former Secretary of the Treasury, and former president of Harvard, will speak on setting priorities in higher education. **John Engler**, president of Business Roundtable and former governor of Michigan, **Michael Crow**, president of Arizona State University, and **Peter McPherson**, president of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, will also join us. A continental breakfast and catered lunch will be served.

That evening, ACTA will host cocktails and dinner in Georgetown for speakers and members of ACTA's Chairman's Circle, Decade Society, and Society of Fellows, our most distinguished donor societies.

On Saturday afternoon, November 5—building on the foundations laid by conference speaker Gordon Wood—we will mark the 150th anniversary of the beginning of the Civil War with a tour of President Lincoln's Cottage.

The celebration will culminate Saturday evening with the presentation of the 7th annual Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education to **David McCullough** at a special reception and dinner at the stunning House of Sweden on the Potomac River. The awarding of this prize, made on the recommendation of a very distinguished selection committee, honors individuals who have made an extraordinary contribution to the advancement of liberal arts education, core curricula, and the teaching of Western civilization and American history. The Award is in honor of Philip Merrill, distinguished public servant, publisher, entrepreneur, and philanthropist.

Registration form for ACTA's 2011 ATHENA Roundtable

Complete the form below and send in the enclosed envelope with your registration fee. Or register online at www.goacta.org. For more information, contact ACTA at 1-888-ALUMNI-8.

Name and Title _____

Organization/Affiliation _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Telephone _____ Fax _____

Email (must provide email to use credit card) _____

I (WE) WILL ATTEND:

ATHENA Roundtable Conference, November 4, 9am-3:30pm

The George Washington University
Elliott School of International Affairs
1957 E Street NW, Washington, DC 20052

\$150/person

Philip Merrill Award Gala Dinner, November 5, 6:30pm

House of Sweden
2900 K Street NW, Washington, DC 20007

\$125/person

Special Tour of President Lincoln's Cottage, November 5, 1pm

Eagle Gate at intersection of Rock Creek Church Road NW
and Upshur Street NW, Washington, DC 20011

For ACTA Donor Society members:

Special Cocktail Reception and Dinner, November 4, 6:30pm

Georgetown

Please register by October 13, 2011.

ACCOMMODATIONS: A special rate of \$155/night for conference attendees is available at the Georgetown Suites, 1111 30th Street NW, Washington, DC. **Please call 800-348-7203 by October 13** for reservations and mention "ACTA" or "ATHENA."

SHUTTLE SERVICE to and from the conference, as well as the tour, will be provided at the hotel. The hotel is within walking distance of the Merrill Award dinner to be held at House of Sweden.

ENCLOSED IS MY REGISTRATION FEE:

Enclosed is my check for \$ _____ made payable to ACTA.

Please charge \$ _____ to my credit card.

Credit card (check one): Visa Mastercard American Express

Name as it appears on Credit Card _____

Credit Card Number _____ Expiration Date _____

Cardholder's Signature _____

I cannot attend but am pleased to enclose a donation to support ACTA's work: \$ _____ .

