

A photograph of classical white columns supporting a structure with a skylight, set against a dark background. The image is partially obscured by a horizontal band.

# Q&A

**American Council of  
Trustees and Alumni**



**ACTA**  
AMERICAN COUNCIL OF  
TRUSTEES AND ALUMNI



# Q&A



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## What is the American Council of Trustees and Alumni?

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) is an independent nonprofit organization launched in 1995 to promote academic freedom, academic excellence, and accountability in higher education. We do so through a unique partnership with trustees, alumni, parents, and policymakers around the country.



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## Why does ACTA exist?

Colleges and universities across the nation are suffering from low academic standards, weak curricula, and attacks on free speech and free thought. Meanwhile, they have raised tuition and fees far beyond inflation and continue to demand more public and private funding. Too many campuses avoid accountability to students, alumni, and taxpayers.

If American higher education is to remain the envy of the world, friendly voices must raise concerns about what is happening. ACTA's goal is to help alumni, trustees, parents, taxpayers, and policymakers understand the challenges facing higher education—and what they can do about them.

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*“ACTA has achieved amazing victories in defense of true academic freedom and is continuing its vital program of educating alumni, trustees and the rest of us interested in the health of our educational institutions and the country they serve.”*

Professor Donald Kagan  
Yale University and National Endowment  
for the Humanities Jefferson Lecturer

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## What does ACTA stand for?

ACTA believes:

- The mission of higher education is teaching, learning, and the pursuit of truth.
- Rational debate and the free exchange of ideas are essential.
- In addition to preparation for productive careers, students should be given a strong liberal arts education that enables them to live thoughtful lives informed by the study of human civilization's highest achievements.
- Students should be exposed to various viewpoints and encouraged to think for themselves.
- Engaged trustees must be guardians of the financial and academic health of our colleges and universities.
- The cost of higher education is too high—and there is troubling evidence that our investment in it is not achieving results.

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## What key challenges does ACTA address?

**Colleges are not providing young adults with the strong educational grounding they need.**

Colleges and universities have by and large abandoned a coherent, content-rich general education curriculum, thereby allowing students to graduate with important gaps in their knowledge.

ACTA's study *What Will They Learn?* surveyed over 700 major colleges and universities around the country and found that curricular "requirements" have so many loopholes that students can now graduate without exposure to key subjects such as math, science, composition, literature,

foreign language, economics, and U.S. history or government.

Of the institutions surveyed:

- More than 60% received a “C” or worse for requiring three or fewer of these core subjects.
- Nearly 40% don’t require college-level math.
- Less than 5% require economics.
- Less than a third require intermediate-level foreign language, a broad survey class in U.S. government or history, or literature.

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“...the [ACTA] study and Web site do fill a gap so that parents and students can make better choices. As a consequence, colleges and universities may be forced to examine their own responsibility in molding an educated, well-informed citizenry.”

Kathleen Parker  
*Washington Post*, August 15, 2010

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In its report *The Vanishing Shakespeare*, ACTA found that only 15 English departments at 70 top schools across the country required *English majors* to take a course on Shakespeare.

To make matters worse, ACTA’s study *Degraded Currency* reported that “at most institutions, grades have been rising steadily.” At Harvard, the average GPA in 2005 was 3.45, an “A.” In 2010 Brown registered a staggering 67% of “A” grades. Meanwhile, employers have virtually no reliable information on which to make hiring decisions.

### **Free speech and free thought are in peril.**

Professors have the freedom to speak their minds—but academic freedom does not mean “anything goes.”

A scientific survey commissioned by ACTA of college students across the country found:

- Nearly half of the students said they had professors who frequently injected political comments into their courses, even if they had nothing to do with the subject.

- 46% said professors used the classroom to present personal political views.
- 42% reported reading assignments that presented only one side of controversial issues.

A recent Zogby poll found much the same, with 58% of Americans saying bias in the classroom is a serious problem.

Furthermore, on too many campuses repressive speech codes and political correctness stifle education and inquiry.

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*“ACTA deserves great credit for highlighting the critical issues of intellectual diversity and pluralism in American colleges and universities, and for doing so in a way that scrupulously safeguards academic freedom.”*

Benno Schmidt, chairman  
City University of New York  
Board of Trustees

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### **Tuition keeps rising—while results keep declining.**

Tuition and fees have risen at more than double the rate of inflation for more than 30 years. The outlay for children’s education is now the second largest family expense—second only to buying a house. And student loan debt—nearly \$826 billion—now surpasses credit card debt.

Yet, while families are paying more, they are receiving less, with survey after survey showing troubling declines in adult literacy and skills. The National Assessment of Adult Literacy

found that millions of college-educated American adults cannot understand texts such as newspaper editorials or practical information such as instructions for taking medicine.

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*“ACTA is one of the real positive reform voices in higher education, and they ask the hard questions the establishment wishes no one raised.”*

Professor Richard Vedder  
Center for College Affordability  
and Productivity

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Even as students learn less and less, they are taking longer and longer to graduate, especially at public

institutions. In 2007, the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems reported a national six-year graduation rate of only 56.1%. The four-year graduation rates are so low at so many institutions that they are no longer recorded!

A recent poll by Public Agenda found that the public's confidence in higher education is rapidly eroding—with increasing anxiety about costs and educational quality. Nearly 80% of Americans believe students have to incur too much debt for college, and only 44% believe students get their money's worth. Nearly half said that public higher education should be “fundamentally overhauled.”



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### Why is a national organization needed?

The challenges facing higher education are national in scope. To meet the challenges successfully, alumni and trustees, parents, and policymakers need the resources and information only a national organization can provide.

When threats to intellectual freedom and academic excellence arise, ACTA responds and draws national attention.

Concerned citizens can and should be holding trustees, administrators, and faculty accountable—ultimately ensuring that students get the best possible education at the lowest possible cost.



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### What can alumni do?

Alumni care about the well-being of their colleges and universities. Free from campus politics, they can speak with independent judgment and without fear of reprisal.

Alumni can let administrators and faculty know that they support high academic standards and deplore the politicization of education. They can keep in touch with each other, host forums and communicate their concerns with trustees and college officials. They can advocate change through concerned alumni groups. And they can serve more actively on search committees, visiting committees, and boards of trustees.

ACTA works to provide opportunities for alumni to effect positive reform and give them a national voice—challenging policies and practices that threaten academic freedom and excellence. And by providing timely information in our quarterly newsletter, *Inside Academe*, media appearances, press releases, and published reports, ACTA keeps alumni informed about what is really happening on campus.

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*“The Society for the College is a new organization based on some pretty old ideas—that good governance at the College of William & Mary is important, that our academic excellence matters foremost. ... We could not have done ... this without ACTA’s support.”*

Andrew R. McRoberts, Class of 1987,  
College of William & Mary  
President, Society for the College

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According to the Council for Aid to Education, alumni are an enormous source of financial support for higher education, giving about 30% of all private aid. But in too many cases, colleges are turning their backs on donor intent, and alumni find themselves unsure of whether their money will be well spent.

ACTA’s *Intelligent Donor’s Guide to College Giving* provides step-by-step instructions for donors on how to target their giving. It encourages donors to decide what college activities they value most and direct their funds to those activities. And through ACTA’s Fund for Academic Renewal, alumni can target their giving to programs that maintain high standards of excellence and intellectual integrity.

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## Why does ACTA work with trustees?

Trustees are in an ideal position to stimulate reform. They are fiduciaries, responsible for the financial and academic well-being of their institutions. Yet, when surveyed by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, less than 15% said they were adequately prepared when they joined their board.

ACTA gives trustees independent and well-researched information on subjects ranging from academic quality and intellectual diversity, to graduation and retention rates, cost, and accreditation.

ACTA's Institute for Effective Governance provides regular guidance on issues such as presidential searches, curricular assessments, and good governance to our trustee database of over 10,000. IEG also offers a range of services tailored to the specific needs of individual boards.

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*"I wanted to express my appreciation for the ACTA's efforts to lead the charge in terms of helping trustees and regents to remember that they are first and foremost fiduciaries for those outside—the owners—of higher ed colleges and systems."*

Jim Van Houten, trustee  
Minnesota State College &  
University System

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ACTA's ATHENA Project, launched in 1996, convenes a Roundtable each year where trustees and educational leaders from across the country explore steps they can take to advance quality higher education.

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## Why does ACTA work with policymakers?

Taxpayers provide huge subsidies to higher education, and policymakers have come to ACTA for help in making sure those dollars are well spent.

In too many ways, policies—at the state and federal level—increase costs, restrict competition, and undermine institutional innovation and autonomy.

ACTA advises and speaks regularly on trends in higher education. We have testified before Congress, numerous state legislatures, and dozens of government-appointed commissions on higher education, as well as presented our reports at the request of state governors.



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### How can I get involved?

ACTA has a number of programs that address the challenges facing higher education—and we need you to be a part of our work.

As a trustee, administrator, or faculty member, you can work with your colleagues, fellow board members, and president to ensure that students are receiving a high quality, affordable education in an environment that safeguards the free exchange of ideas. ACTA provides materials on effective governance, advice for working productively with board colleagues and campus administrators, and board consultations and training opportunities.

As an alumnus or concerned parent or grandparent, you can receive regular updates on key issues in higher education and be part of an active network of alumni in touch with their alma maters. ACTA will also keep you informed about upcoming conferences and events. And, of course, we welcome your financial support to fund the studies and reports, materials, and seminars that are helping to change the face of higher education.

Please sign up on our website [www.goacta.org](http://www.goacta.org) or contact us at [info@goacta.org](mailto:info@goacta.org) or (202) 467-6787 to become involved or make a contribution.





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