

# THEN & NOW

ACTA's 25-Year Drive to Restore the  
Promise of Higher Education

ANNUAL REPORT 2020





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*Photo: 1880 illustration of the Library of Alexandria in Egypt.*



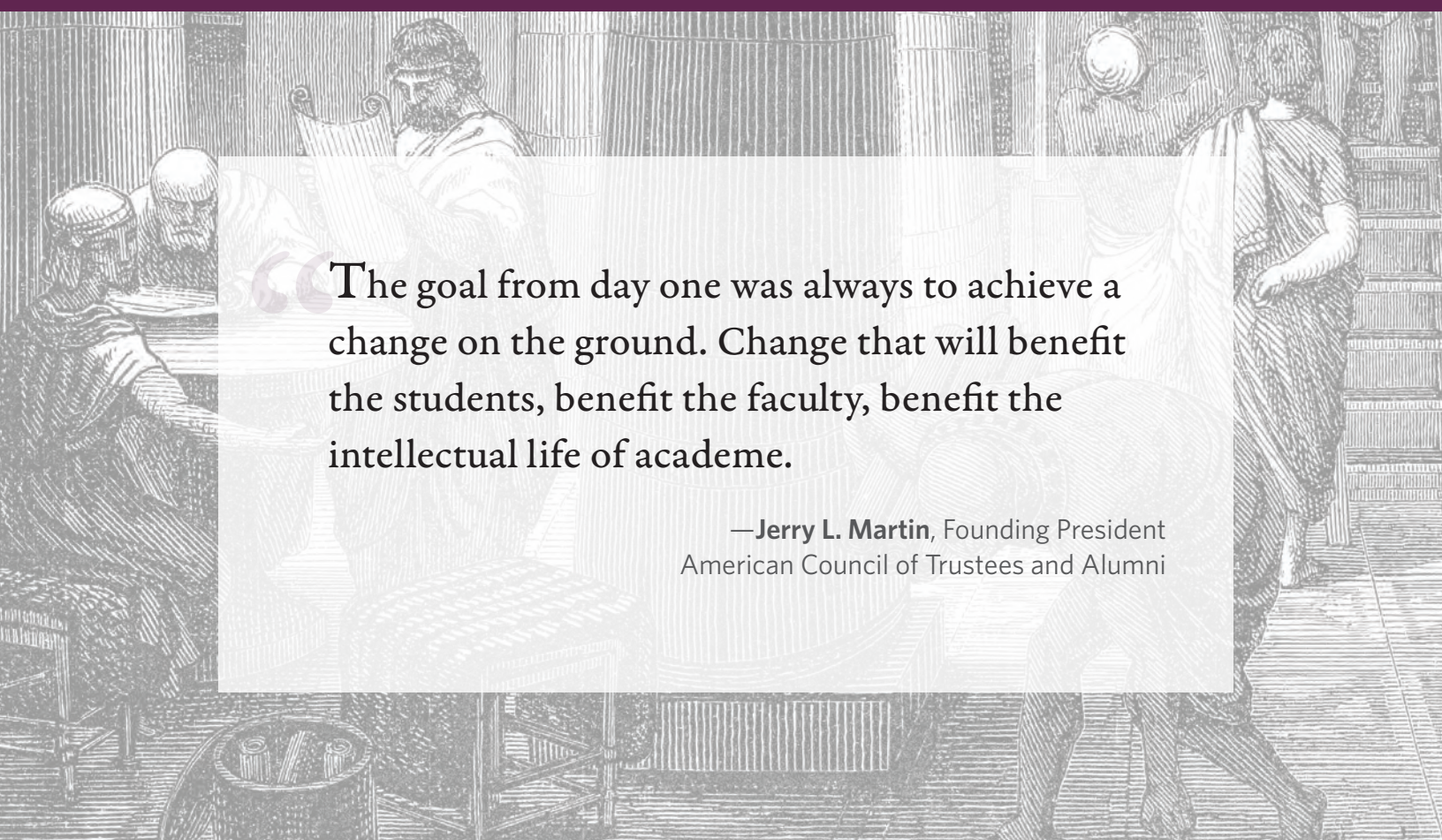
# THEN & NOW

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The **AMERICAN COUNCIL OF TRUSTEES AND ALUMNI** is an independent, nonprofit organization committed to promoting academic freedom, academic excellence, and accountability at America's colleges and universities. Founded in 1995, ACTA works with alumni, donors, trustees, and education leaders across the country to support liberal arts education, uphold high academic standards, safeguard the free exchange of ideas on campus, and ensure that the next generation receives an intellectually rich, high-quality education at an affordable price.





The goal from day one was always to achieve a change on the ground. Change that will benefit the students, benefit the faculty, benefit the intellectual life of academe.

—**Jerry L. Martin**, Founding President  
American Council of Trustees and Alumni





## THE THREE “A’s”

### ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Help institutions preserve and foster a campus culture that champions intellectual diversity, open inquiry, and the free expression of ideas.

### ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

Work with colleges and universities to promote high academic standards and rigorous liberal arts curricula that prepare students for the challenges of career and informed citizenship.

### ACCOUNTABILITY

Empower trustees and higher education leaders to advance accountability at colleges and universities through increased engagement on issues of quality and cost.

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# FROM THE PRESIDENT

**2020** was a year that tried the soul of our nation, and our trials have not ended. The pandemic is not over, and there are weaknesses in the body politic that call on all of us to do better. It is for us to realize the vision of our Founders and the promise that America holds for its citizens and the world. We must ensure that higher education is part of the way forward. It will shape the values of the graduates who will go on to be the staff and leadership of corporations and businesses large and small. And

“It is for us to realize the vision of our Founders and the promise that America holds for its citizens and the world. We must ensure that higher education is part of the way forward. . . . Its effects on American prosperity and American culture will always be profound.

it will shape the values of those who will be our elected officials, preside in our courts, and teach our children. Its effects on American prosperity and American culture will always be profound.

In our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, ACTA focused on the importance of the free exchange of ideas on campus. So as the pandemic closed in, we moved the campus debate program that we sponsor with Braver Angels online. In 2020, over 800 students from 24 campuses met in civil, parliamentary-style debates on controversial issues ranging from defunding the police to building the border wall. We intend to change “cancel culture” to a culture of intellectual affirmation.

It was a privilege to name as a Hero of Intellectual Freedom Professor Abigail Thompson, chair of

the mathematics department at the University of California–Davis. She defied vilification from her colleagues to expose the University of California System’s oppressive diversity screening requirement. Pandemic notwithstanding, ACTA was proud to travel to Princeton University to present the same award to Professor Joshua Katz, who bravely resisted a faculty-led initiative to establish procedures to punish colleagues deemed out of step with Princeton’s purported “anti-racism” protocols.

We published a brilliant essay by former ACLU president Nadine Strossen, *Resisting Cancel Culture: Promoting Dialogue, Debate, and Free Speech in the College Classroom*, which we will soon send to nearly 25,000 trustees and college leaders. And we continue building an alliance of donors who will bring their generosity to bear not only in moving institutions to commit themselves to freedom of expression but also to live by that commitment.

From the boardroom to the *Washington Post*, ACTA’s work to make a solid core curriculum part of every undergraduate’s collegiate experience continues to resonate. By expanding our database of high school counselors to more than 50,000 in 2020, we made that message sound loudly in secondary schools, helping college-bound students and their families make wise choices.

Americans are hungry to know the nation’s history, and we were proud to publish Professor Allen Guelzo’s outstanding essay, *10 Things Everyone Should Know About American History*, with a brilliant introduction by Wilfred McClay. We registered over 104,000 digital downloads, distributed nearly 30,000 printed copies, and have gone into





a second printing. Our publications are among the many ways that ACTA counters the misinformation increasingly forced into school and college curricula. We often find student allies. At Louisiana State University, the students themselves expressed their dismay at the “D” grade their core curriculum “earned” in ACTA’s What Will They Learn?® rating system, but agreed the low grade was merited. We promote institutions not always well known, but that are distinguished for their devotion to a disciplined and rigorous liberal arts education.

We have had important victories. Our intervention in Florida helped stop the Department of Education from weakening its requirement for civic education, and we are very happy that we helped move forward the REACH Act in South Carolina to establish a much stronger requirement for collegiate study of American history. We were honored to assist in the development of the Arizona Board of Regents’ excellent initiative for a strong, new undergraduate requirement in American history and government. Tens of thousands of students will be better equipped for informed and engaged citizenship.

This year, our Fund for Academic Renewal passed the \$100 million mark for higher education funding that it has advised. We help donors move beyond writing a blank check for general institutional support to crafting gifts that fulfill their vision and intent, and genuinely strengthen academic programming.

Since ACTA’s birth, we have counseled trustees to be informed, engaged, and confident fiduciaries. Nothing exemplifies better ACTA’s groundbreaking work to empower trustees than our HowCollegesSpendMoney.com website. With a few keystrokes, it becomes clear whether an institution prioritizes academic over administrative spending. In 2020, the Iowa Board of Regents used the site to make budgetary decisions; other schools base presidential performance reviews on it. This same year, its data became part of a U.S. Representative’s address to Congress.

The pages of this report are adorned with scenes from an engraving that evokes the lost Library of Alexandria. It was once the greatest repository of learning that the world had ever known, and its fate warns us that civilization is fragile. We must never be complacent.

Please read on. ACTA’s 25<sup>th</sup> year was a challenging one for all of us and for our nation, but it was also a year in which ACTA energetically embraced its mission. We are grateful to all of our supporters for their generosity, inspiration, and encouragement and for turning a difficult year into a year of progress and achievement.

With warm regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Michael B. Poliakoff". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "M".

Michael B. Poliakoff  
President

# ACADEMIC FREEDOM

## BUILDING A CULTURE OF FREE EXPRESSION ON CAMPUS

Since its founding, ACTA has labored to defend academic freedom, promote free expression within a campus culture of robust, civil dialogue, and ensure that students can pursue ideas widely across the ideological and political spectrum. Our work to protect these freedoms is critically important today. In 2020, we saw the dire consequences of the free speech crisis in full force, as we witnessed coarsening public dialogue and the proliferation of cancel culture. On campus, students are self-censoring at alarming rates in response to faculty bias, restrictive speech codes, Orwellian “bias response teams,” and a pervasive fear of offending other students.

ACTA is renewing free speech at America’s colleges and universities. The relationships we have built with campus stakeholders enable us to institute much-needed changes at schools across the nation—from the top down with college presidents and trustees, at the level of teaching and learning among faculty, and at the grassroots with students. We are also spearheading a powerful new project to encourage donors to make their gifts to colleges and universities contingent on the adoption of policies that protect free expression.

### RESISTING CANCEL CULTURE

This year, as colleges and universities encountered the formidable challenge of protecting free expression on virtual platforms, we published a profound and instructive essay by Nadine Strossen, former president of the American Civil Liberties Union, entitled ***Resisting Cancel Culture: Promoting Dialogue, Debate, and Free Speech in the College Classroom***. In the essay, which features a foreword by Brookings Institution Senior Fellow Jonathan Rauch, Professor Strossen distinguishes the difference between a “free expression culture” that ACTA believes all

#### 1995

ACTA is founded to promote academic freedom, excellence, and accountability in higher education and publishes the first edition of its quarterly newsletter *Inside Academe*.

#### 2003

ACTA presents expert testimony before the U.S. Senate on the need for **intellectual diversity** at colleges and universities.

#### 2005

ACTA begins its campaign for access to **ROTC** on elite college campuses. **Now**, students at Yale, Stanford, Columbia, Harvard, and Brown are able to participate.

#### 2004

ACTA issues the stunning ***Politics in the Classroom*** survey, revealing **49%** of students feel political pressure in the classroom.

### ACTA TURNS 10

#### 2009

ACTA publishes ***Trouble in the Dorms***, taking on residential life programs that violate students’ freedom of conscience. **Today**, we are challenging the growing political activism of student services departments.

#### 2013

ACTA releases its influential trustee guide ***Free to Teach, Free to Learn*** at a conference of educational leaders on academic freedom in New York City.





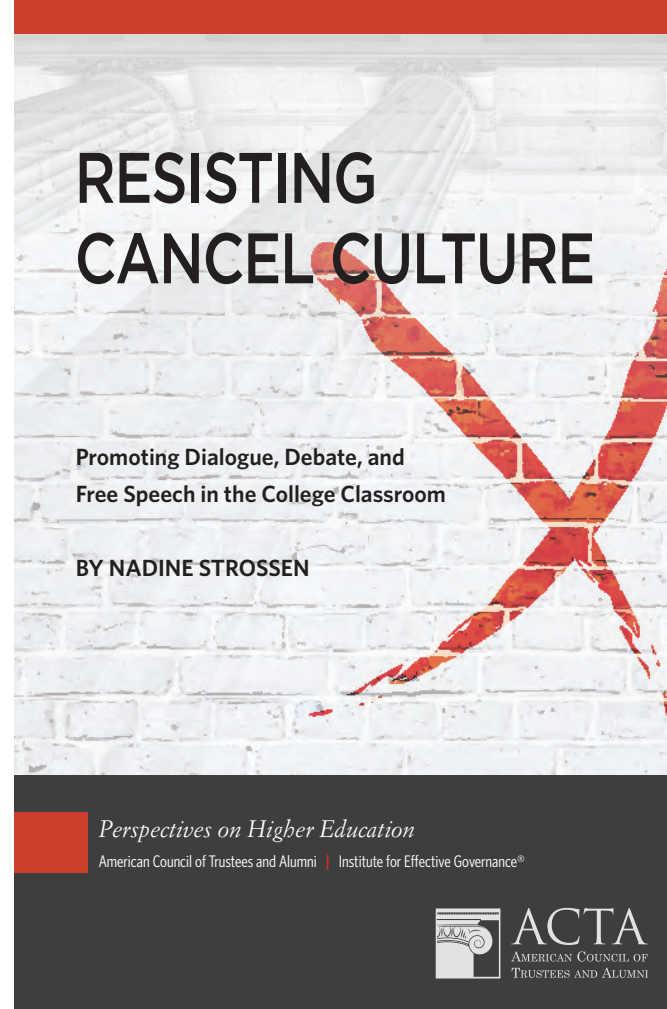
universities ought to promote and the “cancel culture” that has unfortunately emerged at many institutions.

The essay outlines strategies that college leaders must adopt to counter social pressure, self-censorship, and incivility in traditional and online classrooms. It also provides a model for academic inquiry based on the procedures of parliamentary-style debate that faculty can employ to empower students to share their ideas with both confidence and intellectual humility. Professor Strossen circulated the essay as recommended reading for a Federalist Society presentation, putting this urgent admonition in the hands of higher education experts and faculty across the country.

ACTA will soon send the publication to our vast network of trustees, college presidents, and alumni, along with a companion piece featuring best practices for protecting free speech in the online classroom.

## Emboldening Professors: Heroes of Intellectual Freedom

The bold creativity of faculty has been the engine of research and progress in our country for generations. When professors



“All of us who are engaged in education must redouble our efforts to promote the embattled free speech culture and to counter the ascendant cancel culture in the especially challenging context of the virtual classroom.

—**Nadine Strossen**, John Marshall Harlan II Professor of Law Emerita, New York Law School;  
First female president of the American Civil Liberties Union from 1991–2008

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## ACTA TURNS 20

### 2014

ACTA continues to challenge the **disinvitation** of controversial speakers on campus. In 2014, the **New York Times** publishes ACTA's defense of Ayaan Hirsi Ali after she is disallowed to speak at Brandeis University.

### 2015

ACTA writes 20,000 college trustees, urging them to adopt the newly created Chicago Principles on Freedom of Expression. **Today, 81** colleges and universities have adopted the Principles or a similar statement.

### 2017

ACTA honors University of Chicago **President Robert Zimmer** for his leadership on freedom of expression.

### 2019

ACTA testifies before the South Dakota legislature to advise on the nation's **first statewide law** to protect intellectual diversity on campus.

### 2019

ACTA launches its **Heroes of Intellectual Freedom** initiative, honoring members of the academic community who protect and foster the diversity of viewpoints that is the lifeblood of liberal education.

### 2018–2020

ACTA forges a dynamic partnership with **Braver Angels** to launch student debates on college campuses nationwide to promote civil discourse on divisive issues. To date, **24** institutions and over **800** students have participated.





Princeton professors Keith Whittington, Robert George, Joshua Katz, and John Londregan with Debra Parker, program manager of the James Madison Program, gather to honor Professor Joshua Katz as ACTA's newest Hero of Intellectual Freedom.

are unwilling to voice their opinions, the entire campus community, and society at large, suffers. In 2019, we launched our **Heroes of Intellectual Freedom** initiative, which honors faculty who stand up for intellectual diversity and defend free expression. In 2020, we recognized **Abigail Thompson**, chair of the mathematics department at the University of California–Davis, who brought to light the dangerous implications of the University of California System's initiative to screen candidates for hire on the basis of their attitudes toward diversity and eliminate from consideration those deemed insufficiently engaged in diversity programs. In response to her essay in the *Wall Street Journal*, "The University's New Loyalty Oath," she faced vicious online attacks against her and a letter questioning her position as chair. Despite this, Professor Thompson stood firm in her opinion that mandatory screening for diversity will inevitably eliminate many candidates distinguished for their academic record, scholarship, and teaching skills. She will deliver remarks about her experience at our 25<sup>th</sup> *Plus One* Anniversary Celebration in November 2021.

In an award ceremony in August at Princeton University, attended by several high-profile ACTA friends—including Robert P. George, Keith Whittington, and Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) Senior Fellow Samantha Harris—ACTA President Michael Poliakoff honored Princeton classics professor **Joshua Katz** as a Hero of Intellectual Freedom. On July 4, Professor Katz published an article in *Quillette* entitled "A Declaration of Independence by a Princeton Professor" in which he bravely criticized a letter signed by some 300 faculty and staff members that included 49 demands to address alleged racism on campus. Professor Katz showed indisputably that some of those demands were illegal, discriminatory, and highly unethical. For exercising his right to free speech, he came under immediate fire from his colleagues and was denounced by the university's president, but he has stood resolutely against assaults that have continued for many months.



By: Michael B. Poliakoff | July 28, 2020

## Princeton Grapples With Race, Woodrow Wilson's Controversial Past, And A Professor's Dissent

Judging by common metrics of success, Princeton University does well. It is highly selective, accepting only 5% of its applicants, and its 2019 endowment stood at \$26.1 billion. Alumni include First Lady Michelle Obama, four U.S. Supreme Court justices, and two United States presidents, James Madison and Woodrow Wilson.

There is more to an institution than status and wealth, however, and the freedom of inquiry and expression that is the lifeblood of liberal education is in danger at this extraordinary campus. Successful in so many ways, Princeton faces a crisis of values.

Princeton's commitment to the free exchange of ideas was once exemplary. In April 2015, with a clear majority vote of its faculty, it became the first university in the nation to follow the University of Chicago's lead in adopting the Chicago Principles on Freedom of Expression, the landmark commitment to the "discussion of ideas, however offensive or disagreeable those ideas may be to some members of our community."

In the tense time following the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, a student group called the Princeton Open Campus Coalition modeled reasoned debate among its multi-gender, multi-ethnic members. Princeton's president, Christopher Eisgruber, made Keith Whittington's book, *Speak Freely: Why Universities Must Defend Free Speech*, a "campus read," not just for incoming freshmen, but for all Princeton students.

Princeton's president, Christopher Eisgruber, made Keith Whittington's book, *Speak Freely: Why Universities Must Defend Free Speech*, a "campus read," not just for incoming freshmen, but for all Princeton students. African American philosopher Cornel West and Robby George, director of Princeton's James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions, have demonstrated in their frequent public discussions how

scholars can represent widely different worldviews yet together build consensus around shared truths. In other words, Princeton seemed unusually able not only to protect speech but even to cultivate civility in disagreement.

This year has been different. By contrast, in 2015–16, Princeton's Trustee Committee on Woodrow Wilson's Legacy took nearly six months to determine how to approach the problem of its distinguished but controversial alumni whose name is attached to a Princeton college and school. Its measured decision was to vote for "transparency in recognizing Wilson's failings and shortcomings as well as the virtues and achievements that led to the naming of the school and the college." A report from the trustees described how students and others were troubled by Wilson's past support of segregation. As president of Princeton, he had acted to bar Black students from admission, and as U.S. president, he supported the segregation of the civil service.

On June 22, 2020, in the wake of the killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor, students and alumni demanded the "public renunciation of Woodrow Wilson." This time, it took President Eisgruber but five days to reverse the 2016 decision. Little or no time was allocated for discussion or disagreement.

Many demands from students and faculty followed. Alumni of Princeton's Black Justice League, which was active on campus from 2014–18, declared to President Eisgruber, "we denounce your actions as woefully inadequate." On July 4, a letter with roughly 350 signatures of

professors, staff, and graduate students listed 48 demands to further its campaign against racism. They included a call for the establishment of a faculty committee to "oversee the investigation and discipline of racist behaviors, incidents, research, and publication on the part of faculty," with guidelines to be authored by a faculty committee. Other demands were extra leave time for faculty of color and the removal of the statue of John Witherspoon, slave-owner, but also past president of the college that later became Princeton and signer of the Declaration of Independence.

Enter Joshua Katz, a 22-year veteran of the department of classics and holder of an endowed chair in the humanities. Self-described as a "liberal" and "liberal democrat," he published his dissent in *Quillette* four days after the faculty letter appeared. He warned that many of the proposals in the July 4 faculty letter "would lead to civil war on campus and erode even further public confidence." He worried that the proposed faculty committee to address racism could become a "star chamber." Based on its treatment of other students, he characterized the now-defunct Black Justice League as a "small local terrorist organization."

The reaction to Professor Katz's declaration was fierce. The chairman of the department of classics, Michael Flower, labeled what Professor Katz had written about the League "abhorrent." Princeton's president joined the discussion, decriing Katz's use of the term "terrorist" as "false," "irresponsible," and "offensive."

The department of classics seemed intent on "killing the messenger"—which always ended badly in the ancient world—rather than engaging

Raising the profile of these courageous individuals through our Heroes of Intellectual Freedom project is a crucial component of ACTA's work to restore the free exchange of ideas at our colleges and universities. Faculty members who voice diverging views are the most powerful line of defense for the preservation of free expression and intellectual diversity. ACTA will continue to support and encourage such exemplary citizens of the academy, looking forward to the time when faculty and students can discuss and debate without facing censorship, attacks on their reputation, or viewpoint-based disciplinary action.

## Advancing the Chicago Principles on Freedom of Expression

By law, public colleges and universities must abide by the First Amendment, and many private institutions purport to guarantee free speech in their mission statements. However, the reality is that many schools do not practice what they preach. The increasing limitation of free expression has diminished the quality of education, restricting the ideas that can be explored and the conversations that can be shared on campus.

The renewal of the free exchange of ideas will only be effective if there is change at the top, in both policy and practice. Since their introduction in 2015, ACTA has been a leading voice in encouraging colleges to adopt the **Chicago Principles on Freedom of Expression** or a similarly strong commitment to free and open inquiry. The Chicago Principles charge the university with the "solemn responsibility not only to promote a lively and fearless freedom of debate and deliberation, but also to protect that freedom when others attempt to restrict it."

To date, **81** schools have adopted the Chicago Principles, including most recently the University of Alabama System, Jacksonville State University, Colorado Mesa University, Boston University, and the University of Richmond. In 2020, ACTA consulted with trustees at the University of Denver and Ohio State University as they considered instituting policies to protect freedom of expression. Additionally, **19** institutions sought out ACTA's expertise on promoting academic freedom on campus.

“The default response to criticism of any given social justice initiative cannot be a charge of racism with coercive power to end the discussion and punish dissenters. It will not advance social justice, and it will assuredly destroy the dialogue and debate that can move our society forward.

—Michael Poliakoff, President, ACTA  
Forbes.com, July 28, 2020



On December 22, 2020, the University of Texas–Austin reached a settlement with Speech First to disband its Campus Climate Response Team. Speech First, a student group, sued the university in 2018 to prohibit enforcement of policies that prevented conservative and libertarian students from discussing controversial issues on campus, and ACTA submitted an amicus brief on Speech First’s behalf. Texas, Mississippi, and Louisiana are all covered by the ruling, and ACTA is currently lending our support to more cases.

## Protecting Intellectual Diversity

In November 2020, the South Dakota Board of Regents issued its annual report to the state legislature on its efforts to promote and ensure intellectual diversity and the free exchange of ideas, citing ACTA’s assistance in developing a robust campus climate survey to assess student perception of academic freedom. The report comes a year after ACTA worked with South Dakota Representative Sue Peterson to help craft a framework for the nation’s first legislative-governing board partnership to protect intellectual diversity at the state’s public colleges and universities.

## DEFEATING BIAS RESPONSE TEAMS

Bias response teams are disturbingly common at colleges and universities today. A 2017 FIRE report identified teams operating on 232 campuses, including 143 at public institutions. Prejudice has no place on the college campus, but the practice of deploying bias response teams to police speech is not the answer and, in fact, will move us backward by inhibiting the open conversations that are necessary to address such difficult issues.

ACTA’s efforts to challenge this trend and promote a culture of free expression are generating results. On December 22, 2020, the University of Texas–Austin (UT) reached a settlement with Speech First to disband its Campus Climate Response Team. Speech First, a student group, sued the university in 2018 to prohibit enforcement of policies that prevented conservative and libertarian students from discussing controversial issues on campus, and ACTA submitted an amicus brief on Speech First’s behalf. While the district court originally dismissed the case, a Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals decision vacated the lower court’s decision in



October, leading UT to reach a settlement. The university will make additional changes to policies that can inhibit the free exchange of ideas.

As ACTA pointed out in its amicus brief, bias response teams are dangerous weapons in the hands of those who seek to suppress dissenting viewpoints. Although the criteria for what constitutes a “bias incident” are often very vague, bias response teams are designed to be punitive and often operate like an investigative apparatus. Many conduct interviews in collaboration with campus police and track and record bias allegations, and they can refer cases to an institution’s formal disciplinary body.

It should not take a federal appeals court to force public universities to live up to their academic ideals and constitutional responsibilities. Thanks to ACTA’s work, and the efforts of other organizations and allies, including Speech First and FIRE, it is becoming harder for university leaders in many states to turn a blind eye to such violations of students’ First Amendment rights. Texas, Mississippi, and Louisiana are all covered by the ruling, and ACTA is currently lending our support to more cases, including a challenge to the Bias Assessment and Response Team at the University of Illinois.

## HEALING POLITICAL POLARIZATION

As colleges and universities sent thousands of students home after the pandemic hit, ACTA brought our series of campus debates, in partnership with **Braver Angels**, right into students’ homes. ACTA and Braver Angels, along with campus chapters of **BridgeUSA**, have worked together to promote robust dialogue at colleges and universities across the country by bringing students with divergent political views together to discuss controversial issues. We facilitate parliamentary-style debates that provide a civil, respectful way for students with opposing opinions to listen to and learn from each other.

In June, we launched our first online debate with Linn Benton Community College, examining the topic of free college tuition. On October 1, we hosted a virtual debate with Texas Wesleyan University, attended by 50 students, that took up the volatile controversy, “Trash or Treasure: Should Confederate statues



On PBS News Hour, Pete Peterson, dean of the School of Public Policy at Pepperdine University, praises the parliamentary-style debates hosted by ACTA and Braver Angels for “bringing together conversations with people across the left and right to not only better understand each other, but to talk through very polarizing policy issues.”



ACTA and Braver Angels host a debate for students and faculty from The George Washington University on term limits for the Supreme Court. David Dagan, an instructor in the Political Science Department, remarked, “At George Washington University and in its Civic House program, we’re really trying to build a community of students who care about public engagement. . . . It was really important to have guidance through this process. Having the ACTA and Braver Angels team available to us in the way they were was worth gold.”

remain across America?” Another debate on October 6, held with various colleges and universities across Oregon, drew nearly 60 participants to discuss the question, “Have the Portland protests done more good than harm?” Later that month, students from Yale, Princeton, Harvard, Columbia, Fordham, Stanford, and Dartmouth sparred over the topic, “Resolved: American Democracy is in Irreversible Decline.” On October 21, another event brought students from The George Washington University, Georgetown University, and surrounding Washington, DC, schools to debate the proposal, “Should the U.S. Implement Term Limits for Supreme Court Justices?”

In the midst of a contentious election season and the civil strife that marked 2020, these debates show that students are eager to rise above political mudslinging and engage with peers who hold views at odds with their own. ACTA provides them with the tools and the platform to do so. As one Texas Wesleyan student commented, “This is what I think civil discourse should be at every level of government.”

In early 2021, debates are scheduled at Arizona State University, the University of Notre Dame, and the University of Connecticut, with more to come. We are also beginning to teach students and faculty how to organize and conduct their own debates in order to expand the transformational impact of this initiative—reducing political polarization and reaching ever more of America’s future leaders.

## LAUNCHING A DONOR REVOLUTION

The COVID-19 pandemic’s blow to the economy has caused a steep drop in state funding for higher education, giving philanthropists unprecedented leverage to effect positive change in the effort to restore academic freedom on campus. ACTA is working to increase the number of schools that have endorsed



the Chicago Principles by building a coalition of donors who make their gifts to institutions contingent on the adoption of this commonsense commitment.

We are expanding this groundbreaking campaign into a national movement to help schools emerge from the crisis with a recommitment to free speech. ACTA has held meetings with donors in Florida, New York, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Washington, DC, building widespread support.

Jeffrey M. McCall wrote in *The Hill* about ACTA and the need for such an approach.



“Before sending in that tuition deposit, prospective college students and their parents should study carefully the intellectual environment in which the students will have to survive for four years. Alums should also ascertain whether their alma mater’s free speech commitments are suitable before making that annual donation.

# ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

## PREPARING STUDENTS FOR SUCCESS

Colleges that have earned a prestigious “A” rating from ACTA for requiring a comprehensive core curriculum gain a competitive market advantage that they celebrate in their publications and public events. Employers seek graduates who have the intellectual depth of verbal and quantitative skills that a strong core curriculum provides. Parents concerned for their children’s future and the return on investment of a college education should look beyond the easy promises of college advertising to the reality of academic standards. Increasingly, too, the nation calls out for graduates who understand American institutions of freedom and the history of those institutions.

ACTA provides unique resources to make this happen. In special reports, we shine a spotlight on colleges and universities that fail to keep U.S. history as a requirement for majors, and we put before the nation the urgency of foreign language study. We sound our call for higher academic standards before legislators, boards of trustees, high school principals, college admissions counselors, and parents.

### DRIVING CURRICULAR REFORM

Now in its 12<sup>th</sup> year, **What Will They Learn?**® (WWTL) is ACTA’s annual evaluation of the general education programs at over 1,100 U.S. colleges and universities across the nation. Our research team devotes over 4,000 hours each year to the project, and the result is a rating system unlike any other: one that focuses on what schools are actually teaching. We publish the results in print and online every September with two goals in mind: to help high school college admissions counselors, principals, and teachers educate families about the importance of selecting a college or university with a strong core curriculum, and to encourage and support education leaders and policymakers in their curricular reform efforts.

#### 1996

ACTA convenes its first **ATHENA Roundtable Conference**, an annual meeting of influential college and university trustees, educators, state policymakers, and alumni leaders. Our 25<sup>th</sup> will be held in 2021.

#### 2000

ACTA releases *Losing America's Memory*, documenting historical illiteracy among college students. In response, Congress passes a unanimous resolution calling on higher education to help restore America’s memory.

#### 2005

ACTA establishes the **Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education**.

#### 2009

ACTA launches the **What Will They Learn?**® project. Now in its 12<sup>th</sup> year, WWTL rates the core curricula at over 1,100 schools nationwide.

#### 2012

ACTA assembles a national **Council of Scholars**, drawing on outstanding professors from across the country, to advise on curricular standards and projects.

#### 2015

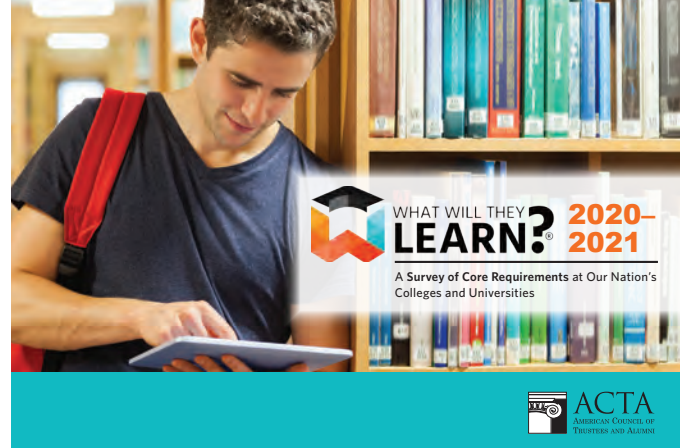
ACTA receives the 2015 **Salvatori Prize for American Citizenship** from the Heritage Foundation in recognition of the What Will They Learn?® initiative.





2020 was a breakout year for What Will They Learn?<sup>®</sup>. Despite the pandemic's interruption of the curricular revision cycle, we worked with dozens of trustees, presidents, and other institutional leaders. We provided research and strategic support to faculty and board members at a range of institutions, from large public universities (e.g., The Ohio State University and Arizona State University) to small liberal arts colleges (e.g., Ashland University) and regional state schools (e.g., University of Las Vegas). All told, 11 universities strengthened their core requirements in 2020. Among the highlights, ACTA welcomed Wyoming Catholic College and The King's College to its prestigious "A" list.

Every year, What Will They Learn?<sup>®</sup> alerts media to the importance of the core curriculum. In 2020, a wide array of media outlets called attention to the report, from the *Daily Signal* and *Campus Reform* to the *Washington Examiner* and the *Washington Post*. More importantly, the report draws students' attention to the quality of general education programs at their own colleges and universities, programs



- **82%** of colleges do not require students to take a foundational course in U.S. government or history.
- **42%** do not require students to take a college-level mathematics course.
- **68%** do not require students to study literature.
- **88%** do not require intermediate-level foreign language courses.
- **97%** do not require a course in economics.

“*What Will They Learn?* is a fascinating resource, giving citizens and scholars alike much to reflect on. . . . When only roughly one-third of college-aged students can name the three branches of government, the answer to what will they learn, sadly, is not enough. The information ACTA provides has given me ammunition to take to colleagues and administrators to argue for more rigorous curriculum.

—**Gregory A. McBrayer**, Associate Professor, Department of History & Political Science; Director of University Core Curriculum, Ashland University

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## 2016

ACTA documents the civic illiteracy sweeping America's colleges and universities, publishing *A Crisis in Civic Education* and *No U.S. History?* An updated and expanded *No U.S. History?* will be published in 2021.

## 2016

ACTA announces the expansion of the **Fund for Academic Renewal**, the indispensable program for college donors seeking to uphold the liberal arts, demand high academic standards, and protect academic freedom.

## 2017

ACTA holds its inaugural **Oases of Excellence** conference, a gathering of faculty leaders of rigorous college programs.

## 2018

ACTA completes its database of **50,000+** high school counselors, advancing ACTA's work to help high school seniors make wise college selections.

## 2019

ACTA launches its new **WhatWillTheyLearn.com** website, providing students, parents, high school counselors, and higher ed leaders with resources and information beyond that of traditional college rankings.

## 2020

ACTA establishes the **National Society of ACTA Scholars**, designed to promote achievement in liberal learning by recognizing graduates who complete an ACTA "A" curriculum.





In 2020, ACTA significantly enhanced **WhatWillTheyLearn.com** to provide students and parents with the resources they need to make informed decisions in college selection. We now feature detailed profiles of Oases of Excellence and Hidden Gems academic programs; new information on each school's results page, including a Chicago Principles badge, student-to-faculty ratios, and cohort default rates; and a Campus Climate page detailing the importance of a free and open marketplace of ideas.

Website traffic rose **45.42%**, with social media engagement up **125.84%**.

which generally constitute one-quarter to a full third of a student's academic course of study. This year, for example, students at Louisiana State University (LSU) called on their school to do better in *Reveille*, the student newspaper, agreeing with ACTA that LSU deserves its "D."

What Will They Learn?® also brings valuable recognition to "A" schools. Many display the ACTA "A" prominently on their websites and in recruiting materials. An ACTA "A" helps campus leaders resist the pressures that have caused so many programs nationwide to erode in recent decades.

## HELPING STUDENTS CHOOSE THE RIGHT COLLEGE

If there is one force powerful enough to discipline the higher education sector, it is the marketplace. That is why this year we significantly expanded the reach of the report. ACTA introduced 1,100 state legislators on education committees to WWTL, and we immediately received several requests for more information. We completed an initial mailing to over 51,000 high school counselors and began outreach campaigns to over 3,000 high school principals, associations of homeschool parents, influential parenting blogs, and ambitious high school students.

When COVID-19 interrupted our plan to attend state and national meetings around the country, we launched a series of webinars for counselors and created new social media properties to connect with families and educators online. We also added a multimedia web tutorial for educators to introduce our college choice toolkit and produced a brochure for families and a wallet card for students to inform campus visits.



## RESTORING CIVICS EDUCATION

From our founding, ACTA has focused on the need for historical literacy. Unfortunately, the grim reality is that many college graduates would fail to pass a citizenship test. A 2019 ACTA-commissioned National Opinion Research Center survey found that only 19% of college graduates can identify the amendment to the U.S. Constitution that abolished slavery—on a multiple choice question. Twelve percent answered that Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was the architect of the New Deal.

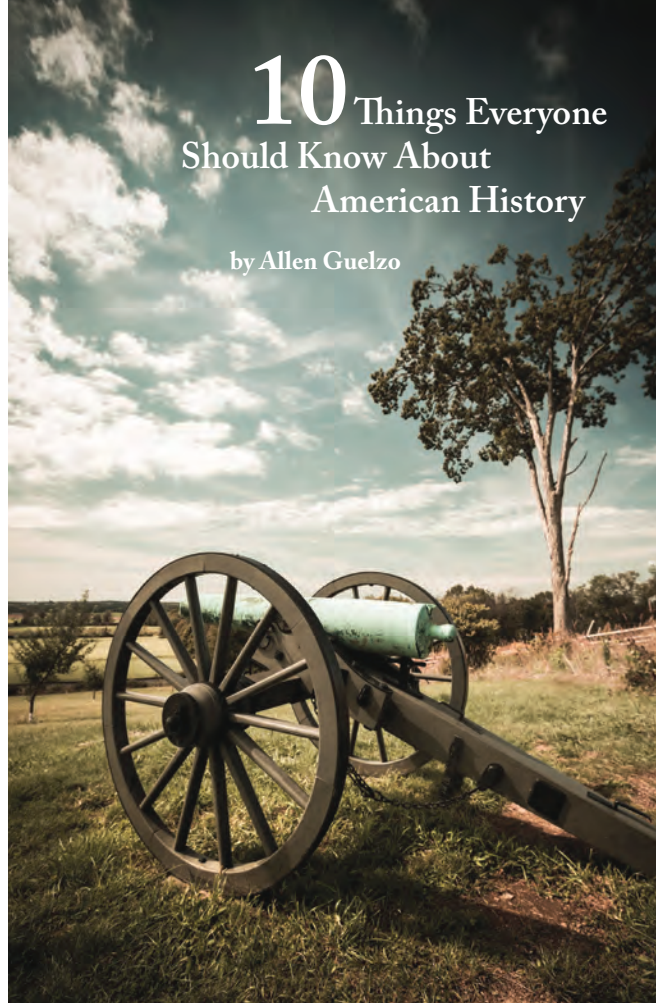
ACTA's multi-pronged strategy to reform civics education includes working with college leaders and faculty to build a robust core curriculum; encouraging students and families to select schools that promote the teaching and learning of our nation's heritage; and assisting state lawmakers as they seek to mandate civics requirements at public institutions.

We are making significant progress. In 2020, we successfully petitioned Florida's Division of Administrative Hearings to block a rule that would have weakened a legislative requirement for students in the college system to demonstrate collegiate-level understanding of U.S. Founding principles and American history. We worked with a major state system to revise a system-level policy that will require public universities serving over 150,000 students to add a foundational course in U.S. history or government to their general education programs. And we were invited to testify in Maryland and South Carolina in support of state legislation designed to have a similar, positive effect.

We also published a speech by Princeton University historian Allen Guelzo, titled **10 Things Everyone Should Know About American History**, and mailed it to nearly 30,000 college trustees, administrators, faculty, policymakers, and high school principals to promote the teaching of American history. To date, the publication has over **104,000** digital downloads, and RealClear determined that it is "essential reading in American civics." The report was republished and shared on a variety of RealClear websites, including RealClearEducation, RealClearHistory, and RealClearPublicAffairs, as well as the Catholic Education Resource Center. We are currently updating our landmark publication **No U.S. History?** to highlight the

## 10 Things Everyone Should Know About American History

by Allen Guelzo



“The best scholarship is finding a vast readership in the general public. When history departments in colleges and universities notice this, and adjust accordingly, we can expect a surge of interest among students. They might not realize it, but they hunger for a patriotic engagement with the sort of large subjects that Allen Guelzo identifies as mind-opening chapters in a luminous national story that is still being written.

—George F. Will, Author & Columnist  
*The Washington Post*



## The INTELLIGENT DONOR'S GUIDE to COLLEGE GIVING

Transformative Philanthropy in Higher Education

THIRD EDITION

Fund for Academic Renewal  
American Council of Trustees and Alumni



In 2020, ACTA released the third edition of *The Intelligent Donor's Guide to College Giving*. After interviewing several successful philanthropists and faculty leaders, we detailed new case studies that reflect timeless lessons in higher education giving.

“Anyone considering a gift in higher education would be wise to consult ACTA's updated *Intelligent Donor's Guide to College Giving* for insightful and actionable advice.

—Joanne Florino, Adam Meyerson Distinguished Fellow  
in Philanthropic Excellence, Philanthropy Roundtable

failure of many top universities to require an American history course. We are reviewing course catalogues dating back to the 1950s, which demonstrate that universities once were serious about fostering civic understanding. Look for the publication in 2021.

## ADVANCING ACADEMIC RENEWAL

### Oases of Excellence & Hidden Gems

Every year, ACTA brings together faculty leaders drawn from nearly 80 top academic programs around the country. Programs designated “**Oases of Excellence**” exist on campuses large and small and straddle academic colleges and disciplines. But they all have in common a dedication to promoting serious academic study, encouragement of free and open debate, and a proven record of fostering a community of intellectually engaged students. COVID-19 necessitated offering webinars instead of an in-person meeting in 2020. We covered important topics like best practices for engaging students in a remote learning environment and how to address pandemic-related budget and fundraising challenges. This year, we also formalized a monthly newsletter and continued to provide technical assistance to Oases programs.

In our continuing efforts to connect families with outstanding academic programs, we expanded our network of **Hidden Gems** academic programs—high-quality minors, Great Books sequences, and certificate programs rooted in the traditional arts and sciences disciplines that can be combined with almost any campus major. Students who know where to find a real academic community from day one—engaged faculty, intellectually serious students, free and open deliberation, and exposure to the big questions—get much more from their education. ACTA is now publishing on our website detailed profiles of Hidden Gems and Oases of Excellence



programs so that families, educators, and matriculating students are not reliant just on good fortune to find one.

## National Society of ACTA Scholars

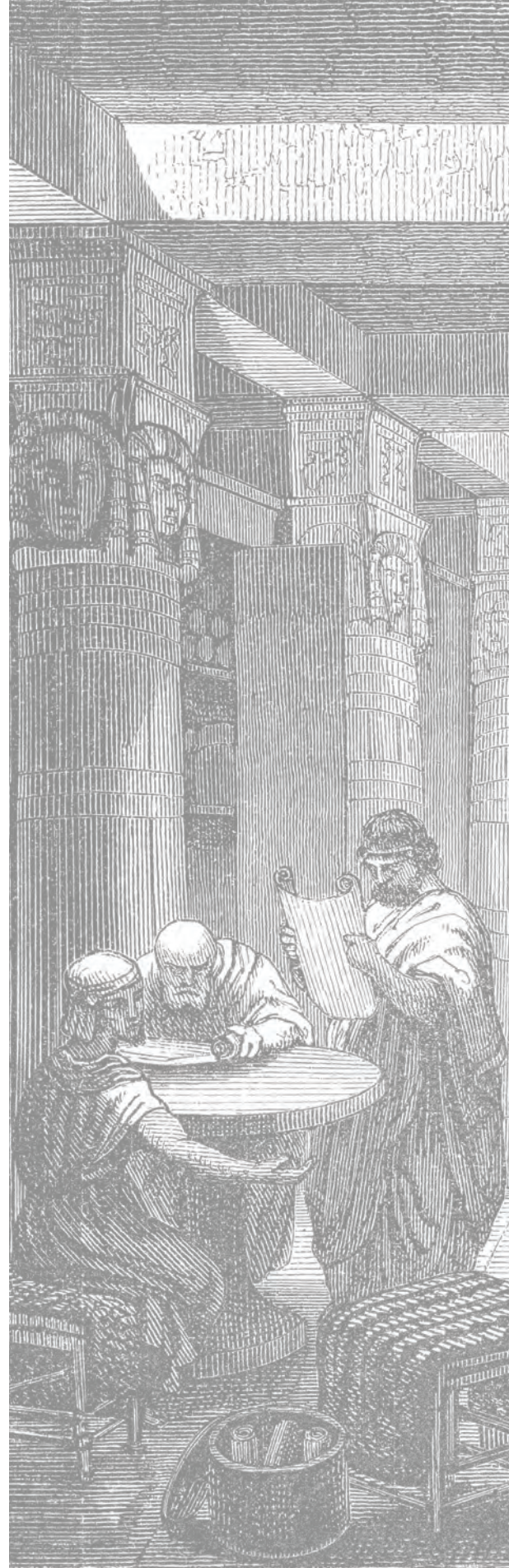
In 2020, ACTA launched a new initiative designed to recognize and promote achievement in liberal learning. Graduates who complete an ACTA “A” curriculum at two pilot schools gain admission to the **National Society of ACTA Scholars**. The certificate signals to employers that graduates are intellectually ready to acquire the new skills that a dynamic, global economy demands, capable of critically assessing complex information, and well-trained in the clear and persuasive writing essential for success in all endeavors. We have also created social media networks for ACTA scholars—to build a community of liberally educated men and women, contributing to the ongoing renaissance of classical education. In 2021, we will expand the program to an additional three schools.

## Fund for Academic Renewal

Alumni are deeply grateful for their own college experiences and want the next generation to have the same benefits of a college education that they enjoyed. But they are alarmed by the erosion of academic quality, that lightweight courses on trendy topics often displace rigorous courses on essential subjects. They are concerned that a cancel culture inhibits the free exchange of ideas and limits students’ opportunities to hear different perspectives on controversial issues. ACTA’s **Fund for Academic Renewal (FAR)** is a vital resource for college donors seeking to uphold the liberal arts, demand high academic standards, and protect academic freedom. FAR helps donors articulate their philanthropic goals, identify meritorious programs, and craft gifts with enduring impact.

FAR has advised on over **\$100 million** in gifts to higher education since 2016. With FAR’s assistance, donors have endowed chairs, established scholarships, and created thriving academic centers. This year, several donors requested FAR’s guidance on estate gifts that would provide unique opportunities to students and protect free speech on campus.

FAR is funded through the generosity of the Diana Davis Spencer Foundation. Services are provided at no cost, including legal consultation from Arnold & Porter, LLP, giving donors confidence that their funds will be directed to the goals they envision.



# ACCOUNTABILITY

## FORTIFYING INSTITUTIONAL GOVERNANCE

Twenty-six years ago, ACTA warned that American higher education was on a financial collision course that would put college out of reach for many of our citizens. We began to provide tools for college leaders and policymakers to help them find and apply remedies. ACTA is proud of what it has accomplished, yet much remains to be done. The global pandemic has thrown college enrollment into disarray along with institutions' projections of tuition revenue, not to mention battered state economies upon which public institutions rely for fiscal support. Campus closures all but dried-up income streams from athletics, medical centers, and related enterprises; and public scrutiny of resource allocation decisions has thrust higher education's financial woes into the national spotlight.

ACTA's call for engaged governance and transformative board leadership is now more urgent than ever. Trustees must be willing to identify and address wasteful spending, and ACTA provides the tools to assess how they are allocating resources.

Bold change is needed to put American higher education on a sustainable path. This includes reforms such as introducing a cost-effective, 90-semester-hour baccalaureate degree; replacing the wasteful "electives" system with a solid, foundational core curriculum; and ending the burgeoning student life programming that squanders funds and often intrudes on student privacy and freedom of speech. The only way forward is to streamline spending and adopt strategies to improve performance. By following ACTA's recommendations, trustees and higher education leaders are reconceptualizing and restructuring their schools to emerge with higher standards and greater efficiency.

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### MILESTONES

#### 2004

ACTA founding president Jerry L. Martin testifies before Congress to advocate for **accreditation reform** during the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.

#### 2006

Anne Neal, former ACTA president, testifies before the **National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI)**, which monitors accreditation. Ms. Neal was appointed to the Committee in 2010.

#### 2005

ACTA publishes its 1<sup>st</sup> **state report card**, examining North Carolina's public universities. In **2020**, we published our **13<sup>th</sup>**.

#### 2007

ACTA's **Institute for Effective Governance®** launches its **trustee guide series**, providing insights on key higher education governance issues.

#### 2011

ACTA partners with the **Aspen Institute** to provide professional development for trustees through **regional trustee seminars**. In **2020**, ACTA launches a **webinar training series**.

#### 2014

ACTA convenes **22** national higher education leaders to draft **Governance for a New Era®**, a blueprint for board governance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. **To date**, **500** trustees, presidents, and others have requested copies.

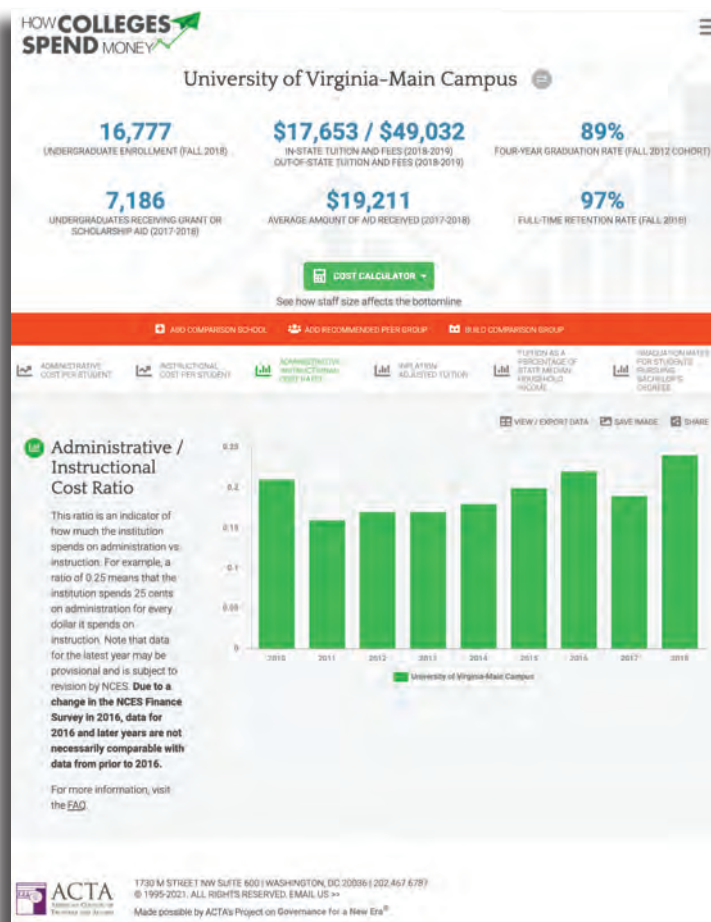




## TACKLING ADMINISTRATIVE BLOAT

Our work began years ago. In 2008, we launched *Shining the Light: A Report Card on Georgia's System of Public Higher Education*, ACTA's first report to use data from the U.S. Department of Education to examine institutions' cost-effectiveness and growth trends in administrative spending. Over the past decade, ACTA has expanded its research through an extensive series of research reports, including *Getting What You Pay For?*, *Education or Reputation?*, and *How Much is Too Much? Controlling Administrative Costs through Effective Oversight*. In 2019, ACTA launched **HowCollegesSpendMoney.com**, an online tool empowering governing boards, lawmakers, and the public to create their own custom reports using the same analysis. We helped them move past rhetoric to reality.

**To date, more than 16,000 trustees, presidents, and officials have used HowCollegesSpendMoney.com**, including the Iowa Board of Regents, which cited administrative cost data from ACTA's website during public discussions of its 2021 budget. Since 2016, over 100 institutions have contacted us for an in-depth analysis of our findings, and many are using the data to pursue concrete change in the boardroom. In June, we presented at the annual



## HowCollegesSpendMoney.com

—Michael Hsu, former regent, University of Minnesota

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### 2015

ACTA establishes the **Jerry L. Martin Prize for Excellence in College Trusteeship**. In **2021**, our 4<sup>th</sup> recipient will be honored at ACTA's 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration.

### 2016

ACTA launches the **Project on Administrative Costs**. In response, **4** governors and **17** institutions representing **700,000+** undergraduates reach out to ACTA to discuss the findings.

### 2017

ACTA publishes *How Much is Too Much?*, featured in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*.

### 2018

ACTA hosts a Capitol Hill briefing to feature its contributions to *Accreditation on the Edge*, a seminal volume published by Johns Hopkins University Press.

### 2019

ACTA launches **HowCollegesSpendMoney.com**, an online tool to help trustees and policymakers benchmark their spending patterns against their peers. Nearly **350** colleges and universities have examined their expenditures.

### 2020

ACTA launches *Higher Ed at a Glance*, an eNewsletter that reaches over **1,100** members of legislative education committees in **all 50** states and every member of the U.S. Congress.



By Rep. Greg Murphy | December 09, 2020

## College administrative bloat is robbing our children of their futures

Politicians often put Band-Aids on problems rather than address their root causes. It's always tempting to make your constituents happy now and pass the burden to future generations. Such is the case with the disastrous plan to "forgive" student loan debt.

Everyone agrees that something must be done about skyrocketing costs at colleges and universities. Second only to mortgage debt, student loan debt has grown approximately 157% in the past 11 years to \$1.6 trillion.

Many on the left such as Senator Elizabeth Warren have called for as much as \$50,000 of debt per student to be forgiven. She and others have also proposed universal "tuition-free" college. These policies are dangerously misguided.

First, the policies are regressive. According to a recent study from the University of Chicago, full college debt forgiveness would distribute \$192 billion to the top 20% of earners while only giving \$29 billion to the bottom 20%.

These plans also transfer the burden to millions of taxpayers who have worked hard to pay off their student loans, especially those who were employed and those who were unemployed during school to pay for them. In turn, these former students would be forced to foot the bill for people who did not make such sacrifices. The people who make these cost-saving decisions often come from lower-income backgrounds, while those who rack up expensive debt by attending

private and out-of-state schools are typically from affluent families.

Instead of forgiving student debt and tolerating the superfluous that is now common in higher education, we need to cut costs. We must attack the growing monster of administrative bloat.

Between 1993 and 2007, administrative costs increased an outrageous 61.2%, while instructional costs increased 39.3%. According to the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, noninstructional spending at colleges and universities from 2016 to 2017 exceeded the gross domestic product of 134 countries. We have seen the explosion of vice presidents, counselors, diversity coaches, and all kinds of administrative staff. Someone must supervise the addition of climbing walls, spectacular gyms, and the now-ubiquitous "safe spaces." Some administrators now see their mission to be more political than educational, and the student ends up funding their ideological initiatives.

Some schools, however, are better stewards of their students' money than others. According to How Colleges Spend Money, Williams College, for example, spends a respectable 28% on administrative costs compared to its peer institutions' average of 34%. Another peer among private colleges, Davidson College, spends a costly 46% on administrative costs.

But students must also take some responsibility. While many fields of study may be interesting, certain majors offer students little chance of

gainful employment. By finishing with a major in "Comic Art,"

"Forensics," and the ever-present "Gender and Sexuality Studies," the likelihood of finding a job in these fields that pays the bills is low. Upon graduation, many cannot repay their student loans and now plead with the taxpayers to bail them out. Perhaps they ought to have studied "Forensics" before they chose a major.

Everyone agrees that student loans are financially crippling many people in this country. But the far Left's plan evinces a failure to comprehend the problem. Absolving debts does not make them magically vanish. It just forces others, many who toiled to pay off debt, to pay for them.

Debt cancellation will only encourage colleges to continue implementing the same bloat and inefficient initiatives that have driven up costs so much already. Rather than placing a Band-Aid on the problem of student debt, why don't we cure the underlying disease?

The lazy rivers need to dry up. No college should spend more than 25% of tuition dollars on administrative costs and expect to receive federal aid. Stop the playgrounds. Stop the bubble life. Stop funding the fantasy.

European universities manage without doing those things. Life is hard, and college should prepare students for it without crippling them out of the gate. Colleges must become better stewards of their students' futures.

Between 1993 and 2007, administrative costs increased an outrageous 61.2%, while instructional costs increased 39.3%. According to the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, noninstructional spending at colleges and universities from 2016 to 2017 exceeded the gross domestic product of 134 countries.

**U.S. Representative Greg Murphy** cited ACTA's work in the *Washington Examiner* and on the floor of Congress. He represents North Carolina's 3<sup>rd</sup> Congressional District. He is a member of the House Committee on Education and Labor and a former member of the Davidson College board of trustees.

meeting of the Association for Institutional Research (AIR), informing institutional research officers around the world about HowCollegesSpendMoney.com and the current peril of administrative bloat. We work hard to reach as many education stakeholders as possible. Through targeted mailings to boards of institutions with egregiously rising administrative costs, ACTA has been staying at the forefront of the fight to keep a college education affordable and accessible.

Our message has even reached the halls of Congress. **U.S. Representative Greg Murphy** (R.-N.C., 3<sup>rd</sup> District) has worked to address runaway administrative bloat in higher education, advocating for colleges and universities to become more transparent in their spending priorities. On December 9, in a floor speech before Congress and in a related article in the *Washington Examiner*, Representative Murphy cited ACTA's research to call attention to spending on administration and its role in the student debt crisis. He warned: "Between 1993 and 2007, administrative costs increased an outrageous 61.2%, while instructional costs increased 39.3%. According to the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, noninstructional spending at colleges and universities from 2016 to 2017 exceeded the gross domestic product of 134 countries."

2021 will bring with it a new dimension to ACTA's fight to control administrative spending. We will publish a white paper with macro-analysis of data from 1,500 colleges and universities to give the public an even deeper understanding of college spending and its effect on affordability and student outcomes. In our annual update of HowCollegesSpendMoney.com, we will add new features to the site, including a tool allowing users to track institutional spending on student services, a fast-growing category that includes expenses such as student activities, some athletics, and offices of diversity and inclusion—entities that often have a detrimental impact on freedom of expression. As boards, lawmakers, and taxpayers pay closer attention




to the problem of administrative bloat, ACTA is empowering higher education leaders to make cost-effective decisions that align mission with finance.

## SUPPORTING ENGAGED GOVERNING BOARDS

Bold thinking and action from trustees and academic leaders are the keys to ensuring that future generations have access to a high-quality college education at an affordable price. Trustees possess the decision-making ability to control costs and safeguard academic excellence. To accomplish this monumental task, trustees need access to independent data and research to guide policy decisions. ACTA has made it our goal to equip trustees with accurate knowledge and to offer our consultation, informed by a long history of supplying quality resources to boards.

In 2020, we distributed over **1,500** copies of our publications, meeting requests from over **260** education leaders and policymakers. Requests for materials and consultations have increased steadily and sharply over the past five years. The essay *10 Things Everyone Should Know About American History* by distinguished historian Allen Guelzo was ACTA's most-requested resource in 2020. In addition, the recent popularity of two other publications demonstrates the sustaining impact of ACTA's message: the 2020-21 edition of *What Will They Learn?* and *Governance for a New Era*, the 2014 statement on governance published by ACTA, signed by 22 national higher education leaders, and headed by former City University of New York board chair and Yale University President Emeritus Benno Schmidt.





When the global pandemic began, ACTA recognized the need for trustees to have real-time access to resources to help them address the immediate and long-term consequences on campus. We quickly launched our COVID-19 resources initiative, a one-stop landing page with links to our Higher Ed Now podcasts, featuring interviews with higher education leaders, as well as articles from across the country detailing how colleges are navigating these unprecedented circumstances. In 2021, ACTA will build upon its newly




Kansas

## Your impact on higher education can be measured.

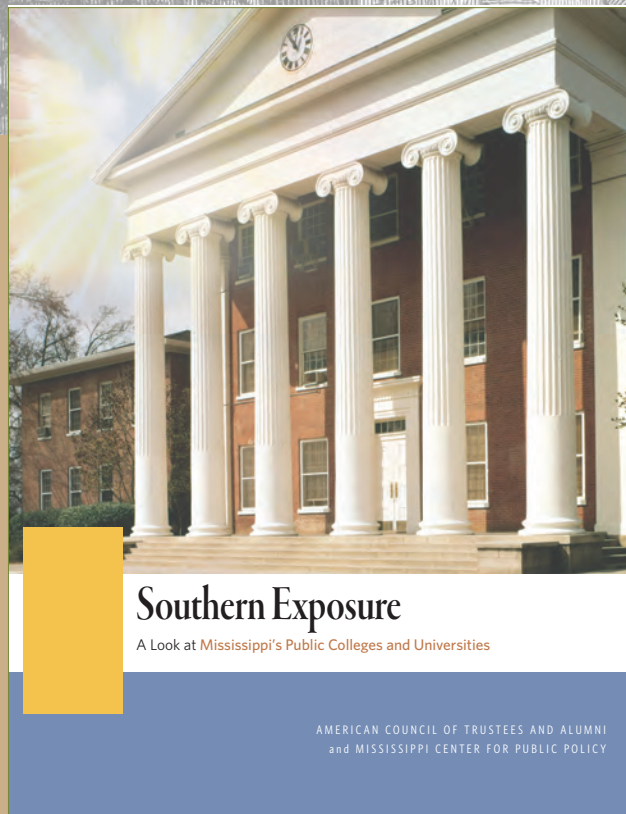
Does your state provide an intellectually rich, high-quality college education at an affordable price?  
See how your state is doing compared to others.

 <b>Core Curriculum</b> <small>Are your schools preparing graduates for career and community? For more information, visit <a href="https://www.whatwillytheylearn.com">WhatWillTheyLearn.com</a>.</small> <b>36<sup>th</sup></b> / 50 states	 <b>Speech Code Policies</b> <small>At your state institutions, is there freedom of inquiry and freedom to debate and challenge? Visit <a href="https://www.thefire.org/resources/spotlight">TheFIRE.org/resources/spotlight</a> to learn more.</small> <b>13<sup>th</sup></b> / 50 states
 <b>Administrative Spending</b> <small>at University of Kansas Does your state flagship do a good job in controlling administrative bloat? For more information, visit <a href="https://www.howcollegespendmoney.com">HowCollegesSpendMoney.com</a>.</small> <b>20<sup>th</sup></b> / 50 states <small>\$3,334 per student</small>	 <b>4-Year Graduation Rate</b> <small>Are college students graduating in four years? When students enter college but do not graduate, there are serious consequences for the student and taxpayers.</small> <b>31<sup>st</sup></b> / 50 states <small>33% graduate on time</small>

**Make quality education a reality.**  
[GoACTA.org/Policymakers](https://GoACTA.org/Policymakers)

Flip over for more information 

ACTA launched a new initiative in 2020 to assist lawmakers in all 50 U.S. states by providing them with information on key performance metrics of their 4-year public colleges and universities. These metrics are designed to start in-depth conversations among legislators on how best to steward funds so that students receive an intellectually rich, high-quality education at an affordable price.



In 2020, ACTA published its most recent state report, partnering with the Mississippi Center for Public Policy to assess the performance of eight public universities governed by the Board of Trustees of the Mississippi State Institutions of Higher Learning.

The report called for state institutions to take a hard look at their policies on curricular requirements, academic freedom, and the hiring of chief executives, as well as conduct a sweeping review of their spending practices. As a result, the state House of Representatives introduced HB 1200, a bill that would expand free speech protections on campus.

launched trustee webinar program to address further issues of importance to trustees, including responding to student mental health and substance use and dealing effectively with the economic fallout of the pandemic.

## BRINGING SOLUTIONS TO POLICYMAKERS

State legislatures provide critical oversight to ensure that public colleges and universities properly serve taxpayers and students. ACTA alerts lawmakers to national trends in higher education and points them to proven methods in cultivating a free and open learning environment and spending public funds wisely. In 2020, we aggressively expanded our efforts to put our resources in the hands of legislators. To address the role of policymakers in facing the financial challenges posed by the global pandemic, ACTA presented at the American Legislative Exchange Council's annual meeting for state legislators in July. We discussed the monetary impact of COVID-19 on higher education and promoted our new proposal to increase the affordability of a college degree by establishing a **90-credit-hour** baccalaureate degree program. We also focused on providing consistent, reliable information to stakeholders. Our brand new ***Higher Ed at a Glance*** eNewsletter reaches over **1,300** members of state higher education committees as well as every member of Congress. Additionally, ACTA now produces custom one-page reports for each state to show how public institutions rank on key performance metrics such as core curriculum, speech code policies, administrative spending, and 4-year graduation rates.

ACTA partnered with the Mississippi Center for Public Policy to produce ***Southern Exposure: A Look at Mississippi's Public Colleges and Universities***. This in-depth state report assessed the performance of the eight public universities governed by the Board of Trustees of the Mississippi State Institutions of Higher Learning,



examining Academic Strength, Intellectual Diversity, Cost & Effectiveness, and Governance. Our investigation of Bias Incident Response Teams that chill campus discourse at the University of Mississippi supported legislation to protect the free speech rights of students on campus, igniting a crucial discussion of the issue.

Over the past year, we also provided guidance in several states considering policy proposals affecting civic education. ACTA gave expert testimony before the **Maryland State House** Ways and Means Committee to support HB 1151, which would establish a U.S. history requirement for all undergraduate degrees at state public higher education institutions. We also filed a successful petition with the Administrative Hearings Division to prevent the **Florida Department of Education** from weakening the legislature's mandated civics education requirement by allowing students to opt out of a three-credit course through a "low-bar" multiple-choice civics test. Finally, last year, ACTA worked with allies in **South Carolina** to support the REACH Act, a bill reintroduced in the 2021 legislative session that would strengthen the state's existing civic education requirement for public institutions.

## Challenging Accreditor Overreach

For nearly a quarter decade, ACTA has been at the forefront of efforts to promote innovation by protecting institutional autonomy from accreditor overreach into trustee governance. In 2004, ACTA founding president Jerry L. Martin testified before Congress as it was considering the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, bringing to light many of the systemic issues plaguing accreditation and calling for reform. Since 2006, ACTA Senior Fellow Anne Neal has served on the federal National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI), where she is a strong advocate for reform of accreditation. Through briefings on Capitol Hill, amicus curiae briefs filed in federal courts across the country, and thoughtful published commentary, ACTA has established itself as a leading authority on the changes needed to federal law affecting postsecondary accreditation, a position upon which it will only expand in 2021 and beyond.



# NATIONAL REACH

## INFORMING THE PUBLIC CONVERSATION

In the 25 years since its founding, ACTA has become a powerful, respected authority on higher education reform. Our office receives calls almost every day from media outlets seeking our insights on a broad range of challenges facing colleges and universities, from protecting free speech to revising core curriculum to cutting costs.

The COVID-19 pandemic and civil unrest dominated headlines in 2020, and ACTA used its position to offer the nation messages of reassurance, reason, and reform, becoming a go-to resource for college leadership as they navigate the ongoing crisis.

This year, ACTA appeared over 370 times in 100 different outlets and 44 different states, with 40 of those media appearances in publications with an estimated reach of over one million. Our counsel and commentary on higher education reform were sought out by the **Washington Post**, **The Hill**, **Politico**, the **Washington Examiner**, the **Washington Times**, **National Review**, **Inside Higher Ed**, **USA Today**, **U.S. News & World Report**, the **Associated Press**, and more.

Our **Higher Ed Now** podcast provided a road map for wise and effective college leadership, featuring distinguished experts and policymakers. Widely viewed episodes included “Institutional Shifts after COVID-19” with Stephen Joel Trachtenberg, president emeritus of The George Washington University; “College Sports Pushed to the Brink,” a fascinating edition on excessive college athletics spending with Sally Jenkins, acclaimed sports journalist for the *Washington Post*; “How Institutions Should Face the Crisis,” featuring former U.S. senator Hank Brown; “The University’s New ‘Loyalty Oath,’” a discussion with University of California-Davis Professor Abigail Thompson, an ACTA Hero of Intellectual Freedom; and “Innovative Learning in the Age of COVID-19” with groundbreaking educational entrepreneur John Katzman, founder of the Princeton Review. Total views of the podcast series topped 36,000 this year.

As a regular contributor to **Forbes.com** on higher education leadership, policy, and best practices, ACTA President Michael Poliakoff published 15 articles on the platform in 2020, with his combined readership growing to over 110,000. His column called national attention to Liberty University’s mishandling of reopening its campus, condemned wasteful spending during a national pandemic at the State University of New York-Binghamton in the form of a \$60 million baseball stadium, and came to the defense of Princeton University Professor Joshua Katz. As many Americans continue to lose faith in institutions of higher education, Dr. Poliakoff’s advice on managing the coronavirus financial crisis and his willingness to call out irresponsible



college governance, and provide solutions, have motivated many schools to reflect on how to improve transparency and recommit to academic excellence.

To mark our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, ACTA's completely redesigned website went live. The new **GoACTA.org** targets the needs of ACTA's four main stakeholders: trustees, alumni, policymakers, and students and their parents. **Website usership has increased by 97%**, from 76,287 in 2019 to 150,371 in 2020, and page views have risen 72%.

The 2020–2021 edition of our *What Will They Learn?* report has received wide-ranging coverage since its release in September, driving traffic to ACTA's websites and resources. The report was highlighted in the *Washington Post*, the *Washington Examiner*, the *Daily Signal*, and *Campus Reform*, as well as many regional outlets, including the *Atlanta Tribune*, the *Albany Herald*, the *Atchison Daily Globe*, and a local ABC-affiliated TV station in West Virginia. **Users of WhatWillTheyLearn.com increased by 45%** to 95,855, up from 65,924 in 2019. Over a dozen schools that received an "A" rating from the report shared the news on their university websites and on social media, including Christopher Newport University, Baylor University, and the University of Georgia.

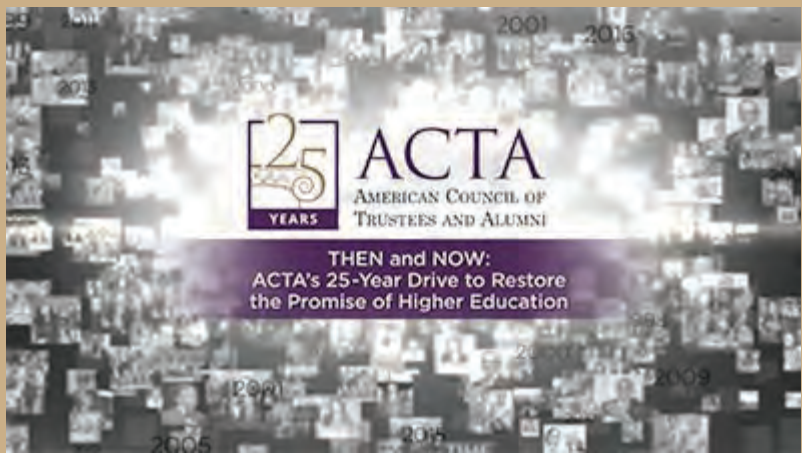
With a renewed emphasis on digital engagement, our website traffic from **social media has grown by 853%** as compared to last year. In late 2020, we launched a What Will They Learn?® **Instagram** page, which now has over 2,000 followers and will soon feature informational videos, college choice resources, and infographics. The page provides a place to build a community of high school and college students, homeschool families, educators, lifelong learners, and organizations committed to the Great Books and to supporting the renewal of classical learning.



For acclaimed sports journalist **Sally Jenkins** of the *Washington Post*, the COVID-19 pandemic has blown the lid off excessive spending in college athletics and brought higher education to a profound reckoning point. She sat down with ACTA's Armand Alacbay (shown) and Doug Sprei for a probing conversation on ACTA's **Higher Ed Now** podcast.

“Through its resources for alumni, donors, trustees, parents, and students, ACTA can help guide institutions of higher learning back to the principles and practices that made them an example to the world.

—Mike Sabo, Editor, RealClear American Civics



View at [GoACTA.org/anniversary-video](https://GoACTA.org/anniversary-video).

America's colleges and universities are among the nation's most important institutions: drivers of innovation and economic growth, repositories of our civilizational inheritance, and incubators of civic understanding and norms of civil dialogue. ACTA has spent the last 25 years working to ensure that they fulfill their promise.

In this video, ACTA's leaders, past and present, discuss a quarter century of successful efforts to promote academic freedom, academic excellence, and governance accountability in higher education.

## REACHING THE HIGHER EDUCATION COMMUNITY

**Trustees.** Our growing network includes trustees from nearly every four-year institution across the country offering a liberal arts degree. We continue to provide guidance and support and reach over 23,000 trustees at nearly 1,300 institutions.

**Alumni.** Our quarterly newsletter *Inside Academe* reaches more than 13,000 alumni from a wide range of colleges and universities. And over 3,000 alumni receive our monthly eNewsletters as well as email updates about our latest initiatives, events, and achievements.

**Governors and Policymakers.** ACTA reaches out to governors and their education policy staffs, in addition to state policymakers and legislators.

## CELEBRATING OUR 25<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY IN 2021

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, we postponed our 2020 event. **ACTA's 25<sup>TH</sup> Plus One Anniversary Celebration** will take place on November 11-12, 2021. As good fortune would have it, we have been able to schedule the same exciting roster of events, culminating at the storied Library of Congress, which Thomas Jefferson envisioned as a temple of learning for our nation.

We will honor **Gordon S. Wood**, Alva O. Way University Professor of History and Professor of History Emeritus at Brown University, with our Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education. Professor Wood is the nation's leading historian of the American Revolution. Through his work,



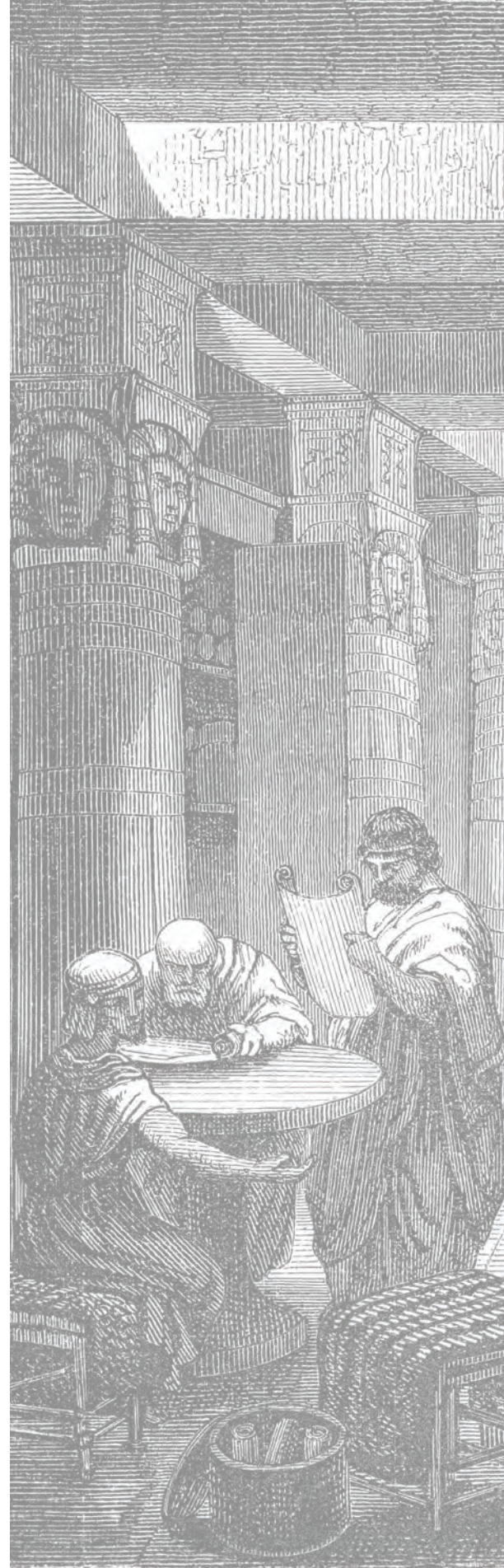
he has emphasized the important and prescient lesson that the study of our nation's history must not be an exercise in ideology, but a comprehensive and balanced entry into complex historical realities.

We will also recognize **Karrin Taylor Robson**, secretary of the Arizona Board of Regents, with the Jerry L. Martin Prize for Excellence in College Trusteeship. Ms. Taylor Robson is the architect of the Regents' Cup, a debate competition between Arizona's three public universities that teaches students how to engage respectfully with each other in high-level, formal debate.

With issues of cost, quality, and free speech roiling an impatient public, five college presidents will chart the way forward in a colloquy: "A Challenging Landscape: Presidents on the Future of Higher Education." Participants include University of Chicago President **Robert Zimmer**, Purdue University President **Mitch Daniels**, The George Washington University President Emeritus **Stephen Joel Trachtenberg**, Baylor University President **Linda Livingstone**, and Arizona State University President **Michael Crow**.

Robert Zimmer will introduce **Dr. Abigail Thompson**, chair of the Mathematics Department at the University of California–Davis, who will provide the morning's keynote remarks. Dr. Thompson is recognized as an ACTA Hero of Intellectual Freedom for her principled stand on hiring standards in the midst of the University of California System's prejudicial use of diversity and equity statements in faculty screening.

Please join us in celebrating a quarter-century of shared work to promote academic excellence and academic freedom at America's colleges and universities and in looking ahead to the frontiers before us.



# ABOUT US

## OUR STAFF

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*Executive Assistant*

## Senior Fellow Anne D. Neal

ACTA continues to benefit from the expertise of our senior fellow, Anne Neal. Ms. Neal is a cofounder of ACTA and served as our president from 2003 to 2016. She currently serves as a member of the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity and is on the frontlines of accreditation reform.

## Interns & Fellows

ACTA's internship program offers a unique educational experience to talented college students and recent graduates. Our spring and summer interns perform critical research on the What Will They Learn?® project as well as other key research and writing tasks, including the development of our high school



# 2020 FINANCIAL STATEMENTS

## STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION

as of December 31, 2020

### Assets

Cash/Cash Equivalents (unrestricted)	\$1,188,118
Cash/Cash Equivalents (restricted)	2,179,662
Marketable Securities	3,301,961
Receivables	363
Prepayments/Other Assets	48,968
Property/Equipment (Net)	<u>502,854</u>

**Total Assets** **7,221,926**

### Liabilities & Net Assets

Accounts Payable	11,285
Deferred Rent	<u>211,807</u>

**Total Liabilities** **223,092**

Unrestricted Net Assets	4,819,172
Temporarily Restricted Net Assets	<u>2,179,662</u>

**Total Net Assets** **6,998,834**

**Total Liabilities & Net Assets** **\$7,221,926**

## STATEMENT OF ACTIVITIES

as of December 31, 2020

### Revenue & Support

Contributions/Grants (unrestricted)	\$2,008,559
Contributions/Grants (restricted)	1,660,500
Interest/Dividends	91,696
Miscellaneous Income	199
Realized/Unrealized Gains	<u>364,692</u>

**Total Revenue & Support** **4,125,646**

### Expenses

Programs	3,189,743
Fundraising	17,764
Management/General	<u>245,138</u>

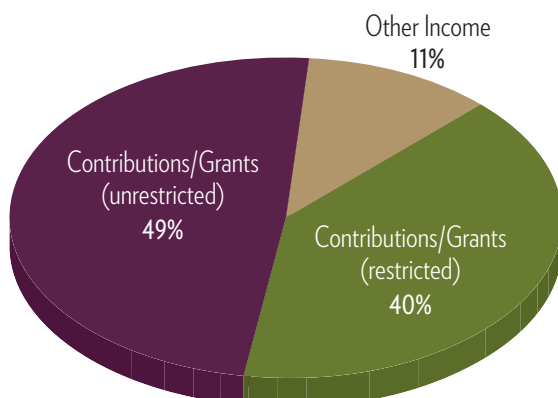
**Total Expenses** **3,452,645**

**Change in Net Assets** **673,001**

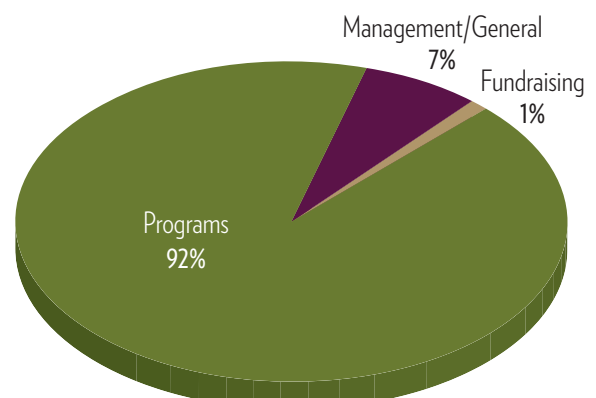
**Net Assets, beginning of year** **6,325,833**

**Net Assets, end of year** **\$6,998,834**

## 2020 OPERATING REVENUES



## 2020 OPERATING EXPENSES



counselor database. The **Robert Lewit Fellowship in Educational Policy** offers select students the opportunity to engage in special assignments. Interns and fellows are treated to a summer speaker series, in which eminent scholars discuss important topics in higher education with them.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this year's eight summer interns worked remotely. Although we were not able to gather together at the ACTA headquarters in Washington, DC, the interns enjoyed virtual guest speakers, including Dr. Murray Bessette, director of academic programs for the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, and Andrew Heim, manager of special projects for Hillsdale College in Washington, DC.

## OUR PARTNERS

ACTA is grateful for our supporters, whose loyalty and dedication make our important work possible. We rely upon them not just for funding, but for inspiration, collaboration, and assistance in our common goal to ensure that all college students receive an intellectually rich liberal arts education at an affordable price. And because we do not receive government funding, our donors enable us to maintain our independence in forming policies and taking action.

Members of ACTA's **Donor Societies** are invited to exclusive events throughout the year, where they meet important and influential scholars and leaders of higher education reform. We appreciate these opportunities to engage with our Donor Society members and to hear their ideas about the future of American higher education.

This year, due to the pandemic, we were unable to host in-person donor events and gatherings. While we missed the opportunity to meet face-to-face with our closest friends and supporters, we were pleased that technology allowed us to stay in touch. We were able to celebrate our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a very special video tribute in which several of ACTA's eminent founders joined together for a discussion of what has happened in the past 25 years, how ACTA rose to meet the challenges, and what we have before us in the coming years.

We look forward to a return to normalcy in 2021 and are eager to see everyone at the Library of Congress for **ACTA's 25<sup>th</sup> Plus One Anniversary Celebration**, to be held on November 11-12 in Washington, DC.

We work hard to acknowledge all of our donors. If we have inadvertently omitted you, please let us know.

## Legacy Society

The Legacy Society honors donors who make planned gifts to ACTA. Their generosity drives ACTA's work, creating a real legacy by protecting rich liberal arts education for future generations.

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## Leadership Society

The Leadership Society consists of grant-making foundations whose generous gifts make ACTA's endeavors possible.

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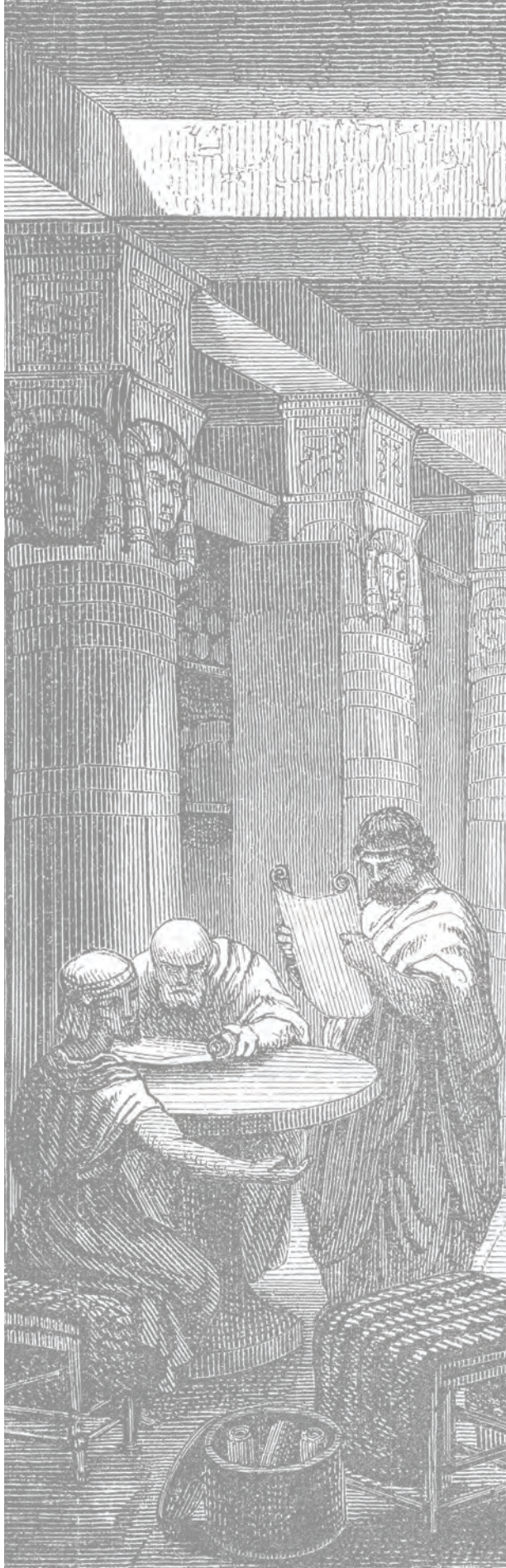
Woodford Foundation for Limited Government, *Colorado*

## Founder's Society

Established in 2015, the Founder's Society is ACTA's highest level of individual donors. It recognizes donors who support ACTA with gifts of **\$50,000** or more.

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Paul S. Levy, *New York*



## Chairman's Society

Established in 2011, the Chairman's Society consists of individuals who support ACTA with gifts of **\$25,000–\$49,999**.

Anonymous

Harold W. Eickhoff, *New Jersey*

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## Trustee's Society

Established in 2016, the Trustee's Society consists of individuals who support ACTA with gifts of **\$15,000–\$24,999**.

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Barbara & John Bruning, *New York*

Jane & Robert Lewit, *New York*

The Mississippi Center for Public Policy, *Mississippi*

Michael B. Poliakoff, *Virginia*

## Decade Society

Established in 2005 to commemorate ACTA's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the Decade Society consists of individuals who donate **\$10,000–\$14,999**.

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Established in 2011, the Society of Fellows recognizes individuals who contribute **\$5,000–\$9,999** in support of ACTA's work.

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Established in 2007, President's Society members contribute between **\$1,000–\$4,999**.

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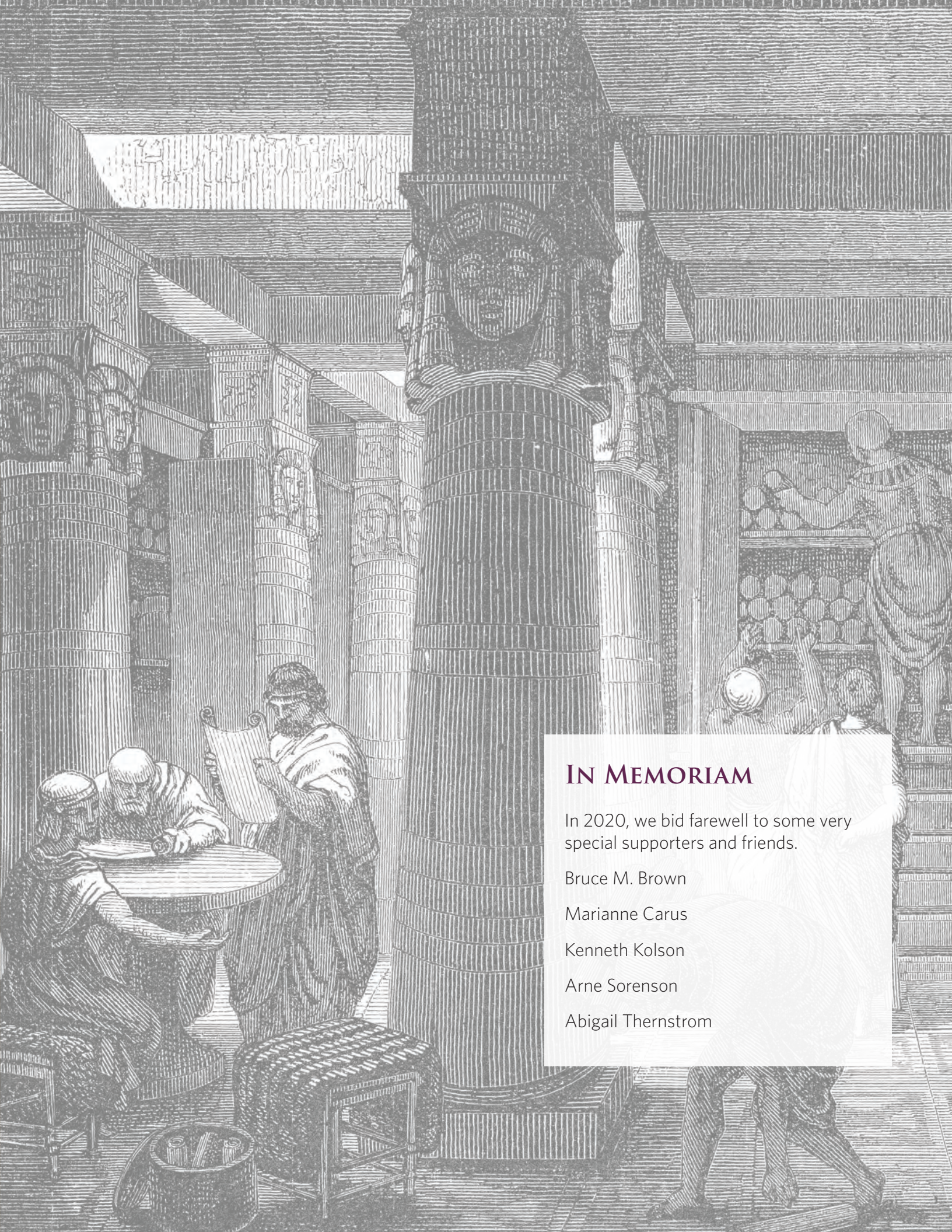


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