



Promoting  
Academic  
Freedom and  
Excellence

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## ACTA White Paper: Colleges Must Prioritize Access, Not Excess

In August, ACTA released *The Cost of Excess: Why Colleges and Universities Must Control Runaway Spending*. This white paper, featuring original research by ACTA’s analysts in our Trustee & Government Affairs Department, comes at an important moment, with the financial fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic forcing colleges and universities across the country finally to reckon with decades of irresponsible spending. The report is part of ACTA’s Project on Administrative Costs, which aims to empower university boards with guidance to address rising costs and prioritize their core academic mission.

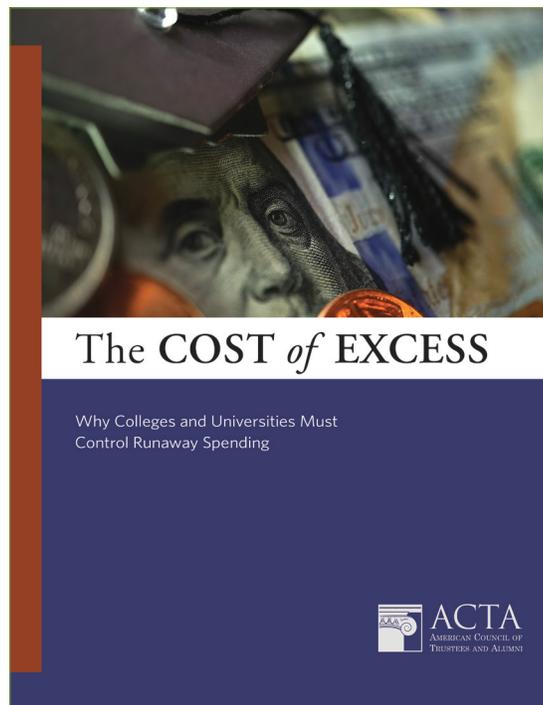
ACTA analyzed data from over 1,500 public and private institutions in the period from 2010 to 2018 to illustrate the financial and academic implications for students of the steady growth in college spending since the Great Recession. Rather than cut expenditures to make up for the decrease in revenue in the years immediately following the Recession, colleges and

universities chose to charge students more, raising the price of tuition. Yet, year after year of runaway spending has not improved graduation rates, and student debt for the average borrower has reached \$39,351, with 6% of students owing more than \$100,000.

Where does all this money go? The report finds that “in recent years, an increasing share has been going to costs not directly related to student education. For example, in 2018, four-year public and private, nonprofit institutions spent \$73 billion on student services and administration alone.” Growth in spending on administration and on student services have both out-

stripped growth in spending on instruction. This is especially alarming given that spending on instruction—defined as expenditures on general academic instruction and on the expenses that support the academic mission, like libraries and museums—is more effective at raising graduation rates than spending in the other two categories: “On a percentage

(continued on 2)



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## ACTA President Testifies Before House Subcommittee

On July 29, ACTA President Michael Poliakoff was invited to give testimony at a hearing before the Higher Education and Workforce Investment Subcommittee in the U.S. House of Representatives, chaired by Frederica Wilson (D.-F.L.). The hearing was titled “Keeping the Pell Grant Promise: Increasing Enrollment, Supporting Success.” Other witnesses included Justin Ortogus, associate professor of higher education administration & policy at the University of Florida; Robert Jones, chancellor of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign; and Darleny Suriel, a student at City College of New York.

In his testimony, President Poliakoff discussed the need for more rigorous accountability measures in the Pell Grant program. He recommended that “institutions with poor Pell Grant completion rates should be held accountable and required to pay back to the Pell program a percentage of the funds received.”

Questioned by Representative Mariannette Miller-Meeks

about the need to ensure academic quality in the face of so many institutions attempting to inflate graduation rates and performance metrics, President Poliakoff remarked, “Any degree should not be an expensive ticket to nowhere, and there are certainly ways to make sure that graduation rates aren’t gamed. There are some excellent academic, value-added assessments that need to

be used more—the ETS Proficiency Profile, the Council for Aid to Education’s College Learning Assessment. These are rigorous tests; they are ways of seeing how well students have taken in the core collegiate skills they need for any career. We need to use them better.”



U.S. Representative Greg Murphy discusses Pell Grants with ACTA President Michael Poliakoff at a hearing before the Higher Education and Workforce Investment Subcommittee in the U.S. House of Representatives.

In response to a question posed by ranking subcommittee member Greg Murphy about the role of trustee boards in addressing administrative bloat, President Poliakoff said, “We need to be very clear about what should be the role of the trustee. The trustee is not primarily a checkbook or a

*(continued on 6)*

### Cost of Excess, *continued from 1*

basis, an increase in instructional spending at public institutions is twice as effective as increases in administrative spending at boosting graduation rates, while an increase in instructional spending at private institutions is over five times as effective as an increase in administrative spending and nearly three times as an increase in student services spending.”

All higher education spending merits the highest level of scrutiny. Given ACTA’s finding that spending correlates strongly with increases in tuition, trustees must view claims that the addition of this new program or that new office is essential for student success with a heavy degree of skepticism. Indeed, even spending on

instruction, when not carefully targeted, is only weakly linked to graduation rates. Our aggregated data show that the average four-year public university, for example, would need to spend an

“It is time to concentrate on academic quality. Smart spending is possible, and there are areas where spending can strongly influence student outcomes.”

additional \$10.2 million to graduate 72 more students. The damage to students’ finances in such instances far outweighs the anticipated benefit of the additional spending.

The status quo is not working. “In

times of plenty, institutions poured billions of dollars into spending in an amenities and student services arms race, resulting in a seemingly never-ending stream of projects on campus that projected a veneer of quality to prospective applicants. Even spending on instruction played into this, as schools ‘modernized’ classrooms by replacing blackboards with smartboards and introduced an ever-expanding roster

of programs and majors. This process has been overseen by an expanded administrative bureaucracy dominated by well-paid, specialized professionals.” It is time to concentrate on academic quality. Smart spending is possible,

*(continued on 4)*



## “Liberal Education is Conversation” An Interview with Pano Kanelos

In a recent episode of our Higher Ed Now podcast, ACTA President Michael Poliakoff and President Pano Kanelos of St. John’s College–Annapolis entered into a fascinating discussion about open discourse and the purpose of a higher education.

**Michael Poliakoff (MP):** I’d like to start by asking you to talk a little bit about your leadership as the 24<sup>th</sup> president of St. John’s.

**Pano Kanelos (PK):** You can’t be the president of St. John’s College—and I think maybe any other college—by just being some sort of administrative manager, because existence is not simply a matter of balancing accounts and raising money. It’s about living and exemplifying the mission of the institution. So my North Star here has always been . . . embodied in the motto of the college, which is, “Facio liberos ex liberis libris libraque.” Quite a tongue twister, but it translates from the Latin as, “I make free adults from children by means of books and a balance.” . . . to be a truly mature human being is to cultivate one’s freedom and to take responsibility for it. And a liberal education does this by . . . putting the humanities and sciences in conversation with each other. . . . If you



follow the St. John’s curriculum, which is roughly 200 of the greatest books ever written, you’re constantly following others who are pursuing the thread of truth.

**MP:** I think you found something that’s enormously important for all of higher education, which is that the answer is partly to be found in the process itself. It’s not so much pouring knowledge through a funnel into students’ ears, but taking them through those difficult conversations and modeling the ability to disagree and debate.

**PK:** Michael, I think liberal education is conversation. I mean, our patron saint is Socrates, right? Somebody who pooled around Athens and grabbed people by whatever a lapel looks like on a toga and insisted that they talk with him. And he insisted on posing questions and then

pressing and pressing. . . . That’s part of the freedom of a liberal education, that we allow conversations to be unbounded . . . It’s about the art of discovery. . . . A true liberal education is not about the transfer of information, it’s about transformation itself. And it’s through that process that one becomes a better and more efficacious knower of things.

**MP:** St. John’s campus has a long, long legacy of people taking very difficult, often painful issues—issues that have been painful for humankind for centuries—and being able to talk about them.

**PK:** St. John’s absolutely is a place where civil discourse is alive and well . . . because what we do is talk about the larger human questions . . . What is a human being? What is the good? What is suffering? What is beauty? . . . in talking about

*(continued on 5)*

## ACTA Offers Guidance on Campus Free Speech Restoration Act

U.S. Representative Greg Murphy (R.-N.C.) recently introduced H.R. 4007, the Campus Free Speech Restoration Act, to address increasing viewpoint censorship on college campuses across the United States. The bill will require public and private universities “to report First Amendment violations to the Department of Education and publicly share campus policies on free speech.” Schools that fail to comply will lose access to Title IV funding.

The congressman requested ACTA’s guidance as his office drafted the legislation, and a June 17 press release covering the bill quoted ACTA President Michael Poliakoff: “Intellectual diversity and the free exchange of ideas are the lifeblood of higher education and of a vibrant democracy. Colleges and universities best serve students and the public when they foster an environment that welcomes, not discourages, open and honest discussion of controversial subjects.”

Last year, Representative Murphy cited ACTA’s Project on Administrative Costs and our HowCollegesSpendMoney.com website in a speech before Congress on the problem of runaway college spending and the student debt crisis. We are glad to be of assistance to state and federal lawmakers who seek to protect academic freedom on campus and help make college more affordable for our nation’s students. ●



# H E A R D C A M P U S ON

## Greek and Latin Pushed out of Princeton's Classics Major

Students concentrating in classics at Princeton University will no longer be required to learn Latin or Greek. In May 2021, classics faculty stated, “The ‘classics’ track, which required an intermediate proficiency in Greek or Latin to enter the concentration, was eliminated, as was the requirement for students to take Greek or Latin.” The Classics Department has “added a track in race and identity” to increase “flexibility for concentrators.”

Princeton Professor of Classics Joshua Billings said faculty had been considering the change for a while, but President Christopher Eisgruber’s university-wide initiative to dismantle systemic racism motivated the department to move forward. “We think that having new perspectives in the field will make it better” and that the elimination of the Greek and Latin requirement will draw in more students.

ACTA has extensively documented the removal of the study of U.S. history from the history major at colleges and universities across the country, and now, unfortunately, we must also turn our attention to classical languages disappearing from the classics major. Studying classics without the ancient languages is like pursuing physics without mathematics. Princeton’s new majors will be less equipped to understand the great thinkers of antiquity and to understand the subtleties of their ideas and the impact they have on society today.

## Rutgers Relocates Walt Whitman

A statue of Walt Whitman has been removed from its prominent place at the center of Rutgers University–Camden and will be “relocated to a historically relevant site on campus and contextualized,” according to the school’s interim chancellor Margaret Marsh. The decision was recommended by a committee of Rutgers faculty and came in response to a 2020 petition that claimed “the statue of Walt Whitman glorifies a man who should not hold such a place of honor on our campus. . . . He instead stood for white supremacy and racism against Black and Indigenous Americans.”

Walt Whitman—the father of free verse and writer of “Leaves of Grass” and “O Captain! My Captain!”—displayed prejudice against African Americans and said things that are still painful today. But he changed. Although initially opposed to abolitionism, he eventually came to support the Wilmot Proviso and wrote an unpublished essay in 1856 in support of abolishing slavery. In 2018, ACTA President Michael Poliakoff wrote in a *Forbes* column that discussed the trend of tearing down statues: “‘The evil that men do lives after them, the good is oft interred with their bones.’ So said William Shakespeare. Few of us are likely to withstand the withering judgment of those who come after us, whatever our positive contributions to humankind might be. And what will we have learned from history about the complexity of human experience if the monuments disappear?” ●

## Cost of Excess, continued from 2

and there are areas where spending can strongly influence student outcomes—such as creating lifesaving substance abuse programs and hiring better-qualified teachers.

Colleges and universities must “prioritize access instead of excess by scrutinizing nonessential spending and performing long-overdue cuts with an eye on efficiency and lowering the overall cost of a college education.” The white paper includes a set of recommendations to empower institutions, policymakers, and philanthropists to move forward on a more sustainable path. Colleges must cut spending in tandem with tuition reductions or freezes so that the “windfall” created by cuts makes its way to students, not administrative offices. State legislatures can adopt models like those in Florida and Michigan, which place statutory limits on the amount institutions can increase tuition each year. Moreover, college donors should insist that cost containment and reduction strategies are in place before they open their pocketbooks, and governing boards must be vigilant about monitoring non-instructional expenditures to ensure that academic mission and students come first. Please download *The Cost of Excess* at [GoACTA.org](http://GoACTA.org) and contact us for a copy to use in your boardroom. ●



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# ACTA Expands the Reach of Our College Search Tools



ACTA's Vice President of Academic Affairs Jonathan Pidluzny discusses how What Will They Learn?® helps students with college selection.

team hosted a conference in Austin, TX, that drew over two dozen high school college admissions counselors, headmasters, enrollment services professionals, and professors. Participants enjoyed a keynote address from Robert Jackson, director of the Institute for Classical Education, as well as panels with college admissions officers and headmasters about the difficulty of finding a sound liberal arts education at the collegiate level. They also learned how ACTA's *What Will They Learn?* report—which rates the general education programs at over 1,100 schools across the country—helps students choose colleges with a strong core curriculum and a commitment to preparing students for rewarding careers and informed citizenship.

In addition, ACTA staff attended several conferences focused on promoting the liberal arts. At these meetings, we spoke to parents, teachers, students, and homeschoolers about the problem with college rankings and the essential information that the WWTL project provides about what colleges are actually teaching and other key performance indicators, including graduation rates, cost of attendance, and the free speech climate on campus. We distributed copies of our *What Will They Learn? 2020–21* report to over 2,600 attendees, and we will attend six additional conferences later this year. ●

## Pano Kanelos Interview, *continued from 3*

those bigger questions, we start to learn how to talk to each other and to trust one another so that when we do sometimes descend into the weeds of everyday life and politics, we're a community that knows how to listen and be kind to one another already.

Last fall, I decided to teach a preceptorial on Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. . . . I had forgotten how absolutely provocative this book is. It's filled with horrific violence. It's filled with sexual assault. Every kind of taboo is present, every hot button issue related to race is there. . . . And so I said, "I have one rule for our discussion. And that is that we lead with grace, that if we become anxious about what somebody says or angry or disagree, that our first impulse is to be gracious toward one another." The students, and this was a class that had students of different political perspectives, from different racial backgrounds, they handled this challenging work during a challenging time with such maturity. . . . So if we can cut and paste that and share it with the world, I think we would have done everybody a service.

Please listen to the rest of this conversation at [GoACTA.org](http://GoACTA.org). ●

## Former ACTA Scholar-in-Residence Honored for Distinguished Service



Dr. Clara Lovett, ACTA's first scholar-in-residence, has been recognized by Northern Arizona University (NAU) for her outstanding service to the institution. Dr. Lovett served as NAU's 13<sup>th</sup> president from 1994 to 2001. In June 2021, the university announced plans to name the Art Museum on the NAU campus in her honor. A formal dedication ceremony is scheduled for November 3.

The museum is one of the leading cultural institutions in northern Arizona, and its many special exhibitions reflect Dr. Lovett's long-held commitment to providing the public with access to the arts. During her presidency, she promoted and raised funds for arts programs on the NAU campus and in the Flagstaff, Arizona, community.

While leading NAU, Dr. Lovett also worked with several governors to establish Western Governors University, the first fully online, competency-based institution in the United States. Following her retirement from the NAU presidency, she became CEO of the American Association for Higher Education in Washington, DC.

In 2014, Dr. Lovett joined ACTA as our first scholar-in-residence, and her expertise helped build the foundation for ACTA's campaign to reform the broken system of accreditation. We join in applauding her distinguished career in higher education. ●

## ACTA's High-Achieving Staff

Our staff is made up of outstanding individuals who demonstrate passion and excellence in their work to reform higher education and in their personal endeavors. Below, we share some of the recent accomplishments of our current and former staff members.

**Zachary Rogers**, program officer for educator outreach, is a frequent contributor to the *Imaginative Conservative*. His recent articles include “Parties and Presidential Selection”; “John Locke’s ‘A Letter Concerning Toleration’ and the Liberal Regime”; and “Churchill and Prudence: Actions at Mers el-Kebir”. He is currently enrolled in the University of Dallas’s Certificate of Classical Learning program, and, as an executive member of the Steamboat Institute’s Emerging Leaders Advisory Council, he co-hosts the podcast Liberty Chats. He has summited Pikes Peak in Colorado on three occasions.

**Nick Down**, program officer for trustee & government affairs, joined the

ACTA team in October 2020. Previously, Mr. Down served on the staff of former U.S. Representative Frank LoBiondo from 2012 to 2019. As a legislative assistant, he was instrumental in working with New Jersey’s senators and the senate committee to pass H.R. 6602, a bill that reauthorized and provides funds to maintain the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Route, a beautiful trail stretching 300 miles along the eastern and southern coasts of the state that includes several historical landmarks.

**Nathaniel Urban**, associate director of curricular improvement, will be leaving ACTA to pursue a Master of Divinity at Ashland University Theological Seminary. In addition to writing many op-eds for ACTA, he has published several articles under his own byline, including most recently “Student debt forgiveness punishes financial responsibility” in the *Washington Examiner* and “The Meaning of Genealogy” in the *Imaginative Conservative*.

**Nayeli Riano**, who interned at ACTA in 2017 and is now earning her Ph.D. in political theory at Georgetown University, will soon publish a book entitled *Dwellings Far from Desperate Fields: Essays on Faith, Memory, and Modernity* (New Hampshire: Stone Tower, 2021).

In addition to fighting those who disparage Western Civilization and seek to “deplatform” Classical Studies, **ACTA President Michael Poliakoff** continues to be active in the world of classical scholarship. His essay “Greek Combat Sport and the Borders of Athletics, Violence, and Civilization” will appear this August in *The Oxford Handbook of Sport & Spectacle in the Ancient World*, and the forthcoming *Palgrave Handbook of Sport, Politics and Harm* will begin with his essay “The Perils of Rewarding Toughness: Honor, Injury, and Death in the Athletics of the Ancient World.” ●

### ACTA President Testifies, *continued from 2*

cheerleader . . . they are fiduciaries. They’re the people who have to make the hard calls. They should not seek an adversarial relationship with administration, but they are their supervisors. Ultimately, everything that happens on campus is something they’re accountable for. They tend to usually understand more about the budget as one of their key roles, but they also need to take a look at issues of the core function of the institution, which is academic success. What’s the curriculum like? What’s the general education program like? They should take a look at student life and the level of the free exchange of ideas. These are all part of their solemn responsibility.”

Representative Murphy commented, “Institutions have shown very little activity in regards to reining in costs. Is there any hope for universities to take that seriously, to cut costs, to actually help our students in the long term rather than bloating budgets for administrators and extra programs?”

President Poliakoff responded, “We need to look to the positive outliers, and they are there. Purdue—whose president

is Mitch Daniels, former governor of Indiana—has an administrative cost that is \$1,100 less than its peers. It has had a tuition freeze for seven years. Tuition went down from the time he started his presidency, and academic measures have been going up all the time. This can be done. Arizona State University is another example where administrative costs have actually dropped per student.

“The trustee is not primarily a checkbook or a cheerleader . . . they are fiduciaries. They’re the people who have to make the hard calls.”

I don’t mean to be touting our own products, but we have a free website called HowCollegesSpendMoney.com where with a few keystrokes, people can see the ratio between spending on administration versus instruction, and in some cases, I hope boards of trustees will look at it and say, ‘We need to investigate. Maybe there’s a reason for it, but this is not acceptable.’”

ACTA is glad to see our congressmen taking up the issue of excessive higher education spending. We will continue to provide best practices for lawmakers and university leaders who seek to increase the accessibility and quality of a college education. ●

## 10 Interns Spend Summer with ACTA

This summer, 10 interns joined the ACTA team to provide valuable assistance to our Academic Affairs and Development departments. Seven of the interns worked on ACTA's annual *What Will They Learn?* report, conducting hundreds of reviews to help assess the quality of curricula at America's colleges and universities. Two interns supported the work of ACTA's Development team, learning about donor communications, database management, and professional writing. Our final intern served as the Robert Lewit Fellow in Education Policy and contributed to a variety of writing and research projects.

**Conner Paszko** is a senior at North Carolina State University majoring in political science. He plans to work for the North Carolina General Assembly and pursue a career in the U.S. Army. **Leah Schnyders** is a recent graduate of Wheaton College where she studied international relations and Spanish. **Megan Ober** is a junior at Baylor University studying political science and economics.

**Kaitlyn Beckett** recently graduated from Otterbein University where she majored in sociology and criminology, with a minor in psychology. **Monica Boryczewski** is a sophomore at Franciscan University of Steubenville. She is studying English with a concentration in writing. **Daniel Siegel** majored in finance at Emory University and will attend law school in the fall. **Mary Ridenour** attended the University of Wyoming and majored in international studies. She will be attending Texas A&M University to pursue a master's degree in public service and administration.

**Austin Calvo** graduated from Quinnipiac University with a major in political science and minors in Spanish and international studies. He recently accepted an offer to join



Interns Dana Ross, Conner Paszko, Austin Calvo, Max Prowant, and Megan Ober.

ACTA's Development team. **Dana Ross** graduated from Grove City College where she majored in economics. She hopes to work in education policy or economic development. **Max Prowant** is earning his Ph.D. in political science at the University of Texas–Austin and plans to enlist in the military or work for the state department.

Reflecting on her internship, Ms. Ross remarked, “I have learned more about the decision-making processes in higher education policy and just how hard it can be to make effective change. I also experienced a fantastic community at ACTA, which has emphasized the importance of a good work environment and culture wherever I may find myself in the future.” We are grateful to our interns for their excellent work and wish them the very best in their future careers. ●

## Protections for Donor Privacy Upheld by Supreme Court

Donors—and nonprofits—had cause to celebrate this June as the Supreme Court upheld donor privacy. In the 6-3 decision, *Americans for Prosperity Foundation v. Bonta*, the court struck down a California law requiring nonprofit organizations to provide the state with a list of their donors' names and addresses.

ACTA's Fund for Academic Renewal applauds the ruling. Though the court's vote fell along ideological lines, support for the plaintiff came from a broad and diverse base. Hundreds of nonprofits—including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Cato Institute, and the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund—submitted amicus briefs advocating for donor privacy.

Forcing nonprofits to disclose a list of their donors could have a chilling effect on giving, as many donors prefer to keep their giving private. “Anonymous” can be found at the top of donor rolls for nearly every nonprofit, including colleges and universities. Earlier this year, anonymous donors gave \$550 million to Western Michigan University—the largest single donation in history to an American public university.

Critics of the Supreme Court's decision argue that it has potential implications for secrecy in political giving. However, charitable contributions and political giving are distinct categories. The precedent set in *Americans for Prosperity Foundation v. Bonta* will not necessarily apply to cases involving campaign contributions. Nor do most states require as extensive of a disclosure as California tried to implement. The Supreme Court's ruling brings California back in alignment with widely accepted protections of donor privacy and ensures that donors who choose to stay behind the scenes will continue to have that option. ●



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### **INSIDE ACADEME**

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## **Dr. John Altman Becomes ACTA's New Board Chairman**



John W. Altman has been elected as the new chairman of ACTA's Board of Directors. Dr. Altman has led a distinguished career in both business and higher education. He has been the sole proprietor, founder, partner, and significant shareholder in six different enterprises, co-founding and serving as executive vice president of Continental Polymers, Inc.

He has extended his legacy of pioneering entrepreneurship to our nation's college students, becoming Miami University's first professor of entrepreneurship in 1994. The university's Farmer School of Business houses the John W. Altman Institute, which has reached over 3,200 students across all 117 majors at the university and recently received the 2020 NASDAQ Center of Entrepreneurial Excellence Award. He has also served as a member of Miami University's Alumni Board, Business Advisory Council, Board of Visitors, and Board of Trustees.

Dr. Altman is firmly committed to ACTA's mission to strengthen American higher education. As a Miami University trustee, he worked with ACTA to lead the institution to become the 68<sup>th</sup> campus to adopt the Chicago Principles on Freedom of Expression in 2019.

We thank our former chairman Edwin D. Williamson for his outstanding guidance through the COVID-19 pandemic. ACTA President Michael Poliakoff remarked, "ACTA is grateful for the steady direction by Mr. Williamson during an important transitional period, and before him, Dr. Robert Lewit. We are delighted to embrace Dr. Altman's leadership as we continue to promote academic excellence, academic freedom, and accountability." ●