

# Education and Freedom: Hope for a Self-Governing Society

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Remarks by Karrin Taylor Robson on accepting the  
Jerry L. Martin Prize for Excellence in College Trusteeship



**ACTA**  
AMERICAN COUNCIL OF  
TRUSTEES AND ALUMNI

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by Karrin Taylor Robson

*Remarks accepting*

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni's

**Jerry L. Martin Prize for Excellence  
in College Trusteeship**

*Tributes by*

William Bennett

Michael Crow

November 11, 2021

Washington, DC

## AMERICAN COUNCIL OF TRUSTEES AND ALUMNI

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The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) is an independent nonprofit educational organization committed to academic freedom, academic excellence, and accountability. Launched in 1995, ACTA has a network of alumni and trustees from nearly 1,300 colleges and universities, including more than 23,000 current board members. The quarterly newsletter, *Inside Academe*, reaches over 13,000 readers. ACTA receives no government funding and is supported through the generosity of individuals and foundations.

Presentation of

**THE JERRY L. MARTIN PRIZE**  
for Excellence in College Trusteeship

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**TRIBUTES**

**William Bennett**

*Secretary of Education under President Ronald Reagan and Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy under President George H. W. Bush*

It's an honor to introduce Karrin Taylor Robson tonight, but it's even more honorable that you at the American Council of Trustees and Alumni have bestowed the Jerry L. Martin Prize on Karrin. As someone who has fought more than a few battles with you, you have chosen well in recognizing Karrin's work and taking her into further battle with you for all that you stand for. Academic excellence, academic freedom, and academic accountability have never been needed more. I've known Karrin for many years, and despite having some really good connections in Arizona—I could brag about them—whenever something came to my office about the great Grand Canyon state, the first thing I would do, and always do, is say, "Let's get Karrin on the phone and see what she thinks." She is and she should be policymakers' first and last call when it comes to public policy in Arizona, and beyond.

She's a force of nature, and her work is now recognized nationally, as it should be. It's an awfully odd time in America and higher education right now, all education really. Things we used to take for granted like the freedom to think, the freedom to speak what we're thinking, and the freedom to explore ideas are not just a great discount today. They are under threat, threat from the United States' attorney general, if one can believe that. This is not what the Department of Justice is for, or the FBI. And

universities were not created to instantiate and defend a single party line. I was rereading George Orwell's *1984* the other week, and recall this line from Orwell. Quote, "By 2050, earlier probably, all real knowledge of Oldspeak will have disappeared. The whole literature of the past will have been destroyed. Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Byron—they'll exist only in Newspeak versions, not merely changed into something different, but actually contradictory of what they used to be." Close quote.

This reminded me of ACTA's report on how less than 10% of our nation's top colleges even require Shakespeare for their literature majors anymore. And I was put in mind of Sir Thomas More's line in *A Man for All Seasons*, "I show you the times."

Karrin Taylor Robson is a woman for all seasons, given her work as a member of the Board of Regents in Arizona, as well as everything else she has put her shoulder to the wheel on. It's my hope that along with ACTA, you all together can help change the times. They need it. And we need to face reality. We are in a battle for freedom right now, unprecedented. In our elementary and secondary schools, in our colleges and universities, in our thoughts and minds, and in our speech. And there are other areas we must consider as well. It's not a battle for the timid. It's not a battle we asked for. It's not a battle we started. But the battle has come and it's before us and the country's at stake. I believe the West is at stake. Human liberty and excellence are at stake. That's why, of course, organizations like ACTA and reform activists like Karrin are so important. So after tonight, go back to work. We need you all busy. Congratulations, Karrin.

## **Michael M. Crow**

*President, Arizona State University*

It's my honor to recognize Karrin Taylor Robson for the ACTA Jerry L. Martin Prize for Excellence in College Trusteeship. Karrin is a graduate

of Arizona State University, and she is a very successful business leader and community leader in Arizona, but in her term on the Arizona Board of Regents, she was really focused on how to build a modern, successful, adaptive, public enterprise-driven, free-speech protecting university, that is advancing core American values. Advancing all the things that we love dearly about our country, all that we stand for and all that we are.

Karrin was always driving things forward. Asking hard questions. Driving us to higher levels of performance and creativity, and really doing that with her deep commitment to the success of Arizona as a place. At the end of the day, some people forget this: We are a federation of states in these United States, and each state was purposefully designed to be its own thing, to march to its own drum, within certain parameters.

Karrin is one of those drummers. She is drumming.

How do we keep a state to be very much focused on self-reliance, entrepreneurship, innovation, the protection of individual liberties, and many other things? Within such a state, the universities would look, behave, and perform differently, and ASU is that.

I just want to say, “Congratulations!” to Karrin on this award. ACTA is an organization that we’re very proud to be a part of. I am sorry that I cannot be there, but this is a much recognized and honored prize for a very honorable and purposeful civil servant, public servant, and person committed to the future. Karrin Taylor Robson, congratulations.

“Every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. We have called by different names brethren of the same principle. We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists. If there be any among us who would wish to dissolve this Union or to change its republican form, let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it.

—Thomas Jefferson

# Education and Freedom: Hope for a Self-Governing Society

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by Karrin Taylor Robson

It's an absolute privilege and delight to be here tonight. Thank you for this honor—and to everyone associated with ACTA, thank you—to be recognized by the one organization, that if our colleges and universities are to be turned around and saved, it is because of the work of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. Thank you for your honor tonight, but more importantly, thank you for being here and doing what you do. I think of ACTA and higher education as Abraham Lincoln thought of America in the world: our last best hope.

I'm doubly honored in that part of this celebration continues on at the Library of Congress, an institution for which I think it's fair to say, Thomas Jefferson is its indispensable man, given that he signed it into operation as president, and then he sold his personal library to the library for \$24,000—7,000 volumes at about \$3 a book, which was a lot of money then. In fact, I think I probably have some overdue library charges that exceed that, but I assure you they're all good books.

Good books. I pause on that for a moment, because when I think of the notion of good books or higher education and everything that we work for, I think of Thomas Jefferson. About a year before he signed the legislation that gave us the role and function of the Library of Congress, he delivered his inaugural address, where we can find nearly everything we need to know about freedom, the life of the mind, and democracy. Two lines in particular from that speech are lines that we could use just now. Upon taking the oath of office, Thomas Jefferson said, “Every difference of opinion is not a

difference of principle. We have called by different names brethren of the same principle. We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists,” which were the two parties at the time. “If there be any among us who would wish to dissolve this Union or to change its republican form, let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it.”

I think about our state of higher education today a lot in the context of Jefferson’s quote. First, as you, I am sure, are often asked, how did we get to a place where Twitter mobs can silence distinguished professors? ACTA’s Hero of Intellectual Freedom, Abigail Thompson, is here with us tonight. She has taken unimaginable flack for questioning faculty hiring on the basis of something other than merit. Or how did we get to a place where pundits say free speech is a tool of oppression and bias response teams make life a living hell for those who violate campus orthodoxies? Or how did we get to a place where saying, “My great-grandfather was an immigrant. He worked hard and made something of himself,” is now considered a microaggression? And now we learn teachers are dropping Shakespeare to make room for “more inclusive voices.” You open the pages of the newspaper or turn on cable news and you can be excused for not quite recognizing the country you’ve lived in and worked so hard for.

How did we get here? I give you our education system. We have been graduating upwards of four million young college graduates from our universities every year. Think about what a generation of what William Buckley called “junk thought” can constitute. In 1987, 34 years ago, Ruth Marcus, a highly respected liberal columnist, shared the shocking findings of a Hearst Corporation survey: In a poll of over 1,000 Americans, nearly half of them believed the Marxist doctrine, “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need,” came from the United States Constitution. Meanwhile, ACTA’s own poll revealed that only 22% of seniors from America’s most prestigious universities, you know, the ones that *U.S. News*

& *World Report* calls “Top Schools,” could match the phrase “Government of the people, by the people, and for the people” with the *Gettysburg Address*.

Four million newly credentialed and minted young adults, 80% of whom are steeped in socialist and Marxist doctrine today, and we have convinced ourselves that wouldn't make a difference? Well, the receipts, as they say, are in. And thus, I give you a poll from just this last summer, revealing that 60% of one of our two major political parties in America now favors socialism over capitalism. That, my friends, is a difference of principle, not a difference of opinion. We now find ourselves in America with radically polarizing differences of principles, rather than opinions.

For years, many of us, and I'm sure many of you in this room, would watch what was being taught, spoken, and said at our colleges and universities. Our children and grandchildren would come home from spring break quoting some French philosopher we never heard of, or justifying some violent revolution we would never in our right minds agree with. And we would dismiss all of it. We would convince ourselves, “Well, that's college for you. It'll be okay. Once our students graduate, get into the real world, get a job and start paying taxes, they'll normalize, they'll moderate, and they'll be just fine.” Well, in those days, there was only one member of Congress who was a socialist, and today, by my count and theirs, there are six.

The late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, honored in 2016 with the prestigious Bradley Prize, had this to say. While reminding the world of the importance of improving the distribution of the benefits of capitalism, he said, “It is clear that capitalism has delivered its fundamental promise. It is the best system ever devised for generating and creating wealth. The end result of which is that at least, at the very least, 500 million, perhaps a billion people have been taken out of poverty in the last 20 years . . . Wherever capitalism has touched, it has created wealth and taken people out of poverty.”

Yet, as a *Newsweek* editorial reported just last month, a recent survey of a thousand college students showed only 24% of college students today have a positive view of capitalism, compared to 32% who favor socialism. But as disturbing as that finding is, the reasons for the negative view of capitalism are yet worse. These students did not choose the standard economic definition of private property, voluntary exchange, or market forces, but chose instead social connections, special rules, and tax breaks for the rich in corporations. They had drunk the Kool-Aid of anti-capitalism: Easy to do, for as ACTA has shown, less than 3% of liberal arts colleges in America today require a basic course in economics.

It was to combat this collegiate ignorance that I worked hard with Regent Larry Penley, who is with us tonight, and other colleagues of mine on the Arizona Board of Regents. We were at it for three years, but we had to stop leaving the civic education of our students at our public universities to chance. And now, as Michael mentioned, by board policy, every student will, at a minimum, study the basic principles of American constitutional democracy, including the Constitution and the debate surrounding it, the Founding documents and their importance today, and landmark Supreme Court cases. And I dare to out another colleague from Arizona who is here with us tonight, Dr. Paul Carrese from the School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership, who has been very supportive of me and helpful in my efforts with my colleagues on the board to establish some of these new benchmarks for our students.

What happens on our college campuses doesn't stay on our campuses. We reap the fruit of it in American society, as we all know. Abraham Lincoln is said to have offered this urgent admonition, "The philosophy of the classroom in one generation will be the philosophy of government in the next generation." In the seemingly idyllic days of the past, you had an ACLU and a legal bar that defended freedom of the press and freedom of speech. And the media would be the first to wrap itself around the merits of

the First Amendment, to protect its rights, to speak and to write whatever and wherever they thought the truth would lead them. Especially if it was speaking the truth to the power of government. Today, you have news outlets and networks actively engaged in shutting down other news outlets and networks for publishing opinions and news stories the rest of the media doesn't agree with *precisely because they are in the service of electing a certain kind of government and covering up for it in the midst of an election*. Can you imagine Alexander Hamilton watching his own *New York Post* being censored and deplatformed by its fellow newspapers, not the government but by its own cohorts? I think he might demand another duel today.

So how did we get here? Back to Jefferson. Jefferson, and all of our Founders, and pretty much every serious educator up until about 30 years ago, put it best as I mentioned above. We tolerate error of opinion here, “where reason is left free to combat it.” What does “left free to combat it” mean? It means let ‘er rip. It means debates. It means discussion. It means open inquiry. It means there are no closed questions in an open society, and that the best societies are open societies, and that inquiry and question would not be punished.

Of course, this is why professors insisted on tenure in the first place. Well, all that has changed. And it's an interesting story how a “value free” and relativistic social science curriculum has now converted into a rigid adherence to a campus creed of ideology—addled hostility to America and Western Civilization. But let me try starting here. Classical liberals and conservatives slept while campus indoctrination replaced a culture that is the lifeblood of education: debates, discussion, and open inquiry. Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci taught that education would be the engine to counter capitalist culture. And fast forward to the beat poet Allen Ginsburg who once told *Commentary* magazine editor Norman Podhoretz, “We'll get you through your children.” Well, they didn't get to Norman's children, but they got to a lot of other people's children.

So what we thought were quaint and innocuous theories flying around the ivory towers, theories that would never be accepted by, much less introduced into, the real world . . . we thought those theories would stay there, but the ivory tower had a lab leak. A lab leak of the virus of junk thought that I argue is much more toxic and noxious than any other we read about these days because it affects not just our lungs, but our brains, our human spirit, and the entire environment and experiment of the West in self-government. The leak became a rivulet, and the rivulet became a flood. So much so that I don't even know if in many places we can even teach, much less quote Thomas Jefferson—the man for whom learning, freedom of thought, and freedom of conscience were so critical. So critical that he didn't even put the presidency on his tombstone as one of his accomplishments. No, he has three accomplishments listed. One is authoring the Declaration of Independence. Two is writing the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. And three is founding the University of Virginia.

Think about those three things: 1776, freedom of religion, and higher education. We now live in an America where our children are taught that 1776 is no longer relevant. We live in an America where there is a right way to think and a wrong way to think. And if you base any of your thought on religious conviction or try to practice your faith, someone else's political point of view and social behavior will trump it if it embraces the ethic of the modern age rather than the ethic of the Old or New Testament. As for the founding of the University of Virginia, well, just look at the curriculum that Thomas Jefferson and James Madison designated for it in order to teach the topic of government. Pretty good and pretty simple curriculum. Here it is: The Declaration of Independence, the Federalist Papers, and Washington's inaugural and farewell addresses. Outside of about five colleges that you and I can probably name, these not only wouldn't be taught today, they'd be condemned.

All of this is why we started the Regents' Cup—to get young adults to debate and, even more importantly, to think, in the very Jeffersonian and

Madisonian tradition of allowing reason to flourish so that error of opinion would not succeed. We have had students research and take on positions they never encountered or would never consider agreeing with. Yes, it's fair to say, most of the positions they would never agree with were conservative ideas, though I'm not sure Jefferson or Madison would say that. They would just consider them ideas. I had judge after judge tell me about their interactions with these college students. Many of them told them things like, "I never considered that perspective." "I never knew there was a defense of that perspective." "That defense at least makes sense to me, even though I don't agree with it." And the best of all, my favorite, "After researching the topic, I totally changed my position and my mind."

This is why we have free speech in the first place, free inquiry, and why we have universities and colleges. That is their purpose. Not to be places of refuge or depositories of social bubble wrap and psychological Purell. This is why I am so honored to be with you today and have our work and our commitment to free inquiry, free debate, and heck, just freedom, be celebrated.

Can we turn this ship around? Of course we can, if we are committed to it. I'm reminded of what C.S. Lewis defined as the real progressive: he who realizes he is on the wrong path and is the first to turn around. I'm proud to join you in turning things around. I'll close on a note of optimism and instruction for ourselves. You will hear tomorrow from Purdue President Mitch Daniels, former governor of Indiana. As governor, he told the university trustees, "You are not there to be a mindless cheerleader." And as president of Purdue in 2015, he educated his students and faculty and said, "If you absorbed anything of our Constitution, you know that it contains no right not to be 'offended' . . . . As they say, 'deal with it.'" And he went on to say, "And if you are disturbed enough, then answer it with superior facts and arguments." We need this to become the norm and not the exception. Thank you, President Daniels.

I know it seems hard to get us back on track, but Americans don't do easy. We've faced a lot tougher challenges in the past. As Thomas Paine put it, "Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: It is dearness only that gives every thing its value."

The success of the Regents' Cup and its core commitment to free speech and civil discourse is a beacon of hope for a continued existence in a self-governing society. The degree to which we are successful in our mission is the extent to which we will restore education here in America. Anything short of our success will sound the death knell, not only for education, but for America and the West. But if we succeed, we will all do so knowing that we will be supplying, not just our generation, but future generations to come, with not just the *knowledge* of things like free speech and freedom of conscience, but the *experience* of free speech and freedom of conscience.

And for our nation at large, we will find our true vaccines against the viruses of junk thought so permeating our culture and our country right now. We will, in short, restore freedom and, if I might say, all things beautiful. American Council of Trustees and Alumni, I thank you, and soon the rest of the nation will, too. Thank you very much.

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## KARRIN TAYLOR ROBSON

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Karrin Taylor Robson is a long-time Arizona business leader and land-use expert. She is founder and president of Arizona Strategies, a premier land use strategy firm headquartered in Phoenix.

Ms. Taylor Robson has worked with national organizations representing major landowners and stakeholders across the country to advance balanced federal environmental law and policy on endangered species acts and wetlands issues. In addition, she has advanced

multiple public-private partnerships, leveraging private sector capital to deliver public infrastructure and other public benefits.

Ms. Taylor Robson has served on the boards of numerous government, community, and economic development organizations. In June 2017, she was appointed by Governor Doug Ducey to the Arizona Board of Regents which is responsible for the governance of the state's three public universities, Arizona State University, Northern Arizona University, and the University of Arizona. During her tenure, she created the Regents' Cup, an annual debate competition between the three universities. The event fosters vibrant democratic engagement that teaches students how to communicate respectfully with each other and exchange thought-provoking ideas in the spirit of free inquiry.

She served as the chair of the Joe Foss Institute, the vice chair of the Greater Phoenix Economic Council, and as a board member of the Arizona Chamber of Commerce and inVisionAZ. In addition, she serves as a member of the Civic Leaders Group for the Chief of Staff of the United States Air Force.

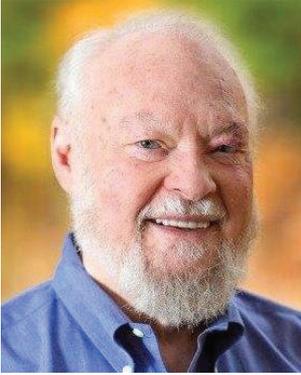
Prior to forming Arizona Strategies, Ms. Taylor Robson served as executive vice president of DMB Associates, Inc., a Scottsdale based master-planned community developer. Earlier in her career, she was a principal with the law firm of Biskind, Hunt & Taylor, P.L.C., where she practiced in the areas of land use, development, and zoning law representing large landowners on significant and complex land use cases.

Through her numerous professional, community, and philanthropic commitments, Ms. Taylor Robson advocates daily for building and sustaining a dynamic and diverse economy, protecting property rights and creating value in real estate, and supporting the men and women who serve in our military.

Ms. Taylor Robson is the wife of Ed Robson and the proud mother of four.

## THE JERRY L. MARTIN PRIZE for Excellence in College Trusteeship

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Jerry L. Martin is chairman emeritus of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, having served as president of ACTA from its founding in 1995 as the National Alumni Forum until 2003. He is the author of *God: An Autobiography, As Told to a Philosopher* and coordinator of the Theology Without Walls project at the American Academy of Religion.

From 1977 to 1979, Dr. Martin served as president of the Colorado Conference of the American Association of University Professors.

In 1982, he was selected as an Andrew W. Mellon Congressional Fellow and worked on education, regulatory issues, and international trade on the staff of then-congressman Hank Brown of Colorado. He has also held faculty positions at Georgetown University, The Catholic University of America, and the American Enterprise Institute.

From 1967 until 1982, Dr. Martin was a tenured professor and chair of the philosophy department at the University of Colorado–Boulder, where he also served as the director of the University’s Center for the Study of Values and Social Policy.

From 1988 to 1995, Dr. Martin held senior positions at the National Endowment for the Humanities, including acting chairman. He has testified before Congress on education policy and appeared on “World News Tonight” and other television news programs.

He earned a B.A. in political science at the University of California–Riverside, an M.A. in philosophy and political science at the University of Chicago, a Ph.D. in philosophy at Northwestern University, and a Doctor of Humane Letters from the Thomas More College of Liberal Arts.



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