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Academic
Freedom and
Excellence

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DONOR REVOLT: Capital Research Center Interviews ACTA’s Michael Poliakoff and Emily Koons Jae



In December, ACTA President Michael Poliakoff and Vice President of Development & Philanthropy Emily Koons Jae were invited to appear on the Capital Research Center’s Giving Review podcast hosted by **Michael E. Hartmann**. They discussed alternatives for donors who no longer wish to support institutions that do not uphold free expression and academic rigor.

Michael Hartmann (MH): If I were, hypothetically, an impatient donor . . . what would you have said to me on October 1 if I said, ‘It doesn’t seem as if we’re effecting any reform or making any progress?’

Emily Koons Jae (EJ): I would tell that donor that the challenges to reform are real, they’re formidable, but also that higher education is too important to our society to abandon. Unlike Vegas, what happens on college campuses doesn’t stay there. This illiberal ideology that we’ve seen take over workplaces, government, you name it—that started on college campuses. We can’t simply

walk away from higher education. I would tell donors, if they’re frustrated about what they’re seeing on campus, to stop giving to their alma mater . . . as some of the Penn and Harvard donors did.

But we really try to encourage donors to think beyond the Ivies and the elites to look at other institutions that might be a better match for their values, because there are some really great campuses out there that are doing wonderful work and that fly under the radar and don’t get support. . . . We have identified about 90 of what we call Oases of Excellence. These are really excellent campus centers that are upholding Great Books education, teaching about free market economics and entrepreneurship, and providing a real kind of counter to the prevailing campus culture. . . . Fund the good on campus but stop writing those blank checks.

MH: Now let’s go to mid-October. . . . What changed and why?

Michael Poliakoff (MP): A deep sense of betrayal and perhaps even a sense of awaken-

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ACTA Calls on Universities to Adopt Institutional Neutrality!

America’s colleges and universities have developed a bad habit of weighing in on political controversies. It is damaging their credibility and undermining free expression on campus. ACTA calls on them to adopt a policy of institutional neutrality, as exemplified by the University of Chicago’s 1967 **Kalven Report**. Returning to the political sidelines is the best way for institutions to get back to their true mission: the free pursuit of knowledge and serving the public good.

Discover more about ACTA’s Institutional Neutrality Campaign on page 4 of this issue.

**Jeff Kaplan, Trustee
The Ohio State University**

“I truly am grateful to all of you and look forward to continuing this important dialogue.”

**James P. Lentini, President
Molloy University, New York**

“The Braver Angels debate approach offered an excellent forum for a wide group of students who are not necessarily experienced in debate protocols to engage in a robust dialogue around a topic of interest. It was moderated in such a way that encourages participation in a structured format that requires a ‘pro’ and ‘con’ view of interesting topics. The debate format beautifully demonstrates what we value in a Molloy education that allows a topic to be viewed from multiple angles, while respectfully weighing the merits of opposing viewpoints.”

Note: On December 1, ACTA and its partner Braver Angels held a student debate at Molloy University on the question, “Does Artificial Intelligence provide more harm than benefit to humanity?”

**Jeremy Haefner
Chancellor, University of Denver**

“I want to extend my gratitude for the successful Braver Angels debate conducted on University of Denver’s campus on November 14. . . . As you all know, DU is deeply committed to civil discourse, pluralism, free expression, and academic freedom. This event exemplified not only these ideals in practice, but also *why* they are so important and valuable.

“As our world becomes ever more complex and, in many ways, divisive, it is integral that our nation’s students graduate able to engage with that complexity, listen to and understand others’ perspectives, and respectfully articulate their own. This is what we saw at the debate, and it is commendable.

“Thank you all again for your work, and our continued partnership. I look forward to even more opportunities to bring these important conversations and exercises to the Denver and the DU community.”

Note: In November, ACTA organized its second debate with the National Governors Association, chaired by Sadie Webb, ACTA’s program manager for the College Debates and Discourse Alliance.

Capital Research Interview, continued from 1

ing. The betrayal was watching students the day after the worst massacre of Jews since the Holocaust celebrating this. I asked two questions immediately: Who raised these children, and who pretended to educate them? The antisemitism problem on campus had been a dirty little secret for a very long time. . . . And seeing how bad it had gotten was one of those great wake-up calls for people like Jon Huntsman and Marc Rowan and Ronald Lauder, people who had been incredibly generous.

What’s beginning to emerge now is a recognition that the antisemitism problem is egregious and horrifying, but there’s an even deeper cause behind it which is miseducation. . . . Where were the courses, the outside speakers, that would have broken into this canard of intersectionality that—the most ludicrous thing of all—has gay students advocating for a group that would throw them off of the roofs in a heartbeat? This muddled thinking is a reflection of something much deeper that’s been going on for a

very, very long time. The erosion of the free exchange of ideas, cancel culture, the DEI offices that are so myopic in looking at only one kind of diversity—these are problems that have been crying out for redress. And that’s where I hope the donor revolt is going to bring us back. Donors should not be looked upon as piggybanks or check-writers or guests at the football game. They’re the guardians of values.

MH: How long will this increased sense of energy . . . arising from the sense of betrayal last, and how do you think it should be directed?

EJ: I’m really encouraged because it’s not the first time that donors have stopped giving to higher ed, but it’s one of the first times that they were so public about their outrage and their disapproval. My hope is that through their courage and speaking up—not just kind of silently fading away as a lot of donors have done—I’m hoping that will inspire other philanthropists to know that they don’t have to continue funding a status quo that’s so broken. . . . That’s why ACTA

exists, to provide the services that help to identify good partners on campus, help to identify good programs, and then of course also help with a gift agreement to ensure that the gift stays true to the donor’s intent.

MP: This really is the moment for [donors] to come together and to make so absolutely clear that this is going to be a fiscal hit, because schools really do understand that, sadly perhaps more than they understand values. . . . When you’ve got thousands of alums, even modest donors, who are saying “No,” that registers in *U.S. News & World Report* ratings, and that’s also a pretty persuasive metric for these schools. I think our duty now is to help each other stand firm, to find the philanthropic outlets that are going to rebuild what we need in this country. The private-public partnerships for independent institutes and Oases of Excellence will give students the opportunity to have the kind of mentors that I had and to whom I’m so very grateful. ●

ACTA Launches 2023–2024 Levy Forum Series!



Palm Beach Synagogue Rabbi Moshe E. Scheiner, Paul and Karen Levy, George Will, and Michael Poliakoff at ACTA's Levy Forum for Open Discourse event featuring a lecture by George Will.

The Levy Forum for Open Discourse has launched its 2023–2024 lecture series at the Palm Beach Synagogue in Palm Beach, Florida. Created by ACTA Board Member Paul Levy and his wife Karen, the Levy Forum lectures are dedicated to exploring the most urgent social and political topics of our times in a spirit of fearless inquiry.

On December 6, human rights activist **Ayaan Hirsi Ali** delivered a passionate speech entitled, “Free Minds, Free Lives: The Escape from Islamic Extremism.” Ms. Hirsi Ali observed with alarm that the democratic values of freedom and self-determination are disappearing in

Western countries, including America, and that we must urgently defend these values from internal social destruction and external political usurpation. She remarked, “If we can sell Coca-Cola to the whole world, surely we can sell the most important principles to our own citizens.” The series continued with a lecture by *Washington Post* columnist **George Will** on January 10, entitled, “The

(continued on 6)

ACTA Participates in Congressional Free Speech Roundtable

On December 6, ACTA was invited for the third time to participate in the annual Congressional Campus Free Speech Roundtable, hosted by **Representative Greg Murphy**, along with **Representative Burgess Owens** and **Representative Virginia Foxx**.

The roundtable brings together students, alumni, and education leaders each year for a conversation about the state of free expression on campus and what should be done to restore First Amendment freedoms.

Steven McGuire, ACTA's Paul & Karen Levy Fellow in Campus Freedom, represented ACTA. In his opening remarks, he said, “We have seen some important successes in the last year. For example, trustees at the University of North Carolina and Ohio State University have passed resolutions endorsing free expression. Importantly, they've endorsed the University

of Chicago's Kalven Report, the idea of institutional neutrality. That is a topic that has suddenly become more interesting to college presidents in the last couple of months, and I hope that many more institutions will look at that document and the

idea of institutional neutrality as something they should adopt or endorse.”

Despite these successes, Dr. McGuire emphasized that the situation for free expression

and intellectual diversity is getting worse. He stated, “If anyone didn't know, they certainly have hopefully seen in the last few months just how bad things have gotten on America's campuses. And while I think a lot of what we're seeing in regard to antisemitism can be attributed to several causes—including declining academic excellence and curriculum problems—certainly a good deal is owing also to hypocrisy on

(continued on 4)

“ If anyone didn't know, they certainly have hopefully seen in the last few months just how bad things have gotten on America's campuses. . . . We have whole programs that are essentially devoted to ideological activism on most of our campuses.

Effective TRUSTEESHIP



ACTA Leads UNC–Chapel Hill Board Retreat

In November, the University of North Carolina (UNC)–Chapel Hill Board of Trustees invited ACTA to lead the board’s annual retreat. The board has demonstrated bold leadership in advancing civic education and free inquiry over the last several years, for which it received ACTA’s 2023 Jerry L. Martin Prize for Excellence in College Trusteeship.

In his opening presentation, ACTA President Michael Poliakoff said, “There are a lot of fun parts to being a board member. The football games. The people you meet. The cocktail receptions. But it’s also a critical job for the state of North Carolina, and yes, even American competitiveness. . . . Beyond the economic impact of higher education for North Carolina, you’re also producing the next generation of civic leaders.” Trustees have myriad responsibilities—from promoting academic freedom and intellectual rigor, to navigating the complexities of accreditation, to keeping tuition affordable. They must rise to the challenge, empowered by the knowledge that they “were chosen for this job for a reason. . . . What often gets in the way of board members being optimally engaged is when they underestimate what they bring to the table.”

Stephen Balch, ACTA’s John Hillen Fellow in American History & Civic Education, discussed trustees’ responsibility to ensure that a degree from UNC–Chapel Hill signifies competency in the full range of core subjects that prepare students to be excellent employees and informed citizens, including rigorous study of American history and government. Alex Wolf, our research fellow for campus freedom, discussed the university’s current policies related to free expression and academic freedom and provided recommendations for improvement.

ACTA Policy Research Fellow Kyle Beltramini closed out the day with a deep dive into the historical purpose of university accreditation. Mr. Beltramini emphasized that trustees, not accreditors, serve as the ultimate guarantors of academic quality at their institutions.

We thank the trustees of UNC–Chapel Hill for upholding their duty to serve their students, the state of North Carolina, and the nation at large through engaged and informed leadership. To learn more about ACTA’s board services, please contact Nick Down at 202-684-8822 or ndown@GoACTA.org. ●

ACTA at Congressional Roundtable, *continued from 3*

free expression issues and years of not respecting free expression and intellectual diversity. We have whole programs that are essentially devoted to ideological activism on most of our campuses, and we are seeing some of the fruits of that now.”

Dr. McGuire explained that when students step on campus, they are immediately confronted with resident life staff and orientation programs that teach them what they can and cannot say. When asked if people should be free to express themselves, Dr. McGuire said, “A lot of students would say ‘Yeah,’ but . . . one of the main things we’re seeing is that free speech isn’t at the top of the hierarchy in their minds. That can be especially problematic on a college campus, which is an institution specifically designed for people to engage in free inquiry and debate.”

Other roundtable participants included current college students, **John Coleman** of the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, and **Cherise Trump** from Speech First. The alumni perspective was shared by **John Craig** and **Kevin Cook**, members of Davidsonians for Freedom of Thought and Discourse, a chapter of the Alumni Free Speech Alliance, which ACTA has supported since its founding in 2021. ●

ACTA’s Institutional Neutrality Campaign



Institutional neutrality protects the vibrant exchange of ideas that is the lifeblood of our colleges and universities.

Scan the QR code to find out more and download a copy of the Kalven Report.

ACTA Submits Complaint to Harvard’s Accreditor

ACTA has submitted a complaint to the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE), the accrediting body of Harvard University, requesting that the commission open a formal inquiry into Harvard’s apparent violation of its own established procedures in its investigation of plagiarism allegations against former president Claudine Gay.

On October 24, 2023, the *New York Post* submitted plagiarism charges against Dr. Gay to the Harvard Corporation, the university’s governing body. The Harvard Corporation stated that it “promptly initiated an independent review by distinguished political scientists,” but that its review had found only “a few instances of inadequate citation,” not plagiarism. On January 2, after further allegations were made by an anonymous source, Dr. Gay resigned.

In its complaint, ACTA states, “Additional evidence suggesting that Harvard may be in violation of several provisions of NECHE’s *Standards for Accreditation* continues to appear. Harvard’s former president, Dr. Claudine Gay, admitted to multiple instances in which her published work and dissertation required corrections to her citations; instances of this sort would normally be seen as plagiarism according to the *Harvard Guide to Using Sources*.”

ACTA found that “Credible press accounts, and Harvard’s own account, of its institutional response to these allegations suggest that Harvard’s current policies and procedures are insufficient to ensure compliance with NECHE Standard 4 . . . and 9.”

Steven McGuire, ACTA’s Paul & Karen Levy Fellow in Campus Freedom, remarked, “Academic dishonesty offends against the very nature of the university as an institution devoted to the pursuit of truth. . . . it is critical that our elite institutions adhere to rigorous standards in such matters both for the sake of their own integrity and because the rest of higher education will follow their lead.” ●



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Virginia Leaders Promote Free Speech

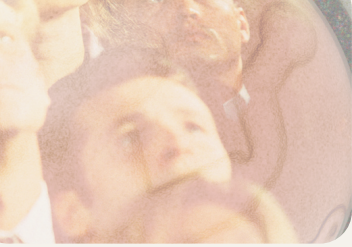
On November 29, ACTA President Michael Poliakoff was invited to speak at the Higher Education Summit on Free Speech and Intellectual Diversity, hosted by Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin at the University of Virginia. More than 100 presidents and representatives from every public university and over half of the private universities in the state attended the summit.

In his keynote address, Governor Youngkin said that higher education is in desperate need of greater intellectual diversity. He remarked, “When it comes to freedom of expression, we have to create an environment that protects the ability to challenge conventional thinking.” He continued, “Challenging beliefs and fostering an environment for these debates is exactly why we all exist.”

Speaking on one of the summit’s panels about best practices for supporting civil dialogue on campus, President Poliakoff discussed how many universities “internalize a culture of offense rather than the free exchange of ideas.” A true marketplace of ideas can only exist when students and faculty are free to discuss, challenge, or express support for ideas across the intellectual spectrum, without fear that they will be censored, isolated, or punished.

All attendees were tasked with creating an “action plan,” according to Virginia Secretary of Education Aimee Rogstad Guidera, for promoting free expression and viewpoint diversity at their institutions. By March 1, each university will submit its action plan to Secretary Guidera, identifying the specific steps they will take to advance free expression and debate on campus and the resources they need to make the new changes.

ACTA commends Governor Youngkin’s administration for making diversity of thought and free discourse priorities in the state of Virginia. ●



CAMPUS ON H E A R D

Substance Use and Mental Health Initiatives

In response to what has been called a college student mental health crisis—49% of students experience depression or anxiety, and 14% have seriously considered committing suicide, according to a national survey by the Healthy Minds Network—colleges and universities across the country are urgently ramping up their mental health services. As part of these initiatives, college leaders must recognize that substance use is closely connected to mental health disorders.

Studies shows that substance use can both exacerbate existing mental health problems and contribute to their onset, creating a vicious cycle, especially for students who use alcohol and drugs to self-medicate. Marijuana use has been linked to depression, anxiety, temporary psychosis, schizophrenia, thoughts of suicide, suicide attempts, and suicide, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A study led by researchers at Columbia University’s Irving Medical Center found that alcohol and opioid misuse significantly increase the risk for suicidal ideation, attempts, and death.

Students who walk into campus

mental health services seeking help with depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts may also be experiencing alcohol and drug disorders. Many do not recognize the relationship between substance use and the symptoms they are experiencing. They need assistance to connect the dots and form a successful plan for recovery. Many programs, like Auburn University’s Health Promotion & Wellness Services, provide student counseling, psychological services, and substance use prevention all in one place. This is the way forward for colleges and universities that want to use their resources wisely and get students the critical help they need.

Costly DEI Programs Yield Little Return

In a January 12 article in the *New York Post*, titled “How one college spends more than \$30M on 241 DEI staffers . . . and the damage it does to kids,” ACTA’s Steven McGuire details the University of Michigan’s costly five-year plan to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). In the 2023–2024 academic year alone, the university will pay over \$30 million to 241 DEI employees.

Dr. McGuire states that the new plan

is likely to be the same “reckless waste of taxpayer money” as the University of Michigan’s last five-year plan to advance DEI. Despite spending \$85 million, enrollment of black students “dropped slightly from 4.3% in 2016 to 3.9% in 2021,” and, according to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, “The percentage of students who were satisfied with the overall campus climate decreased from 72 percent in 2016 to 61 percent in 2021.”

“The truth is,” Dr. McGuire writes, “that DEI does not work and frequently makes matters worse. DEI trainings not only fail to achieve their purposes but often exacerbate grievances and divisions by antagonizing people and teaching them to monitor one another for microaggressions and implicit biases.” Instead, “Why not use all that money to give students a much-needed tuition break” or “fund need-based scholarships for promising students”?

“While the financial waste is appalling, the price of expecting everyone on campus to conform to an ideology that undermines free expression and excludes intellectual diversity, two foundational values of the academy, is one we should be unwilling to pay.” ●

Levy Forum, *continued from 3*

Founders, the American Enlightenment, and Religious Freedom.” Mr. Will discussed the “large-scale, aggressive repudiation of the Enlightenment” on American campuses, the very places where the Enlightenment should be “most cherished.” And on February 6, **Glenn Loury**, the Merton P. Stoltz Professor of the Social Sciences at Brown University, gave an outstanding lecture entitled, “What Has Become of the Partnership Between Blacks and Jews?”

If you are able, please join us for two more upcoming lectures at the Palm Beach Synagogue. On March 5, U.S. Ambassador **John Bolton** will speak on “Middle East Challenges for America and Israel.” On March 13, French playwright and filmmaker **Bernard-Henri Lévy** will discuss his experiences making documentary films on the front lines in Gaza and Ukraine. ●

ACTA Debate Program Takes Off at Virginia Military Institute

In 2022, ACTA and Braver Angels began a two-year project funded by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation to bring our College Debates and Discourse Alliance to 10 colleges across the country and research its effectiveness in depolarizing campus culture. At the Virginia Military Institute (VMI), one of the 10 schools included in the project, our grant-funded student and faculty fellows have hosted many debates and attracted overwhelming interest not only from their peers, but also from surrounding colleges.

VMI Professor of Economics Valentina Dimitrova-Grajzl has hosted three debates in her classroom with over 70 students, on topics such as the advantages of free trade and government

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Governor Scott Walker Visits Higher Ed Now Podcast

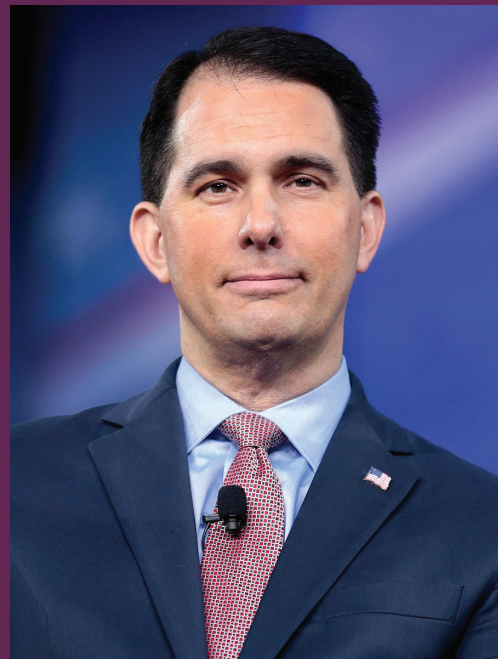
In November, President Poliakoff interviewed Governor Scott Walker on ACTA's Higher Ed Now podcast. As the 45th governor of Wisconsin, he led major reforms to the state's higher education system. He now serves as president of the Young America's Foundation (YAF), which seeks to educate young people about individual freedom, free enterprise, and traditional values.

Governor Walker discussed his effort to reform the tenure system by asking faculty to teach one more course hour per semester to avoid staff reductions. He said, "There was pushback on any sort of changes, be it with tenure or standards of any sort. It was 'academic freedom, academic freedom.' Well, I said, there really isn't academic freedom in most institutions of higher education these days. . . . and that's a real disservice to young people." He commented that every student should be exposed to professors and ideas from across the political spectrum, not just the left side. "Sadly," he said, this kind of dialogue "is largely becoming extinct at many of our institutions."

The frustration over political imbalance is felt by both students and faculty. Governor Walker shared, "What I've increasingly found with advisors and others who help our YAF chapters is that educators feel even more isolated and as intimidated as students are on campus. And I don't even mean just conservatives. Certainly, they feel intimidated, but increasingly I've found people who say, 'I'm not necessarily a conservative. I just want to teach a class and be objective.' . . . These people are as intimidated as anyone out there because they know [they will face pushback] not only from their review committees for tenure and placement, but just oftentimes even from colleagues and even students on campus who target people who have the audacity to actually teach the truth."

Discussing North Carolina's REACH Act, which would require a three-semester-credit-hour course in U.S. history, Governor Walker said that asking students to read the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Emancipation Proclamation should not be controversial. "They are the building blocks of a free and just society, of this great republic we live in." Unfortunately, he described, nearly 700 faculty members wrote a letter in opposition to the requirement, saying it would have infringed on academic freedom. He said, "That tells me . . . that many of these professors want to be the sole conduit through which students understand what it means to be American." When students read Founding documents for themselves, they can come to their own conclusions. Some may share the critiques of faculty, others may not. The beauty of exploring the foundational documents and history of our country is that "you don't have to interpret them the same way."

Listen to the full interview on GoACTA.org. ●



ACTA Debate Program, *continued from 6*

regulation of life-saving drugs. On November 28, our VMI fellows invited students from Mountain Gateway Community College, Southern Virginia University, and Washington and Lee University to participate in the school's first intercollegiate debate, chaired by ACTA's Doug Sprei. Over 100 participants debated the resolution, "K-12 schools should ban controversial books."

In a January 2 article for the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, one of our VMI faculty fellows, Lieutenant Colonel Kim Connolly, said that the debate program provides "practical approaches to prepare students for a fragmented and volatile world, in which compromise is needed more than confrontation." She also shared student reactions to VMI's intercollegiate debate, including the comments of VMI cadet Isabella Bruzonic, who said, "I have never in my life been involved in such a thought-provoking discussion, getting to understand the ideas and thoughts of not only other VMI cadets but also students from other colleges." Southern Virginia University student Jared Smith commented, "I was grateful for the opportunity to speak my mind. . . . we need more events like these! We have the freedom of speech in America, but it hardly serves our society if we do not implement the structure and activities that give people the opportunity to exercise it productively and peacefully."

ACTA is proud of the work of our staff members and Templeton fellows who are making our debate program, in the words of Lieutenant Colonel Connolly, "an example for the nation." ●



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Support ACTA Today

These have been dark and turbulent months for American higher education. The storms we have witnessed on campus have drawn attention and outrage as the public realizes how far off course our nation's universities have drifted.

ACTA's work to guard the values and virtues of higher education is more important than ever. Since 1995, ACTA has led the charge to promote academic freedom, academic excellence, and accountability at America's colleges and universities. We work with trustees, policymakers, alumni, faculty, and university leaders to ensure that students receive an affordable education that prepares them to be engaged and informed citizens.

We are best known as ACTA, the acronym for American Council of Trustees and Alumni. But ACTA is also a Latin word for "things accomplished." That is what we are about: positive, lasting change at a time when it is desperately needed.

Our breakthroughs are only possible because of the support of donors across the country who believe in our mission. We are deeply grateful for their generosity. If you have not already, I hope you will consider making a gift, either by using the envelope enclosed, visiting [GoACTA.org/Support-ACTA](https://www.GoACTA.org/Support-ACTA), or scanning the QR code.

Thank you for your consideration and for your encouragement of our efforts. ●

ACTA
Saving higher education
from itself since 1995.

