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**Kyle Beltramini, Policy Research Fellow
American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA)
Proponent Testimony on Minnesota Senate File 377
Minnesota Senate Committee on Higher Education
February 18, 2025**

Thank you all for the opportunity to speak with you today. By way of introduction, my name is Kyle Beltramini, and I serve as the policy research fellow for the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, or ACTA. We are an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit dedicated to ensuring that every student receives an intellectually rich, high-quality college education at an affordable price. With this mission in mind, it is easy to see why ACTA enthusiastically supports Senate File 377. We believe it is essential that American higher education works to restore fair and just admissions practices to our colleges and universities. We are grateful to Senator Oumou Verbeten and Chair Omar Fateh for bringing this issue before the committee, as well as for inviting me to testify on this matter.

For over 30 years, ACTA has worked with a network of over 23,000 alumni, governing board members, and policymakers to identify best practices in higher education policy. Our philosophy on admissions has always been clear: This process must be defined by integrity, transparency, and fairness. Legacy preferences have no place in this industry, as they are clearly antithetical to the principles of academic excellence and equal opportunity which form the bedrock of liberal education. Despite this, a majority of institutions across the country continue to rely on a system that places undue weight on wealth and personal connections. Too often, our nation’s colleges and universities are willing to narrow the scope of their academic mission for the sake of financial gains. This is not a new issue.

Shortly after Wallace Hall was appointed to the University of Texas (UT) System Board of Regents in 2011, he began a series of investigations that uncovered widespread corruption in the admissions process. It had become common practice for Texas legislators to intercede at the university to ensure that their children—and their benefactors’ children—were admitted to the UT–Austin School of Law even when they did not meet the institution’s academic standards.

Mr. Hall’s reward for this diligent service in the name of transparency and accountability? He became a public pariah. Multiple members of the legislature threatened him with impeachment and prosecution. The Texas

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House formed a select committee to investigate his actions and advanced a motion which admonished him for “misconduct, incompetency in the performance of official duties, or behavior unbecoming a nominee for and holder of a state office.”¹ The decision of Texas’s legislators to circle the wagons to protect this unethical process was simply shameful. Fortunately, the coda to this story was Mr. Hall’s vindication. An external investigation confirmed that senior university administrators had acted improperly, and the chancellor of the UT System called for the resignation of UT–Austin’s president. Two years after he left the board, the student government lauded Mr. Hall with a resolution recognizing him as “one of the few University administrators genuinely acting on behalf of students and fairness in admissions.”²

The rot that Mr. Hall exposed was not contained to Texas, as the 2019 Varsity Blues scandal demonstrated. This large-scale admissions bribery scheme saw wealthy parents creating fake athletic profiles for their children, buying off proctors to cheat on standardized tests, and even paying coaches and college administrators to recruit students regardless of their credentials. One administrator at the University of Southern California testified that she had been pressured to admit these students “by a dysfunctional university” and that “the larger university advancement office accepted and embraced this underbelly as business as usual.”³

Senators, America’s students cannot afford business as usual. Confidence in higher education has plummeted, with just over one-third of Americans expressing a great deal of confidence in the industry and just under one-third expressing no confidence at all.⁴ Legitimate concerns regarding cost, academic quality, political bias, and inequality are exacerbated by a kind of resigned cynicism that we have seen emerging as more of these unfair admissions practices are brought to light. Can there be any wonder why the number of high school seniors choosing to attend college is declining?⁵

What is so frustrating about this is that a college degree remains valuable for most prospective students. A recent analysis of 53,000 degree programs by the Foundation for Research on Equal Opportunity found that 77% of bachelor’s programs had a positive return on investment, with the median program worth \$160,000.⁶ For many, attending college remains one of the most effective

¹ Reeve Hamilton, “Transparency Committee Votes to Censure Hall,” *Texas Tribune*, August 11, 2014, <https://www.texastribune.org/2014/08/11/transparency-committee-exploring-multiple-options/>.

² Richard Vedder, “University Trustee Of The Decade, My Texas Hero: Renegade Regent Wallace Hall,” *Forbes*, May 6, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/richardvedder/2019/05/06/university-trustee-of-the-decade-my-texas-hero-renegade-regent-wallace-hall/>.

³ Anemona Hartocollis, “Former U.S.C. Official Sentenced to Six Months for Role in College Admissions Scandal,” *New York Times*, January 6, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/06/us/college-admissions-scandal-heinel-usc.html>.

⁴ Jeffrey M. Jones, “U.S. Confidence in Higher Education Now Closely Divided,” *Gallup*, July 8, 2024, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/646880/confidence-higher-education-closely-divided.aspx>.

⁵ Jessica Dickler, “New York sends college acceptance letters to 125,000 high school seniors, but broader enrollment crisis may be hard to fix,” *CNBC*, June 2, 2023, <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/06/02/college-enrollment-may-have-reached-its-peak-experts-say.html>.

⁶ Preston Cooper, “Does College Pay Off? A Comprehensive Return On Investment Analysis,” Foundation for Research on Equal Opportunity, May 8, 2024, <https://freopp.org/whitepapers/does-college-pay-off-a-comprehensive-return-on-investment-analysis/>.

pathways to upward social and economic mobility. Not only does higher education prepare students for success in the workforce, but an education steeped in the liberal arts also provides the skills and knowledge needed to thrive in our increasingly diverse, global society. This is a resource that should not be restricted to the few and the fortunate.

Legacy preferences create a deeply unequal playing field for applicants, undermining the idea that admission to college should be based on a student's academic performance, achievements, and qualifications. Admitting students due to their familial connections signals that the hard work they put in and adversities they overcome to achieve academic success are of secondary importance to the institution's finances. This dynamic harms individual students, betrays the fundamental mission of higher education, and may ultimately weaken the overall academic quality of the institution. Schools that tout their egalitarian natures, charitable missions, and history of service to the community cannot in good faith maintain these unfair systems.

These are not new ideas. Over the past few years, legislation banning legacy preferences has passed in several states, with the latest—California's Assembly Bill 1780—specifically restricting the practice at private colleges and universities.⁷ ACTA was proud to support these initiatives as well, and we will continue to advocate for this much-needed reform.

I want to close by highlighting just how fundamental this issue is to the history of our country. In a letter to John Adams in 1813, Thomas Jefferson railed against “artificial aristocracy founded on wealth and birth.” He stated that his goal in writing the Declaration of Independence was to take an “axe to the root of Pseudoaristocracy” and to allow for the flourishing of a “natural aristocracy” among the entire citizenry, grounded in “virtue and talents.” And what was key to the development of these talents? Publicly available education. Indeed, he believed that “worth and genius would thus have been sought out from every condition of life, and compleatly [sic] prepared by education for defeating the competition of wealth and birth for public trusts.”⁸ It is perhaps fitting that one of the first major bills restricting admissions preferences passed unanimously in Jefferson's home state of Virginia 210 years after he penned these words.⁹ I hope that the next state to live up to this legacy will be Minnesota.

I thank you all again for your time and for the vital work you all do to support American higher education.

⁷ Michael T. Nietzel, “California Becomes Fifth State To Ban Legacy Admissions Preferences,” *Forbes*, October 1, 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelnietzel/2024/10/01/california-becomes-5th-state-to-ban-legacy-admissions-preferences/>.

⁸ Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams*, The Founder's Constitution, Volume 1, Chapter 15, Document 61, <https://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch15s61.html>.

⁹ Liam Knox, “UVA Threads the Needle on Legacy Admissions,” *Inside Higher Ed*, August 3, 2023, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/quick-takes/2023/08/03/uva-alters-doesnt-end-legacy-admissions>.