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Proponent Testimony on House Bill 7, the North Carolina REACH Act (Reclaiming College Education on America’s Constitutional Heritage Act)

North Carolina House Committee on Higher Education

Nick Down, Associate Director of External Affairs, American Council of Trustees and Alumni

April 2, 2025

Good morning, Chair Hastings, Chair Pickett, Vice Chair Reeder, and distinguished members of the House Committee on Higher Education. My name is Nick Down, and I am the associate director of external affairs at the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, or ACTA for short. By way of background, ACTA has worked tirelessly for the last 30 years to protect and promote academic freedom, academic excellence, and accountability at our nation’s four-year colleges and universities. One of ACTA’s initiatives that we are most passionate about is reversing the alarming decline in civic knowledge among the college students who will be our next generation of leaders. That is why I am here in support of House Bill 7.

Twenty-five years ago, my organization brought attention to the problem of civic illiteracy in a report entitled, *Losing America’s Memory: Historical Illiteracy in the 21st Century*. Our report revealed that 81% of seniors from the top 55 U.S. colleges and universities failed a high school-level history exam.¹ Our follow-up survey, released last year, was no more encouraging, finding that only one-quarter of college students know which constitutional amendment freed the slaves, and less than one-third can identify when the Constitution was written.² We are not alone in monitoring this trend. The issue that House Bill 7 seeks to remedy is a matter of bipartisan concern, and we enthusiastically support the proposed legislation because it provides a commonsense solution to the problem.

Few have articulated the imperative better than President John F. Kennedy:

¹ Anne D. Neal and Jerry L. Martin, *Losing America’s Memory: Historical Illiteracy in the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: ACTA, 2000), https://www.goacta.org/resource/losing_american_memory/.

² *Losing America’s Memory 2.0: A Civic Literacy Assessment of College Students* (Washington, DC: ACTA, 2024), <https://www.goacta.org/resource/losing-american-memory-2-0/>.

There is little that is more important for an American citizen to know than the history and traditions of his country. Without such knowledge, he stands uncertain and defenseless before the world, knowing neither where he has come from nor where he is going. With such knowledge, he is no longer alone but draws a strength far greater than his own from the cumulative experience of the past and a cumulative vision of the future.

Those words went unheeded. In a 1987 survey, about half of the American citizens polled thought that the phrase, “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs,” came from the U.S. Constitution. Regardless of what one thinks of that sentiment, it would improve political discourse to identify it correctly as classic Karl Marx. Flash forward 34 years, a 2021 *Newsweek* poll revealed that 24% of college students had a positive view of capitalism while 32% of survey respondents favored socialism.³ We can easily recognize the cause of these survey results: Only 18% of the 1,100 schools ACTA evaluates in our What Will They Learn?[®] college ratings survey require a foundational course in American history or government.

Our colleges and universities can, should, and *must* do more to educate students to be active and informed participants in public life, ready to join productively in debate and discussion of the major social and political issues of our times. Our nation was founded on principles of liberty, equality, and the rule of law, and our citizens need to understand those ideas that animate our civic life. Students should not be allowed to leave an American public university ignorant of crucial concepts like representative democracy, bicameralism, separation of powers, federalism, and constitutionalism.

I would like to praise the University of North Carolina Board of Governors for taking the initiative in 2024 to consider and pass the “Foundations of American Democracy” course requirement, which ACTA considers to be a step in the right direction. However, the requirements in House Bill 7 are more rigorous and would *ensure* that students graduate with the requisite knowledge to be informed citizens.

For example, the bill requires students to take a course that includes “a comprehensive overview of the major events and turning points of American history and government.” This strong language ensures that REACH Act-compliant classes will focus on addressing the aforementioned civic knowledge deficit. By comparison, courses that satisfy the “Foundations of American Democracy” requirement need not focus primarily on American history and government, as demonstrated by Appalachian State University listing “Political Sociology, Discourse and Democracy” and “Philosophy of Democracy” courses as satisfying the requirement. While these courses are no doubt valuable for students, their broad focus is not conducive to cultivating in-depth knowledge of American history and government.

³ John Bitzan and Clay Routledge, “College Kids Don’t Understand Socialism—Or Capitalism. Our Research Proves It,” *Newsweek*, July 12, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/college-kids-dont-understand-socialism-capitalism-our-research-proves-it-opinion-1608876>.

The proposed legislation is nonpartisan and insists upon quite reasonable, but nonetheless very important, standards for civic education in the State of North Carolina. South Carolina has already passed a similar bill, and other states are currently considering similar legislation. For example, Ohio signed a bill into law last week that will require students to take a three-credit-hour course in American history or civics, with requirements much like those of House Bill 7, prior to graduation.

With House Bill 7, the North Carolina legislature has an opportunity to provide the next generation of leaders with knowledge and tools for fruitful participation in American civic life. We believe this legislation, once passed, would put North Carolina in the vanguard of states that have committed themselves to preparing college students to be well-informed, engaged citizens of this state and the nation.

With that, I thank you for your time and am happy to answer any questions. Thank you again.

Warm Regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "N. Down", with a stylized flourish extending to the right.

Nick Down
Associate Director of External Affairs