HERO OF INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM AWARD

Remarks Accepting
Hero of Intellectual Freedom Award

Memory, Forgetting, and the Freedom of the Intellect

by Dr. Panayiotis (Pano) Kanelos

Tribute by
Dr. Jacob Howland

30 YEARS
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Preface

by Michael B. Poliakoff
President, American Council of Trustees and Alumni

In Greece and Rome, the ambassadors and heralds, who were often the bearers of unwelcome messages, enjoyed the protection of man and god. Those who harmed such a messenger could expect punishment in the form of exile or death, and sometimes in ways that were particularly unpleasant. On the divine level, Zeus, the king of the gods, and Hermes, god of messengers and boundaries, would curse those who committed such a deed and likely curse the entire city that sanctioned such an act. It could become a notorious place, a city under a miasma of pollution.

The bearers of bad news naturally have reason to fear, which is why ancient civilizations took pains to protect them. They brought messages that had to be heard, however unwelcome.

At his trial in 399 BCE, Socrates compared himself to a gadfly that stings a lazy horse into action. For Socrates, his mission was to rouse his fellow citizens to lives of virtue:

If I may speak in a lighter vein, you won't easily find another who is literally fastened by the will of god on the city, like a massive, noble horse that has become rather lazy and needs to be stirred up by some sort of gadfly. Just so god has stationed me as such a person, who doesn't rest from rousing and persuading and reproaching, camping out by each one of you all day long. Perhaps annoyed like those roused as they nod off to sleep, you will easily kill me with a swat. Then, possibly, you will be sleeping away your lives, if god, in his care for you, fails to send another such as I.

As is sadly known to history, in an unusual betrayal of their deep-seated commitment to intellectual freedom, the Athenians did execute Socrates. The stain of their act has followed them through the centuries.

Fast forward to today: Our campuses have their own stains and keep adding new ones, assured, in towering hybris, that they are on the right side of history. They wreak from the pollution of cancel culture: shout-downs and the deplatformings and the squelching of viewpoints that depart from comfortable orthodoxies. Exile is commonly the fate of the campus offender, though the death of his or her career is hardly unknown. The gods, so far as we can tell, simply weep.

For 30 years, ACTA has been committed to campus freedom of expression and the intellectual diversity that is its lifeblood. In 2018, we began the Hero of Intellectual Freedom award to honor members of the academy who have taken risks, sometimes at significant personal cost, to uphold the free exchange of ideas. We celebrate their integrity and their courage and help them, in dark moments, to know they are not alone. The future of higher education and the future of our nation depend upon them and those like them. What Justice Louis Brandeis wrote in 1927 about political life is writ large in the academy: *freedom to think as you will and to speak as you think are means indispensable to the discovery and spread of political truth . . . the greatest menace to freedom is an inert people.*

In 2018, we honored Luana Maroja from Williams College for her vigorous and successful advocacy for her school to adopt the Chicago Principles on Freedom of Expression. That same year, Samuel Abrams was named a Hero of Intellectual Freedom for staring down the students, faculty, and administrators angered by his *New York Times* essay that uncovered vast ideological imbalance at his own institution and elsewhere. In 2019, Abigail Thompson revealed in a *Wall Street Journal* article the University of California's use of diversity statements in faculty hiring, a discriminatory practice metastasizing at colleges

and universities. Joshua Katz stood up to hundreds of Princeton faculty who, in 2020, called for preferential treatment on racial grounds as well as a faculty committee to discover and punish their peers' publications for alleged racial insensitivity: ACTA was proud to travel to Princeton during the pandemic lockdown to present the award to him. That same year, Jodi Shaw resigned from her dream job at Smith College, saying, "Stop presuming to know who I am or what my culture is based upon my skin color." In 2021, Dorian Abbot co-authored a *Newsweek* article calling for merit, fairness, and equality to replace diversity, equity, and inclusion: In response MIT canceled its invitation to Professor Abbot to deliver the prestigious John Carlson Lecture. The next year, ACTA honored Erec Smith, co-founder or Free Black Thought, who has advocated in his teaching and scholarship for replacing identity politics and victim mentality with self-empowerment. In 2023, ACTA honored Carole Hooven, an esteemed Harvard professor of evolutionary biology, who was aggressively canceled for maintaining the biological truth that sex, male and female, is a fact of nature that does not change according to sociopolitical whims. Called "the most gifted economist of his generation," Roland Fryer was ruthlessly punished by Harvard for his lifelong habit of following the data to the truth, in his case, the inconvenient truth that the media consistently misrepresented the facts about police violence toward African Americans; ACTA was proud to honor him in 2024.

Please read the following pages to understand why ACTA now feels privileged to present its 2025 Hero of Intellectual Freedom Award to Pano Kanelos, past president of St. John's University in Annapolis and founding president of the University of Austin, an institution dedicated to the fearless pursuit of truth. He takes his rightful place among the Heroes of Intellectual Freedom that ACTA so greatly admires.

Memory, Forgetting, and the Freedom of the Intellect

by Dr. Panayiotis (Pano) Kanelos

I. The Enemy of Freedom: Forgetfulness

I would like to begin with a simple proposition: The enemy of intellectual freedom is forgetfulness. And what we seek, through the freedom of the intellect, is a kind of homecoming—a *nostos*, as the Greeks would say—a return to the place where we remember who we are. But more on that later.

II. 1989: On the Edge of History

One of the most vivid episodes in my life began in late 1989. On the evening of November 9 of that year, East German officials, following what was essentially a bureaucratic blunder, announced that citizens were free to cross into West Berlin. Within hours, vast crowds surged toward the Brandenburg Gate. Young people climbed atop the concrete wall that had divided their city for a generation, and with hammers and chisels they began to tear it down.

As luck—or providence—would have it, I was at university in England that year. As soon as we could, three friends and I crossed the Channel and

hitchhiked east, determined to witness what we thought might be the end of history, or at least its next turning.

Following a misadventure in Berlin involving an abandoned guard tower, a field of still-active land mines, and a day's detention by East German security forces, we found ourselves on the night train to Prague. We had no plan, no map, and certainly no understanding of what we were about to encounter. We were 19-year-olds in ripped jeans and college sweatshirts. Life for us was a lark.

When we stepped off the train at Prague station, it felt like stepping through the wardrobe into a winter-swept Narnia. The city was hushed, gray, and watchful. People moved quietly, bundled against the cold, their eyes downcast.

We discovered that there were no hotel rooms, no guesthouses open to us. Then one of our number remembered an address he had copied from a message board at our university—a Czech student seeking English-speaking pen pals. So we trudged through the slush to the dormitories of Charles University, hoping at least to find someone who spoke our language. There we met a group of Czech students—Veronica, Mikhail, Tomáš, and Kristina—who looked at us as if we had fallen from the sky. How had four Americans suddenly appeared in their lives, at that precise moment in their history? Yet they were infinitely more remarkable to us.

III. The Velvet Revolution and the Power of Truth

The fall of the Berlin Wall had been followed, less than two weeks later, by what would be called the Velvet Revolution: a wave of demonstrations and strikes that would soon bring down the communist regime. Those events

had begun right there, at Charles University. On November 17, student protesters had gathered in the streets, defiantly singing their national anthem, and were brutally beaten by the State Security forces.

Our new friends still bore the bruises and welts of that fateful day. They had done something unimaginable to us. When the truncheons fell, they continued to sing. When they were forced to the ground, they sang even louder. Although they lived under a regime that would routinely disappear those who spoke up, they refused to be silenced.

Because of their courage, within days the entire country rose in a general strike, soon toppling the communist government that had held power for half a century. Over the next two weeks, we traveled with our new friends across their country—to villages, to the homes of dissidents, to gatherings in basements and apartment kitchens. We heard stories of a society that had suffered for 40 years under the impress of ideology: a place where truth was a state-controlled asset and the only freedom allowed was the freedom to submit.

IV. The Erasure of History

Every totalizing ideology seeks to architect a new reality. After the communist coup of 1948, Czechoslovakia became a laboratory for the rewriting of history. The regime declared that the nation had not been occupied but "liberated." The democratic First Republic of Masaryk and Beneš—once a model of liberal governance—was condemned as a "bourgeois experiment." Their names vanished from public life; their books disappeared from libraries; their statues were torn down. A gigantic statue of Stalin was erected, looming over Prague, signifying the dawn of the new age.

The goal was not merely to control politics but to control the past—to make it impossible to remember any world outside the Party's reality.

Why was this necessary? Because the communist project was not merely political; it was metaphysical. Its ideology promised a future paradise—a utopia—and to achieve that utopia, humanity itself had to be reforged, purified of inherited loyalties and inconvenient traditions.

They built their paradise upon the slag heap of forgetting. Professors and priests were purged. Admission to university required a "class background" check; children of intellectuals or believers need not apply. Western writers —Kafka, Orwell, Kierkegaard—vanished from shelves. Philosophy was replaced with catechism.

Most people learned to live a dual life. Publicly they professed loyalty; privately they doubted. Families developed what one dissident called a "double vocabulary": one for home, another for the world outside.

The State Security Service had informants everywhere, so everyone censored themselves. Diaries were burned, letters unwritten. People turned up the radio when they wanted to speak honestly.

Writers and scholars practiced what they called "life in the drawer." They produced their real work—poems, essays, treatises—and hid it away. Every hidden manuscript, every whispered story was an act of faith and defiance.

That winter in Prague, I learned that intellectual freedom is not an abstraction; it is a moral imperative.

V. Roger Scruton and the New Illiberalism

When I entered graduate school not long afterward, I had the great fortune to study under Roger Scruton. I learned that this bookish, courtly English philosopher had risked his own safety to aid the underground universities of Central Europe—smuggling books into Prague and Warsaw, teaching in secret seminars, sustaining the intellectual life that totalitarianism sought to extinguish.

But Scruton also knew the cost of telling the truth closer to home. In Britain, he had been shunned and vilified by his academic peers for his unapologetic defense of tradition, beauty, and intellectual freedom. He was denied promotions, disinvited from conferences, and treated as a pariah—not for being wrong, but for refusing to conform.

In that sense, Scruton's persecution was a precursor to what we now see across much of higher education: the slow displacement of intellectual pluralism with moral certitude, of dialogue with denunciation. The same illiberalism that had once marked the totalitarian state began to creep, quietly but steadily, into the free institutions of the West.

Scruton taught me that intellectual freedom is never secure; it must be renewed again and again by those who refuse to live within the lie.

We like to imagine that censorship requires state surveillance and gulags. But within the modern academy, the mechanisms of suppression are psychological and cultural rather than political. Where the communist state enforced conformity through violence and terror, we enforce it through fear of ostracism and moral gaslighting.

Where they had censors, we have bureaucrats; where they had ideological officers, we have committees for "compliance." Professors learn to silence themselves in the classroom and pursue scholarship that comports with the ideological strictures of their guild. Students master the art of speaking safely rather than truthfully. The result is the same: an atmosphere of ambient anxiety, in which the most dangerous thing one can do is to express an opinion that is heterodox.

VI. Founding UATX: Memory and Renewal

Years later, when we founded the University of Austin, I often thought of those underground universities. They had offered what the official academies forbade—authentic dialogue, intellectual risk-taking, and an impassioned search for truth.

So when we launched UATX, we began with the Forbidden Courses—summer programs that invited the kinds of conversations many universities now avoid. We welcomed intellectual dissidents, including many who have been prior recipients of the Hero of Intellectual Freedom award—Joshua Katz, Roland Fryer, Carole Hooven, Luana Maroja, Dorian Abbot, and others—thinkers who had been silenced or shunned for questioning orthodoxy.

UATX was not conceived in defiance, but in hope: hope that education might once again rise to its highest purpose, the fearless pursuit of truth; that students could wrestle with ideas, not imbibe ideology; that professors could speak and think freely, without fear of retribution.

And more than that—the University of Austin was founded to remember.

True education is itself an act of remembrance. The most essential feature of the UATX curriculum is the Intellectual Foundations program, which turns us back toward the storehouse of our intellectual tradition, to Plato and Augustine, Aquinas and Shakespeare, Tocqueville and Du Bois. To study the authors, artists, scientists, theologians, and political figures of the past is to participate in the great chain of conversation that sustains civilization.

At UATX, we seek to keep alive the full sweep of that tradition—to remember what we have received so that we can live meaningfully in the present and move wisely toward the future. For only by remembering what has come before us can we discern what deserves to be renewed.

VII. Eliot and the Wasteland of Forgetfulness

T. S. Eliot understood this better than most. Writing in the shattered aftermath of the First World War, he saw that modernity, predicated upon a fetishized presentism, had allowed the stream of civilization to run dry.

The Waste Land is a collage of broken voices, shards of conversation, bits of sacred scripture and pagan myth—all the echoes of a culture that once engaged in vigorous and variegated conversation, but now stammers in fragments.

Eliot ends his poem with a gesture of recovery: "Shantih, shantih, shantih" —an incantation borrowed from Sanskrit, meaning peace, but a peace that comes only through recollection and reconciliation. *The Waste Land* is not merely a lament; it is an attempt to reintroduce the life-giving spring of memory into a parched and wilted world.

He saw that when we sever ourselves from our inheritance—when we imagine that the past is irrelevant or oppressive—we are not liberated; we are left orphaned.

VIII. The Land of the Lotus-Eaters

A few years after that frigid winter in Prague, I met my friend Mikhail again. He had come to work at a summer camp in California, and we met for lunch near the Pacific.

He told me how he had arrived in America full of hope—convinced that here, in this vast, open society, freedom would flourish. And yet, as he looked around, he was dismayed.

He described his first visit to an American shopping mall—the garish lights, the repetitive storefronts, the uniform crowds drifting from boutique to food court—as well as the ubiquitous conformity and lack of intellectual curiosity he had encountered by those he had met through his work.

He said that he had expected to find a society of dynamic and free individuals, but what he found was a society awash with free markets and free time—but not free people.

His words haunted me. Here was a man who had lived under totalitarianism, who had fought for his own freedom, and who now saw in America a different kind of oppressive conformity—less visible, less brutal, but conformity nonetheless, and all the more distressing because it seemed self-imposed.

It was as though the very freedom that had once animated the West had become somnolent, dulled by comfort and convenience. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn foresaw this peril when he warned:

> The victory of technological civilization has also instilled in us a spiritual insecurity. Its gifts enrich, but enslave us as well. All is interests, we must not neglect our interests, all is a struggle for material things; but an inner voice tells us that we have lost something pure, elevated, and fragile. We have ceased to see the purpose.

The greatest threat to intellectual freedom is not from the censors, but from moral lassitude. Those dissidents behind the Iron Curtain were more intellectually alive than most of us living freely in the West; they had learned that to live fully as human beings, we must live in the light of truth—even when it entails discomfort and sacrifice.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus lands in the country of the Lotus-Eaters, where the fruit of the lotus makes one forget home and lose all desire to return. Forgetfulness, Homer tells us, is seductive. It tempts with soporific security—freedom from concern and conflict. But to forget one's home is to lose the propulsive drive toward purpose and meaning, the very thing that makes us human.

IX. Paradise, Utopia, and the Thread of Logos

We are all, in a sense, exiles, seeking a way back to the garden—that place where there was no disjunction between what is human and what is transcendent.

The call back to the garden is the call to discover who we really are. To heed that call is to continue on the journey of knowledge and self-knowledge—following the great thread of conversation between books, art, and ideas which has defined our civilization and which binds us beyond our own age, place, and circumstance to the intellective spark at the animating spirit of humanity itself.

This thread of logos—of word, reason, and meaning—is evident even in the etymology of the word that we use to denominate the garden, "paradise," which can be traced through the French *paradis* to the Latin *paradisus*, through the Greek *parádeisos*, and back to Old Persian, and then earlier to the Sanskrit roots, *pairi-daēza*—meaning "an enclosure" or "a walled garden." This word reaches towards the most ancient soil, the mythic place where the garden itself was said to be found.

If we forget, we allow the thread to be broken.

The Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall—these too were walls, enclosing millions within a counterfeit paradise, where transcendence was expelled and replaced with materialist ideology. Those trapped behind those walls fought their way out with hammers and chisels.

If we, who are free, allow ourselves to forget what our freedom is for—if we willingly cut ourselves off from what has preceded us out of neglect, indifference, or even pride—we become our own wardens, imprisoned within a desiccated landscape.

Utopia—which literally means "no place"—is the negation of paradise. Utopia is predicated upon forgetting; paradise, the place that calls us to reconciliation with what is highest, through the courageous pursuit of truth, calls us to remembrance.

X. The Call to Remember

And so, in receiving this award today, I do not think of myself as a hero of any sort. I think instead of those students in Prague, their voices rising above the sound of batons, singing their way home to freedom. I think of Roger Scruton and his uncompromising nobility. I think of those who have received this honor before me for acts of courage and defiance.

They remembered who they were and, even when the truncheons fell, when the censors pressed, when their colleagues turned away and their institutions turned hostile, that to compromise their own intellectual integrity was to compromise their very humanity.

So let us remember their courage, and the courage of all those across the great span of history who have shaken off the chains of ignorance, apathy, and moral ennui, seeking out instead the searing light of truth.

Shantih, shantih, shantih.

Thank you.

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The following tribute was given in honor of Pano Kanelos at the presentation of the Hero of Intellectual Freedom award on October 24, 2025.

Dr. Jacob Howland
Former provost, senior vice president for academic affairs, and dean of intellectual foundations at the University of Austin

ACTA's Hero of Intellectual Freedom award recognizes "members of the academic community who protect and foster the diversity of viewpoints that is the lifeblood of liberal education." It's a privilege and a pleasure to introduce this year's honoree, my dear friend, Pano Kanelos.

Pano is the first recipient of this award to have founded a new university. Like the 12 men and women who preceded him, he has courageously defended academic freedom and intellectual diversity. But a founder must also see things whole, and it is the wholeness of his vision, and the wholesome energy of his being, that makes Pano particularly deserving of recognition as a hero of intellectual freedom.

When we were building the University of Austin, Pano was fond of saying that we would bring transcendence back to higher education. For if "higher" education means anything, it means one that is concerned with higher things—with ultimate ends, not just means, and with the eternal questions that concern us precisely insofar as we are human. But colleges and universities have, within our lifetimes, lost their yeasty elevation and much of their intellectual and spiritual vitality, leaving them a flatter, harder, more brittle version of their former expansive selves. And it was to

combat this leveling that Pano stepped up to be the primary founder of the University of Austin.

Plato taught that the journey of education from ignorance to the sunlit uplands of truth and being is powered by questions asked in wonder. Elie Wiesel wrote in *Night* that "Man comes closer to God through the questions he asks Him." But today, universities are as likely to dampen the upward motion of the soul, or mind, as they are to quicken it. Political pressures have limited the kinds of questions students and professors are permitted to ask, while the soil in which good questions may take root and sprout shows signs of intellectual exhaustion. Interlocking ideological pieties restrict the range of faculty candidates that can be hired and promoted, the types of research that can be funded, and the perspectives and arguments that can be published. Worse, the liberal arts have become an afterthought in much of undergraduate and graduate education and are too often taught by professors who are more inclined to criticize the great books, works of art, and ideas they are teaching (including scientific ones) than to let them speak for themselves.

Given this situation, the viewpoint diversity that ACTA celebrates is vitally important. Yet it can do only so much. Just as important, I think, is to reestablish, at the heart of higher education, the anthropology that I take to be implicit in Pano's quest to bring transcendence back to American universities. By "anthropology," I don't mean a scientific or systematic account of man. I mean the shared intuitions of the philosophical and theological traditions that originated in Athens and Jerusalem. According to this common understanding, the universe is a mysteriously ordered whole to which man, of all terrestrial beings, is uniquely open. This openness

belongs among the highest goods, things good in themselves and for their consequences. It makes possible the pure pleasures of knowing. It allows us to register, within the limits of our human capacities, what is external and what exists in time, and to organize the chaos of our souls by attuning ourselves to ultimate measures of truth and meaning. No less important, it enables the formation of communities united, in Saint Augustine's felicitous phrase, by concord regarding loved things held in common.

Some might regard this anthropology as just another dogmatic academic piety. In fact, it is a hypothesis in the Platonic sense: a springboard for the energetic exploration of fundamental questions, and the common ground of communities of teaching and learning that aim to form whole adults, equipped to flourish. In the best case, students and professors share in the pursuit of two inseparable kinds of questionable and debatable knowledge: knowledge of self, of human beings, and of the parts and whole of reality.

The best students leave high school thirsting to puzzle out the mysteries of man and world, and to experience the very special dialogical wakefulness of really good undergraduate classes. When Pano was just starting out as president of St. John's College, he struck up a conversation with a brand-new freshman. "What are you interested in studying?" he asked him. "Computer science," the student answered. "Uh oh," Pano thought, "how do I break it to this kid?" "You know," he said, "you can't specialize in computer science at St. John's." "That's okay," the student replied. "Computers serve human beings, so it seems like a good idea to begin by learning what a human being is."

Can you imagine how delighted Pano must have been to hear this? Pano is a lover of Shakespeare, a scholar of the Bard, and a poet in his own right.

He is also actively and enthusiastically Eastern Orthodox. He has spent his whole life learning what a human being is, always joyfully, but often through suffering; he has, after all, been a university administrator. Having studied at the feet of the Masters, whose teachings will echo for ages of ages, and having learned in the old tragic way of suffering, or *pathei mathos*, Pano knows as well as anyone that man is broad and muddled: attracted simultaneously to goodness, beauty, and truth, and to evil, ugliness, and falsehood, and therefore apt to confuse the lowest depths with the highest heights. His learning and experience have fitted him perfectly for past presidencies of two remarkable colleges and universities, launched in 1696 and 2024, that bookend the rich and distinctively American tradition of liberal arts education. And it is in his deep and hard-won knowledge, manifested in constructive action, that Pano models a full and upright humanity, not just in his academic leadership, but in every role and community he inhabits on the great stage of our little lives.

Let me explain. We embodied human souls resemble spinning tops that move, often in seemingly random ways, across the floor of the world. Our inner, rotational motion is almost physically gyroscopic—a combination of the Greek words γῦρος and σκοπέω that means "turning and looking around." This searching, panoptic activity makes it possible to find our way through the world. But it is the angular momentum, the mass and velocity, the energy of the individual psyche, that matters. That energy, generated at first by innate Karamazovian forces, by primal instincts and appetites, and then maybe, if all goes well, by things like love and friendship and the yearning to know and create, is the source of whatever stability we possess in this life. But if this energy wanes and is not replenished, we begin, intellectually, morally, spiritually, and psychologically, to wobble, and finally,

to collapse. This is the general condition of far too many Americans and of many civically essential institutions as well.

Now, the most striking thing about Pano is his joyful energy, his infectious zest for life, expressed in wonder, grace, and gratitude, yet nevertheless reflecting his understanding that man does not live by heavenly bread alone. The first in his family to go to college, he grew up in the back of a Greek restaurant, where he began his journey to exceptional chefhood. He and his lovely wife Christina host dinner parties celebrated for their warm fellowship, good conversation, fine wine, and Pano's Mediterranean feasts and graced on occasion by the presence of their children, Emmie and Theo. (This is where, had I sufficient wit, I would have inserted a joke about the Gyros of Intellectual Freedom award.) What I mean to say is this. At home, in his church, on campus, and in the broad yet—as David Lodge has it—small world of higher education, Pano excels at creating communities of active and reciprocal friendship and love, true charging stations of heart and mind, body and soul. And what, in our confused and troubled time, could be more important than that?

Please join me in welcoming to the podium Pano Kanelos.

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Panayiotis (Pano) Kanelos

From 2017 to 2021, Pano Kanelos served as the 24th president of St. John's College–Annapolis, a storied college for the study of the Great Books. A dedicated advocate of free discourse, open inquiry, and the pursuit of truth, Dr. Kanelos resigned from St. John's College in 2021 to become the founding president of the University of Austin (UATX). He served as president of the university until 2024 and as chancellor until Fall 2025. Under his leadership, UATX devoted itself to showing how higher education can be rescued from the illiberalism that has strangled discourse on too many campuses. He ensured that UATX abided by the Chicago Principles on Freedom of Expression and the principle of institutional neutrality.

Prior to his presidency at St. John's, he served as dean of the honors college at Valparaiso University, oversaw the Lilly Fellows Program in Humanities and the Arts, and taught at Stanford University, the University of San Diego, and Loyola University Chicago. He founded the Cropper Center for Creative Writing at the University of San Diego and is a noted Shakespeare scholar, having served as the resident Shakespearean in the Old Globe MFA Program and the founding director of the Interdisciplinary Shakespeare Studies Program at Loyola University Chicago.

He received his B.A. from Northwestern University, his M.A. from Boston University, and his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago.

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1730 M Street NW, Suite 600 • Washington, DC 20036
Phone: 1-888-ALUMNI-8 or 202-467-6787 • Fax: 202-467-6784
Email: info@GoACTA.org • Website: GoACTA.org