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Steven McGuire, Paul & Karen Levy Fellow in Campus Freedom American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) Proponent Testimony on Oklahoma Senate Bill 1725 Oklahoma Senate Committee on Education February 17, 2026

Dear Members of the Oklahoma Senate Committee on Education:

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) enthusiastically supports the Oklahoma Legislature’s efforts to strengthen free speech protections on college and university campuses through Senate Bill 1725. We appreciate your commitment to protecting students’ rights by ensuring that constitutionally protected speech is assessed in a content-neutral manner when public institutions charge security fees and by requiring free speech training for all new students.

Senate Bill 1725’s common sense reforms strengthen free speech protections for the campus community by reconciling First Amendment rights with the need to maintain an orderly environment and by ensuring that students understand their rights and the rights of others. Too many universities have tarnished their public reputations and exposed themselves to easily avoidable litigation by charging excessive security fees that diminish free expression and discriminate based on viewpoint. For example, in 2023, the University of Pittsburgh attempted to charge conservative student organizations \$18,734 in security fees for a campus event.¹ In 2024, the University of New Mexico sought \$5,400 in security fees from Turning Point UNM for an on-campus event.² At the University of Pittsburgh, it took correspondence from the Alliance Defending Freedom to have the charge rescinded. At the University of New Mexico, it took the intervention of a federal judge to waive the charge.

These cases were neither new nor novel, and they represented clear violations of students’ First Amendment rights. The Supreme Court has long recognized that, while controversial speech may lead to unrest, “the vitality of civil and political institutions in our society depends on free discussion.”³

¹ Phil Sechler, “ADF Letter Prompts Pitt Officials Who Incited Mob to Withdraw Unconstitutional

Fee Levied on Victims,” Alliance Defending Freedom, April 17, 2025, <https://adflegal.org/pressrelease/adf-letter-prompts-pitt-officials-who-incited-mob-withdraw-unconstitutional-fee/>

² Olivier Uyttebrouck, “Judge orders UNM to halt security fee for speech events,” Albuquerque Journal, October 10, 2024, <https://www.abqjournal.com/news/judge-orders-unm-to-halt-securityfee-for-speech-events/400191>

³ *Terminiello v. Chicago*, 337 U.S. 1 (1949)
PROMOTING ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND EXCELLENCE

Although colleges and universities may impose narrowly tailored, reasonable restrictions on protected speech, such limitations must be applied in a content-neutral manner. In short, “speech cannot be financially burdened, any more than it can be punished or banned, simply because it might offend a hostile mob.”⁴

For more than 30 years, ACTA has worked with higher education leaders across the country to ensure that all Americans can receive a high-quality education at an affordable price. In 2022, we created the ACTA Gold Standard for Freedom of Expression™, a 20-point action plan for improving free inquiry and the open exchange of ideas on American college and university campuses. Among the reforms ACTA proposes in the gold standard is that colleges and universities include a free expression unit for all new students, as SB 1725 calls for. Such training is essential to protecting the free expression rights of the campus community, but too few universities require it. Should this bill be passed, Oklahoma would become a national leader in this area of higher education reform.

ACTA commends Senator Ally Seifried for her leadership and foresight in introducing Senate Bill 1725. We respectfully urge members of the Oklahoma Senate Committee on Education to support this legislation and to continue advancing policies that strengthen free speech and expression on college campuses.

Thank you all for the vital work you do to support American higher education.

⁴ Forsyth County, Georgia, Petitioner v. The Nationalist Movement, 505 U.S. 123 (1992).

Free Your Campus, Free Your Mind

Learn more about ACTA's Campus Freedom Initiative.

GoACTA.org/campus-freedom-initiative/



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**ACTA
GOLD
STANDARD**

—
FOR FREEDOM
OF EXPRESSION

ACTA Gold Standard for Freedom of Expression

A blueprint to help institutional leaders
create a culture of free thought on their
campuses.

Free Expression and the Task of American Colleges and Universities

There are certain truths of American political life that antedate even the Founding and are as important for our age as they were for ages past. Among these are that demagogues hold most sway over the ignorant, that a free people must be an informed people, and that representative democracy requires widespread education to flourish. A self-governing people cannot be a foolish, deluded, or benighted people, else it will soon lose its liberty. For these reasons, Americans must become passionate learners, fearless truth-seekers, and searching critics in order to take up the responsibilities of citizenship.

Universities are indispensable for a free and prosperous society. They are the engine that drives both scientific and social progress. They educate students for career and responsible citizenship and habituate them to self-discovery and the pursuit of truth. Their mission depends on a campus culture of free expression and intellectual diversity. Unless teachers, students, and researchers can inquire and speak freely and fearlessly, innovation will stall, questions will be left unasked and unanswered, and students will be ill-prepared for life, career, community, and citizenship.

But we learn in story after story, year upon year, that colleges and universities have lost their way. Instead of encouraging students to explore different lines of intellectual inquiry and equipping them for the rough-and-tumble of a vibrant democracy, too many institutions seem to be training them for lives as informers, inquisitors, and isolated, distrustful individuals. Rather than teaching students how to engage productively with challenging new ideas, far too many colleges and universities build cozy bubbles in which only comfortable orthodoxies are permitted. They foster large, expensive bureaucracies to police infractions of vague (and often extralegal, if not outright illegal) rules against expressing ideas that someone might find offensive.

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) seeks to hold American colleges and universities accountable to their missions. Progress depends on the freedom to pursue new ideas. Self-discovery requires uninhibited exploration of life's timeless questions. Education for citizenship in a liberal democratic republic necessarily involves opening ourselves to all the perspectives we might encounter in the community at large, even silly and dangerous ones, so that we are prepared to live and negotiate with all our fellow citizens. In short, an excellent education depends on free expression and intellectual diversity.

ACTA now provides a blueprint to help higher education regain and live by this core principle. The **ACTA Gold Standard for Freedom of Expression** provides clear guidance for institutions to create a culture of free thought on their campuses. Following these best practices will help colleges and universities reclaim their place as leaders within our liberal democracy.

The Gold Standard for Freedom of Expression is part of ACTA's **Campus Freedom Initiative**: GoACTA.org/campus-freedom-initiative/.

ACTA Gold Standard for Freedom of Expression



1. Commit to a Culture of Freedom of Expression

- Adopt the Chicago Principles on Freedom of Expression or a similarly strong statement.
- Establish clear expectations regarding free expression in student and faculty handbooks and codes of conduct.
- Include a free expression unit in new-student orientations.
- Protect the diversity of political viewpoints by adopting an institutional neutrality policy such as the Kalven Report.

2. Foster Civil Discourse

- Sponsor campus debates that model civil discourse.
- Promote free expression by encouraging the establishment of student groups devoted to free expression, civil discourse, or representing a plurality of perspectives.
- Establish policies that protect free expression rights on campus and set clear consequences for disruption of sponsored speakers, events, and classes.
- Enforce policies that protect free expression rights on campus and apply clear consequences for disruption of sponsored speakers, events, and classes.

3. Cultivate Intellectual Diversity

- Encourage presidents, provosts, and deans to model respect for a broad range of viewpoints.
- Guarantee that viewpoint diversity is reflected in student life policies and practices.
- Support academic centers dedicated to free inquiry and intellectual diversity.
- Ensure faculty hiring, evaluation, and promotion processes are based on merit and make clear that the institution is open to intellectual diversity.

4. Break Down Barriers to Freedom of Expression

- Eliminate speech and IT policies that have a chilling effect on free expression.
- Ensure that enforcement of Title VI, Title VII, and Title IX does not infringe on free expression.
- Disband bias response teams.
- Review student government policies to ensure viewpoint neutrality in student group recognition and funding.

5. Advance Leadership Accountability

- Include commitments to free expression in mission statements, values statements, strategic plans, or other key institutional documents.
- Include a commitment to free expression as a criterion in searches and evaluations for presidents, provosts, and deans.
- Require free expression and viewpoint diversity training for administrative staff.
- Conduct regular evaluations of the state of free expression and intellectual diversity on campus.