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July 19, 2006

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The Honorable Janet Napolitano
Governor of Arizona
1700 West Washington
Phoenix, Arizona 85007

VIA US MAIL AND FACSIMILE: (602) 542-1381

Dear Governor Napolitano:

Philip Merrill
(1995-2002)

I write today on behalf of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), a nonprofit, nonpartisan, educational organization committed to academic freedom, excellence and accountability at America's colleges and universities. We have a network of concerned alumni and trustees from institutions across the country including Arizona.

Jerry L. Martin
Chairman

We recently became aware of HB 2583, the new Arizona law requiring that an American flag, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights be displayed on the wall of every public college and university classroom in your state. While ACTA of course applauds efforts to encourage respect for our nation and its principles, we believe there are other, more beneficial, steps that the state should also consider. After all, respect for the American flag, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights only matters if students understand *why* these symbols and documents are important—and unfortunately, we have no reason to believe students in Arizona's state universities have that understanding.

Anne D. Neal
President

According to ACTA's research, not one of Arizona's major public universities has an American history requirement for undergraduates. For example, instead of requiring students to take courses that enrich their knowledge of American ideals and fundamentals, the University of Arizona allows them to take courses like "Human and Animal Interrelationships from Domestication to the Present" to fulfill its very loose "historical awareness" requirement. The requirements are even looser at Arizona State University and Northern Arizona University. Students at the former have no specific history requirement, but rather a

“traditions and cultures” requirement. Courses that will satisfy that requirement this fall include “Fossil Hominids” and “Fire.” NAU is similar—students are required to study not American history, but rather “cultural understanding,” through courses like “Hollywood & the Social Construction of Crime & Justice.”

Of course, this problem of a “smorgasbord” curriculum is not limited to Arizona. The truth is that most college students today graduate without having any guaranteed exposure to general areas of knowledge including history, literature, mathematics and economics. ACTA outlined this problem in two studies, *The Hollow Core: Failure of the General Education Curriculum* and *Losing America’s Memory: Historical Illiteracy in the 21st Century*.

After conducting detailed analysis of students and coursework at 55 of our country’s elite colleges and universities for *Losing America’s Memory*—a copy of which is enclosed for your review—we found that not one requires students to take an American history course. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of graduating seniors polled displayed virtually no knowledge of American history: Many could not identify Valley Forge, or the words of the Gettysburg Address, or even the basic principles of the U.S. Constitution.

Only 23 percent of the students polled could identify James Madison as the father of the Constitution. And only 35 percent of respondents properly identified Harry Truman as the president at the beginning of the Korean War. But there were some questions on which students did rather well: 98 percent knew that Snoop Doggy Dogg is a famous rapper and 99 percent could identify Beavis and Butthead as television cartoon characters. The National Assessment of Educational Progress has documented a similar problem in primary and secondary education.

ACTA believes colleges and universities have an obligation to direct the next generation of Americans, especially in the first two years of their college careers, to the most important courses—the foundational subjects—that ensure a solid general education. Knowledge of our democracy’s origins, and of the principles and documents on which free government stands, is surely one of those.

Given the legislature’s clear desire for college students in Arizona to understand and respect their history and heritage, I hope that you will insist that the Board of Regents immediately puts curricular review at the top of its agenda. As a voting member of the board responsible for all trustee appointments, you can take the lead in this most important task. Otherwise, Arizonans in the 21st century will be ill-prepared for the tasks and challenges of citizenship in a free society.

Curricular reform is not expensive. At very little cost, any college or university can engage in a process of self-examination. Notably, institutions in a number of states are already taking steps to ensure a strong general education so that their graduates will have a competitive edge over students with only a patchwork of trendy and narrow courses.

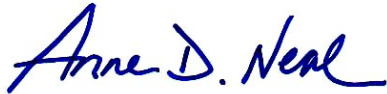
The State University of New York—the largest public system in the world—has implemented a system-wide core curriculum that ensures students have exposure to the study

of American history and Western Civilization. Virginia Tech and George Mason have imposed American history requirements, and all state colleges and universities in Colorado are undertaking a major curricular review.

As governor, you may also want to take this opportunity to issue the attached Proclamation calling upon institutions in your state to renew their commitment to historical literacy.

Strengthening U.S. history requirements and engaging in a serious examination of what students should be expected to know will do much more for graduates than simply displaying objects in the classroom. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Anne D. Neal
President

Enclosure

CC: Senate Minority Leader Linda Aguirre
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House Majority Leader Stephen Tully
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