

## In This Issue...

- 2 In Box  
ACTA Fights Fire with FIRE
- 3 Breaking News: Florida Higher Ed Rising, But Still Needs Improvement
- 4 Effective Trusteeship: University of Hawaii and Penn State  
New Guide Evaluates "Test-Optional" Admissions
- 5 Speaking Up: ACTA Stands Up for Free Speech at Swarthmore  
What Will They Learn Named "Top Resource" for Choosing a College
- 6 Academic Renewal: Advancing the Liberal Arts  
McClay to Teach About Liberty at OU
- 7 New Faces at ACTA  
From the Bookshelf

## Tackling Accreditation Reform on Capitol Hill

On June 13, ACTA president Anne Neal delivered hard-hitting testimony at a hearing of the House Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Training on how college accreditors fail to ensure academic quality and educational effectiveness. So effective, in fact, was Ms. Neal's testimony that the principal organization of accrediting associations could only declare in its summary: "the historical government reliance on traditional accreditation is called seriously into question!"

For years, ACTA has been a voice in the wilderness seeking to reform America's broken college accreditation system. Now the nation is listening and observing the troubling connection between accreditation and high tuition, low academic standards, and poor outcomes. Here are some of the problems Neal highlighted:

**Accreditation fails to ensure academic excellence.** Though accrediting agencies are supposed to guarantee academic quality, studies show that accredited colleges often fail to add value in core collegiate skills like writing, mathematics, and critical thinking. Many graduate less than one-third of the

students who enter as freshmen. "Higher education quality," Neal told Congress, "has declined under accreditors' watch."

**Accreditation acts as a barrier to innovation.** The past decades have

seen an unprecedented increase in the cost of attending college even as the country transitions to a knowledge-based economy. Technology is revolutionizing traditional teaching methods. But the current accreditation system is still largely focused on the four-year bricks and mortar institutions, Neal noted.

*(continued on 3)*



ACTA president Anne D. Neal testifies on Capitol Hill.

## Register for 2013 ATHENA Roundtable!

ACTA's 2013 ATHENA Roundtable will be held **November 8** in Washington, DC. The day promises provocative discussion on "Shaping the Future of Higher Education." Speakers include **Roosevelt Montás**, dean of Columbia University; **Hank Brown**, former president of the University of Colorado; **Helen Dragas**, UVa Board of Visitors; and **Dean Colson**, chairman, University System of Florida Board of Governors. The event will culminate with a gala dinner and presentation of the ninth annual Philip Merrill Award. Register at [www.goacta.org](http://www.goacta.org) or call us at 202-467-6787.

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**The Honorable Virginia Foxx, Chairwoman  
U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Higher  
Education and Workforce Training**

“Thank you for testifying at the June 13, 2013 hearing entitled, *‘Keeping College Within Reach: Discussing Program Quality through Accreditation.’* The subcommittee found your testimony informative and thought provoking. In addition, your responses to our questions provided great insight on ways to improve the accreditation process to ensure students and families have access to the information necessary to properly assess the quality of colleges and universities. Your contributions will prove invaluable as Congress proceeds with the reauthorization of the *Higher Education Act.*”

*Editor’s Note: Read more about ACTA’s testimony on accreditation reform in this issue’s cover article.*

**Dean Colson, Esq., Chair  
State University System of Florida Board of Governors**

“I am going to make certain that we address all your recommendations. We are under a lot of political pressure from all sides so it is nice to have someone say we are doing a decent job.”

*Editor’s Note: After the publication of ACTA’s Florida State Report, Florida Rising, ACTA was invited to speak at the Florida Board of Governor’s June meeting. See article on the following page.*

**Bill Freebern, Professor Emeritus  
State University of New York**

“... I watched with pleasure your presentation [for the House Subcommittee on Higher Education]. Very, very well done. Thank you also for *Florida Rising* [ACTA’s Florida State report]. ACTA is having a definite impact in higher education throughout the country.”

**Harvey Silverglate, Esq., Chair, Board of Directors  
Foundation for Individual Rights in Education  
Boston, MA**

“Thank you so much for the two copies of the *Free to Teach* guide. It’s mandatory assigned reading for my two research assistants, and I’ve got the second copy sitting in front of me.”

**Blouke & Marianne Carus  
Carus Publishing Company  
Chicago, IL**

“I enjoyed the ACTA/Aspen Institute seminar a lot. ... What a great role ACTA is playing in restoring higher education to health and to its original purposes.”

*Editor’s Note: In July, ACTA and the Aspen Institute held a trustee seminar in Chicago on “Envisioning the Future of Higher Education.”*

## ACTA Fights Fire with FIRE

New, overbroad sexual harassment guidelines from the federal government threaten free speech on campus, and ACTA and the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) have spoken out against them.

The guidelines, relayed in a letter to administrators at the University of Montana at Missoula by the Departments of Justice and Education, are described as “a blueprint for colleges and universities throughout the country.”

The guidelines impose so loose a definition of sexual harassment that ordinary students and professors risk running afoul of them if they express controversial opinions. Debates and discussions about important issues such as sexual morality or gay marriage, or even a joke with sexual undertones, could be viewed as sexual harassment. If a student is offended after being asked on a date by a classmate, that could potentially fall into the vague guidelines of sexual harassment as well.

ACTA and FIRE responded by sending a letter to board chairs and college presidents nationwide, urging them to resist any hasty changes in policy. The letter also suggests calling upon legal counsel to outline the policies, procedures, and costs that would be necessary to implement the Montana standard, and contacting legislators to raise concern.

ACTA also joined FIRE, 14 other organizations, numerous prominent scholars, and other concerned individuals in a letter to the Departments of Education and Justice, calling on them to rescind the policy. With our co-signers, including former presidents of the ACLU and AAUP and the director of the Stanford Constitutional Law Center, we called on the federal agencies to “issue an immediate retraction and clarification” in order to ensure that the rights of students, faculty, and everyone else in the university community are protected. ●

Read the ACTA/  
FIRE letter to board  
chairs and university  
presidents and  
the letter to the  
Departments of  
Education and Justice  
at [www.goacta.org/  
whatsnew/ACTA\\_  
whats\\_new](http://www.goacta.org/whatsnew/ACTA_whats_new).

## Florida Higher Ed Rising, But Improvements Still Needed

ACTA's newest state report, *Florida Rising: An Assessment of Public Universities in the Sunshine State*, has already received plenty of attention from the public and the press.

Prepared in conjunction with the James Madison Institute, the report covers issues of cost, freedom of expression on campus, administrative versus academic spending, core curricula, athletic spending, classroom utilization, and graduation rates. And it finds many bright spots in Florida's higher education system.

• **Metrics of academic quality show strong improvement.** The State University System's overall six-year graduation rate places it among the top ten nationally.

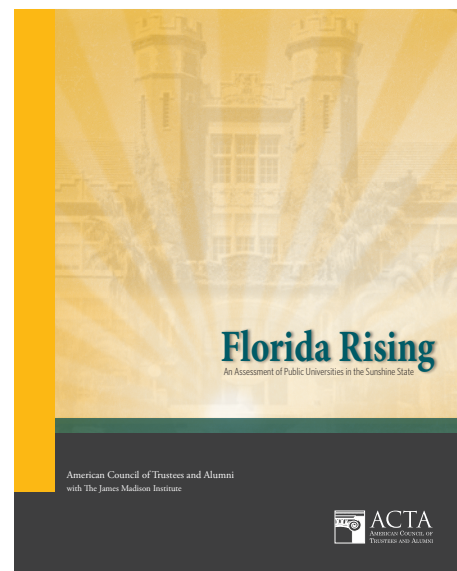
• **Tuition has been low despite cuts to funding.** Although tuition has risen

over the last five years, Florida's public university tuition is among the lowest in the nation. The University of Florida has the distinction of having the lowest tuition rate among the prestigious Association of American Universities schools.

• **Florida sets a high standard for transparency and accountability.** The Florida Board of Governors has developed better and clearer accountability measures than any provided by the regional college accreditors.

*Florida Rising* makes several significant suggestions for building upon these successes.

• **Strengthen the core curriculum.** Sadly, just one of the 11 public universities requires a course in U.S. history or government. Fewer than half of Florida schools require a literature course, only



one school requires foreign language at the intermediate level, and only one requires any coursework in economics.

• **Many colleges restrict free speech.** A review of Florida schools by the Founda-  
(continued on 5)

### Accreditation, continued from 1

**Accreditation interferes with institutional autonomy.** Accreditors have frequently “intruded in governance and institutional matters to tie the hands of America’s colleges and universities.” Not long ago, ACTA challenged the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools for its interference in the University of Virginia’s governing process. This kind of interference in universities’ internal governance is a distraction from issues of educational quality—the original purpose of the accrediting agencies—and well outside accreditors’ statutory authority.

In lieu of the current dysfunctional system, Neal proposed ending the accreditors’ control over access to the massive federal student aid programs and instead requiring colleges annually to provide the public with independently certified data on a variety of key outcome measures, such as cost of attendance, loan default rates, and job placement success.

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Joining Neal before the House subcommittee were Elizabeth Sibolski, president of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education; Michale McComis, executive director and chief executive officer of the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools

and Colleges; and Kevin Carey, director of the Education Policy Program of the New America Foundation.

Carey echoed many of ACTA’s arguments. He highlighted the silliness of the current accreditation system with the following example: suppose a Nobel Prize-winning physicist “wanted to create a start-up company that did nothing but teach the world’s greatest undergraduate physics curriculum online,” at one-tenth the cost of a traditional university. “Under current law, a student could give their Pell grant or Stafford loan money to the most dysfunctional or chronically mediocre college in America but

(continued on 6)

# Effective TRUSTEESHIP



## Turning Around the University of Hawaii

ACTA's work in Hawaii is empowering regents and strengthening leadership in the Aloha State, turning around a once scandal-wracked institution. The problems at the University of Hawaii became public in 2012, when scam artists claiming to represent Stevie Wonder defrauded the university of \$200,000. Shoddy management at the university enabled the ruse, and ACTA published an op-ed calling out the board for a "culture of deference" to the chief executive, wherein regents were simply cheerleaders and yes-men to the university president. We urged them to take responsibility—responsibility that by law belongs to them—for their school.

Since then, the board has stepped up. After UH's president announced in May her pending resignation, the system board members sought ACTA's advice on how to conduct an effective presidential search. The search committee is now composed almost entirely of members of the board of regents, ensuring that the board takes primary responsibility for this important decision.

The board also continues to identify better ways to exercise its fiduciary responsibility over major financial decisions and refine its role to protect the public interest. The board is demonstrating how boards can improve their schools through engaged leadership.

## Strengthening Board Governance at Penn State

Penn State provides the most tragic recent example of unengaged trustees. As both ACTA and former FBI director Louis J. Freeh noted at the time, the board's lack of oversight and willingness to kowtow to the president created the conditions for a catastrophe that continues its damaging effects on the university. An oversized board and an archaic board structure put in place at the time of the Civil War rendered accountability to the people of Pennsylvania nearly impossible. But now Pennsylvania is following the advice that ACTA gave in consultations with the Pennsylvania Auditor General's office, and in pointed recommendations to the state legislature and to university leaders, including an op-ed in the *Harrisburg Patriot-News*, to ensure an efficient, accountable board.

The board has reduced its size and raised the quorum from 13 members to a majority of the board, both changes which will ensure a more engaged board. It also eliminated the president's voting rights on the board. Then-auditor general Jack Wagner credited ACTA for our help when he spoke on ACTA's panel, "High Stakes in the Board Room."

Now a bill is pending in the legislature to improve board effectiveness and accountability even more. We look forward to conversations about further reforms. ●

## New Guide Evaluates "Test-Optional" Admissions

What is the value of the SAT and ACT? Are they useful tools for admissions officers, or should they be abandoned in favor of other measures? What role should trustees play in setting admissions standards? These are just some of the questions answered in ACTA's newest trustee guide, *The Art of College Admissions: A Trustee Guide to the Value of Entrance Exams*.

In recent years, many reputable colleges have gone "test-optional," dropping their requirement that new applicants provide SAT or ACT scores. Instead, these schools seek to evaluate students "holistically," focusing on high school course work, interviews, and other qualitative measures.

Mailed to over 14,000 university trustees throughout the country, ACTA's new guide provides them with an understanding of the history and purposes of standardized admissions tests, and presents the arguments for and against test-optional admissions. ACTA shows that standardized tests provide a rare objective measure of student potential, and that they have historically opened the doors of elite universities to many students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

ACTA's guide also highlights how trustees can provide effective oversight of their schools' admissions policies, from requesting relevant data to ensuring that any proposal suggesting major changes in the admissions process be brought before the board.

For a copy of ACTA's new trustee guide, visit [www.goacta.org](http://www.goacta.org) or call 202/467-6787. ●



## “SPEAKING UP”



### ACTA Stands Up for Free Speech at Swarthmore

ACTA called on the trustees of Swarthmore College to protect academic freedom and the free exchange of ideas after students angry about the school's investment policies hijacked a board meeting in May and silenced dissenting opinions with yells, clapping, and tirades.

The trouble began at the first open meeting in student memory of the college's board of managers. The managers (Swarthmore's equivalent of trustees) convened the meeting at the request of Swarthmore Mountain Justice, a student environmental group, as an open forum on the issue of fossil fuel divestment. Swarthmoreans holding diverse views on the issue would have been given the opportunity to talk, but Swarthmore Mountain Justice itself disrupted the

meeting. Approximately 100 students interrupted a manager's presentation on the costs of divestment and took over the event, making so much noise that no other students, managers, or administrators were permitted to speak.

ACTA wrote to the board, pointing out that this is not just about divestment: fundamental freedoms of speech and expression are at stake. If the disruptive students are allowed to succeed, any other group with a grievance against the college will feel empowered to hijack the debate and drown out competing voices. As ACTA's *Free to Teach, Free to Learn* guide demonstrates, threats to academic freedom are all too common and it falls to trustees to ensure that academic freedom is protected. ●

### Named “Top Resource” for Choosing a College

Keep your eyes out for ACTA's upcoming *What Will They Learn?* guide, because it's one of the top resources for choosing a university. That isn't ACTA talking; it is **YesCollege.com**, a site dedicated to helping students and parents navigate the labyrinthine processes of choosing, getting into, and paying for college. On its list of the “101 top resources” for getting into college, the website praises *What Will They Learn?* for providing “a ton of useful information to students about great schools that may typically get overlooked.”

ACTA appreciates the hat-tip. *What Will They Learn?* is an invaluable resource for students and their parents. Watch for the 2013-2014 release this fall at **WhatWillTheyLearn.com**. ●

### Florida Report, *continued from 3*

tion for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) found that all the institutions in the Florida state system have policies that restrict free speech.

• **Athletic spending has grown faster than instructional spending.** Eight out of the nine Florida schools in Division I of the NCAA have allowed athletic spending to grow at a higher rate than their instructional spending.

ACTA's vice president of policy, Michael Poliakoff, was invited to present our findings to the Board of Governors at their June meeting. State University System chancellor Frank Brogan remarked, “We are consistently striving to improve our state's university system, and reports like ACTA's provide an important perspective in comparison with other nationwide benchmarks.”

Governor Rick Scott commented, “I strongly agree with the final report recommendation calling for the university system to continue to hold the line on tuition.”

“We are consistently striving to improve our state's university system, and reports like ACTA's provide an important perspective in comparison with other nationwide benchmarks.”

– Frank Brogan, chancellor  
State University System of Florida

“By addressing critical issues now,” Michael Poliakoff said, “Floridians can ensure that their graduates are as prepared as possible to face life after graduation with as little debt—and as much skill and knowledge—as possible.”

ACTA hopes to help Florida do just that. As we noted in the report, Florida

has the potential to be a model for states around the nation, and it has leadership with its eye on that prize.

For a copy of the report, please visit our website: [www.goacta.org](http://www.goacta.org). ●



## Advancing the Liberal Arts

### Tocqueville Program Brings Study of Democracy to Furman

These days, too many college students graduate without ever having studied the foundations of Western civilization or the fundamentals of American political thought.

The **Tocqueville Program at Furman University** bucks this trend. Thanks to Ginny and Sandy MacNeil, the Tocqueville Program began in 2006 and still runs today. Currently directed by two Furman professors, Benjamin Storey and Aristide Tessitore, the program encourages “traditional liberal education at Furman.”

Named for the great student of democracy Alexis de Tocqueville, the program sponsors a course and brings prominent scholars and public intellectuals to Furman’s campus “with the aim of encouraging serious and open engagement with the moral questions at the heart of political life.” According to Professor Storey, the program’s lectures are always filled to capacity. This past year, it focused on studying “Tocqueville and the American

Republic” through a close look at his masterful work, *Democracy in America*.

ACTA commends the Tocqueville Program, the MacNeils, and all those working to advance historical literacy and academic excellence.

### New Prize Promotes Military History

ACTA has long argued that colleges and universities should expose students to military history. Now the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation and Lewis E. Lehrman have joined the fight by establishing the Guggenheim-Lehrman prize in Military History, awarded annually for the best book in the field. The award seeks to “draw public attention to military history not only as an important staple of education in the areas of international relations, diplomacy, and conflict studies, but also as a subject in which any educated citizen should be interested.” The award comes with a \$50,000 prize. The first winner will be announced on February 13, 2014. ACTA looks forward to seeing the results! ●

## McClay to Teach About Liberty at OU



Congratulations to ACTA friend Wilfred McClay, the new G.T. and Libby Blankenship Chair in the History of Liberty at the University of Oklahoma! Professor McClay’s new chair was created to emphasize the importance of

undergraduate teaching and focus on historical and contemporary issues of freedom. As chair, Professor McClay will also serve as director of OU’s Center for the History of Liberty.

In his new position, Professor McClay will be charged with “teaching students about the concept and evolution of liberty in Western civilization”—a task to which he is well-suited. As a scholar and a public intellectual, McClay has been a vocal defender of the humanities and has consistently fostered serious thinking about the idea of America and the nature of freedom. ●

## Accreditation, *continued from 3*

not to the Nobel Prize winner.”

It was a one-two punch for higher education reform! With the Higher Education Opportunity Act up for renewal in 2014, Congress should use this opportunity to break the link between accreditation and federal student aid. By making dollars contingent on fair and transparent standards instead of an accreditor’s seal of approval, Congress can help cut college costs while improving educational quality. There is no time to waste, and ACTA’s accreditation reform project is on the move! ●

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## New Faces at ACTA

The new season has brought many new faces to ACTA. **Tom Sanford**, our new program associate for trustee affairs, supports our extensive trustee outreach. He is our office's resident Civil War buff, graduating *magna cum laude* from Washington and Lee University with a degree in history and politics. While in college, he worked on a congressional campaign and interned at the Heritage Foundation. **Avi Snyder** is our new social media coordinator and research associate, working to expand our communications and research efforts. Avi graduated *summa cum laude* from Brandeis University with a degree in philosophy, politics & economics. He has worked at the Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism and hopes to pursue a career in public policy.

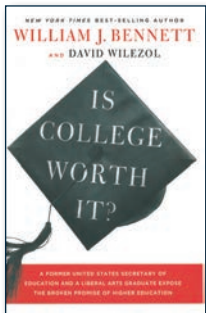


ACTA's summer interns discuss America's Founding with Ambassador Michael Novak.

No summer in DC would be complete without a new cohort of interns who provide valuable research for our What Will They Learn™ project. This year's group includes **Marielle Gage**, a graduate student in medieval history at Catholic University; **Mary Hardy**, who will spend this year studying for her Master's in Renaissance and Early Modern studies at the University of Edinburgh; **Sarah Larson**, a Hamilton College junior studying history and government; **Angela Geosits**, currently pursuing her PhD in English at Catholic University; **Felix Miller**, a junior at the College of Saint Mary Magdalen majoring in liberal studies; and **Sarah Scalet**, a junior at Hamilton College majoring in history and art. **Mary Schuhrimen**, a PhD student in American literature at Catholic University, also joined ACTA as our Robert Lewit Fellow in Education Policy.

In addition to their work on What Will They Learn?™, ACTA's interns and fellow had the opportunity to learn from important policy leaders. Among the speakers who visited ACTA this summer were Adam Keiper, editor of *The New Atlantis*, and ambassador Michael Novak, author of numerous volumes in philosophy, theology, history, and other subjects. The interns also visited sites of interest around Washington, DC, including a special tour of the United States Capitol Dome. ●

## From the Bookshelf...

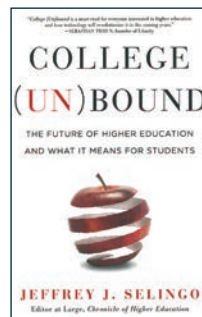


### Is College Worth It?

by William J. Bennett and David Wilenzol

ACTA has long advised students to think seriously about the purpose of college, where they should go, and what they should study—recognizing that too many schools charge too much and teach too little. *Is College Worth It?* helps students understand and make those decisions.

Bennett and Wilenzol's book, which cites ACTA's What Will They Learn?™ project, is aimed primarily at students and encourages them to take control of—and responsibility for—their educations. It offers a synopsis of the problems plaguing higher ed today—skyrocketing costs, ballooning student debt, debased curricula, and a challenging job market for recent graduates—in a way that prepares students to navigate the system and make good educational decisions. Particularly helpful is an appendix, "Twelve Hypothetical Scenarios," which provides college advice to sample students with very different backgrounds, interests, and levels of financial support.



### College (Un)Bound

by Jeffrey J. Selingo

If Bennett and Wilenzol's book is the 2013 college book for students, Selingo's is the book for policymakers, administrators, and anyone with a hand in shaping the future of higher education.

The book clearly lays out the grave challenges facing higher education—but it is chock full of innovative experiments that are improving student outcomes, and university leaders across America who are pioneering solutions to higher ed's problems. Our readers have probably heard of Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs, but Selingo also describes new ways of measuring value-added, of matching students with colleges, of helping students identify majors in which they will excel, and in keeping them on track to graduate—just to name a few of the topics outlined in the book. ●



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## **Professor Gary Gallagher Wins Merrill Award!**

Congratulations to Gary W. Gallagher, noted Civil War historian, who has won the **2013 Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education.**

Gallagher is the John L. Nau III Professor in the History of the American Civil War at the University of Virginia. A nationally recognized expert on the Civil War and beloved undergraduate teacher, Gallagher is the author of several scholarly publications, including *The Confederate War* and *Lee and His Generals in War and Memory*.

"As Americans mark the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, Dr. Gallagher's selection seems particularly timely," remarked ACTA president Anne D. Neal.

Previous winners of the award include Thomas M. Rollins, founder of The Teaching Company (2012); acclaimed historian and author David McCullough (2011); and Benno Schmidt (2010), chairman of the Board of Trustees of the City University of New York.

**Join us for the presentation of the award at a gala dinner on Nov. 8 at the Anderson House of The Society of the Cincinnati in Washington, DC, 6:30 pm. See your registration form inside this issue.**