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ACTA Documents Crisis in Civic Education

Over a decade ago, ACTA raised the alarm that the United States urgently needed better civic education. Our publication of *Losing America's Memory* prompted Congress to issue a unanimous joint resolution to improve historical and civic literacy. But there has been little improvement, and in January 2016, ACTA followed up with *A Crisis in Civic Education*. The report unearthed shocking levels of civic illiteracy among college graduates.

Among the findings: A recent survey commissioned by ACTA and conducted by GfK found that 60% of college graduates failed to identify a requirement for amending the Constitution. Almost half the graduates couldn't correctly list the term lengths of members of Congress. And the real kicker: Nearly 10% of them thought Judith Sheindlin—commonly known as

"Judge Judy"—sits on the Supreme Court!

This statistic went viral in news outlets and on social media. The *New York Post*, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, the *Austin American-Statesman*, *The Hill*, *TIME*, *Forbes*, *CNN Politics*, *The Today Show*, *Outnumbered*, and

even *Us Weekly* covered the report with justifiable outrage and concern. Judge Judy herself found it "interesting to say the least."

ACTA President Anne Neal took to the airwaves on *Nightside with Dan Rea* and on *McIntyre in the Morning*, and she appeared on *Wall Street Journal's Opinion Journal* to explain ACTA's findings. *EWTN News Nightly* also covered the story and interviewed Vice President of Policy

Michael Poliakoff on the need for higher academic standards in the teaching of civics.

But the report does more than report survey data; *A Crisis in Civic Education* calls for action on the part of higher education

(continued on 3)



In a recent ACTA survey, nearly 10% of college graduates thought Judge Judy is on the Supreme Court. (CBS Photo Archive)

Save the date for ATHENA 2016

Join us on **October 28** to celebrate ACTA's 12th annual ATHENA Roundtable conference. The day will examine threats to academic freedom and free speech on campus, fueled by widespread civic and historical illiteracy. The event will culminate with a gala dinner and the presentation of the 2016 Philip Merrill Award in the beautiful reading room of the Folger Shakespeare Library. Registration information to come.

www.GoACTA.org

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1-888-ALUMNI-8

**Kenneth Starr, President
Baylor University**

“According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Baylor is at the very tippy-top of great colleges to work for. Not only is it a happy place, it’s an academic haven where important work is done. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni once more bestowed its highest honor—an ‘A’—on Baylor for the rigor of our undergraduate curriculum.”

**The Honorable José A. Cabranes
United States Circuit Judge**

“For two decades you have kept alive, and fostered, the ideal of general education and core curricula in Western civilization and the related (and equally embattled) concepts of serious and responsible university trusteeship. . . . Our country is in your debt.”

David McCullough

“I don’t want another day to go by without thanking you again for the chance to take part in the ACTA gathering. . . . Your cause is worthy, your energy and leadership are outstanding. . . . Rosalee and I wish you all continuing progress in making a difference.”

**Tom Walker, CEO
American Village Citizenship Trust**

“As a concerned citizen and as Vice Chair of my alma mater’s Board of Trustees, I am dismayed by many of the changes now sweeping through much of higher education. You and ACTA have brought extraordinarily important counter-balance to the culture of political correctness and academic diminution and expedience. . . . Your vigorous and ever more urgent defense of the First Amendment on our campuses has been indispensable.”

**Abigail Thernstrom, Adjunct Scholar
American Enterprise Institute**

“What a tribute to you—an audience that was so very appreciative of what you have accomplished. Steve and I were excited to be there—and excited by our continuing relationship with ACTA. With every passing day your work becomes more important.”

Editor’s Note: This note is in reference to ACTA’s 20th Anniversary Gala.

Chicago Principles on Academic Freedom Spread

The recent turmoil seen on so many college campuses across the nation demonstrates how students—and even some faculty—are becoming increasingly willing to suppress the beliefs of others when they deem that those opinions cause students to feel “uncomfortable.” Too many colleges and universities have been willing to capitulate to strong-arm tactics that undermine the pursuit of truth, especially when it comes to the most difficult and controversial subjects of the day.

ACTA recently sent a letter to our network of more than 20,000 trustees urging them to ensure that their institutions foster freedom of thought and expression rather than suppress speech. Along with the letter, we included a copy of the University of Chicago’s 2014 Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression, which affirms the value of free speech on campus. The Chicago principles rightly state: “In a word, the University’s fundamental commitment is to the principle that debate or deliberation may not be suppressed because the ideas put forth are thought by some or even by most members of the University community to be offensive, unwise, immoral, or wrong-headed.”

Fortunately, several major institutions have embraced the principles outlined in the University of Chicago’s report: Most recently, Purdue University, Chapman University, and the University of Wisconsin System have adopted the statement. And Johns Hopkins University developed a similar statement of its own. ACTA will continue to urge institutions to take up such policies that affirm the value of free speech on campus and ensure the free exchange of ideas. ●

Read ACTA’s full letter to trustees urging them to foster freedom of thought and expression at their institutions:
GoACTA.org/images/download/Chicago_Principles.pdf.

ACTA Defends Free Speech “On Air”

The *Diane Rehm Show* advises its 2.2 million listeners that one of her guests is always you! This was particularly true for ACTA last December. On December 9, ACTA Vice President of Policy Michael B. Poliakoff was an invited presenter on her show. Dr. Poliakoff joined a distinguished panel—Professor Craig Steven Wilder of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Professor Jody L. Allen of the College of William & Mary, and president and CEO of the National Constitution Center Jeffrey Rosen—to discuss the potential impact of campus protests on *Fisher v. University of Texas*, a case now before the U.S. Supreme Court.

Dr. Poliakoff warned that the rush to eradicate the campus memorials of historical figures like Thomas Jefferson, Woodrow Wilson, and Elihu Root is a slippery slope that could eliminate almost any historical figure. His point drew general agreement as panelists focused on the need to engage with history rather than suppress it. He called on higher education to protect free and vigorous dialogue, invoking Oliver Wendell Holmes’s admonition that we must respect freedom for even the thought we hate, and he decried the new fashion of looking for microaggressions in an effort to shut down free speech. Dr. Poliakoff noted with dismay how Yale University failed to support a professor who spoke up for free expression, and he emphasized one of ACTA’s core principles: It is diversity of intellect that defines the academy.

ACTA was honored to have a part in this important national discussion, and the conversation on this *Diane Rehm Show* program exemplified the engaged and honest dialogue that ACTA seeks for higher education and the nation. ●

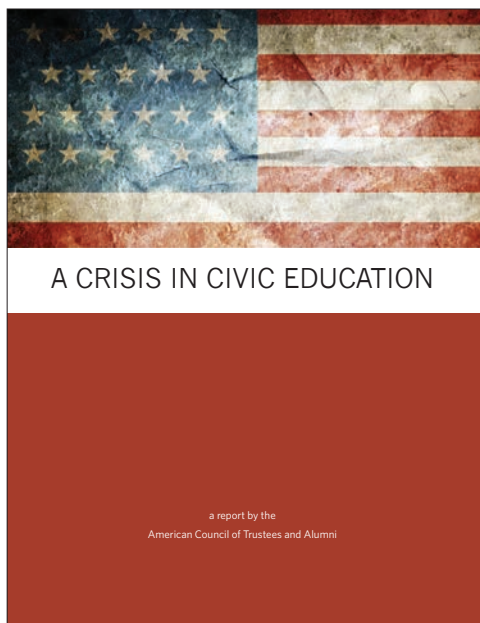
Crisis in Civic Education, *continued from 1*

stakeholders and policymakers to ensure that all college students take at least one course in U.S. history or government. Currently, only 18% of colleges and universities require such a class, according to ACTA’s signature report on general education curricula, *What Will They Learn?* The lack of substantive civics and U.S. history requirements is the single largest contributing factor to this epidemic of ignorance.

The call for improvement was too often answered by programs that unfortunately fail to address the underlying problems. Instead of foundational courses in history and government, many colleges created service-learning programs. These initiatives are a wholesome way to encourage community service and volunteering, but they do not teach students about their responsibilities as citizens in America’s democratic republic.

Requiring a foundational course in American history or government is the best way to guarantee a working

understanding of our nation’s institutions of government. These classes provide the



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substance necessary for informed citizenship. Without the content and context of such classes, service-learning

endeavors are hollow. Ultimately, too many colleges and universities are leaving graduates disempowered.

The stakes have never been higher. There are, fortunately, some small pockets of hope: A few states have explicit legislation that requires colleges to teach meaningful courses in U.S. history; these are Oklahoma, Nevada, Texas, and Georgia. Indeed, almost all the public universities in these states receive U.S. History or Government credit from *What Will They Learn?*™. Ideally, change would come from within the institution, but state requirements like these can be a step in the right direction to ensure that schools maintain the public trust.

The last 15 years have seen a continued decline in civic education. But by taking the simple steps outlined in ACTA’s report, higher education can remedy the missteps of the past and make good on its responsibility to educate students for engaged and informed citizenship. ●



Trustees as Fiduciaries: A Regent's Take

In *Higher Ed Now's* three-part program, ACTA's Vice President of Policy Michael Poliakoff and University of Colorado regent **Stephen Ludwig** discuss the question of whom college and university trustees serve in their roles as fiduciaries.

Contrary to common belief, the proper role of a trustee is not simply being a college booster or raising funds or always supporting the administration. Mr. Ludwig reminds us that, unmoved by the interests of any constituent part of their institution, trustees have as their first and foremost duty the interests of the public at large. The proper role of a board of trustees, then, is to be an independent and objective arbiter of the public interest.

As stewards of their institution, trustees should “take it upon themselves to educate themselves” and consult other organizations for accurate and relevant information. For example, a board might turn to consultants to discover what information they need to guard against grade inflation. Such data, Mr. Ludwig observes, empowers trustees to ensure the overall integrity of campus grading policies. Only by looking beyond themselves and their institutions can trustees gain a fuller understanding of their challenges and better deliver on academic excellence. ●



Colorado regent Stephen Ludwig

Alumni Activism

A Williams Alum Steps Up

After another assault on free speech, alumni of Williams College—with ACTA's help—are assembling to defend the free exchange of ideas on campus. In October, Suzanne Venker, a feminist critic and *Fox News* contributor, was disinvited from speaking on campus, ironically, as part of a speakers series called “Uncomfortable Learning.” She planned to discuss her critique of feminism until, in the words of Ms. Venker's Williams College contact, “angry reactions among students on campus” forced the event's cancellation. The cancellation is sadly a symptom of the ever-increasing “safe space” culture on America's campuses.

Disturbed by Williams's shutting down of free speech, ACTA wrote to the board—and to Williams alumni—urging them to uphold the free exchange of ideas. In turn, Tony Moro, an alumnus of the college, reached out to the Williams board. His proposition? To address the problem head-on by hosting an on-campus debate on the violation of First Amendment rights in addition to pressuring the board to update its institutional policy on freedom of expression. When colleges lose touch with first principles, informed alumni and trustees must come to the rescue.

Free Harvard, Fair Harvard?

ACTA has long focused on higher education governance, particularly when institutions allow direct participation by

alumni. That is why we are now following the upcoming election of the Harvard Board of Overseers. A front-page story in the *New York Times* features a five-person petition slate, running on a platform of “Free Harvard, Fair Harvard.”

Software developer Ron Unz, author Stuart Taylor, citizen activist Ralph Nader, Professor of Theoretical Physics Stephen Hsu, and business lawyer Lee C. Cheng have banded together in an effort they hope will “pressure . . . colleges and universities to trim their bloated administrative costs and drastically cut their tuition.” The candidates also propose to make the Harvard admissions process transparent by eliminating any direct or indirect ethnic quotas.

As of press time, Harvard had yet to say whether the candidates would be certified for election, although petitioner Unz told the *Harvard Crimson* that he believed they had more than enough signatures to qualify. Whatever the outcome, the Harvard administration felt it necessary to respond to the high-profile campaign, with President Drew Faust objecting to their platform in a front-page story in the *Harvard Crimson*.

Recent experience tells us that petition candidates—whether at Dartmouth, Penn State, Yale, or Harvard—can often bring fresh and independent judgment to the challenges their alma maters face and renewed focus on crucial issues of quality and cost. We shall keep you posted on developments. ●

Mizzou Professor Suspended

A University of Missouri communications professor, Melissa Click, has been suspended with pay, pending an investigation of a third-degree assault charge against a student reporter documenting a campus protest. Click gained notoriety in November when, during the protest, she attempted to strong-arm the student journalist, saying, “Hey, who wants to help me get this reporter out of here? I need some muscle over here!”

Beyond the legal issues of Click’s behavior is yet a larger issue: a communications professor obstructing freedom of the press and abandoning her responsibilities as a teacher. The University of Missouri states in its own bylaws: “As a citizen engaged in a profession that depends upon freedom for its health and integrity, the professor has a particular obligation for promoting conditions of free inquiry and to further public understanding of academic freedom.”

On January 12, ACTA sent a letter to the University of Missouri Board of Curators, observing that they have a duty to ensure the integrity and appropriateness of tenure decisions. Acknowledging that Professor Click has a right to due process, ACTA stressed that her recent actions should be included for consideration in her tenure portfolio. Professors must hold a special position in the academic community as guardians of the free exchange of ideas, essential to the mission of any American university.

Colleges and universities need to defend the First Amendment in their classrooms and communities. Granting tenure to faculty who blatantly debase America’s founding principles would be an egregious assault on the academic freedom that has been the lifeblood of American higher education. ●

Accreditation Update

At present, an institution’s eligibility for federal funding is dependent upon accreditation: a costly, broken, and self-serving system. It functions as a higher education cartel stifling innovation while enabling soaring tuition costs.

The good news is that on September 30, Senators Michael Bennet (D-CO) and Marco Rubio (R-FL) introduced a bill to the U.S. Senate that would create an alternative authorization process, no longer connecting federal student-aid eligibility to accreditation.

ACTA commends all efforts to create an effective quality-assurance system to replace the existing accreditation gateway to limitless taxpayer funds. Another step in protecting students and taxpayers is to grant federal funding only to institutions that deliver strong student outcomes and success. Federal student aid should return to enabling an education for lifelong success in career and citizenship. When tied to accreditation, which currently does not hold institutions accountable for student success, federal funding is too often a tragic waste. ●

Read ACTA’s full letter to the University of Missouri Board of Curators at GoACTA.org/images/download/Letter_to_Mizzou.pdf.

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H E A R D C A M P U S O N

Furman’s Tocqueville Program, a Source of Academic Renewal

The Oases of Excellence that ACTA recognizes and promotes bring fresh ideas and diverse programming to campuses across the country. Alumni and donors who support them know that their philanthropy fosters academic renewal and intellectual diversity.

Furman University’s Tocqueville Program is once such Oasis. It has been a model of academic excellence in political science. And this past fall, the program displayed its strength as a forum for differing ideas. Past Merrill Award recipient Professor Robert P. George of Princeton University and Professor Cornel West of the Union Theological Seminary visited the Tocqueville Program to hold “A Conversation about Christianity and Politics.”

Professors George and West, of course, are close friends and also prominent thinkers representing different ends of the political spectrum. As a result, their dialogue at Furman encouraged students to have conversations around challenging topics of politics, religion, and race—all while maintaining personal respect and intellectual openness. Riveting discussions like these are exactly what our nation’s campuses need.

Another arm of this admirable program is the Society of Tocqueville Fellows, a select group of students who study political philosophy and Western civilization. Every month,

they hold a colloquium to discuss contemporary issues that relate to their intended course of study.

ACTA is excited to see such outstanding programming coming out of the Oases of Excellence, creating models for other institutions to follow.

Good News! CUNY Protects Core Curriculum

In January, the administration of the City University of New York (CUNY) defended academic integrity when it opposed the erosion of the general education curriculum at Brooklyn College. CUNY’s core curriculum overall is one of the reasons its institutions have a reputation for academic strength.

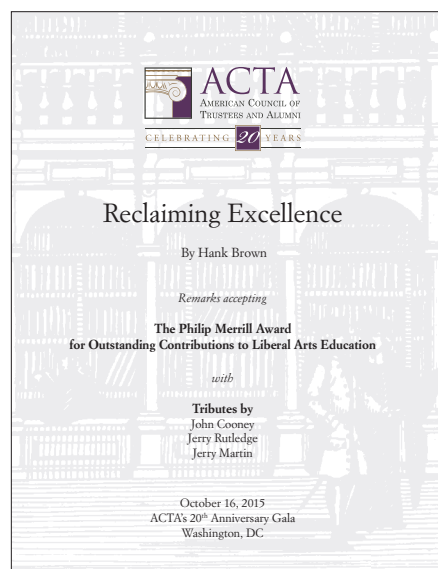
In April 2015, ACTA issued a statement advising faculty to maintain Brooklyn College’s core, lest students receive a watered-down education. A proposal from the system’s faculty senate would have weakened the core curriculum and replaced its broad-based courses with vague standards; such a change would have allowed students to graduate without taking the foundational courses they need to be successful later on in life. In blocking the plan, CUNY’s administration has ensured that students will continue to enjoy the solid core curriculum that will set them up for success.

It’s good to see that CUNY’s leaders are defending a true liberal education. And we hope that the trustees at other institutions take note of CUNY’s clear vision. ●

Sen. Hank Brown on Reclaiming Excellence

“Periods when mankind embraced real intellectual freedom and stood up for the rights of those who expressed new and different ideas have in reality been few and brief, but they were special moments when society moved forward.” **The Honorable Hank Brown** gave these remarks during his acceptance speech of the Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education during ACTA’s 20th Anniversary Gala. Hank’s distinguished career as a reformer spans his terms as a U.S. Representative, U.S. Senator, and as president of the University of Northern Colorado and then the University of Colorado. He has also remained a steady adviser to ACTA since he became a founding member 20 years ago. Hank’s speech provided specific insight on how to address issues facing higher education, including trimming administrative bloat, raising the number of classes that faculty teach, demanding the broad core curriculum that is essential for an educated citizenry, confronting grade inflation, and ensuring academic freedom.

Hank Brown has been a tireless champion of high academic standards, academic freedom, and integrity in college governance for decades. ACTA is proud to have him as the 11th recipient of the Merrill Award and as a constant friend and ally in fighting for reform. You can find the speech at GoACTA.org or call 202-467-6787 for a copy. ●



President Anne Neal to Step Down



After cofounding ACTA in 1995 and leading it since 2003, President Anne Neal announced she will step down in June to lead the Garden Club of America. Neal will remain involved with ACTA as a senior fellow. “I have loved every minute at ACTA and look forward to continuing my involvement in higher education reform while I also pursue interests in historic preservation, conservation, and environmental education,” Neal said. “It has been gratifying to build a firm foundation and to see ACTA’s issues come front and center; my successor will have the opportunity to take ACTA to an even higher level of impact and outreach.”

Under Neal’s leadership, ACTA has become one of the most prominent leaders in American higher education reform. ACTA spearheaded the 2014 blue-ribbon report, *Governance for a New Era: A Blueprint for Higher Education Trustees*, chaired by former Yale President Benno Schmidt, which has been a catalyst for reforms on campuses across America. Also during Neal’s tenure, ACTA created its popular college-rating website, *WhatWillTheyLearn.com*, which evaluates general education curricula at more than

1,100 colleges and universities. ACTA received the 2015 Salvatori Prize for American Citizenship in recognition of the success of this project. ACTA has also become a recognized expert in accreditation reform.

Neal is serving in her second term on the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI), where she has been an outspoken critic of the existing accreditation system. In 2015, she was invited to testify about these issues before the U.S. Civil Rights Commission and the U.S. Senate.

Since Neal became ACTA’s president, its assets have increased ten-fold, and fundraising in 2015 broke all records. ACTA currently has a budget of \$2.5 million and a staff of 13 and is planning to expand further in 2016. “Anne Neal has been a terrific leader whose energy and commitment have made ACTA a powerful force in higher education reform,” said ACTA Board Chairman Robert Lewit. “We are sad to see her go.”

ACTA’s board is undertaking a national search for Neal’s replacement and expects a new president will be in place before June 30. ●

ACTA Updates

ACTA welcomes our new Scholar-in-Residence for 2016, **Dr. Elizabeth D. “Betty” Capaldi Phillips**. Dr. Capaldi Phillips—who, along with ACTA’s Michael Poliakoff, coauthored our report on *The Cost of Chaos in the Curriculum* this past fall—will have accreditation reform as her primary focus. She brings to ACTA her experience at Arizona State University (ASU) as a University Professor of psychology, as a former provost, and as a former executive vice president. Previous to ASU, Dr. Capaldi Phillips served at the University of Buffalo SUNY, the University of Florida in Gainesville, and the American Psychological Association, among many other organizations. Her vast experience and intricate know-

ledge of higher education will prove invaluable for our efforts.

We also welcome two new interns to our team: **Abigail Staysa**, who has joined our What Will They Learn?™ team, and **Alex Cornacchini**, who has joined our Trustee Affairs team. Abigail studied political science and philosophy at Hiram College and received a B.A., *summa cum laude*. Alex is a junior at American University, studying communications and political science.

We congratulate two of our former employees who are making important contributions. **Michael Pomeranz**, a past press secretary and senior researcher, recently joined the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois as a law

clerk. And **Professor Barry Latzer**—who authored *The Hollow Core*, ACTA’s first major report on the state of college and university core curricula—has just published a new book, *The Rise and Fall of Violent Crime in America*, which analyzes criminal violence in the United States in the latter half of the 20th century.

Finally, ACTA congratulates **Joyce Lee Malcom**, professor of law at George Mason University and a member of our Council of Scholars, for her new appointment to the Congressional Commission on a National Women’s History Museum. She and seven other scholars will submit a report to Congress later this year on the necessity and feasibility of creating such an institution. ●



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ACTA Awards Trustee of the Year Prize to the Hon. Tom McMillen

This past December, ACTA announced the winner of our inaugural **Jerry L. Martin Prize for Excellence in College Trusteeship: Tom McMillen**, a former regent of the University System of Maryland, a former U.S. congressman, and the current president of the Division 1A Athletic Directors' Association.

McMillen served as regent from 2007 to 2015 and has been a strong and constant advocate for trustees' obligations to students, their families, and taxpayers. In 2013, he coauthored a *USA Today* op-ed with U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, bringing nationwide attention to the huge disparity between academic and athletic bonuses for NCAA coaches. He then led the effort to establish a new Maryland system board policy—the first in the country—requiring teams to meet a minimum academic threshold before any coach may be paid a bonus.



McMillen also created the board's first Workgroup on Intercollegiate Athletics.

He has been an invaluable supporter of ACTA. In 2014, with 21 other civic and higher education leaders, McMillen signed onto *Governance for a New Era*, a blueprint for effective governance in colleges and universities. And just last year, he participated in ACTA's *Higher Ed Now* video web series for trustees, hosting "Best Practices in Athletic Oversight."

In short, Tom McMillen has been a reform-minded trustee and an example for trustees around the nation to follow. The Martin Prize—named after ACTA's first president and former University

of Colorado professor, Dr. Jerry L. Martin—recognizes outstanding efforts by college and university trustees on behalf of the public interest. ●