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Better Angels Counters Polarization on Campus

As the *Washington Post* reported earlier this year, political scientists from several universities found that great numbers of Americans “dehumanize” those who oppose their political views. Recognizing that bitter divisiveness is the common enemy of democracy, a groundswell of concerned citizens from both the Republican and Democratic parties are joining forces to combat extreme polarization and restore civil discourse. One such initiative is the **Better Angels** project, which has generated a grassroots movement that is rapidly growing and garnering national media attention.



David Blankenhorn holds a Better Angels event at a Virginia high school.

Launched by **David Blankenhorn** shortly after the 2016 election, Better Angels is a nonpartisan nonprofit that leads events, debates, and “red-blue” training workshops—all designed to bring conservatives and progressives to the table in civil dialogue. The organization is now setting its sights on bringing depolarization efforts to college and high school campuses. To that end, ACTA is partnering with Better Angels to help col-

lege students nationwide gain experience in thoughtful, civil debate and dialogue. The following are excerpts from our conversation in July with David Blankenhorn.

The name “Better Angels” comes from a well-known speech by President Lincoln. What is it about the “better angels of

your nature” that predicated founding this organization?

When I was growing up in the south, the civil rights conflict and the war in Vietnam were splitting the country. It was a time of deep polarization; and it became important to figure out how we can maintain trust in one another as citizens, and how to speak to one another even across important differences.

President Lincoln believed this when he

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Register Now for ATHENA Roundtable 2018!

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ACTA's **2018 ATHENA Roundtable** event will be held on **October 12** at the Ronald Reagan Building in Washington, DC. Join us for a morning discussion with higher education leaders, the awarding of the **Jerry L. Martin Prize for Excellence in College Trusteeship** to former University of Pennsylvania trustee Paul Levy, and a gala dinner for the presentation of the 14th annual **Philip Merrill Award** to the Honorable Mitch Daniels. For more information or to register for the event, please visit www.GoACTA.org/events/ATHENA.

**Kim Rauscher, Executive Administrator to the Chancellor
University of Nebraska—Lincoln**

“Recently Chancellor Ronnie Green received a copy of an ACTA publication entitled *Building a Culture of Free Expression on the American College Campus* by Joyce Lee Malcolm. He found it very informative reading and would like to share copies with our campus leadership.”

**Douglas Faigin, Trustee
California State University**

“Thank you for sending me those two pamphlets, *Asking Questions, Getting Answers: A Guide for Higher Ed Trustees* and *Bold Leadership, Real Reform 2.0*. I was very impressed. They provide short, concise suggestions for trustees who can be active and who can help administrations make real, beneficial change for the future of education. Your advice to reject the idea that ‘the role of the trustee is to go along to get along—

no questions asked’ is terrific. I hope people in California and around the nation take that advice to heart.”

**Steven Frankel, Professor
Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio**

“I wanted to thank . . . the entire team at ACTA and FAR, for organizing a terrific conference. I’ve already been in touch with several of the participants to continue the discussion . . . It was certainly the most productive and useful conference I’ve ever attended!”

**Michael Maibach, Managing Director
James Wilson Institute, Washington, DC**

“Excellent program with the right people! This is another unique contribution ACTA is making to academia. Thank you!”

Editor’s Note: ACTA’s Fund for Academic Renewal convened its second Oases of Excellence Faculty Conference in June. See article on page 4.

Better Angels, continued from 1

spoke those words. Lincoln pointed to something in us that we could call the better angels of our nature, but what followed was the greatest period of divisiveness in our country’s history. There’s a tragic element there and it tells us that this American experiment of ours can be fragile.

When online communication and social media came into its own, the universal assumption was that the internet would be a great equalizer and unifying force. But what we’ve seen is even more extreme polarization—citizens withdrawing to their own information bubbles and digital havens of people who agree with their point of view. How does Better Angels begin to address the dynamics of divisiveness in the 21st century?

We’ve identified in our research about fourteen contributors to current polarization. What you outline in terms of the media ghettos that we can live in now is one of the major contributors,

and certainly has got to be near the top of anyone’s list. We call it the “Partisan Media Complex.” We’re first trying to model a different way of disagreeing: can we disagree *accurately*? Because exaggerated or imagined disagreement is

“What if we took time to disagree accurately with one another and listened enough so that we could get straight what we actually disagreed on?”

really easy. What if we took time to disagree accurately with one another and listened enough so that we could get straight what we actually disagreed on?

Better Angels recently helped students organize a parliamentary style debate at Eastern Tennessee State University. It proved so compelling that other colleges and universities are asking how they can stage similar debates, and we at ACTA are working to

facilitate this with you going forward.

When we tried it out, it just lit up the room. We think it really has enormous potential to attract a lot of students at the college level. We train students, and they run their own program. This is a grassroots, democratic activity, and you don’t have to raise a lot of money to make it happen.

This form of debate is based on the parliamentary debate system, which is foundational in all democracies for public deliberation. It draws from American civic tradition, and it makes me really proud because it allows students to connect to the deep democratic roots of our country.

By strengthening free expression, thoughtful discussion, and Founding principles on campus, ACTA and Better Angels are working to ensure that American college students can cultivate the skills to counter political polarization with well-formed opinions and rigorous, unfettered debate. ●

Listen to the podcast of our full conversation with David Blankenhorn on GoACTA.org.

Regional Accrator’s Proposed Guidelines Threaten Institutional Autonomy

In a guest column published on July 22 by the *Colorado Springs Gazette*, entitled “A threat to liberty in higher education,” ACTA President Michael Poliakoff and Colorado Christian University President Donald W. Sweeting firmly challenged a dangerous new guideline proposed by a higher education accreditor.

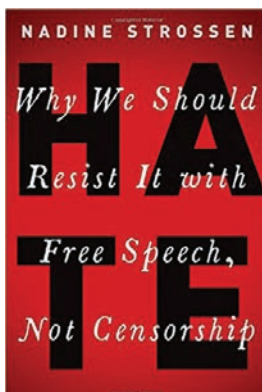
The proposed protocol comes from the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), a regional accreditor with jurisdiction over colleges and universities in 19 states. The HLC seeks to claim authority to decide whether a school sufficiently “ensure[s] inclusive and equitable treatment of diverse populations,” rather than honoring the longstanding right of institutions to act in accordance with their mission and the constituencies they serve. Under this

proposed guideline, if a school fails to meet the HLC’s new standard, it is at risk of losing access to federal grants and loans for its students.

Dr. Poliakoff and President Sweeting explained in their column that “The broad nature of the HLC’s proposed change threatens the autonomy of the country’s colleges and universities. America offers a remarkably wide array of different schools, a diversity that, at its best, meets the intellectual needs of a very wide range of students.” American higher education includes large public schools, small private colleges, religious institutions, historically black colleges and universities, and technical institutes. Trustees at all of these institutions have a duty to maintain and uphold their respective missions, a function that must not be

eroded by a federal accreditor: “American higher education has grown organically from communities and visionaries, reflecting our country’s independence of thought.” And now it is precisely that—independence of thought—which accreditors have attempted to circumscribe.

Ironically, the HLC’s attempt to privilege its own idea of “diversity” will compel all of its member institutions to adhere to a homogenized understanding of diversity. This decision will severely compromise the ability of universities to serve their students appropriately. ACTA continues to urge Congress to reform the Higher Education Act in order to stop accreditors from intruding upon the mission and governance of our nation’s colleges and universities. ●



After several tumultuous years of shout-downs and disinvitations of controversial speakers, students struggle to reconcile free speech with values of inclusivity and diversity. But according to former ACLU president Nadine Strossen, this constitutes a false dichotomy. In her latest book *HATE: Why We Should Resist It with Free Speech, Not Censorship* (Oxford University Press, 2018), Ms. Strossen demonstrates how even the most well-intentioned attempts to restrict hate speech have often ended up harming the groups they were designed to protect.

The book is clear, concise, and comprehensive. It examines first principles of American free speech jurisprudence and notes the already robust legal protections against incitement of violence, threats, or harassment. Strossen builds her case through an array of examples drawn from domestic and international case law, and calls attention to emerging private-sector attempts to craft speech policies for social media.

Ms. Strossen contends that “laws censoring ‘hate speech’ have predictably been enforced against those who lack political power, including government critics and members of the very minority groups these laws are intended to protect.” According to Strossen, when such laws are enforced, they frequently lead to pyrrhic victories; the offender appears as an intellectual martyr and gains prolonged media attention. Furthermore, such laws tend to keep odious beliefs from being aired in the public square—where they may be effectively refuted—and prompt dog-whistle politics, with public figures engaging in carefully worded “disquisitions” while eschewing overtly offensive “epithets.”

In all cases, American political culture is better equipped than any proposed legal remedy to address even grossly offensive speech. ●

Effective TRUSTEESHIP

Featured Trustee: Guido Pichini

ACTA recently had the pleasure of interviewing Guido Pichini, a trustee with 20 years of experience on the Council of Trustees at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania. Mr. Pichini is also a member of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education's Board of Governors, on which he served five terms as chairman. Below are excerpts from the interview.

What is your fundamental motivation as a trustee?

What has stayed the same with me over the years is the fact that I'm driven by believing that higher education is a game changer for students. And I've become more driven because over the years I've gone to scholarship dinners and I've seen young men and women going on to be very successful in life—and shaking their hands after they graduated from law school or they came back as a professor. It's been a difficult journey . . . but the angle is still the same: that you give everybody in the country the equal opportunity to get a higher education.

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ACTA's Vice President of Trustee & Government Affairs Armand Alacbay interviews Kutztown University of Pennsylvania trustee Guido Pichini at ACTA's offices.

ACTA & FAR Host Oases of Excellence Conference

ACTA and the Fund for Academic Renewal convened our second Oases of Excellence Faculty Conference in early June. Faculty leaders representing 18 different programs discussed strategies for building partnerships with other campus faculty and administrators, establishing a long-term communications strategy, and fostering a culture of free expression. Many professors represented programs recognized by ACTA as "Oases of Excellence," which offer students extra-curricular opportunities like reading groups and seminars that promote the liberal arts.

Sessions were led by faculty who have built top programs across the country: Siri Terjesen, director of the Center for Innovation at American University; Elizabeth Kaufer Busch, co-director of the Center for American Studies at Christopher Newport University; Michael A. Gillespie, director of the Program in American Values and Institutions at Duke University; and Carol McNamara, associate director for public programs of the School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership at Arizona State University.

Faculty leaders shared novel ways to reach students on today's campuses, from building living-learning communities to creating credit-bearing academic centers. As one attendee noted, "It is great to put different kinds of programs and leaders around the table, so that we can all learn from each other about the different sorts of challenges we all face."

ACTA and FAR are pleased to partner with faculty leaders who ensure that their students are introduced to the best of the liberal arts tradition and have the opportunity to hear all sides of controversial issues. We look forward to assembling a new group of distinguished faculty in the fall for another Oases of Excellence Faculty Conference at Arizona State University's School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership. ●





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

Colleges Drop SAT Essay

This summer, a flurry of institutions—including Dartmouth, Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, and the California Institute of Technology—have announced they are dropping the SAT writing test as a requirement for their applicants. Fewer than 25 schools nationwide require the SAT essay test score.

While many institutions of high academic stature, such as St. John’s College, do not require college admissions tests, ACTA encourages institutions to consider carefully before eliminating SAT and ACT requirements. The essay portion on the SAT is admittedly imperfect, but admissions tests are the most objective standard that the application process incorporates. Eliminating this requirement ultimately means a less holistic review of potential applicants.

ACTA urges trustees to take an active role in the conversation about application requirements at their institutions to ensure that the decision process is comprehensive and guided by best practices. ACTA’s report *The Art of College Admissions: A Trustee Guide to the Value of Entrance Exams* explores this topic in more depth and can be found at www.GoACTA.org.

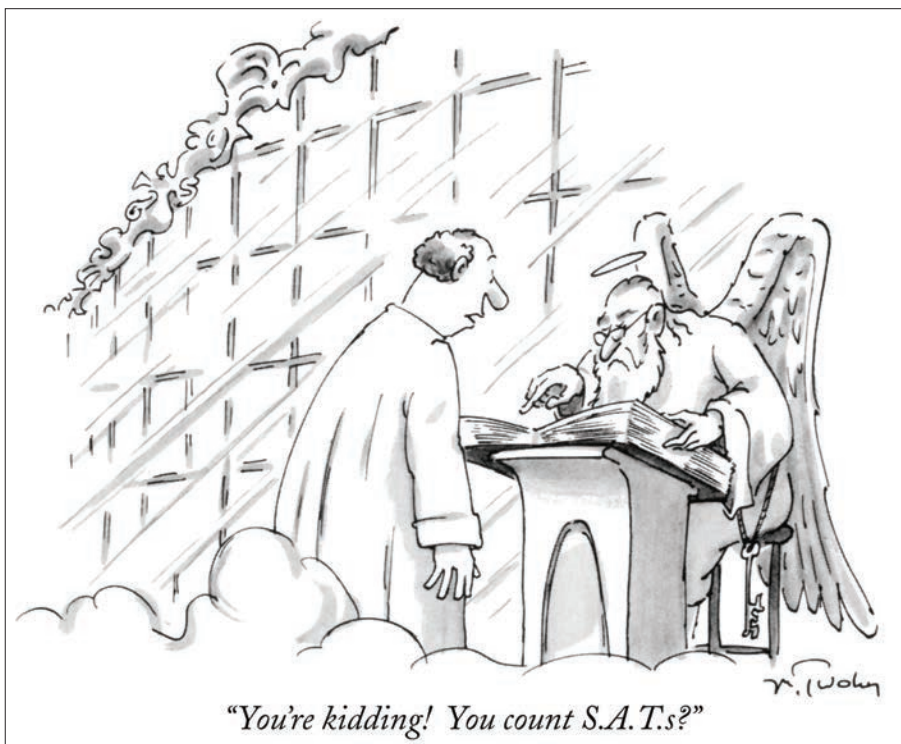
FIRE Takes Aim at Censorship

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) has released a new report entitled *One Man’s Vulgarity: Art Censorship on American Campuses*. The report focuses on recent instances of colleges and universities removing controversial artwork or making it less accessible to the public.

According to the report, art is often censored “because its use of offensive

imagery is misunderstood by viewers who see it as an endorsement of a certain viewpoint, rather than a criticism of it.” Other times, artwork is removed because of its political subject matter. In these cases, spectators fully understand an artist’s intent, but protest because they “don’t like what they see.” Administrators are often quick to denounce artwork that causes controversy, shroud it with drapes, or totally remove it from view.

Colleges and universities must not assume the position of deciding which ideas students are permitted to encounter over the course of their undergraduate careers. In fact, it is their duty to expose students to a wide range of perspectives and ensure that students develop the tools to determine for themselves both the purpose and value of controversial paintings. ●



“You’re kidding! You count S.A.T.s?”

Mike Twohy/The New Yorker © Conde Nast.

In Memoriam

We mourn the passing of William B. Sordoni, who was a faithful friend to ACTA over many years.

Mr. Sordoni served our country in the U.S. Army from 1965 to 1968, stationed at different times in Vietnam, Thailand, and Alaska. After his honorable discharge, he pursued an energetic career that included major leadership roles at Sterling Industrial Corp., Commonwealth Telephone, and Sordoni Construction Services, until his retirement in 2010.

He is survived by his wife, four children, and eight grandchildren. ACTA is grateful for his long friendship, and we pay honor to his life, so full of service and achievement. ●



On June 15, ACTA President Michael Poliakoff spoke at Heterodox Academy’s (HxA) Open Mind Conference, a forum featuring six panels dedicated to examining intellectual diversity in the academy, and helping college leadership address complex issues of open inquiry both in the classroom and on campus. The conference was attended by 350 people.

Dr. Poliakoff joined Heterodox Academy Executive Director Debra Mashek and three college leaders to discuss “Opportunities on Campus: The Power of Leaders and Administrators.” Addressing the largely-faculty audience, Dr. Poliakoff asked, “What are you doing to ensure that our campus is a place that allows freedom of expression?” He shared the remarkable work of the 1974 C. Vann Woodward Committee to define for Yale University what it needed to do to allow free expression to flourish unobstructed. He also advised campus leadership to enforce consistently their institutions’ principles by adhering to their own stated policies to discipline students who disrupt invited speakers—as fellow panelist and Vice

President for Academic Affairs Peter Uvin’s institution, Claremont McKenna College, did last year by suspending five students who blocked the presentation of Heather Mac Donald.

Dr. Poliakoff discussed how professors can be “agents of change and leadership” to foster free expression on their campuses. He encouraged university professors to urge their institutions to adopt the Chicago Principles, as faculty have recently done at the University of Montana, Kansas State University, and Ashland University, among other institutions.

The growing list of institutions that have adopted the Chicago Principles or similar statements reveals the powerful role that faculty can play to improve university policies. ACTA and HxA will continue to urge university administrators and professors to safeguard the vital place of open inquiry and the free exchange of ideas within the academy. ●

Meet ACTA’s Interns

This summer, ACTA welcomed a group of 11 interns from a wide range of educational backgrounds to work on our annual *What Will They Learn?* publication and our guidance counselor project.

Adam Burkhart, a Pittsburgh native, is pursuing a dual BA and MPIA degree at the University of Pittsburgh, where he studies political science and international relations. He plans to pursue his Ph.D.

Two interns harken from the University of Michigan. **Amory Manual** is majoring in history and is also studying the philosophy of computer science. He hopes to pursue policy research. And **Stephanie Glenn**, a rising junior, is studying political science. She is interested in law school, teaching, or criminal justice policy.

Caroline Toth is a rising senior at Ashland University in Ohio, where she studies political science, history, and education. She plans a career in teaching and education administration. **Erik Gross**, originally from Washington, DC, is a 2018 Kenyon College graduate. An economics major with a minor in history, he is interested in economics research.

Joshua Miller, a junior at the University of South Carolina, will graduate with degrees in political science and philosophy. He plans to attend law school. University of North Carolina–Greensboro sophomore **Lillian Vitale** is a double major

in cultural anthropology and political science. She looks forward to a career in academia as an anthropologist.

Minji Choi works on the guidance counselor project. She is a rising senior at George Washington University, where she studies information systems and technology management. **Rachel Wagner**, ACTA’s Robert Lewit Fellow, attends Christopher Newport University. She is majoring in American studies and interdisciplinary studies, and plans a career in academia.

Originally from Albuquerque, NM, **Ryan Ansoan** is pursuing a Juris Doctor in law at the Antonin Scalia Law School at



The interns and their managers visit Lincoln’s Cottage. Back Row: Nathaniel Urban, Ryan Ansoan, Amory Manual, Adam Burkhart, Joshua Miller, Erik Gross, Lillian Vitale, and Megan Riethmiller. Front Row: Caroline Toth, Rachel Wagner, Caitlin Patrick, Stephanie Glenn, and Minji Choi.

George Mason University. **Caitlin Patrick**, from Fairfax, VA, is a junior at Clemson University, where she is a political science and economics double major.

Thanks to our dedicated interns, ACTA continues its important work on the *What Will They Learn?*® and guidance counselor projects. Ms. Patrick spoke of her experience: “Working alongside individuals who are committed to improving our nation’s higher education system has not only been rewarding, but has allowed me to grow intellectually and professionally.” ●

ACTA Reaches Out to H.S. Guidance Counselors

In June, ACTA's Director of Curricular Improvement Megan Riethmiller attended the Association of Classical Christian Schools' (ACCS) annual conference in Dallas, Texas as part of ACTA's outreach to high school guidance counselors.

We received an enthusiastic response at the conference, with many attendees recalling the speech ACTA staff member Nick Barden gave last year to an audience of high school teachers, advisors, and headmasters on what students need to know to navigate the college selection process effectively and choose institutions that offer a robust liberal arts education. Our defense of a strong core curriculum and of free speech on campus resonated with many at the conference, and we distributed close to 300 copies of ACTA publications. Many attendees expressed special interest in ACTA's most recent essay by constitutional law scholar Joyce Malcolm, *Building a Culture of Free Expression on the American College Campus: Challenges & Solutions*.

Through our guidance counselor project, ACTA works to help prospective college students select schools that will prepare them for both career and citizenship. We are currently building a database of 35,000 high school guidance counselors across the United States in order to provide counselors and their students with ACTA's college selection resources that provide critical data that are not included in popular rankings such as *U.S. News & World Report*. ACTA's *What Will They Learn?* report is the only college rating tool that evaluates schools based on their academic requirements and core curricula. It provides students with an overview of the academic rigor of an institution, along with the culture of free expression on campus—both essential when making a wise college selection.

Through this exciting new initiative, ACTA will directly guide students toward colleges and universities that are committed to academic excellence. ●



Guido Pichini, *continued from 4*

How have you approached being an active, vocal member of the board?

Trying to be an active participant on the [board] includes bringing other trustees into discussion . . . When I'm Chair, I change all of our committee structures on a regular basis and I usually get the people who have not been participating to chair various committees so that their input has to come to the forefront. . . . When I was Chair, I never spoke my piece until everybody had their opportunity to say their opinions, and then I would offer my comments at the end of the discussion.

How can a board go about addressing controversial issues?

A Chair should have the prerogative of creating ad hoc committees to handle various issues that are hot topics of the

day, and one of those is free speech. At one of the institutions I'm Chair of we actually created an ad hoc committee to look at free speech issues, but we also brought in outside counsel to give us the updates on the legal issues on free speech on campus, to give us suggestions, and to work through our policies to make sure they are legal and don't discriminate against anybody or restrict anybody's free speech.

Why is it important to have a say in curriculum?

The board should not be [involved in] the day-to-day managing of things. Their responsibility is looking at the overall integrity of the academic programs under a college campus. . . . we shouldn't be concerned about the number of students that we graduate every year from college,

but if we are graduating students who are capable of competing in the world market, who are highly educated and highly trained.

Whom does the public trustee serve as a board member?

I've always said that you take off your political hat and leave it at the door coming into the boardroom, and you should be making your decisions not based upon your political views, but what's in the best interest of, number one, the students, and number two, the taxpayers of the Commonwealth. That should be driving your decisions, not whether you're going to get reappointed and whether you're going to be making a decision that may not be in your best interest of gaining that appointment again. ●

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RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED



Protecting Free Speech on Campus 10 Questions College Trustees Should Ask

Academic excellence is predicated on the freedom to question, challenge, debate, and discuss.

It is the role and responsibility of the board of trustees to ensure that their institution protects and fosters freedom of speech and viewpoint diversity.

- Have we formally adopted the Chicago Principles of free expression or a similar statement?
- Do we emphasize free speech at orientation, in public presentations, and in course catalogs?
- Have we established clear policies safeguarding free speech in the student code of conduct?
- Have we established clear policies safeguarding free speech in the faculty handbook?
- Have we developed policies and procedures governing the invitation and accommodation of controversial speakers?

10 Questions Trustees Should Ask to Protect Free Speech

Our latest report, *Building a Culture of Free Expression on the American College Campus: Challenges & Solutions* by constitutional law scholar Joyce Malcolm, got the attention of trustees and academic leaders. Building on this momentum, ACTA has developed **Protecting Free Speech on Campus: 10 Questions College Trustees Should Ask**, a wallet card that outlines important questions trustees can pose in the boardroom to improve their institution's free speech policies.

The questions address the current nationwide concern with free expression on campus, including preparation for inviting and accommodating controversial speakers. Trustees must ask if the policies that define and safeguard free speech are clearly codified in the student codes of conduct and faculty handbooks. If students and faculty are made aware of these policies, institutions can better meet the challenges posed by damaging and disruptive conduct.

By adopting the Chicago Principles of free expression or a similar statement, trustees can ensure that their institutions have the tools in place to strengthen the guiding tenets of open inquiry and free speech that are so essential to preserving the foundation of American higher education. ●