



Promoting
Academic
Freedom and
Excellence

2 **In Box**

3 **Breaking News**

ACTA Issues First Gold
Standard Report Card

Generous Matching Gift
Gives ACTA's CFI Project
a Boost

4 **Effective Trusteeship**

ACTA Board Services for
College Trustees

Niall Ferguson and Ruth Wisse
Present at Levy Forum

5 **Speaking Up**

ACTA's Policy Agenda
for New Presidential
Administration

ACTA Launches CFI
Campaigns at Pitt and
Penn State

6 **Heard On Campus**

Selling Alcohol in University
Stadiums Sends Wrong
Message to Students

7 **ACTA's Hidden Gems Meet**

Demand for Liberal Arts
Education

8 **Mark Your Calendars for**

ACTA's 30th Anniversary
Celebration

www.GoACTA.org
info@GoACTA.org
1-888-ALUMNI-8

Civil Debates Are Changing Campus Culture



ACTA's Doug Sprei chairs an intercollegiate debate on immigration at the Virginia Military Institute as part of the CD&D Alliance.

When attending a campus event on abortion, climate change, DEI, or another controversial issue, the average observer might expect to encounter angry shout-downs and gratuitous insults. At many universities, there is hardly any true debate at all, given the overwhelming power of political correctness and resulting pressure students feel to censor opinions that stray from campus orthodoxies. Yet, in debates hosted by the **College Debates and Discourse (CD&D) Alliance** on campuses across the nation, the most controversial topics are being vigorously discussed with civility and respect.

The CD&D Alliance is a partnership between **ACTA**, **Braver Angels**, and **BridgeUSA** dedicated to training college students to engage in civil discourse on the most polarizing topics of our times. The alliance has held almost 400 debates and workshops, engaging 16,500 students on over 100 campuses. Our debates follow a modified parliamentary style developed by Braver

Angels. Self-selected students open the debate by presenting arguments for or against the debate resolution. Each speaker has a chance to respond. Everyone directs questions to the chair. The floor is then opened, welcoming members of the audience to offer their own viewpoint in speeches of two-to-four minutes. Some of the most popular debate topics in 2024 included abortion, free speech, immigration, elections, and the Middle East conflict.

Students across the country tell us that our debate program has helped broaden their perspectives and deepen their understanding of ideological opponents. In our surveys of almost 400 participants, 76% reevaluated their position based on something they heard during the debate. Almost 200 students strongly agreed and 119 students somewhat agreed that, "After this debate, I have greater respect for people who hold different opinions from me."

Many students say they were nervous attending their first debate, but the formal

(continued on 2)

Inside Academe Is Going Digital!

Over the next year, ACTA will begin transitioning **Inside Academe** from a hard-copy newsletter to an eNewsletter. We do not want to lose any of our faithful readers! Please submit your email address to ACTA at **info@GoACTA.org** so that you can continue receiving *Inside Academe* online.

Jerry L. Martin, Former Acting Chairman, National Endowment for the Humanities, and Co-Founder and Former President, ACTA

“You have no idea how wonderful it is for me, as founder, to see the great heights to which you have carried ACTA—and doing such important work in these profoundly troubled times!”

Colonel Valentina P. Dimitrova-Grajzl, Professor of Economics, Virginia Military Institute

“I’ve seen that the debates build trust and connection at VMI. And to me that’s also a huge benefit to cadets. It helps them interact with each other and have a stronger team.”

Mark Urista, Professor of Communication Linn-Benton Community College

“One thing that has been really cool to see is whenever we do in-person campus events, my dean shows up and we also get some other people from upper administration [to] show up as well, and they always say, this is exactly what college campuses need. So qualitatively, they see the value and they see the

importance of the kinds of discourse that we’re facilitating and also the skills that the student fellows are developing.”

Samuel Halbrecht, Lee Barnes Campus Debate Student Fellow, University of North Carolina–Wilmington

“The work we have been able to accomplish within CD&D is incredible and I can visibly see the change myself. Every debate, we have more and more people sharing their stories and being comfortable with talking about the issues that previously would be too controversial to talk about. Through CD&D and these debates, we are able to discuss real solutions for the problems that affect each and every one of us, and hopefully foster real change.”

Note: The previous three quotes are from faculty and student fellows who advance ACTA, Braver Angels, and BridgeUSA’s College Debates and Discourse Alliance through our campus debate initiatives supported by the John Templeton Foundation and the Barnes Family Foundation.

CD&D Alliance, continued from 1

yet non-competitive structure made them want to speak up. A student at East Tennessee State University commented, “We had four prepared speeches, two on the left and two on the right. People came in with pitchforks ready to knock each other down, like you do in a traditional debate . . . but when they finished, the audience was allowed to join, and it became a very nice exchange. People felt like they could talk; nobody felt silenced.” Another student at Linn-Benton Community College said, “Through a format like this, you can learn about what the other side thinks, in a way that you can’t on social media. And you’ll probably be surprised at how much you have in common with them and how much more reasonable they are than you might think beforehand.”

CD&D Alliance events are often the first time students personally interact with those who hold different political views. One student commented that the debate exposed him to “a lot of arguments that I . . . had never been faced with.” A student at Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts shared, “Hearing my peers’ objections to my argument . . . showed me the importance of having correct premises and the danger of oversimplifying the truth. The opportunity, overall, forced me to think more deeply than I had in a long time.”

While free pizza may have got them in the door, students share that our programming has inspired them to advance civil discourse in their communities and even future careers. Kayla Johnston first learned of the CD&D Alliance as a student at the University of North Carolina–Greensboro when she served as an opening speaker for a debate. Impressed by the experience, she attended more events and applied to be a student fellow with the CD&D Alliance’s special debate initiative in North Carolina, funded by the Barnes Family Foundation. She soon graduated and now serves as a full-time program coordinator at ACTA, where she runs the Barnes initiative. ●



CartoonStock.com

ACTA Issues First Gold Standard Report Card

ACTA's **Campus Freedom Initiative**® (CFI) has used its Gold Standard for Freedom of Expression™ to issue a report card on the state of free expression and intellectual diversity at Arizona's three public universities: **Arizona State University (ASU)**, **Northern Arizona University (NAU)**, and the **University of Arizona (U of A)**. The Gold Standard is a list of 20 policies and practices that universities can implement to restore open inquiry and free expression on campus.

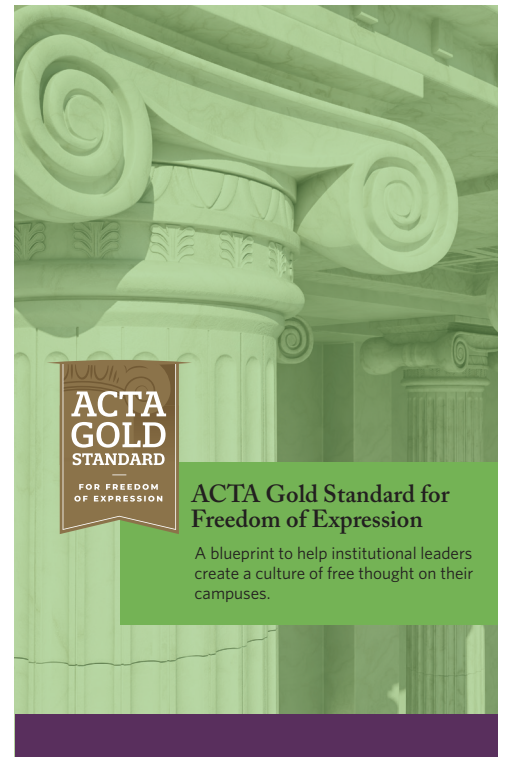
The Arizona report card draws on a CFI survey of over 3,000 students at ASU, NAU, and U of A, which revealed high levels of censorship and viewpoint intolerance on all three campuses. Many students say they wish their schools would do more to protect free expression, and the survey found widespread desire for greater intellectual diversity among faculty.

Each university meets several Gold Standards of which they can be proud, and ASU achieved the highest score. All three schools have adopted the Chicago Principles on Freedom of Expression (at the direction of the Arizona Board of Regents) and include free expression

training in new-student orientations. However, much more is needed to ensure that free expression and open inquiry are recognized and practiced as core values on these campuses. No school requires free expression training for staff. In addition, both NAU and U of A maintain some type of bias incident reporting system, and ASU and NAU do not adequately protect the First Amendment rights of invited speakers.

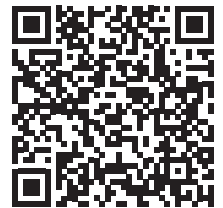
ACTA recommends that all three universities adopt a policy of institutional neutrality modeled on the Kalven Report and make intellectual diversity a stated goal in faculty hiring, evaluation, and promotion. To meet the Gold Standard, each school should also require free expression and viewpoint diversity training for administrative staff and conduct regular evaluations of the state of free expression on campus. NAU should take extra steps to support academic centers dedicated to free inquiry and bring more debate programs to campus.

By implementing our Gold Standard recommendations, ASU, NAU, and the U of A can transform Arizona's public system of higher education into a model for the nation. View the full report card



at GoACTA.org/campus-freedom-initiative/az-report-card/. ●

Scan the QR code



Generous Matching Gift Gives ACTA's CFI Project a Boost

ACTA is starting off the new year with exciting momentum, having received a \$1 million matching gift from the Diana Davis Spencer Foundation (DDSF). In 2024, DDSF challenged ACTA to raise \$1 million, generously promising to match the amount. With the contributions of foundations and individuals across the country, we successfully met that challenge, and we cannot thank enough our faithful friends, supporters, and, of course, the Diana Davis Spencer Foundation.

The \$2 million in new funding will ensure that one of ACTA's most important projects, our Campus Freedom Initiative® (CFI), can continue driving positive change on campus for two more years. This initiative seeks to reverse the tide of illiberalism and intellectual intolerance on college campuses by urging institutions to adopt the ACTA Gold Standard for Freedom of Expression®, a 20-point framework for promoting free speech and intellectual diversity.

CFI had many remarkable achievements in 2024. Early in the year, we launched an institutional neutrality campaign, calling on universities to remain neutral on political and social issues. Over 40 institutions subsequently adopted full or partial policies of neutrality. In another win for CFI, George Mason University's Board of Visitors included ACTA's Gold Standard in its annual goals for the 2024–2025 academic year.

Thanks to the generous support of our donors, especially DDSF, we will continue striving to make every campus a sanctuary for freedom and excellence. ●

Effective TRUSTEESHIP

ACTA Board Services for College Trustees

The remedy to today's higher education crisis is informed and engaged college trusteeship. With bold leadership by trustees, universities can institute high-quality curricula, cut administrative bloat, and improve conditions for free expression and diversity of thought on campus. ACTA is here to help. Through our Institute for Effective Governance® (IEG), we provide workshops, consultations, and retreats for governing board members at universities across the country. We have also built a vast library of guides and reports for trustees on every aspect of university governance, including choosing the right accreditor, selecting a president, addressing substance use on campus, and much more.

In 2024, ACTA led retreats, trainings, and workshops for college trustees at a record number of institutions, including the University of Alabama, the University of North Carolina–Charlotte, and Coastal Carolina University. We were invited by policymakers to lead statewide trustee trainings for the Pennsylvania Association of Councils of Trustees, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, and for the second year at the Ohio Public University Trustee Governance Symposium. We also provided consultation to individual trustees representing governing boards in Colorado, South Dakota, New York, Minnesota, Maryland, Florida, and North Dakota.

IEG retreats cover everything from the basics of responsible trusteeship and articulating the institution's mission, to protecting academic freedom and restoring merit-based hiring practices. IEG also provides seminars on customized topics based on the unique needs of each institution. To learn more about our seminars, please visit GoACTA.org/initiatives/board-services/. ●



Niall Ferguson and Ruth Wisse Present at Levy Forum

In December, we entered the third season of the Levy Forum for Open Discourse, a lecture series sponsored by ACTA Board Member Paul Levy and his wife Karen and graciously hosted by the Palm Beach Synagogue.

The first lecture in the new season, entitled "Cold War II or World War III? The New Threat to Western Civilization," was delivered on December 4 by historian **Niall Ferguson** to an audience of almost 900 attendees. He discussed the need to learn from history as we seek to maintain national security in the face of global unrest, saying, "The grotesque and antisemitic demonstrations that broke out on campuses and in cities from London as far away as Sydney were to me a reminder of why . . . history matters and cannot be allowed to be turned into some perverse sideshow in the identity politics circus of modern academia."



Niall Ferguson opens new Levy Forum season.

Our next lecture was delivered on January 9 by **Ruth Wisse**, Martin Peretz Professor Emerita of Yiddish Literature and Comparative Literature at Harvard University. In her insightful lecture, entitled "Who Brought Antisemitism Back to America?", she remarked, "We Jews are the blue and white in the red, white, and blue, which makes us doubly responsible for defending the Jewish homeland and this remarkable republic. What others mistake for dual loyalty is double loyalty."

On February 10, the Levy Forum welcomed humanitarian and documentary filmmaker **Bernard-Henri Lévy** and former Prisoner of Zion and human rights activist **Natan Sharansky**. On March 19, we will hear from historian **Victor Davis Hanson**. And on April 9, we will host former U.S. ambassador **John Bolton** and *Wall Street Journal* columnist **Walter Russell Mead**. ●

As a new president takes office and Congress begins its first session, ACTA calls on our representatives to turn their attention to American higher education and take decisive action. There is much to be done, but change is most urgently needed in the following five areas.

- **Affordability**

Student loan forgiveness cannot be the solution to the high cost of college. We need to prioritize transparency and accountability by strengthening reporting requirements, scrutinizing programs that produce poor outcomes for students (such as low return on investment and high debt), and forcing colleges to have some skin in the game.

- **Accreditation**

We need to open federal recognition to new and specialized accreditors that will better serve our institutions. Accreditors should no longer be able to strong-arm trustees as the exclusive gatekeepers of federal funds. Congress

should provide for a consumer-friendly, expedited alternative for reaccreditation, focused on mandatory auditable disclosures on key measures of student achievement, not expensive inputs.

- **Free Speech**

Higher education’s core academic mission is threatened when universities do not commit to and uphold the rights of students and faculty. Efforts must be made to ensure that universities fulfill their obligations to the members of their campus communities, while respecting trustees’ institutional autonomy as fiduciaries. Governing boards should take the lead in design and implementation, and lawmakers can support their efforts with laws that remove barriers to free speech and mandate policies that are consistent with the First Amendment.

- **Innovation**

Colleges are approaching the demographic cliff weighed down by an ineffective bureaucracy. We must

accelerate federal review of innovative programs, including the 90-credit-hour degree, micro-credentials, certificate programs, online learning, and apprenticeships.

- **HEA Reauthorization**

Congress needs to overcome its paralysis and provide long-lasting solutions to the problems facing higher education rather than relying on the executive branch, the Department of Education, or the courts to fill the void left by its inaction. Legislators must, moreover, scrutinize the Department’s many funding programs to increase cost-effectiveness and eliminate those that cannot demonstrate their value-added. This Congress must show the necessary courage to reauthorize the Higher Education Act and put control back in the hands of the first branch of government.

View the complete version of ACTA’s 2025 policy agenda on GoACTA.org. ●

ACTA Launches CFI Campaigns at Pitt and Penn State

ACTA launched two new campaigns as part of our Campus Freedom Initiative® (CFI) at Pennsylvania State University (Penn State) and the University of Pittsburgh (Pitt). To date, we have launched a total of seven CFI campaigns, encouraging institutions with poor track records on free speech to restore a vibrant culture of freedom of expression on campus.

In partnership with College Pulse, ACTA fielded two large surveys at Pitt and Penn State to assess student attitudes toward free expression. We uncovered high rates of self-censorship on both campuses, along with widespread intolerance of opposing views. Sixty-five percent of Pitt students report self-censoring for fear of reactions from fellow students, and 71% of Penn State students report that they refrain from speaking up on campus because they think their opinions will be unwelcome. A full 70% of Pitt students believe professors who say something offensive should be reported to the administration; 59% of Penn State students say the same.

The survey found significant ideological divisions in the student experience at both schools: Conservative students self-censor more frequently than liberal students, and viewpoint intolerance is much more common among liberal students as compared to conservative students. A majority of students (liberal and conservative) at both institutions say they wish to see more political diversity among the faculty—58% at Pitt and 60% at Penn State.

Unsurprisingly, students report that little action is being taken to train students in free expression policies. A stunning 86% and 80% of Penn State and Pitt students, respectively, say their universities have failed to provide such training.

ACTA is urging both universities to adopt three policies that are the bedrock of our Gold Standard for Freedom of Expression™: the Chicago Principles on Freedom of Expression, the Kalven Report on institutional neutrality, and the Shils Report on merit-

(continued on 6)



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

Selling Alcohol in University Stadiums Sends Wrong Message to Students

Georgia Public University System Leads the Way in Free Speech, Neutrality

On November 16, Steven McGuire, ACTA’s Paul & Karen Levy Fellow in Campus Freedom, reported on X that the University System of Georgia’s (USG) Board of Regents has approved several promising new policies. First, the university system has banned the use of DEI statements in hiring and admissions. The relevant policy states, “All admissions processes and decisions shall be free of ideological tests, affirmations, and oaths, including diversity statements. No applicant shall be asked to or required to affirmatively ascribe to or opine about political beliefs, affiliations, ideals, or principles, as a condition for admission.” The board of regents has also added free expression training to student orientation and adopted the following declaration of institutional neutrality: “USG institutions shall remain neutral on social and political issues unless such an issue is directly related to the institution’s core mission.” Complementing these reforms, the board instituted new academic requirements in U.S. history. Starting in the 2025–2026 academic year, all USG institutions must offer instruction on several of the nation’s foundational historical documents.

ACTA commends the board’s leadership in prioritizing free expression, institutional neutrality, and robust civic education.

ACTA’s Kyle Beltramini Addresses Fourth Annual Campus Roundtable

On December 11, ACTA was again invited to participate in the fourth annual Congressional Campus Free Speech Roundtable. The roundtable is hosted annually by Congressman Greg Murphy, in partnership with House Education & the Workforce Committee Chairwoman Virginia Foxx and Congressman Burgess Owens. ACTA Policy Research Fellow Kyle Beltramini represented ACTA at the roundtable. In his remarks, he commented that for too long, “policymakers and the public have been unaware of the vast censorial machines that colleges and universities have been building up to police free speech, enforce censorship, and maintain ideological hegemony in the name of protecting and supporting their students.” But after the wave of protests engulfing campuses since October 2023—and thanks to the work of higher education reform groups—universities’ egregious failure to protect free speech and ideological diversity has migrated into the public consciousness and cannot be ignored.

It is encouraging to see broad, bipartisan efforts to expose and address the illiberalism and censorship plaguing college campuses. Working together, ACTA is hopeful that we can restore and safeguard the First Amendment rights of students and teachers at every public institution in the country. ●

Joining a destructive trend, the University of Wisconsin, Northwestern University, and the University of Nebraska announced last fall that they will allow alcohol to be sold in general seating areas of their stadiums. This means that all 18 universities in the Big Ten Conference now sell alcohol at college games. Some of these institutions have announced that a portion of the revenue from alcohol sales will support initiatives to promote student well-being on campus. The tragic irony of using alcohol revenue to support mental health and wellness programming—which includes substance use prevention on most campuses—seems to be lost on university leaders.

According to the latest statistics from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, almost 49% of students ages 18–22 drank alcohol in the past month, nearly 29% of college students engaged in binge drinking at least once in the past month, and 14% of college students meet the criteria for alcohol use disorder. Alcohol use—which is often combined with marijuana, prescription drugs, and other substances—often has devastating consequences: 22,219 college students per year are hospitalized for alcohol overdoses, 1,519 die due to alcohol-related injuries, and 696,000 are assaulted by another student who has been drinking. Additionally, one in four students experience academic problems due to drinking.

(continued on 7)

CFI at Pitt and Penn State, *continued from 5*

based hiring practices. ACTA also called on each school to implement free expression training in student orientation. In a recent press release, ACTA President Michael Poliakoff commented, “Our survey of Pitt [and Penn State] students shows that they are being taught . . . to hide their views and punish those with whom they disagree. At the same time, there is evidence that they want a better climate for free expression and diversity of thought. We call on university leaders to take corrective action and give Pennsylvania students the education they deserve.” ●

ACTA's Hidden Gems Meet Demand for Liberal Arts Education

While recent headlines tell stories of universities cutting humanities majors and departments, ACTA's Hidden Gems programs are thriving. ACTA currently designates 20 programs across the nation as Hidden Gems—major, minor, or certificate programs dedicated to rigorous, interdisciplinary education in the liberal arts, including philosophy, literature, politics, history, and Western Civilization.

Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts, an ACTA Hidden Gem at Purdue University, is a 15-credit undergraduate certificate program that attracts 7,500 students each year. Students study transformative texts in human history, learning “to read closely, write clearly, speak with confidence, and to engage with differing viewpoints and perspectives.” Over 70 colleges and universities are currently replicating the Cornerstone program.

Students enrolled in the Honors College at the University of Tulsa, another Hidden Gem, read Homer, Aristotle, Locke, Eliot, and Morrison in the college's 12-credit curriculum, which simultaneously satisfies general education requirements. Most of the students enrolled are STEM majors; their participation is

evidence of widespread interest in the humanities. The Honors College has become the third largest college at the University of Tulsa.

Two other recent additions to ACTA's Hidden Gems network include the Politics, Philosophy, and Economics (PPE)

programs at the University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill and the State University of New York—Buffalo. The PPE minor focuses on the similarities and differences between philosophical, political, and economic approaches to understanding the world—exploring the individual limitations of each approach and the ways they complement each other.

As some universities close humanities programs down, the popularity of ACTA's Hidden Gems

highlights the enduring power of the liberal arts to open new doors. Students continue to seek a well-rounded education that reaches beyond their majors and equips them not only for a profession, but for meaningful engagement with the world around them. ●

WHAT WILL THEY LEARN?

Hidden Gems

<p>Palm Beach Atlantic University West Palm Beach, FL</p> <p>Frederick M. Supper Honors Program</p> <p>The Frederick M. Supper Honors Program at Palm Beach Atlantic University seeks to help students lead a well-lived life by cultivating their faith, character, and intellect. Honors students are carefully selected by the faculty and join a community of dedicated scholars. Students read the works of Plato, Bacon, Thucydides, and Aquinas, as well as such transformative texts as Beowulf and The Koran. The program grants credit to those studying abroad.</p>	<p>Purdue University - West Lafayette West Lafayette, IN</p> <p>The Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts Certificate Program</p> <p>Purdue University's 15-credit hour Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts Certificate Program introduces students from all majors to transformative texts across disciplines. The program, founded in 2017, serves over 8,000 students per year and acts as a "core within a core", allowing students to satisfy general education requirements simultaneously. Cornerstone aims to inspire and train students to speak confidently, write clearly, read closely, and develop a lifelong love for learning.</p>	<p>State University of New York - University at Buffalo Buffalo, NY</p> <p>The Philosophy, Politics, and Economics Major Program at SUNY-Buffalo</p> <p>The University of Buffalo's Politics, Philosophy, and Economics major program integrates insights from philosophy, political science, and economics into a constructive framework that enhances students' analytical skills. The program creates prepared leaders eager to shape and improve the relationship between markets and the liberal sociopolitical order.</p>
--	---	---

Alcohol in Stadiums, *continued from 6*

Allowing alcohol sales in stadiums undermines the urgent work that universities have done to prevent dangerous alcohol and drug use through awareness campaigns, substance use counseling, and sober residence halls. Michigan State University (MSU), another Big 10 school, offers recovery housing and boasts on its website that “More than nine out of 10 MSU students approve of their fellow Spartans choosing not to drink when partying or socializing with friends.” Yet in 2023, the MSU Board of Trustees approved a policy allowing vendors to sell alcohol during sporting events.

As ACTA wrote in our 2019 report entitled *Addressing College Drinking and Drug Use: A Primer for Trustees, Administrators, and Alumni*, publicizing the true rates at which students use alcohol and drugs on campus, as MSU has done, is an effective way to help correct the false perceptions students have about how much their peers are using, and thus the intense pressure to take part. However, simultaneously granting permission for an activity that is illegal for most undergraduates by approving alcohol sales at sporting events sends a conflicting message: Though the university sees substance use as a serious problem that puts student safety and academic success at risk, it is also willing to capitalize on it to raise money.

Michael Nietzel, president emeritus of Missouri State University, eloquently summed up the bottom line in a 2018 *Forbes* article: “No one would suggest that selling beer throughout college stadiums on Saturday afternoons is the main culprit behind campus drinking problems. But college leaders who adopt such a policy need to recognize that they are sending an unhelpful, mixed message to students. And then, they need to answer a simple question: is it worth it?” ●



ACTA
AMERICAN COUNCIL OF
TRUSTEES AND ALUMNI



RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

1730 M Street NW, Suite 600
Washington, DC 20036

P 202.467.6787 | F 202.467.6784
info@GoACTA.org | www.GoACTA.org

Follow us on:

 [fb.com/GoACTA](https://www.facebook.com/GoACTA)

 [@GoACTA](https://twitter.com/GoACTA)

 [@whatwilltheylearn](https://www.instagram.com/whatwilltheylearn)

INSIDE ACADEME
published by ACTA, Washington, DC

Publisher: Michael B. Poliakoff
Editor: Greta Wagley
Production & Design: Lauri Kempson

MARK YOUR CALENDARS!

ACTA's 30th Anniversary

October 24, 2025

National Museum of Women in the Arts
Washington, DC



We look forward to celebrating three decades of advancing **academic freedom, academic excellence, and accountability** in higher education. This milestone is not just a moment to reflect on the past but also to reaffirm our vision for the future. We would love to have you with us!