



Promoting
Academic
Freedom and
Excellence

John McWhorter Receives 2022 Merrill Award



Photo: Gustavo Fernandez for Columbia College Today

We are delighted to announce that Professor John H. McWhorter is the recipient of ACTA's 2022 Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education. Dr. McWhorter's role as a scholar, teacher, editorialist, and social critic makes him one of the most important voices in contemporary American life. His incisive writings have powerfully increased the public's understanding of language, race relations, and liberal arts education.

A linguist by training, Dr. McWhorter teaches linguistics, American Studies, English, and comparative literature at Columbia University, having previously served as associate professor of linguistics at the University of California–Berkeley. His seminars on the change of languages, and what happens when they come in contact with one another, have won high acclaim. The range of courses he offers spans introduction to linguistics, history of the English language, and the development of languages across the world. He writes, “Far from being a language in decline, we have

reason to believe that English, with all its beauty and quirks and illogiciencies, will be carried far into the future.”

In his 2003 book *The Power of Babel: A Natural History of Language*, Professor McWhorter performs a deep yet witty and entertaining historical analysis to explain how the 6,000 languages spoken today descended through the ages. His 2009 book *Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue: The Untold History of English* and his 2017 book *Words on the Move: Why English Won't—and Can't—Sit Still (Like, Literally)* tell the story of how the English language and its grammar have evolved from the Vikings and the Norman Conquest, to the early formation of Britain, and on to today.

Professor McWhorter has written numerous articles and books that boldly and unblinkingly take on the most sensitive topics of race and politics in America. He argues that today's progressive ideology of antiracism, though well-meaning, infantilizes black Americans and damages black communities. In his most recent,

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Save the Date for ATHENA Roundtable 2022!

Please reserve **October 21** on your calendars for ACTA's 17th annual **ATHENA Conference and Gala** at the Ronald Reagan Building in Washington, DC. This year's celebration will feature presentations by America's leading educators and policymakers and will culminate with remarks from **Professor John McWhorter**, our **2022 Philip Merrill Award** winner. We would love to have you with us!

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2021 Annual Report Out Now!

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The Honorable L.F. Payne
Board of Governors, University of Virginia

“Thank you for the service you are providing to those of us engaged in governance of colleges and universities across America. There is so much change going on in the world that many in our country (and around the world) are having a difficult time processing and dealing with it. It is especially important in these times that our institutions of higher learning maintain their principles and focus to provide both direction and stability to the broader public. Again, thank you for the role you play in this important mission.”

Anonymous
Sherborn, MA

“I am most grateful for ACTA and all that it is doing to preserve our country’s values, and the future of freedom and democracy for our world.”

Carl Neuss
Co-Founder, Cornell Free Speech Alliance

“The gathering was most worthwhile for me—as I work to better educate myself on all that is going on at today’s universities.”

Stuart Taylor, Jr.
Co-Founder, Alumni Free Speech Alliance
Board Member, ACTA

“Many thanks for your wonderful orchestration of an amazing summit! I could not be more grateful for the way you and your colleagues helped us AFSA people put our best foot forward. Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

Editor’s Note: Please see below to read about ACTA and AFSA’s Alumni Summit on Free Expression.

Alumni Gather for ACTA’s Inaugural Summit

On February 24 and 25, ACTA partnered with the Alumni Free Speech Alliance (AFSA) to hold the inaugural Alumni Summit on Free Expression in Washington, DC. This event brought together alumni advocates from across the country who are committed to reviving a culture of free expression at their alma maters. The Alumni Summit is part of ACTA’s exciting work to equip alumni with resources, best practices, and expert consultation in their efforts to protect free speech and viewpoint diversity.

The AFSA network includes alumni free speech groups at Cornell University, Davidson College, Bucknell University, Lafayette College, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Princeton University, the University of North Carolina, the University of Virginia, the Virginia Military Institute, Washington & Lee, Wofford College, and Yale University. AFSA was founded by two Princeton University alumni: Stuart Taylor, Jr., a legal journalist and a member of ACTA’s Board of Directors, and Edward Yingling, former president and CEO of the American Bankers Association.

At the Alumni Summit, over 50 alum-

ni leaders engaged ideas raised in a series of panels, including “What Free Speech Is (And What It Is Not)” and “National Allies Defending Free Expression: Litigation and Policy.” Attendees heard from fellow



Jonathan Rauch speaks at the Alumni Summit.

alumni who have been successful at building effective fundraising and communications plans. They also learned strategies for how to convince college leaders to adopt stronger protections of free speech.

Samantha Harris, past director of

policy research at the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, spoke to alumni about how they can use their voices to support faculty and students who face censorship, punishment, and attacks on their reputation for voicing heterodox opinions. **Jonathan Rauch**, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, shared, “Coming at universities as their adversaries and enemies guarantees that we will lose friends where we need them. . . . We are here to help universities be their best and truest selves. We are the allies of the university and its project. We want to be helpful to the battalions of often silenced, but wonderful teachers and adventurous students who are there to make the university better.”

Nadine Strossen, past president of the American Civil Liberties Union, spoke to attendees about why resisting viewpoint-based censorship and celebrating the free exchange of ideas are essential on college campuses and in every area of our society. She commented, “Based on my ongoing research and analysis, I remain convinced that free speech is still our best hope for promoting any cause, as history has consistently shown it to be. . . . I try my best

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ACTA President Gives Remarks at Signing of Florida Higher Education Bill

The Florida Legislature recently passed Senate Bill 7044, which enacts many key reforms to increase accountability, transparency, and quality at Florida's public colleges and universities. On April 19, Governor Ron DeSantis signed the bill at a special press conference, and ACTA President Michael Poliakoff was invited to give brief remarks.

In his remarks, President Poliakoff stated, "The nation owes Florida a vote of thanks. What happens on campus does not stay on campus. The level to which we prepare our college graduates for career, community, and citizenship will be a major driver of our success as a nation. What we will witness in Governor DeSantis's signing of Senate Bill 7044 is guardianship of our future."

At the press conference, Governor

DeSantis explained how the bill will end the accreditation monopoly by prohibiting public colleges and universities in Florida from being accredited by the same agency for consecutive accreditation cycles. ACTA has long advocated for an

"It was once common to hear America's higher education called 'the envy of the world.' Today, we see an example of how Florida intends to make sure that is a reality."

—ACTA President Michael Poliakoff

overhaul of the current accreditation system, and we are encouraged to see Florida take action. President Poliakoff said, "Regional accreditors have been delegated enormous authority to grant or withhold federal student aid, which is life or

death for most colleges and universities. And they have too often been a law unto themselves. The system has devolved to over-regulation and intrusion into matters properly left to governing boards and to the state."

The bill will also authorize the Florida Board of Governors to conduct comprehensive post-tenure reviews every five years. "There is no doubt that tenure without accountability is an invitation to abuse. Authorizing regular post-tenure review is a best practice, and it is properly established in Senate Bill 7044,"

stated Dr. Poliakoff.

The legislation includes measures to increase financial and curricular transparency, making Florida's institutions more accountable to students and taxpayers. Public colleges and universities will be re-

(continued on 7)

ACTA's Jonathan Pidluzny Testifies Before House Subcommittee

On April 7, ACTA Vice President of Academic Affairs Jonathan Pidluzny was invited to address the House Committee on Oversight and Reform's Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties. The subcommittee hearing was entitled "Free Speech Under Attack: Book Bans and Academic Censorship."

In his testimony, Dr. Pidluzny drew a distinction between what the subcommittee called "book bans" in K-12 education and the ongoing censorship crisis and attacks on free speech in higher education. He remarked, "What some are calling 'censorship' and 'book banning' in K-12 today is, in actuality, overblown criticism of efforts to align what schools are teaching with the concerns and priorities of the constituencies they serve. . . . It is the responsibility of public school systems to teach materials, and to teach in ways, that are age appropriate. . . . We do not call parental controls on an internet browser 'censorship'—even if they are imposed to restrict a six-year-old's online activity. Nor would we call the removal of the Marquis de Sade from a Kindergarten bookshelf a 'book ban.'"

In contrast to K-12 schools, on college and university campuses, "the problem of academic censorship has reached crisis levels." Dr. Pidluzny drew committee members' attention to the large body of survey research documenting speaker disinvitations, intimidating shout downs, and academic cancelations that "are a routine feature of campus life today." Fifty-nine percent of students say they are uncomfortable disagreeing with their professors, and 54% of students self-censor their viewpoints for fear of offending others or facing discipline and reputational damage.

In response to a question posed by Congressman Andy Biggs, Dr. Pidluzny explained how universities create "bias response teams" to enforce unconstitutional campus policies that forbid "offensive" speech. The process "allows any member of the com-

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Effective TRUSTEESHIP

ACTA Trustee Webinar Evaluates New Landscape in College Sports

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) recently reversed its longstanding rule prohibiting student-athletes from receiving financial compensation for their name, image, and likeness. To help trustees understand this change, ACTA hosted a webinar on April 12 entitled, “Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL): What It Means for College Governing Boards.”

The event was moderated by ACTA’s Vice President for Trustee & Government Affairs Armand Alacbay and featured three expert panelists: **Tom McMillen**, president and CEO of the LEAD1 Association and former congressman for Maryland’s 4th District; **Lyle Adams**, founder and CEO of Spry Payment Systems, Inc.; and **Michael Hsu**, co-founder of the College Basketball Players Association and former regent at the University of Minnesota.

The panelists discussed the biggest risks related to the new rule changes, including sports betting, Title IX issues, and lack of clear guidance from the NCAA. Mr. McMillen explained, “One of the issues in NIL is there are clear cut winners who are going to make a lot of money and everyone else is going to make middling sums, in the hundreds. . . . That creates a stratification that could really play into sports betting risks.” He continued, “If there is a sports betting scandal, that president of that university will be on the front page of the local newspaper.”

Mr. Hsu emphasized that trustees must become educated about intercollegiate athletics in order to guide their institutions wisely. He said, “If you really don’t know anything about athletics, ask board office administrators to brief you on the issues and ask questions. . . . When I was a regent, I got contacted by parents, students, and coaches trying to figure out how to navigate their own position. Over time, from listening to these people, you learn a lot about how the system works or doesn’t work.” He



also recommended that trustees should “read the trade rags and try as best you can to understand what’s going on. . . . if your university was mentioned or the Big Ten was mentioned, send it to your board office for comment and ask, ‘What are we doing about this?’”

Reflecting on his past experience as a student-athlete, Mr. Adams explained that his coach acted as an extension of his parents and looked out for him on campus. “[But] now they can’t give [students] much guidance for NIL. Who do students have to trust on campus if coaches can’t help them? When students are isolated, they make bad decisions.” Mr. Hsu recommended that students have a lawyer look over their contracts. He also shared an example of creative projects at some schools where non-student-athletes are helping athletes market themselves and leverage their social media presence.

Above all, the panelists warned, boards must tread carefully in the absence of uniformity in NIL rules or a national enforcement body. ACTA looks forward to helping trustees stay informed as the NIL landscape evolves. ●

Pidluzny Testimony, *continued from 3*

munity to file a complaint” and “the process of investigation is deliberately burdensome . . . the goal is to destroy the reputation of conservative students.” Answering further questions from Congressman Jim Jordan, Dr. Pidluzny explained how the process is designed to be so damaging to students’ reputations that any reasonable student would want to avoid it. Therefore, students refrain from saying anything that anyone could possibly interpret as offensive (a difficult task on today’s college campuses).

Dr. Pidluzny recommended that college administrators abolish bias response teams and overbroad speech restrictions, and model tolerance themselves by attending campus talks that embrace heterodox opinions. They should invite speakers to campus from all ideological perspectives. In addition, faculty should seek to hire new colleagues who will expand viewpoint diversity, instead of further insulating the viewpoint monoculture that dominates on so many campuses.

Following the hearing, excerpts of Dr. Pidluzny’s remarks were featured in an article published in the *Washington Post* entitled, “More books are banned than ever before, as Congress takes on the issue.” ●



HEAD ON CAMPUS

Students Violently Disrupt Event at University at Buffalo

On April 7, the Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) chapter at the University at Buffalo (UB) hosted an event featuring remarks by former congressman and Army Lieutenant Colonel Allen West. A large group of student demonstrators formed a mob to protest the event. At the end of Lt. Col. West's speech, Therese Purcell, president of the YAF chapter, reported that she was pursued by the protesters and had to seek refuge. The demonstrators also punched and kicked YAF's student treasurer. Lt. Col. West

needed a security escort in order to leave.

UB's free expression policy states that "the University at Buffalo strives to create an environment in which diverse opinions can be expressed and heard. As a public university, it is a fundamental value of UB that all members of the campus community and their invited guests have the right to peacefully express their views and opinions . . . This includes the right of protesters to oppose the views or opinions of others, but not in such a way as to limit or prevent the speaker's freedom of expression or interfere with university operations."

The students who disrupted the event and attacked fellow students are in clear violation of this policy. While UB has said it will review the incident, ACTA President Michael Poliakoff remarked, "The University at Buffalo must resolve not just to 'review' but to punish appropriately the students who disrupted Lt. Col. West's presentation and then chased and threatened Therese Purcell and her Young Americans for Freedom colleagues. At a minimum, suspension for a semester will signal that the university is serious in its resolve to promote the free exchange of ideas." ●

McWhorter Receives Merrill Award, *continued from 1*

bestselling book, *Woke Racism: How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America*, he argues that what he terms "Third Wave Antiracism"—an ideology that is widely promoted on college campuses—amounts to a new, and perverse, religion. In this religion, "white privilege" serves as original sin, and cancel culture and social media mob attacks are the weapons of choice to silence heretics, or anyone who, like Dr. McWhorter, provides an alternative view. Describing the antiracist ideology of today's woke "Elect," he writes,

"Whatever color you are, in the name of acknowledging 'power,' you are to divide people into racial classes, in exactly the way that First and Second Wave antiracism taught you not to" and "watch your kids and grandkids taught the same." He continues, "progress on racism has been so resplendent over the past fifty years that an old-school segregationist brought alive to walk through modern America *even in the deepest South would find it hard not to turn to the side of the road and retch at what he saw* [italics in original]."

Dr. McWhorter has critiqued the use of race-based preferences and watered-down standards for minority students. In a January 28, 2022, article for the *New York Times*, he commented, "My daughters are lively young people taking their places in this thing called life . . . I shudder at the thought of someone on a college admissions committee, in the not-too-

distant future, reading their dossiers and finding their being biracial [is] the most interesting thing about them. Or even, frankly, interesting at all." Professor McWhorter writes that it is time to end patronizing affirmative action policies: "'Diversity' has become one of those terms (and ideas) that makes us feel cozy inside . . . But how would you feel about looking a Black undergraduate in the eye and saying, 'A lot of the reason we wanted you here, on our campus, is your differences from most

of the other students and the life lessons they can learn from them?'"

Professor McWhorter has solutions for the flaws in our higher education system. While strongly asserting that not all young people should be pressured to take the four-year college path and recommending that American higher education should

incorporate vocational training like European countries, he also advocates for preserving high academic standards and creating intellectually rich courses that inspire curiosity, not cynicism.

Professor McWhorter has done much to shed light on complex societal challenges that we face today and to illuminate a path forward. The high importance he places on the free exchange of ideas and dissent from ideological orthodoxies is key to reviving liberal arts education and repairing our fractured public discourse. ACTA is privileged to honor him as its 17th Merrill Award winner. ●

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The Enduring Power of Shakespeare: A Conversation with Robert McCrum

ACTA's Higher Ed Now podcast recently hosted Robert McCrum, author of *Shakespearean: On Life and Language in Times of Disruption*. Mr. McCrum and ACTA President Michael Poliakoff discussed the genius of William Shakespeare and the enduring value of his works.

Michael Poliakoff (MP): What is your overall favorite passage from Shakespeare?

Robert McCrum (RM): It depends on [my] mood. In some moods, *The Tempest*. Other moods, *Winter's Tale*, *Hamlet*, and so on. . . . I love some of the very short speeches. One of his great gifts was that when he wanted to say something that really mattered, he expressed his sentiment in very brief, Anglo-Saxon words. . . . *Hamlet* comes down stage and he's raising the whole question of whether he should commit suicide. He steps to the front of the stage and says, "To be, or not to be? That is the question." It's completely intelligible. It's in English, which you and I use every day, and it's absolutely brilliant.

MP: You referred to Shakespeare as the book of life. And you used another wonderful phrase that "he reads us."

RM: Go to your collected Shakespeare, open it at random at any page . . . and you'll find something there to astonish you. Whether it's a stage direction, or a line, or a sentiment, or a characterization. And that's a classic. It's a book which repays endless revisiting. I know Shakespeare gets a bad rap in schools as being impossible to understand, difficult, one

thing or another. But it's not true.

MP: I would perhaps push back a little bit. It is so important for minds both young and old to wrestle with the depth of thought, and at times even the depth of language, just intended to slow us down, to make us think.

RM: That's very well put. There's a famous passage in *Macbeth* . . . Macbeth is saying that his hands are so bloody that the sea itself is blood-stained. He refers to the "multitudinous seas incarnadine," which means, for a classical scholar, the boiling sea has been made red. He then supplies, as it were, the translation for the common people in the pit, "making the green one red," a famous duality. He switches from the high-flown to the popular all the time. . . . He never forgets it's his duty and his obligation to entertain and to entrance and to keep the audience on the edge of their seats all the way through and never become obscure and difficult.

MP: We find so very few English majors at the most prestigious universities in America being required to take even a single dedicated course on Shakespeare. . . . I imagine you saw the coverage in the *Sunday Times* that was talking about the Globe's own trigger warnings on *Romeo and Juliet*. The title was so evocative: "Too Male, Too Pale, Too Stale: Why Academia is Turning its back on William Shakespeare." There seem to be many ways that one can keep these extraordinary stories alive while being sensitive to the fact that



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we have new values . . . But many schoolteachers are saying, "I'm just not going to teach *Hamlet*. I'm not going to teach *Romeo and Juliet*."

RM: There's a book called *Hamnet* . . . by an English writer called Maggie O'Farrell. It's a study of Shakespeare's grief on the death of his son. It's a very brilliant book, and it's highly acclaimed. But it's unintelligible if you don't know about the plays. What possible gain is there from saying, "I won't teach *Romeo and Juliet*"? If someone said that to me, I'd say, "Why won't you teach it? What is so offensive?" And then if you parse it out and you analyze the themes of *Romeo and Juliet*, they're the themes of teenage anxiety today, yesterday, and tomorrow. These are timeless themes. You can't cancel them. You can't say, "I won't teach them."

Please listen to the full conversation on our Higher Ed Now podcast. ●

Alumni Summit, continued from 2

to honor John Stuart Mill's justly famous explanation of why every idea must be subject to questioning, challenging, and reconsideration. Even if our reexamination leads to our reaffirmation, we don't just rowdily repeat the ideas as dead dogma, but rather they attain new depth and vibrancy."

Alumni voices are indispensable in the effort to restore our colleges and universities as bastions of free discourse and open inquiry. ACTA will continue to provide alumni with the support they need to defend free expression at their alma maters. ●

ACTA Hosts Formal Ceremony Recognizing Dorian Abbot

On April 7, ACTA held a ceremony to recognize Dorian Abbot as a Hero of Intellectual Freedom. While Dr. Abbot first received the award in Fall 2021, this formal ceremony brought together free speech luminaries and ACTA friends to celebrate his courageous defense of the free exchange of ideas.

Dr. Abbot, who serves as associate professor in the Department of the Geophysical Sciences at the University of Chicago, has been a stalwart defender of academic freedom in the face of social media attacks and a high-profile disinvitation. Last fall, in an article he co-authored that was published in *Newsweek*, he took on diversity, equity, and inclusion policies that discriminate against prospective students and faculty hires based on ideological viewpoint. He proposed an alternative called “Merit, Fairness, and Equality” policies, whereby “university applicants are treated as individuals and evaluated through a rigorous and unbiased process based on their merit and qualifications alone.” A social media mob formed to attack Professor Abbot for expressing these ideas, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology disinvited Professor Abbot from delivering its prestigious John Carlson Lecture.

At the award ceremony, ACTA presented Dr. Abbot with an 1873 portrait of John Stuart Mill. Tributes to Dr. Abbot were given by ACTA Board Member Stuart Taylor, Jr., and Sergiu Klainerman, Eugene Higgins Professor of Mathematics at Princeton University.



In his acceptance remarks, Professor Abbot thanked ACTA, saying, “It’s important for an award like this to exist as sort of a counterbalance because you get a lot of grief when you try to speak the truth in a plain way on campus right now.” Professor Abbot continued, “I would like to thank everyone who has attacked me over the past two years. I’m reminded of what Joseph said to his brothers: ‘You intended me harm but

God intended it for good.’ So without your tireless Twitter activism, your meticulously crafted letter of denunciation, your lovingly organized struggle sessions, I wouldn’t be standing here today. You, more than anyone else, have helped me get my message of truth and fairness out.”

Speaking about the controversy that arose over his advocacy for fairness in admissions policies, he said, “I believe that every human being should be treated as an individual worthy of dignity and respect. In an academic context, that means evaluating people for positions based on their individual qualities, not on membership in favored or disfavored groups. It also means allowing them to present their ideas and perspectives freely, even when we disagree with them.”

ACTA thanks Professor Abbot for his persistent advocacy for academic freedom and viewpoint diversity in higher education. He has proven himself willing to be made uncomfortable—indeed, willing to withstand unjust attacks—in order to defend truth and fairness. ●

Florida Bill Signing, *continued from 3*

quired to post all tuition and fees on their websites and give notice to students when they seek to raise fees. Schools must also post information about textbooks and syllabi 45 days before the term begins. The bill includes provisions for eliminating duplicative coursework and ensuring that general education courses fulfill core requirements so that students can easily transfer credits when they move institutions.

Commenting on these changes, President Poliakoff said, “ACTA has exposed in recent years a veritable rogue’s gallery of frivolous college courses around the nation: zombies, vampires, Miley Cyrus, Lady Gaga—I am not joking—and even Peanuts comics. Bravo for the transparency to make syllabi and textbooks available for the inspection of students, parents, and taxpayers. Core general education courses should be reliably robust and transferable across institutions. This is a bulwark against the wasting of opportunity costs and student and taxpayers’ money.”

These reforms make Florida a model for the nation. ACTA encourages more state legislatures to ensure that their public colleges and universities are doing all they can to provide students with an academically rich education at an affordable price. ●



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INSIDE ACADEME

published by ACTA, Washington, DC

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

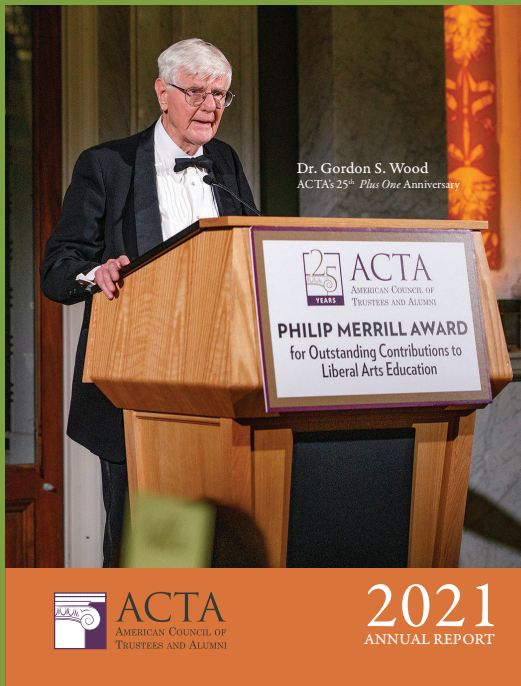
2021 Annual Report Out Now!

ACTA's 2021 Annual Report features all of the exciting progress we made in the last year to promote academic excellence, protect academic freedom, and advance accountability at our nation's colleges and universities.

We held an incredible 25th Anniversary Celebration at the Library of Congress, honoring distinguished historian Gordon S. Wood and commemorating over two decades of higher education reform. In 2021, we helped education leaders and policymakers in Arizona, Florida, and South Carolina to pass new civic education requirements. Tens of thousands of college students will now be required to take a solid, foundational course on U.S. history or government. We are proud to have played our part.

We also partnered with the Alumni Free Speech Alliance to empower a movement of alumni who are advocating for stronger protections of free expression and viewpoint diversity at their alma maters. Through our College Debates and Discourse Program with Braver Angels, ACTA has taught over 3,400 students at 47 colleges and universities across the country how to debate divisive political issues with civility and respect.

These important achievements would not have been possible without the encouragement and support of our donors and friends. Thank you!



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