



Promoting
Academic
Freedom and
Excellence

Reviving Enlightenment Values in Higher Education



Professors Alan Charles Kors, Peter McNamara, Bradley Jackson, and Thomas Merrill discuss the development and influence of the French, Scottish, and American Enlightenment.

ACTA's 2023 ATHENA Roundtable Conference was a momentous and inspiring occasion, and we thank all the friends, partners, university leaders, and students who attended the event. This year's theme, "**Dare to be Wise: Enlightenment and the American College Campus**," was the topic of two panels that featured distinguished scholars dedicated to keeping Enlightenment values alive in higher education.

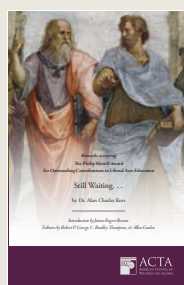
ACTA Vice President of Policy **Bradley Jackson** moderated our first panel, "**Enlightenment, Education, and Liberty**," which explored the different strands of Enlightenment thought. **Alan Charles Kors**, Henry Charles Lea Professor Emeritus of European History at the University of Pennsylvania, explained how the French Enlightenment was a rebellion against religious

and political abuses of power. French philosophers, including Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Diderot, called for religious toleration over creedal despotism and equality before the law over arbitrary rule by man's will. Their most powerful contributions to the Enlightenment were their insistence that people are much more than mere tools living only to obey, and their willingness to learn how to modify the lessons learned in the past by the wisdom of the present.

Peter McNamara, professor of practice in the School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership at Arizona State University, emphasized that though there were many different Enlightenment—in France, Scotland, Britain, America, and elsewhere—they all had a radical goal of dismantling the existing power structure

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Still Waiting . . .



Dr. Alan Charles Kors Remarks Accepting the 2023 Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education

Three decades ago, Alan Charles Kors sounded the alarm about the deterioration of respect for open inquiry and individual liberty on campus. In **Still Waiting . . .**, he lays bare the consequences of higher education's failure to heed this warning and prepares us for the inevitable day of reckoning to come. The publication will be available for download in December on **GoACTA.org**.

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Janice Rogers Brown, Retired Judge
U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit
Member, ACTA Board of Directors

“It is the dedication of ACTA’s staff that makes these days in October both substantive and memorable. And this year was certainly no exception. The video was masterfully done and (alas) recent events have shown just how urgent ACTA’s mission has become. I look forward to sharing it.”

Note: At our 2023 ATHENA Roundtable Conference, ACTA premiered a new promotional video entitled, “Ten Minutes to Midnight: ACTA in the Breach.”

Linda R. Rabieh, Senior Lecturer
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

“A quick note to thank you again for a wonderful conference. It was both reassuring and invigorating to meet and talk to others who care about liberal education and who are implementing it so successfully. I learned from the panels and from individual conversations and reconnected with a few old friends to boot. Returning to MIT with new ideas and a refreshed spirit.”

Jason Jewell, Director
Center for Great Books & Human Flourishing
Faulkner University, Alabama

“I very much enjoyed the setting, sessions, and conversations. Thank you for a great event!”

Note: Read about ACTA’s September 8 Oases of Excellence Faculty Conference on page 10.

Pano Kanelos, President
University of Austin, Texas

“I am grateful to you for writing about UATX, as I am for your leadership of ACTA, which is one of the most essential organizations in the country today.”

Carlos A. Rodriguez, Trustee
National University, Virginia

“I . . . found [the webinar] incredibly informative. All four panel members were terrific.”

Note: Read about ACTA’s trustee webinar on page 4.

ACTA’s Policy Experts Featured in *Washington Examiner* Series

As part of its Restoring America campaign, the *Washington Examiner* recently ran a series of essays on the state of higher education in the United States. The publication asked members of ACTA’s staff to offer their thoughts on the most pressing issues facing colleges and universities today.

ACTA President Michael Poliakoff took on tenure reform in an article titled, “Has tenure outlived its usefulness?” Dr. Poliakoff wrote that the current system is seriously flawed for two reasons: “It does not protect academic freedom as it should” and “it sometimes provides lifetime contracts to underperforming faculty.” He stated, “A system in which there are long-term, 10-year renewable contracts or 15-year contracts would give the institution financial and programmatic flexibility to respond to the needs of the workforce and student interest while still safeguarding the essential freedom of faculty in their teaching and research.”

Steven McGuire, ACTA’s Paul & Karen Levy Fellow in Campus Freedom, called out the political imbalance in colleges and universities that is contributing to the decline of Americans’ confidence in higher education. In his article, entitled “Only an ideological overhaul will restore public trust in higher education,” Dr. McGuire wrote, “University administrators (and many faculty) have shown themselves to be committed to a political cause rather than debate, or they have made the critical error of conflating their ideological preferences with their expertise. How surprised can they be when the public, via elected representatives, insists something has to change?”

In “College alumni are stepping up to defend free speech,” ACTA Director of Alumni Advocacy Bryan Paul urged alumni and donors to stop writing blank checks and cheering from the sidelines. Instead, they should embrace their role as guardians of their alma maters by funding projects that foster intellectual diversity and joining forces to promote free expression policies, host debates, mentor students, and bring speakers to campus who otherwise might be ignored or deplatformed.

Bradley Jackson, our vice president of policy, authored “To Improve higher education, schools must return to a strong core curriculum,” and ACTA Policy Research Fellow Kyle Beltramini contributed an article titled, “When the rights of teachers and students are threatened, college boards must act.” ●

ACTA Presents at Ohio Trustee Governance Symposium

On October 23, ACTA was invited by the Honorable Matt Huffman, president of the Ohio Senate, and Senator Jerry Cirino, chair of the Ohio Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee, to present at the Ohio Public University Trustee Governance Symposium. At this first-ever symposium, lawmakers and over 60 trustees from Ohio's 14 public universities came together to ensure that tax dollars are supporting high-quality, affordable education.

ACTA Senior Vice President of Strategy Armand Alacbay led a presentation on board governance. He emphasized the critical importance of a trustee's job, not only to educate thousands of young men and women in the state of Ohio, but also to advance American competitiveness. Most importantly, trustees are ultimately the arbiters of a university's graduation requirements, which constitute the school's "brand." The rigor of these requirements signals the university's quality to employers, taxpayers, and the world.

Anna Sillers, ACTA's data analyst

fellow, explained how our website, HowCollegesSpendMoney.com, gives trustees the data they need to balance the budget. Kyle Beltramini, ACTA's policy research fellow, covered how to select a new president. The key, he shared, is to be prepared for a vacancy before it happens by articulating a clear mission statement and identifying a strategic direction.

ACTA President Michael Poliakoff moderated a panel entitled "Securing Intellectual Diversity," featuring several of ACTA's most trusted friends. The panelists drove home that the intellectual monoculture on many campuses has reached a crisis point. It must be acknowledged, and trustees can play a role in fixing it. Specifically, they can step in to ensure fairness in faculty hiring and admissions.

Randy Gardner, chancellor of the Ohio Department of Higher Education, and Ohio University Distinguished Professor of Economics Richard Vedder spoke about the relationship between higher education and the workforce.

Shawn Busken, deputy first assistant to the Ohio attorney general, instructed trustees on compliance with the Supreme Court's recent reversal of affirmative action. Attendees also participated in a roundtable discussion led by Ohio State University Trustee Jeff Kaplan, who remarked, "[ACTA] is an absolutely terrific group. It is nonpartisan. They've got presidents and others from the left, from the right, from the middle. . . . And so I would urge you, as you want advice or counsel [for] your institutions, to think about consulting with ACTA."

Senator Cirino stated, "I organized Ohio's first Public Trustee Governance Symposium to remind trustees who serve our great public universities that it is *their* responsibility to set the policies and strategic direction of their institutions. I asked ACTA to participate because I know it has the best tools and resources, as well as a wealth of knowledge to call upon. I highly encourage other state legislatures that are interested in leading similar symposia to call on ACTA." ●



Reprinted from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* with permission of Eli Stein.



ACTA Policy Research Fellow Kyle Beltramini instructs trustees on best practices for selecting a new president.

Effective TRUSTEESHIP

ACTA Webinar Helps Trustees Defend Free Speech

In August, ACTA hosted the latest event in our informational webinar series for college and university trustees, entitled “Defending Free Expression and Intellectual Diversity: What Trustees Need to Know.” The webinar featured four bold proponents of free expression in higher education: Marty Kotis, trustee of the University of North Carolina (UNC)–Chapel Hill; Erec Smith, associate professor at York College of Pennsylvania; Abigail Thompson, distinguished professor of mathematics at the University of California–Davis; and Karrin Taylor Robson, former member of the Arizona Board of Regents.

Each panelist shared perspectives on how trustees can enshrine free expression and academic freedom in campus policy and practice. Ms. Robson recommended incorporating free speech units in freshman orientation. “We need constant vigilance by trustees to make sure universities are actually adhering to the commitments they have expressed. . . . Trustees can encourage robust efforts at new student orientation. . . . Lots of kids come out of high school settings not encouraged to speak freely, but if, as members of the board, we can make sure that students arrive knowing the expectation of free and open debate and diversity of ideas are welcome, we would see transformational change in our students.”



When it comes to adopting important institutional commitments like the Chicago Principles, Dr. Smith said, “There is a difference between having a policy like the Chicago statement and having the spirit of the Chicago statement throughout the college. The latter is what is missing. Orientation is great, but it has to keep going, it has to be systemic . . . to give students the opportunity to see for themselves that challenge isn’t something to run away from but to run toward. I think professors need to model this. There should be normal, semesterly debates between professors who model these principles, even if they lose.” *(continued on 8)*

UNC–Chapel Hill Board Wins ACTA’s Martin Prize



UNC–Chapel Hill trustees John Preyer, David Boliek, and Marty Kotis (far right) with ACTA’s Michael Poliakoff and Armand Alacbay at the Jerry L. Martin Prize dinner.

At the University Club on October 26, ACTA honored the University of North Carolina (UNC)–Chapel Hill Board of Trustees with the **Jerry L. Martin Prize for Excellence in College Trusteeship**. Named for ACTA’s founding president, Jerry L. Martin, the prize is presented to college trustees who display exemplary service in the public interest.

In recent years, the UNC–Chapel Hill Board of Trustees has taken bold action to advance the free exchange of ideas and promote civic education. In Summer 2022, the board passed a resolution that requires the senates of the graduate and undergraduate student governments to appropriate all student fees in a viewpoint-neutral manner. It passed a second resolution reaffirming the board’s commitment to the Chicago Principles on Freedom of Expression and the Kalven Report on institutional neutrality.

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ACTA and NGA Help Students “Disagree Better”



Governors Spencer Cox, Chris Sununu, and Dan McKee with ACTA’s Sadie Webb, BridgeUSA’s Manu Meel, and student debaters at Saint Anselm College.

ACTA’s College Debates and Discourse Alliance has partnered with the National Governors Association’s (NGA) Disagree Better initiative to help reduce polarization and encourage reasoned debate. The Disagree Better initiative was created by Utah Governor Spencer Cox, who serves as NGA’s 2023–24 chair. The initiative aims to hold a series of bipartisan events that bring together governors, national experts, citizens, and students to explore how to reduce partisan animosity and foster healthy conflict.

The first of these events occurred on September 12 in Manchester, New Hampshire, culminating with a debate led by ACTA and Braver Angels at Saint Anselm College. Over 100 students gathered to debate the resolution: “Is climate change the responsibility of the government or the individual?” New Hampshire Governor Chris Sununu, New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy, and Rhode Island Governor Dan McKee were in attendance. In his remarks after the debate, Governor Cox shared how inspiring it was to see students disagree respectfully over a controversial topic.

Governor Cox first learned about ACTA and Braver Angels’ College Debates and Discourse Alliance when he attended a debate on student loan forgiveness that we held at Utah State University last year. The next NGA Disagree Better event, to be held on November 14 in Colorado, will also culminate with an ACTA/Braver Angels student debate at the University of Denver. We are planning two more similar events in conjunction with NGA’s Disagree Better initiative in 2024.

ACTA commends governors and policymakers who are invested in finding solutions to America’s political discord and who recognize that one of the most important places to encourage healthy conflict is on college campuses. ●

ACTA’s Martin Prize, *continued from 4*

In January 2023, the board voted to accelerate the development of the School of Civic Life and Leadership at the university. It will be a stand-alone program with its own dean and faculty that is dedicated to providing an intellectually diverse roster of courses in history, political science, philosophy, and religion. This is an important step toward restoring more balance to the university’s academic programming and encouraging open inquiry.

In July, after the Supreme Court struck down Harvard and UNC’s affirmative

action programs, the board embraced the letter and spirit of the law by passing a nondiscrimination resolution that applies to both admissions and hiring.

At the Martin Prize dinner, ACTA President Michael Poliakoff and Jenna Robinson, president of the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, presented tributes to this exceptional board. Current board chair John Preyer, former board chair David Boliek, and board member Marty Kotis also addressed attendees. They articulated the board’s mis-

sion to ensure that UNC–Chapel Hill is a haven for independent-minded faculty and students, an engine of progress for the community, and a standard bearer for academic excellence.

Dr. Poliakoff presented the board with an 1824 newspaper issue featuring the announcement of a discovery by UNC–Chapel Hill’s first chemistry professor and an exchange between General Andrew Jackson and President James Madison. ●

Reviving Enlightenment Values in Higher Education (cont'd)



Bryan Paul, Ilana Redstone, Pamela Paresky, and Molly Brigid McGrath discuss how to combat the threat of illiberalism on campus.

and replacing it with one built on reason. Adam Smith, the “radical Scott,” articulated the power of commerce as a force to dismantle the “delusions of superstition” and advance human freedom and liberty.

Using Thomas Jefferson’s struggle with the issue of slavery as an example, **Thomas Merrill**, associate professor in the School of Public Affairs at American University, argued that we must beware not to idolize uncritically the Founders. At the same time, we must not imagine that we are morally superior to those who came before us. Rather, we must look at the Founders’ ideas as facts to be investigated and understood. “The core of our tradition,” Professor Merrill remarked, “is the critique of tradition.”

The second panel, “**Enlightenment on Campus in the 21st Century**,” was moderated by ACTA Director of Alumni Advocacy **Bryan Paul** and explored present-day threats to Enlightenment values manifested on campus. **Ilana Redstone**, associate professor of sociology at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, said that professors must gently but firmly challenge students’ sense of dogmatic certainty. We must recapture the Enlightenment premise that the issues we care about most are morally and ethically complex and thus require deep questioning. **Pamela Paresky**, senior research fellow at the Network Contagion Institute, observed that the horrific campus reactions to the recent terrorist attacks on Israel reveal that we have taken ideals like tolerance, equality under the law, and objectivity for granted. Because institutions have failed to teach and talk about these moral imperatives, students no longer share them. The Enlightenment paradigm that was once our “North Star” is being replaced with the illiberal ideas that speech is violence and individual dignity is subordinate to group grievances.

Molly Brigid McGrath, associate professor of philosophy at Assumption University, recommended that to combat dogmatic certainty and the erosion of Enlightenment ideals, we must reject the notion that students are fully morally formed when they set foot on campus, ready to transform the world. It is faculty in the humanities, rather than the sciences or the professions, who are best suited for the serious task of teaching students that before improving the world, they must improve themselves.

Later in the day, **Charles Davis**, president of the Alumni Free Speech Alliance, led a roundtable discussion with leaders of the Boston University Free Speech Alliance, Princetonians for Free Speech, and the UNC Free Speech Alliance. These alumni shared how they are creating grassroots movements and collaborating with students to restore the indispensable Enlightenment values of reasoned debate, intellectual diversity, and free expression at their alma maters. ●



Samantha Harris and Charles Davis examine the ways alumni can help cultivate a campus culture of free expression.

Honoring Alan Charles Kors, a Modern-Day Enlightenment Philosopher

The 2023 ATHENA Roundtable Conference culminated with a gala in the Pavilion of the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center. There, ACTA honored Professor **Alan Charles Kors**, cofounder of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, with the 18th annual Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education. In her opening remarks, the Honorable Janice Rogers Brown, retired DC Circuit judge and member of ACTA's Board of Directors, said, "There is no more ardent and erudite defender of Enlightenment values than Alan Charles Kors."

Tributes to Professor Kors were delivered by **Robert P. George**, the McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence at Princeton

University; **C. Bradley Thompson**, professor of political philosophy at Clemson University; and **Allen C. Guelzo**, senior research scholar in the Council of the Humanities. Professor George remarked, "Alan Charles Kors is our Moses," leading and inspiring the "stiff-necked" members of the academy who have wandered away from truth-seeking scholarship. Throughout his career, he has been willing to be made the object of anger in service to the highest intellectual ideals. Without him, we would have been "drowned in an all too red sea of indoctrination."

Professor Thompson said that to meet Dr. Kors is to be "forever shaken from one's dogmatic slumber." He also described being struck by his benevolence when Dr. Kors befriended

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Presentation of Philip Merrill Award



Professor Robert P. George



Professor C. Bradley Thompson



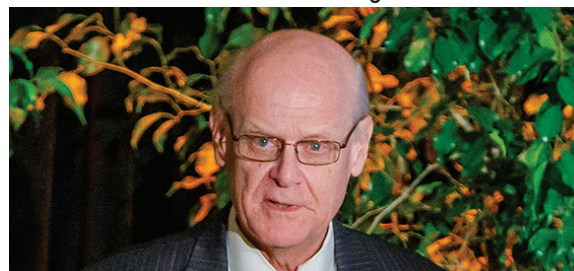
Professor Alan Charles Kors



Michael Poliakoff, Dr. Guelzo, Dr. Kors, Dr. George, and Dr. Thompson



The Honorable Janice Rogers Brown



Professor Allen Guelzo

Carole Hooven: 2023 Hero of Intellectual Freedom

In a ceremony following the ATHENA panels, ACTA presented its 2023 Hero of Intellectual Freedom award to **Carole Hooven**. Dr. Hooven taught at Harvard University for 17 years as a lecturer and codirector of undergraduate studies in the Department of Human Evolutionary Biology. In 2021, she faced a hostile cancellation attempt in response to the publication of her book *T: The Story of Testosterone, the Hormone that Dominates and Divides Us* and her appearance on *Fox and Friends* to discuss the pressure some academics feel to refrain from using terms like “pregnant woman” and “male and female.”

Luana Maroja, chair of the Biochemistry & Molecular Biology Program at Williams College and a past winner of the Hero of Intellectual Freedom award, provided a tribute to Dr. Hooven. Considering Professor Hooven’s heartfelt concern for her students, respect for their preferences, and numerous teaching awards, her cancellation was “proof that we live in truly unbelievable times.” Dr. Hooven could have taken the easy route, apologizing and promising to “do the work” of diversity and inclusion, but instead, she graciously and firmly fought the subversion of biology. In doing so, she brought light to the fact that biological differences between males and females do not infringe on the dignity of either sex.

In her acceptance speech, entitled “Is the Juice Worth the Squeeze?”, Dr. Hooven explored the “squeeze,” the cost incurred by those who speak out against campus orthodoxies,

and the “juice,” the value of those ideas to the speaker who is censored and the students who are not exposed to competing perspectives. The squeeze can entail real damage. When Dr. Hooven was falsely accused of transphobia, no one defended her. Many colleagues stopped speaking to her; others joined the attack. Faculty circulated a petition denouncing her, and teaching assistants boycotted her award-winning course so that she could no longer teach. Facing this betrayal and the loss of her community, she experienced a severe depressive episode.

Still, Professor Hooven explained, the juice was worth the squeeze. She stated, “Nothing can convince me that sex is all just a social construct.” Her concern for exclusive female spaces, for boys growing up under an a priori accusation of toxic masculinity, and ultimately for scientific truth, meant she had no choice but to speak out. She used the experience to engage in the “painful soul searching” that results in growth and allows us to lead lives of integrity and honor.

Steven McGuire, ACTA’s Paul & Karen Levy Fellow in Campus Freedom, presented Professors Hooven and Maroja with nineteenth century engravings of Galileo, who was threatened with the stake for his own defense of science. We are deeply inspired by the courage of these two scholars as they persevere against the fashions of the day to seek and speak the truth. ●



Heroes of Intellectual Freedom Carole Hooven (2023), Jodi Shaw (2022), Erec Smith (2022), and Luana Maroja (2019).

ACTA Webinar Helps Trustees, *continued from 4*

Mr. Kotis recommended that trustees should adopt the Kalven Report, ban compelled speech, and institute nondiscrimination policies. To ensure these policies are being followed, trustees can set up audit committees for each school within the university. He also spoke about UNC–Chapel Hill’s recent creation of the School of Civic Life and Leadership, an independent center on campus that will be dedicated to encouraging reasoned debate and dialogue.

Regarding compelled speech, Professor Thompson implored trustees to investigate if their university is requiring DEI statements for hiring and promotion, a practice that is widespread in California. Trustees can have a big impact by reforming the hiring process for senior administrators. She warned that these administrators are funneled through executive search firms, bypassing many of the requirements used in faculty searches and resulting in intellectual conformity among the leadership class. Listen to a full recording of the webinar on GoACTA.org. ●

On October 20, ACTA President Michael Poliakoff co-authored an essay in *RealClearEducation* with Marc Zvi Brettler, a member of ACTA’s Council of Scholars and the Bernice and Morton Lerner Distinguished Professor in Judaic Studies at Duke University. The piece, titled “Why Was It So Hard for Elite Universities to Condemn Hamas Terrorism?”, reveals the moral equivalency in colleges’ response to the crisis in Israel.

Of Harvard University’s response, they write, “President Claudine Gay has issued three muddled statements, under pressure, on the horrific events. Her first statement was a tepid confession of ‘heartbreak’ that implied an equivalence between the Hamas attacks and Israel neutralizing the terrorists. . . . Only after a barrage of online criticism—and threats by donors—did she muster the strength to condemn the child killers. Not content to leave it alone, she has issued another statement, but still without criticizing the 30-odd student groups who professed to ‘hold the Israeli regime entirely responsible’ for the murder, rape,

kidnapping, and torture of Jews.”

The authors also scrutinize Columbia University President Minouche Shafik, who stated, “I was devastated by the horrific attack on Israel this weekend and the ensuing violence that is affecting so many people.” They write, “The mention of ‘ensuing violence’ is a reference to Israeli targeting of terrorists—putting it on a par with raping and pillaging by Hamas.”

At Middlebury College, “the senior leadership wrote to ‘acknowledge the untold pain, suffering, and loss of life unfolding from the violence happening now in Israel and Palestine.’ President Laurie Patton seems unclear about who is making the violence ‘happen.’ She goes on to warn against ‘hate, racism, ethnic discrimination, antisemitism, or Islamophobia.’ The equivalence is complete, and we can move on to meet the real threat: Islamophobia.”

President Poliakoff and Professor Brettler do not equivocate. They state, “No complexity is so great as to obscure the distinction between the intentional slaughter of innocents and targeted

strikes against terrorists.” They continue, “Under the principle of institutional neutrality, colleges and universities should indeed refrain from speaking corporately on contemporary social or political issues, unless they transcend the institution’s values as a whole. . . . But condemning brutality and savagery, whether the murder of George Floyd under the knee of a policeman, or the civilian carnage Hamas wrought, is not a political statement. No one has asked presidents to endorse Zionism or the two-state solution or anything vaguely geopolitical. They needed only to affirm human decency without which the university is a place of moral chaos.”

These contortions by university leaders reveal “a cancerous moral rot and intellectual confusion.” When colleges “fail to condemn the slaughter of children and fail to show empathy to their students who identify with this slaughter,” they are failing to educate and lead their students “not only in subject matters but in basic issues of morality.” ●

Philip Merrill Award, *continued from 7*

a young Professor Thompson and gave him advice about raising his newborn son. In a moving tribute, Professor Guelzo described how Dr. Kors stood up for him when he was in danger of being dropped from his first-year history graduate program due to his religious beliefs. Professor Guelzo remarked, “All I have done since our first encounter . . . is fruit of the trust that you placed in me, a friendless, fatherless boy. Nor was I in fact the last . . . you rose to defend.”

Judge Brown presented Professor Kors with an early American fire bucket emblazoned with a sun rising over an ancient town, symbolizing the constant progress of civilization. In his extraordinary acceptance speech, Dr. Kors described the “generational swindle” that has occurred on college campuses. The heirs of the ‘60s who run universities today have reversed from rallying for free speech to creating speech codes, from struggling for racial integration and individual dignity to enforcing a new program of racial separation and group identity. He declared, “Don’t blame students,” who have been introduced to the life of the mind in a political bootcamp and who believe that what they are taught on campus has been vetted by the finest minds in the country. This is profound miseducation, and it cannot last. Classical liberals, conservatives, and other students who do not toe the line of the woke mob will not acquiesce under the double standards indefinitely.

To be ready for the day of reckoning, Professor Kors implored the audience to stop subsidizing universities that have become the enemies of a free society and to create alternatives for the thousands of students who do not have the resources to resist on their own. Ultimately, he said, the recovery of liberty and dignity begins with and depends on the education of the minds and souls of our children. And in this fight, “There are no sidelines.” ●

ACTA Convenes Faculty to Promote Liberal Arts

On September 8, faculty from across the country met in Durham, North Carolina, for the 2023 Oases of Excellence Conference hosted by ACTA's Fund for Academic Renewal and Duke University's Civil Discourse Project. Campus centers earn ACTA's designation as an Oasis of Excellence by promoting rigorous academic study, a strong liberal arts curriculum, and viewpoint diversity at their college or university. These faculty-led, donor-supported programs play a vital role in restoring the promise of higher education. The Oases of Excellence network has now grown to almost 90 campus programs.

Opening the conference, Dr. Jed Atkins, director of the Civil Discourse Project, encouraged attendees to continue their good work to keep the study of the liberal arts alive and to expose students to the full range of intellectual viewpoints. The day's panels included "Entrepreneurship, Economics, and the Liberal Arts," "Defending the Liberal Arts," "Workshop: Foundation Giving," and "Civics, Citizenship, and Civil Discourse."

Participants hailed from a variety of schools—public and private, large and small. Siri Terjesen, executive director of the Mad-den Center for Value Creation at Florida Atlantic University, moderated a panel on entrepreneurship featuring Bruce Caldwell

and Justin Heacock, both recent additions to the network.

George Lucas, former president of the International Society for Military Ethics and professor emeritus of ethics at the U.S. Naval Academy, delivered the evening's keynote address. He examined the implications of artificial intelligence for the liberal arts. Faculty must rethink how to advocate for the enduring value of a strong liberal arts education; it is not simply the acquisition of skills, but the pursuit of being human. AI risks making the liberal arts appear permanently irrelevant when its rise really means that understanding human nature is more important than ever.

Christine Basil, associate professor in the Belmont Abbey Honors College, said the conference provided "very valuable time to look up from the everyday

work and to get a feel for the bigger picture of higher ed and the obstacles to the good as well as the very real successes it contains."

ACTA's Fund for Academic Renewal is privileged to partner with faculty who care deeply about their students' success and who are committed to introducing the entire campus community to the best of the liberal arts and sciences. ●



ACTA Launches Redesign of WWTL.com

ACTA has redesigned the website for our signature What Will They Learn?® (WWTL) project, which rates the general education programs of over 1,100 American colleges and universities with a stated liberal arts mission. We will now be updating our ratings on **WhatWillTheyLearn.com** instead of issuing an annual print report. Our team will continuously monitor curriculum changes, ensuring that students and families have the most up-to-date information year-round. WWTL.com presents our ratings via interactive tools and maps, allowing users to compare the course offerings of institutions nationwide.

Not only can users see the grade ACTA gives each school based on its core curriculum requirements, but they can also view data on tuition rates, student-to-faculty ratios, the climate for free speech on campus, and more. We have also added an expanded set of search filters and a new member module. Members will be able to access new search features, including religious affiliations and campus setting, with more to come.

ACTA Vice President of Policy Bradley Jackson commented, "With the cost of higher education higher than ever, it is necessary to choose your school wisely. We hope that the new WhatWillTheyLearn.com will help many families do just that."

"ACTA has been working day and night for over two decades to advocate for academic excellence in higher education. With the new and improved WWTL website, we take yet another step toward making reliable curricular information accessible to all college-seeking parents and students," stated ACTA President Michael Poliakoff. "We hope that their choices in favor of strong curricula and academic excellence will help drive greater change in the academy. The consequences of failing this generation of students are too apparent to need spelling out; the task ahead of us is a serious one."

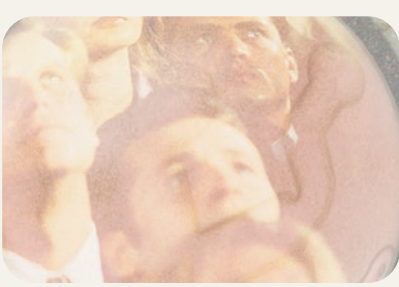
To see what grade your alma mater earns, visit WhatWillTheyLearn.com. ●

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H E A R D C A M P U S ON

No Picnics at University of Nevada—Las Vegas

The University of Nevada—Las Vegas’s Environmental Law Society recently changed the name of a picnic it scheduled for October 7, citing the word’s allegedly racist past. Emailing its members, the law society stated, “In light of recent information regarding historical and offensive connotations associated with the word ‘picnic’, we have chosen to rename our event to ‘Lunch by the Lake.’” The email continued, “The Environmental Law Society strongly promotes diversity and inclusion, and we sincerely apologize

for any harm or discomfort the initial title may have caused.”

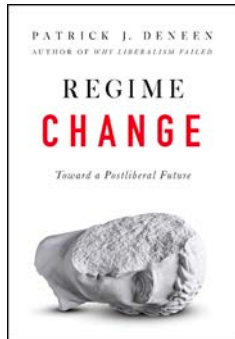
The word was also deemed offensive by the University of Michigan IT Department’s “Words Matter Task Force” in 2020. The task force recommended that the word “gathering” be used instead. At the time, Reuters performed a fact check of the supposed racist connotations of the word “picnic,” finding that while lynchings of black Americans “often occurred in gatherings that could be referred to as picnics,” the word can be traced back to the French *picque-nique*. David Pilgrim, director of Ferris State

University’s Jim Crow Museum of Racist Imagery, noted, “The etymology of the word picnic does not suggest racist or racial overtones. Picnic was originally a 17th Century French word, *picque-nique*. Its meaning was similar to today’s meaning: a social gathering where each attendee brings a share of the food.”

Nonetheless, higher education’s ambivalence over “picnics” continues. In 2021, Brandeis University’s Prevention, Advocacy & Resource Center included the word on its list of “violent language,” then later removed it. George Orwell warned us what comes next. ●

Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future by Patrick Deneen

Review by Kyle Beltramini, ACTA Policy Research Fellow



To call Patrick Deneen’s *Why Liberalism Failed* (2018) a stunning success is an understatement, as it reached a level of public acclaim the average political theorist could only dream of—or dread. The book elicited favorable remarks from Cornel West, Rod Dreher, David Brooks, and Barack Obama. Part of this wide appeal

was that Dr. Deneen’s critique transcended the liberal Democrat/conservative Republican divide in American politics to focus instead on “small l” liberalism: the political and moral philosophy that emerged from the Enlightenment and undergirds most Western democracies.

Dr. Deneen sees liberalism as the cause of many of America’s contemporary problems, including the rise in “deaths of despair,” the fragmentation of family and community, and inequality. The solution to these ills cannot be found in a recommitment to liberal principles. Rather, “liberalism has failed . . . because it was true to itself. It has failed because it has succeeded.”

Why Liberalism Failed was rather unsatisfying, as it declined to present a corrective tonic for our liberal malaise. Dr. Deneen’s latest work, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future* (2023), picks up where he left off by exploring the structural ills of liberalism and offering an alternative vision. The author begins by taking up one of

the oldest issues in Western philosophy: conflict between the *aristoi* (the elites) and the *demos* (the people).

Drawing principally from Aristotle (though also from Aquinas, Cicero, Tocqueville, and several others), Dr. Deneen asserts that Western thinkers traditionally aimed to establish a “mixed constitution” that aspired to a “genuine mixing of the classes,” with the goal of correcting “each class’s inherent vices while developing their potential virtues.” Liberalism sacrificed this tradition in favor of “overcoming the ancient division between the classes” through the advancement of man’s material conditions. The remedy Dr. Deneen proposes is “aristopopulism”: a true mixing guided by a “common-good conservatism” where the elite seek to use their material and social capital for the benefit of all.

How exactly do we bring about this post-liberal future? Here the author falters, entertaining proposals that would be impractical (a revitalization of townships and local governance) or hated (mandatory national service). Ultimately, he observes, the only way forward would be through “the raw assertion of political power by a new generation of political actors.” The danger of that is writ large in history. Here I am reminded less of Aristotle’s careful consideration of existing constitutional orders and more of Plato’s construction of the best possible city in the *Republic*. Perhaps Dr. Deneen could have diverted his critics had he, too, made clear that his postliberal future was only a city in speech. ●

FROM the BOOKSHELF



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We have a special task this holiday season, even while the world reels from the scourge of terrorism and war. And that task is to remember to seek and celebrate the light that guides us to the faith, hope, and love that redeem us. ACTA greets all of our friends at this holiday season with the confidence that we will never give up the belief that, together with all of you, we will educate better the minds and hearts of a rising generation. We will strengthen our nation and enjoy a future filled with blessings.

ACTA wishes you blessed and joyous holidays.

President Michael Poliakoff