

## Keeping the Academy Honest

May 7, 2015

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) is deeply honored to receive the Heritage Foundation's 2015 Salvatori Prize for American Citizenship. We are truly humbled by the company we keep.

To borrow from Governor Scott Walker, we think Founders are Superheroes.

But I must confess that at ACTA, we call them Founding Trustees. They helped start our country, yes, but they also helped start our colleges and universities because they knew that the health of our democratic republic depends upon the health of these institutions.

To quote from Thomas Jefferson: "if a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be."

We think that returning our colleges and universities to first principles is the way to realize the Founders' vision: focusing on the search for truth, focusing on giving students a strong foundation of skills and knowledge, bringing an end to the stifling political correctness on too many campuses.

Now, if you listen to most "higher education experts," you would be told that education really is very simple—it's all about "critical thinking." You would be told that a prescribed curriculum is old-fashioned, benighted, and fails to understand today's complex world. You would be mocked, and let me quote it directly, "for having the courage of...outdated commitments."

You would be told that the way to empower young adults to participate in civic life is to require "service learning projects"—but with no mention of *content*, no mention of requiring them to study America's Constitution and history.

It's no wonder that our survey found that only 38 percent of college graduates could correctly identify the lengths of terms for members of Congress—and that was choosing from a multiple-choice list!

Only 20 percent could say that the "Father of the Constitution" was James Madison. So much for teaching critical thinking.

To put it in not so academic terms, we think these experts are *full* of it. As I suspect you have noted, it is simply hard to think critically if one has nothing to think critically about.

That's why ACTA launched our signature What Will They Learn?<sup>TM</sup> project. Our premise: that to ensure civic empowerment, college graduates must have exposure to core subjects—most especially American history and government.

Most schools pledge to impart a wide range of skills and knowledge that will serve for a lifetime, but at ACTA, we take to heart Ronald Reagan's dictum: Trust but verify. But when we verify, what we find is that colleges allow students today to graduate with vast gaps in their skills and knowledge.

I invite you to go to our website, [whatwilltheylearn.com](http://whatwilltheylearn.com). There you will find our ratings of almost 1,100 schools' general education curricula. There you will also see which schools have oppressive speech codes, thanks to our work with the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. And we have taken a stand by posting only four-year graduation rates—not the six-year graduation rates that the Department of Education uses—because we believe that students at four-year colleges should get their degrees in four years.

We also regularly conduct surveys of historical illiteracy as a way of empowering trustees and other civic and educational leaders to insist that schools do better.

In the last year, ACTA surveys have found that:

- Only 57 percent of college graduates could correctly identify FDR as President during the D-Day invasion from a multiple-choice list.
- More than a quarter of college graduates could not say that the New Deal was a series of domestic economic initiatives in the 1930s.
- And just 18 percent knew the Emancipation Proclamation meant slaves were free in areas still in rebellion.

Not only have ACTA surveys generated terrific press—Cal Thomas dedicated a column to our D-Day findings—but they are the foundation for a growing movement at the state level to require a civics test for high school graduation.

Just this month, we are posting the findings of our study of the top 52 colleges and universities and whether they require their English majors to study Shakespeare. Again, a very sad story.

But our goal is not simply to publicize problems on campuses.

We want to help schools make changes for the better, and I'm pleased to report that we are seeing tremendous successes by educating college trustees about what's really happening and steps *they* can take to make things better.

In 1995, when we were founded, we said that trustees too often saw themselves as boosters rather than fiduciaries responsible for academic and financial matters.

So over the last 20 years, we have made it our charge to help trustees to embrace their responsibilities to bring about necessary changes. We are able to reach out to 18,000 trustees across the country—at public and private institutions, large and small—because visionary and generous supporters have helped us maintain a database of trustees at their home and business.

Each fall, we send detailed letters to every board member and every president of the schools covered, showing their rating and, in the case of those schools with a B+, how they could improve their grade. Our goal is to have the board take a look at its performance, compare their school against its peers, and rise up and want to do better.

We know we are having an impact. Several institutions have called to threaten legal action. We have calmed them down. Far more have requested technical assistance in improving their core curricula, and we work with them every step of the way.

I hope that you saw in the slides a full-page ad that appeared in *The Washington Post*. This was a powerful marketing tool from Christopher Newport University, which sought ACTA's counsel in making curricular reforms. There, its president (former U.S. Senator Paul Trible), faculty, and board have worked together to create a superb core curriculum.

The University of Georgia has twice taken justifiable pride in its rating in the state of the university address. Baylor brags about its ACTA "A" on its website with our specially created branding. And one employer is even planning to add the following to its website: We hire students from ACTA "A's."

We have gained many allies: In Colorado, one regent took to the pages of the *Denver Post* to implore his fellow trustees to assess what is most important for students to learn in the face of a cafeteria line curriculum. In one state, a foundation pulled all of its funding until the schools it funded could earn an ACTA "A" curriculum.

Higher education reform is about changing incentives, and bit by bit, *What Will They Learn?* is motivating schools to reform their curriculum for the better with the promise of recognition as an ACTA "A."

In closing, I know that you all recognize Ed Meese as a remarkable patriot, a great Attorney General, but what you do not know is he has also been a model trustee. When he chaired the board of George Mason University, he and his fellow trustees properly exercised their authority as fiduciaries to ensure that students received a strong core curriculum so that every graduate would know Western Civilization and every graduate would know who George Mason was. It is a point that I believe Mr. Salvatori would have appreciated.

Yes, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni is working hard to advance the principles of the Founding Fathers by doing all that we can to promote education for informed citizenship.

I hope every one of you will go to our website to see how your alma mater fares. I urge you to follow with your feet and your wallets those schools that are doing a good job. I urge you to write your alma mater, insisting that it provide a strong education for our next generation. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni is here to help you.

So, again, thank you to everyone at Heritage for this wonderful honor.

*Anne Neal, co-founder and president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, delivered these remarks upon accepting The Heritage Foundation's 2015 Salvatori Prize for American Citizenship. The prize, named for the late entrepreneur and philanthropist Henry Salvatori, is presented annually to an American who advances the principles and virtues of the nation's Founders.*