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**Action Report #4**

**The American Council of Trustees and Alumni:  
A Little-Known Driver of the Attacks on Academic Freedom  
and Shared Governance**

Nancy MacLean, Fellow at the AAUP's Center for the Defense of Academic Freedom

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The AAUP's 1966 [\*Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities\*](#) lays out the principle of shared governance "to foster constructive joint thought and action" both within higher education institutions and in defense of their "integrity against improper intrusions." Such "cooperative action" is vital to ensure that teachers and researchers remain free from external pressures, while also recognizing that academic institutions still depend upon donors, governments, and other interested parties. Balancing these priorities requires that "the academic institution...be in a position to meet them with its own generally unified view." To maintain that internal unity, the statement explains, "the governing board of an institution of higher education" while playing its own important role of "overview," nonetheless "should undertake appropriate self-limitation."

Shared governance and institutional autonomy are necessary for colleges and universities to conduct scientific inquiry, produce original research, and practice the principle of democratic deliberation. Faculty encourage students to confront difficult questions, learn to assess and weigh evidence, and think for themselves. Such conditions are essential to promoting economic innovation and social advancement and cultivating free minds and spirits. While this kind of education is essential to a thriving democracy, it has come under mounting attack from the right.

At many institutions, trustees and boards of governors are playing a more aggressive role in governance without consultation from or collaboration with faculty. Indeed, one of the most troubling challenges facing higher education today is extreme pressure exerted by ultrawealthy right-wing trustees, who are often also major donors to the institution. The corporate managers and CEOs who make up many boards often have no experience working in education, yet they have clear plans for how to impose an



antidemocratic agenda on universities. Where does the agenda come from? Why did boards begin flexing their muscles in unprecedented ways in veritable synchronicity in recent years? How did they become so effective at driving change?

One little-known but major behind-the-scenes force training and goading on such trustees is the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA). Like many organizations on the right that are now [“laying siege to the institutions,”](#) it has an innocuous name and [mission statement](#). Yet ACTA has engaged in a quiet campaign to subdue faculty authority and shared governance and urge trustees to overpower presidents and faculty governing bodies when conflicts arise. ACTA is explicit about its strategy: [“Trustees are the key](#) to changing public higher education.”

Operating behind the scenes to organize those with great power (above all, trustees, major donors, conservative alumni, and Republican state officials), ACTA wields influence that is invisible to most higher education stakeholders, let alone the wider public. By opening inquiry into the organization’s leadership, funders, allies, and campaigns, this report aims to bring ACTA out of the shadows and into the light for scrutiny by all who value higher education as a public good.

## **Background**

From its founding in 1995, ACTA helped instigate a culture war in higher education. Convened by a team that included Lynne Cheney, whose spouse Dick Cheney was then one of [“the Vulcans”](#) leading the drive for more aggressive US military policy, ACTA sought to mobilize conservative alumni and trustees to stifle the voices and governing input of faculty they deemed too “liberal.”

ACTA’s breakout public campaign came after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks when it issued a report—“Defending Civilization: How Our Universities Are Failing America and What Can Be Done About it”—effectively blacklisting faculty who opposed the rush to war. “No one should ask questions of the American war effort” was how the *National Catholic Reporter* summarized the spirit of the effort. “Arguing that professors should get in step with the prevailing bullying mood contradicts the purpose of free academic discourse,” *NCR*’s editorial observed. “This is a thinly disguised bit of



bullying.”<sup>1</sup> This was a prequel to ACTA’s attacks on campus protests over Gaza today (see below).

During the quarter century since the publication of the 2001 report, the organization has grown exponentially in size, funding, output, and ambition. Having taken in over \$35 million between 1998 and 2023 (Wilson 2025), ACTA now boasts an annual budget of almost \$8 million and claims a following of 23,000 alumni and board members at 1,300 colleges and universities. It uses that power to persuade and train trustees to exert hitherto unparalleled control over universities. Its approach to university governance [does away with over a half century of shared governance](#) with faculty in leading roles.

To better understand ACTA’s political efforts to radically remake the governance of academic institutions, it is helpful to look at the organization’s leadership, funders, allies, and recent campaigns.

## Leadership:

- **Michael Poliakoff, president of ACTA since 2016**, is professor emeritus in classics at Hillsdale College, the conservative Christian and highly partisan institution long a magnet for right-wing donors (including Charles Koch). Hillsdale refused to accept federal money so as to evade anti-discrimination compliance. Today Hillsdale serves as [the model for Ron DeSantis and Christopher Rufo](#) in their hostile takeover and purge of New College. In fact, Hillsdale hosted Christopher Rufo’s speech calling on the right “to [lay siege to our institutions](#).” Poliakoff’s recent publications as the official voice of ACTA include “[DEI Efforts Are Wrecking America’s Military](#),” claiming that programs in the nation’s military academies to promote a more aware and inclusive force are “teaching those who fight for us that our nation is inherently flawed.” Another piece applauds the board of regents at the University of Michigan for intervening in shared governance to “[restore order](#)” by taking power from a faculty senate he portrayed as “determined to support disruption.” Earlier, Poliakoff used the December 2023 Republican-led House hearings that hectored elite university presidents to lay out his own [caricature of these institutions](#) in a bid to use the cynical theater of the hearings to advance ACTA’s agenda for transformation.

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<sup>1</sup> “A ‘Defense’ that Civilization Can Do Without,” *National Catholic Reporter* 38, no. 7 (December 14, 2001).

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## Funders:

- **Arch-right donors underwrite ACTA's efforts.** These donors have a well-documented history of [hostility to voting rights](#) and [climate science](#), among other personal profit-serving commitments. According to the most recent available IRS 990 filings from the [Koch family-organized DonorsTrust fund](#) for “safeguarding the intent of libertarian and conservative and donors,” ACTA took over \$1 million from this one important node in the right-wing funding network. This is an order of magnitude more than DonorsTrust gave during the same filing period to other advocacy organizations it supports like FIRE, Tea Party Patriots, the Gun Owners Foundation, or Students for Concealed Carry. It puts ACTA in the company of large-gift beneficiaries of DonorsTrust like [Turning Point USA](#), which maintains a “Professor Watchlist” to invite targeted harassment of faculty it deems “un-American.” DonorsTrust, which one journalist aptly called “[the dark-money ATM](#)” of the right, is the largest donor to ACTA by a good margin. DonorsTrust’s structure enables contributors to conceal their identities, but among its most committed givers are some foundations who also give directly and generously to ACTA, including those of the Koch family, Bradley, and Scaife.
- According to research by Ralph Wilson of the Corporate Genome Project into its IRS 990 filings, ACTA has received nearly \$36 million from 114 donors from 1996 to 2023, over \$30 million of which came from a handful of well-known right-wing funders (Wilson 2025). Given its revenue stream, it should not be surprising that ACTA regularly partners with those who have laid siege to US democracy.

## Allies:

- **ACTA is [on the advisory board of Project 2025](#)**, the Heritage Foundation’s [plan for a second Trump presidency that is now being implemented](#). Project 2025 characterizes its education agenda as “promot[ing] educational opportunities outside the woke-dominated system of public schools and universities, including trade schools, apprenticeship programs, and student-loan alternatives that fund students’ dreams instead of Marxist academics.”

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- **ACTA is a member of the [State Policy Network](#) (SPN)**, a group of over one hundred right-wing think tanks and litigation outfits that advance corporate special interests in state government. SPN works in coordination with the [American Legislative Exchange Council](#) (ALEC) and [Americans for Prosperity](#), the Koch network's organizing operation in the states, as part of what one political scientist has called "[the troika](#)" driving state legislatures to adopt pro-corporate, antidemocratic laws and policies.

ACTA is thus bankrolled by the usual suspects on the arch-right and allied with groups these same donors fund that are in the vanguard of weakening democratic institutions. The agenda of these donors is evident in the campaigns that ACTA wages.

## **Campaigns:**

- **ACTA offers what it calls "[board services](#),"** including running secretive retreats to advise trustees on matters from presidential searches and "program prioritization" to what it calls "[Governance for a New Era](#)." It explicitly urges overturning "business as usual," a rubric under which it includes shared governance with faculty, in favor of a "[more muscular](#)" application of power by trustees. It also insists that "trustees must have the last word when it comes to guarding the central values of American higher education—academic excellence and academic freedom." ACTA thus emboldens aggressive board members and alumni who seek to disrupt and remake education, while subduing—through the threat of punishment—those who in the older system would have stood up to external pressure. How? By replacing traditional faculty shared governance with domination by boards of trustees, replacing trustees loyal to their school's missions with trustees loyal to ideological donors and political patrons, cowing presidents, and, finally, weakening tenure and laying off faculty and staff to spread fear and induce submission.
- **ACTA is working to [undermine established accreditation agencies](#),** a required process for accessing federal student aid, and set up rivals that will pronounce the transformed institutions legitimate. This is crucial because [appealing to traditional accreditors](#) has been a strategy for defenders of higher education institutions that have come under pressure from the right to violate academic freedom and scrap shared governance, including New College of

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Florida and the journalism school of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. ACTA's website features articles charging that accreditation is "a scam," "a cartel," an "empire," and "a monopoly." Other pieces applaud Governor Ron DeSantis for having "won an early battle" against "abusive accreditors," and relish how "[Trump's vision...could shake up the sector](#)."

- **ACTA has backed state-level efforts to subordinate colleges and universities to MAGA's agenda.** Knowing that most states give governors the power to "appoint trustees and state education officials," [ACTA urges them to use it](#) and offers to "help identify or review trustee candidates." Governor DeSantis's attacks on public higher education applied a [2013 ACTA state game plan](#) that specifically targeted New College of Florida. So, too, has ACTA abetted the dark money, donor-driven attacks on shared governance and particular programs and hires in the University of North Carolina system, as documented in "[Political Influence at UNC: An Examination of the Pope/Koch Network](#)" by researcher Ralph Wilson. He notes, "In the states where [Charles] Koch's political allies control the legislature, ACTA's strategy can be carried out through the system of political appointments" (Wilson 2025).
- **ACTA promotes right-wing donor-driven and -funded centers on campuses** across the country in its [Oases of Excellence](#) listings. The list includes entire schools with administrators and tenure lines imposed over the expressed will of faculty, as with the School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership at Arizona State University and the [School of Civic Life and Leadership](#) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. There are over seventy centers on the list; a cursory review suggests they are funded by the same array of right-wing donors as the ACTA allies named in this report.
- **ACTA grades colleges and universities on what it believes students should be required to learn.** Its "What Will They Learn?" project gives Duke University, where I teach, a C (and Harvard an F) while Patrick Henry College, an [avowedly Christian nationalist institution](#) that recruits and [grooms future Republican leaders](#), earned a rare A+ ([six of seven of which were awarded to Christian schools](#)). No wonder, then, that the Heritage Foundation presented an [award to ACTA](#) in 2015 for this grading initiative.

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- **ACTA advocates “[viewpoint diversity](#)” to secure the hiring of right-wing faculty** who otherwise would not prevail in open competitive searches. While giving conservative scholars a step up, ACTA simultaneously [opposes diversity, equity, and inclusion](#) policies for victims of historical and continuing discrimination.
- ACTA [sounds an alarm about civic illiteracy](#) and lack of historical knowledge among today’s students and the wider citizenry. There is indeed cause for concern; many educators share it. But ACTA’s proposed remedy is to roll back the clock. **It pushes programs that celebrate “[Western civilization](#)”** with a content that is hostile to critique. As demonstrated by its adulation of Ron DeSantis, ACTA would use donor power and state legislative fiat to [suppress more than a half century of scholarship](#) on race, gender, American history, and other subjects that threaten the Right’s preferred ideology.
- **ACTA is currently pushing for [binding institutional neutrality](#)** to gag college and university statements on matters of pressing public concern. While ostensibly “neutral” as the innocent wording suggests, the push is anything but. It comes after protracted attacks by ACTA allies such as [ALEC on environmental, social, and governance](#) investment principles, including actual [legislative prohibitions](#) in Republican-dominated states, accompanied by condemnation of “woke” corporations that seek to stop climate collapse and advance equity. Under the rubric of “institutional neutrality,” ACTA likewise explicitly [urges boards not to accede to calls for socially responsible investing](#). So, too, is the push for neutrality escalating just as ACTA allies helped bring to power an openly authoritarian presidential administration. By locking in silence, [pledges of institutional neutrality deny universities](#) their longstanding ability to dissent and hold government power accountable.
- **ACTA has cheered on the harsh treatment of peaceful campus protests** against Israel’s genocidal war in Gaza, treatment which has been [condemned by the AAUP](#). ACTA has provided a fifteen-page [guide](#) to 23,000 trustees, who it hopes will wield their power to prevent encampments previously accepted as within the First Amendment rights of students and faculty. The guide instead recommends adopting new rules “forbidding encampments” with “severe” punishments. ACTA argues that “the board should not allow stalling, soft

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ultimatum, or worse, concessions.” In this effort, ACTA circles back to its foundational campaign to stifle dissent over the Bush administration’s rush to war after September 11, 2001—a catastrophic endeavor that nearly all parties now acknowledge to have been one of the [greatest strategic disasters](#) in the history of US foreign policy.

To be sure, American higher education has serious problems that need attention, though most stem from the decades of inappropriate [application of private-sector business models](#) to what was and is a crucial public good. With steep cuts in tax funding of public universities, tuition costs have surged. So, too, the scramble to climb [the rigidly modeled rankings](#) of U.S. News & World Report has resulted in an arms race over amenities and star faculty that has distorted the educational mission of countless schools. The result is increasing inequality and millions of students saddled with [unmanageable debt](#), while most faculty now face [contingent employment](#) without the promise of tenure.

Sadly, higher education “leaders” have failed to mobilize collectively to defend their sector. So it is understandable that an organization pledged to “promoting academic excellence, academic freedom, and accountability at America’s colleges and universities” would garner wide interest—especially when it claims it will “[ensure that the next generation receives an intellectually rich, high-quality education at an affordable price.](#)” However, ACTA is a false friend to trustees and administrators. Rather than working to address the profound funding and access crises facing higher education, it works to undo shared governance, institutional autonomy, and academic freedom. It erases local control and individual institutional character by offering the same dubious training and ideologically driven trustee candidates to every institution. In doing so, it makes academic institutions susceptible to partisan and donor influence.

## **Guidelines for Responding to ACTA on Campus**

In short, ACTA is a highly strategic operation designed to mobilize trustees to disrupt the entire higher education sector and rebuild it to conform to the interests of corporate-dominated boards and the political right. All faculty, students, and alumni deserve to know about this project to remake higher education, the interests it really serves, and whether ACTA is active at their college or university.



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But what can faculty and students do? A lot. Try to find out whether ACTA is driving change behind the scenes at your institution:

- Does your school have one of the donor-funded and -implanted centers on ACTA's [Oases of Excellence](#) list? See what it's up to. Are its faculty affiliates organizing for institutional neutrality or viewpoint diversity hiring? If so, urge your campus newspaper to follow the money on the donors driving these efforts.
- Who are the members of your board of trustees or board of governors? Do their biographies show affiliation with ACTA or its [allied groups in Project 2025](#)? Let other faculty and students know why this matters. Also consider following ACTA's communications lead, [Steven McGuire](#), on social media. [His X \(Twitter\) posts](#) and replies alerted one AAUP chapter to ACTA allies on their board.
- Do a [power mapping of the board and alumni](#). Are there potential allies for you to reach out to? Remember that ACTA also wants to subject presidents to board domination, so you may be able to persuade affected presidents to (quietly) help you expose ACTA.
- ACTA promotes its [board training operation](#). Learn about the procedures for training new board members on your campus. If they receive formal training, what entity provides it? If it's ACTA, your AAUP chapter could campaign for alternative non-ideological providers. Two such nonpartisan options are the [Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges](#) and [Board Source](#). If board training is designed internally, faculty should work with their shared governance apparatus to have a role in the development of that training.
- Because ACTA is allied with the [State Policy Network](#), it can be held to account for what SPN's [in-state partners](#) are doing on behalf of their corporate and ideological allies. Track their agenda, and let your campus know ACTA-affiliated board members are implicated in policies that are undermining public education and much more.
- If you are in a public institution, ask journalists to file state Freedom of Information requests to get correspondence between board members and ACTA.

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- Above all, make your findings public: share with your campus newspaper, encourage student journalists to get on this beat ([Reporting Right](#) can help in teaching them how to cover it well), hold forums, or write op-eds or letters to local news sources.
- Sign up on the [mailing list](#) of the AAUP's [Center for the Defense of Academic Freedom](#) for continuing coverage of ACTA and the larger fight to protect academic freedom, faculty power, and higher education from the rights siege.
- Lastly, share with [CDAF](#) what you find out and how you're publicizing it so that we can connect you with others to share information and build out a network of those involved in this fight and work on strategy together.

## Acknowledgments

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