



ACTA on Historical Literacy

For over two decades, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni has led the charge in addressing the crisis in historical literacy.

ACTA's reports, surveys of historical knowledge, and signature What Will They Learn?[™] project give college trustees and policymakers the hard data and strategies they need to empower the next generations with an understanding of our nation's history and institutions of freedom.

Documenting the Problem

ACTA's surveys pinpoint what college graduates know—or don't know—about key figures and events in our history: Lincoln, D-Day, the Roosevelts, the Constitution, and more. They show clearly how much work there is to do if we are to ensure a historically literate citizenry. *See key findings on the reverse.*

Rating Schools

ACTA's annual What Will They Learn?[™] study rates core curricula at over 1,100 schools—and shows that only 18% require students to take a survey course in U.S. history or government. We have been increasingly successful in persuading schools to add new requirements. The Heritage Foundation awarded ACTA its 2015 Salvatori Prize for American Citizenship for promoting knowledge of our nation's history.

Educating Trustees, Policymakers, and the Public

Through op-eds, trustee guides, and major reports, including our recent *A Crisis in Civic Education*, we remind leaders and

the public how much will be lost if our nation forgets its past—and what college leaders can do to ensure college graduates are historically literate. ACTA's seminal report *Losing America's Memory* was endorsed by distinguished historian David McCullough, and it prompted Congress to pass a Concurrent Resolution calling for new college requirements for the study of American history.

Honoring Those Who Promote American History

ACTA's Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education uniquely honors individuals who promote liberal arts education and the teaching of Western civilization and American history. ACTA has bestowed the Merrill Award on many of America's preeminent scholars and teachers of American history, including distinguished historians KC Johnson, Gary Gallagher, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Donald Kagan, David McCullough, and New-York Historical Society president Louise Mirrer.

KEY FINDINGS . . .

From ACTA's Survey on the Constitution

10% of college graduates thought that Judith Sheindlin—better known as “Judge Judy”—serves on the U.S. Supreme Court.

33% of college graduates didn't know that the Bill of Rights is the name given to a group of Constitutional amendments.

46% of college graduates didn't know the lengths of congressional terms.

71% of college graduates couldn't identify James Madison as the “Father of the Constitution.”

43% of college graduates thought the passage of a proposed amendment to the Constitution requires presidential ratification.

“The case for teaching American . . . history has always been strong. But in times when many of the world's nations are in internal turmoil, that case is even more powerful.”

— Louise Mirrer, President, New York Historical Society, on accepting ACTA's Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education

From ACTA's Surveys on U.S. Presidents

60% of college graduates couldn't identify Abraham Lincoln as the author of the phrase “that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

26% of college graduates didn't know that FDR was president during World War II.

47% of college graduates didn't know that Teddy Roosevelt played a major role in the construction of the Panama Canal.

10% of college graduates didn't know who shot Abraham Lincoln; 5% thought it was Lee Harvey Oswald.

32% of college graduates didn't recognize FDR as the president who spearheaded the New Deal.

“History is a discipline in decline. There is a profound ignorance not only among students but among their teachers as well. This study confirms that.”

— Oscar Handlin, University Professor Emeritus, Harvard University, on ACTA's seminal report *Losing America's Memory*

From ACTA's Surveys on Key Historical Events

52% of college graduates couldn't identify George Washington as the American general at Yorktown.

72% of college graduates didn't know the Emancipation Proclamation meant slaves were free in states still in rebellion.

36% of college graduates could not correctly identify the time period of the Civil War from a multiple-choice list.

25% of college graduates did not know that Ulysses S. Grant was the top general of the Union forces in the Civil War; 13% thought it was Robert E. Lee.

58% of college graduates couldn't identify the war during which the Battle of the Bulge occurred.

23% of college graduates didn't know that D-Day took place in France; 9% thought that it happened at Pearl Harbor.

45% of college graduates could not correctly identify the date of D-Day from a multiple-choice list.

“[ACTA's What Will They Learn?™] study and Web site do fill a gap so that parents and students can make better choices. As a consequence, colleges and universities may be forced to examine their own responsibility in molding an educated, well-informed citizenry.”

— Kathleen Parker, *Washington Post*