



Promoting
Academic
Freedom and
Excellence

The Great Books Speak To Everyone: An Interview with Roosevelt Montás



ACTA interviewed Professor Roosevelt Montás about his new book, *Rescuing Socrates: How the Great Books Changed My Life, and Why They Matter for a New Generation*. Roosevelt Montás is senior lecturer in American Studies and English at Columbia University, where he directed the Center for the Core Curriculum from 2000 to 2018. His family emigrated to the United States from the Dominican Republic when he was a child, and he attended Columbia University as an undergraduate through the support of a state program for low-income students. Below are excerpts from the interview.

On his passion for liberal education: My story forms the backbone of the argument I make in the book, which is about the transformative power and the continuing relevance of the kind of liberal education that confronts students with the great text debates, issues that are at the base of our culture and our society. . . . The argument

[comes from] how they helped shape my life. . . . I grew up in the Dominican Republic in a rural village . . . without a telephone, without a TV, without a refrigerator or stove. At age 12, I came to New York City. It was a very frightening and difficult experience. . . . My mother . . . lost her job shortly after my brother and I arrived here. We ended up living for a few years in a basement room in a relative's house.

[I found] Plato's *Dialogues* in a heap of trash next to my house and started reading. That book brokered a relationship with a high school teacher who continues to be a close friend and mentor. He gave me his copy of the *Iliad* and encouraged me to apply to Columbia. [At Columbia], I encountered its core curriculum, one of the few and first Great Books general education programs in the United States . . . that immersion into the political, intellectual, and philosophical culture that is embodied in the core

(continued on 3)

Register Today for the 2022 ATHENA Roundtable!

ACTA's **2022 ATHENA Roundtable** event will be held on October 21 at the Ronald Reagan Building in Washington, DC. Join us for "Diversity Done Right," a morning discussion with higher education leaders; a keynote address by ACTA's Hero of Intellectual Freedom, York College of Pennsylvania **Professor Erec Smith**; and a gala dinner featuring the presentation of the 17th annual Philip Merrill Award to Columbia University **Professor John McWhorter**. For more information or to register for the event, please visit www.GoACTA.org/events/ATHENA.

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Blake Johnson, Class of 2025

Ohio Wesleyan University

“My fellow students and I listened to four speeches arguing for or against gun control. At the beginning, students were clearly entrenched on one side or the other. Yet the longer the speeches went on, the more each of us realized that not one speaker had all the answers. By the end, the room was no longer divided along ‘us v. them’ lines. Instead, we all collectively recognized the value of each and every opinion. In fact, we even diverged from the resolution that we were arguing in the first place! . . . The point is simple: Braver Angels taught me how to work with others, question everything, and reach an acceptable consensus with those I disagree with.”

Editor’s Note: Student Blake Johnson engaged in a debate through ACTA and Braver Angel’s College Debates and Discourse Program, in partnership with BridgeUSA and the Fund for American Studies. Read more about our debate program on page 5.

Deondra Rose

**Associate Professor, Sanford School of Public Policy
Duke University**

“Braver Angels and ACTA and BridgeUSA . . . we are honored and so grateful to have you here with us today. [We] are really

excited about the program and grateful for the work that you and your team are doing.”

Editor’s Note: Read more about ACTA’s debate held at Duke University on page 5.

**Maria Masi, Director
MTM Foundation**

“I . . . want to extend my deep gratitude for your time, expertise, and support that you shared with us during the formation of the fund agreement. We’re thrilled with the outcome and thank you for your many positive contributions. We’re all looking forward to seeing how the Masi Endowed Chair enhances research at COMP.”

Editor’s Note: ACTA’s Fund for Academic Renewal recently assisted Ms. Masi and her father, Dr. Al Masi, with a gift to the University of Illinois Foundation to establish an endowed chair.

Bob Fiddes, Trustee

**George S. Parker II Charitable Trusts
Beloit, WI**

“I always enjoy the ACTA annual report. It is a great summary of the work of the organization. . . . I also get to see the picture of several people I have had the pleasure to have met and admire.”

John Chisholm on Alumni Advocacy at MIT

ACTA recently spoke with John Dana Chisholm, a member of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s (MIT) Free Speech Alliance, which is part of the Alumni Free Speech Alliance. Mr. Chisholm is a passionate advocate of viewpoint diversity and alumni action. He previously served on the MIT Corporation and is CEO of John Chisholm Ventures.

Mr. Chisholm shared his advice for mobilizing alumni to take up the important role they can have in encouraging open discussion and free inquiry on campus. He remarked, “At least some of the decline in alumni giving is due to universities straying from their focus on education and researching, becoming more ideological, and thus estranging alumni. Even among my

close friends with advanced degrees in successful careers, some have stated that they will not support their university because of ideology. For the same reason, many of our alumni have quit reading MIT’s *Technology Review* magazine.”

In his past position as chair of MIT’s alumni association, Mr. Chisholm learned that MIT alumni are a diverse group, hailing from many different geographical areas and representing widespread political views. He feels that it is essential to foster this diversity of opinion on college campuses. He commented, “Growing polarization may be America’s number one existential threat. One of the key drivers, if not the key driver, is lack of dialogue among different groups. . . . We urgently need to find common ground with those outside of our in-group to

keep our civil society from breaking apart. Some people feel that being left behind in education is one of the key drivers of polarization. Universities, more than any other institutions, could be the ones modeling open discussion and tolerance to avoid polarization.”

Mr. Chisholm stated that he hopes MIT will join the 87 institutions that have adopted the Chicago Principles on Freedom of Expression. He continued, “As far as advice for trustees . . . make sure that the other half of the U.S. and all of the intellectual and cognitive diversity they bring is not being ignored. Remember that it’s cognitive and intellectual diversity that make us better decision-makers, and we need to make sure that we’re not a philosophical, political monoculture. ●

ACTA Partners with AFSA to Support Alumni Movement

Since Fall 2021, ACTA has partnered with the **Alumni Free Speech Alliance** (AFSA) to encourage alumni across the country to call for stronger protections of free expression, academic freedom, and viewpoint diversity at their alma maters. ACTA and AFSA are equipping alumni with the tools they need to organize advocacy groups and make the case for free speech to their administrations, while also supporting faculty and student voices. The AFSA network is quickly growing and currently consists of 13 alumni free speech groups.

AFSA's work has gained national attention, including a feature in the *Washington Post* by Susan Svrluga entitled, "College alumni groups spread nationally to counter 'cancel culture.'"

In remarks for the July 24 article, Edward Yingling, president of AFSA and a founder of Princetonians for Free Speech, described AFSA's motivation: "There is a feeling that a lot of universities are losing their way. There is very little diversity of thought." Alumni are recognizing that only they "have the numbers and clout to lead the fight for free speech at universi-

ties, an urgent rebellion against . . . growing orthodoxy on campuses, with faculty and students canceling opposing views, afraid to speak freely, and threatening the inquiry and debate that are central to academia."

Tom Rideout, who spoke at ACTA's Alumni Summit on Free Expression



John Tomasi, Heterodox Academy; Ken Wolf and Carl Neuss, Cornell Free Speech Alliance (CFSA); Michael Poliakoff, ACTA; Nadine Strossen; Bob Platt and William Jacobson, CFSA; Tom Rideout, Washington and Lee University; Joanne Florino and Vivek Mathew, CFSA, at ACTA's Alumni Summit on Free Expression.

earlier this year, was also featured in the article. Mr. Rideout is president of the Generals Redoubt, an alumni free speech group at Washington and Lee University that is a member of AFSA. The article explains, "The alumni groups vary in size [and] character . . . Some have distinctly conservative roots, even if they are now seeking to ensure that all viewpoints are

represented. One of the first to organize, the Generals Redoubt, has been fighting to preserve the traditions of Washington and Lee University in Lexington, VA." Mr. Rideout commented that restoring protections for free speech on the campus is the group's biggest focus.

Ms. Svrluga writes, "Leaders with the national alliance say it is hoping to create something more powerful, and lasting, than a typical alumni letter-writing campaign or petition that flares up and quickly dies away." Through our partnership with AFSA, ACTA has been working with alumni groups to help them scale up their efforts by hiring staff, conducting surveys to assess the campus culture for free

speech, growing a media presence, and calling on institutions to adopt the Chicago Principles on Freedom of Expression.

We are inspired by the growing influence of AFSA, and we will continue to support alumni as they fight for the restoration of free expression at their alma maters. ●

Roosevelt Montás, *continued from 1*

curriculum shaped the person that I am and my mission in life, which is to try to make this extraordinary education I had available to other people.

On the value of liberal education for all people: There is a long tradition, not just in America, but in many societies, of steering the working class, the non-elites, to an education in obedience, an education in following commands. Sometimes we call that a vocational and technical education. Of course, vocational and technical educations are in themselves extraordinarily valuable, but when they are offered instead of or absent the other kind of education, the one that taps into our capacities as free individuals, as agents, as thinkers, as rational beings, when education is used as a means to cut off students from those capacities, then it is unconscionable and indeed an odious tradition.

There is a program every summer that brings high school students to Columbia to study Socrates, Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail." I had a meeting with the cohort that is coming in a few weeks. One student raised his hand and asked if he had to pay for food at the dining halls. No, food is free, the dorm is free, the professors are free, the textbooks are free. And then we give them a stipend of \$600 at

(continued on 4)

Effective TRUSTEESHIP



Connecticut Passes Informed Trustee Act

Many of those who serve on higher education boards of trustees are not experts on governance when they arrive. To be effective fiduciaries, board members need training and support. As part of our work to promote active and informed trusteeship, ACTA communicates with state legislatures, highlighting policies that states can enact to ensure that trustees of public colleges and universities are prepared for the job.

In 2019, after ACTA sent the Connecticut General Assembly's Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee a piece of model policy based on Virginia House Bill 2620, called the "Informed Trustee Act," the committee introduced a new bill that mirrors the Virginia statute. The bill was tabled during the COVID-19 pandemic but was reintroduced this year. This legislation calls upon the Connecticut Board of Regents and the University of Connecticut Board of Trustees to adopt a policy requiring any newly appointed member of the state or university board to undergo targeted training in 15 broad categories. New members will receive instruction on the structure and functions of the board's committees; professional accounting and reporting standards; a board member's ethical responsibilities; budgeting and financial reporting; student tuition and student debt trends; and several other key areas of governance.

Connecticut Governor Ned Lamont signed the policy into law on May 10 as part of a broader higher education bill. ACTA's work to promote the Informed Trustee Act and similar legislation has met with widespread, bipartisan support. Both Virginia and Connecticut's versions of the Informed Trustee Act passed unanimously.

ACTA is proud to have brought this important issue to the attention of the Connecticut General Assembly, and we will continue to assist lawmakers across the country as they seek to increase accountable and informed governance in public higher education. ●

Roosevelt Montás, *continued from 3*

the end of the summer. And the students, it was as if it had begun to dawn on them, and there was this sense of, "What's the catch here? Why are you doing this?"

The reason we do it is because when my child grows up to be that age, I hope to have the resources to allow that kind of experience and education for him. And our purpose is, for these

students who are low income, who are first generation and college bound, to give them access to that same set of values. The only thing we require from you is hard work, and that hard work deserves this kind of acknowledgment and value.

On liberal education and justice: There is no question that there is a kind of Euro-

centric appropriation of the classical tradition as a justification for imperialist exploitation. We cannot deny that, but nor must we reduce the value of those works to those appropriations. In fact, we find that within those works lie the seeds of overturning those racist, exploitative violations of human rights. That is the discourse of equality, human rights, democracy, even of gender equality—all of those are sewn and developed in that tradition.

In fact, it is in the name of values that have been developed and evolved in that tradition that many people today condemn that tradition.

If we deny students access to [the classical] tradition, we are hampering their capacity to contribute to this ongoing conversation on behalf of justice. We talk about things like police

"We talk about things like police brutality and social inequality. Well, if we want to empower our students to solve these problems, we need to give them tools with which to cut through the ideology and obfuscations through which people tend to interact with those issues."

brutality and social inequality. Well, if we want to empower our students to solve these problems, we need to give them tools with which to cut through the ideology and obfuscations through which people tend to interact with those issues. . . . I can't help but lament the fact that so many low-income, working-class students, in the name of

social justice, in the name of identity rights, are denied precisely the most powerful tools we know of to bring about freedom.

The power of [the classics] comes from their capacity to illuminate our own complex humanity. It is not to tell you what is right. It is to equip you to engage in that exploration yourself.

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

ACTA Calls for More Transparency at University of Minnesota

In June, ACTA spoke out against a possible conflict of interest in the University of Minnesota (UMN)–Duluth’s interim chancellor search. UMN Regent Dave McMillan resigned from the system board to join the running for the interim chancellor position at the Duluth campus just one day before the deadline to submit candidacy. The timing of Mr. McMillan’s resignation, along with his role in approving UMN President Joan Gabel’s newest five-year contract, has caused some to allege a conflict of interest or quid pro quo between Mr. McMillan and President Gabel. Mr. McMillan voted to approve a 30% raise for President Gabel in December 2021.

In a press release, ACTA Vice President of Trustee & Government Affairs Armand Alabay remarked, “Members of university governing boards—particularly those that oversee state flagship systems like the University of Minnesota—have a primary responsibility to the public. This duty stands above any other constituency and requires that a regent avoid even the appearance of a conflict of interest in

carrying out his or her fiduciary obligations. To do otherwise undermines public trust in our nation’s institutions of higher education. . . . Public confidence requires that board members treat their role not as an honorific but as a solemn duty.”

In an interview with Minnesota reporters, ACTA President Michael Poliakoff said that universities must seek to be above suspicion. With UMN’s recent approval of a 3.5% tuition hike, “families are really struggling to make those tuition payments [and] have every right to expect a lot from higher education leadership.”

In March, ACTA assisted a member of the University of Minnesota Board of Regents in drafting a resolution that would create a public comment period during future board meetings. Public comment periods give board members the opportunity to listen to the perspectives of constituent groups and interested individuals and to weigh this information to make well-informed decisions. Comment periods also foster a spirit of transparency, signaling that the board is committed to accountable governance.

ACTA hopes that the UMN Board of Regents immediately approves this crucial resolution. ●

Inside an ACTA/ Braver Angels Debate at Duke University

ACTA recently held a student debate at Duke University, collaborating with Deondra Rose, associate professor of public policy and history. The debate centered on the question, “Should college campuses disinvite speakers whose ideas can be construed as ‘cancellable’?” In the parliamentary-style debate, students on all sides of the issue took to a podium in the center of the room to present arguments for their position.

After the debate, Duke student Manon Fuchs shared, “By directing questions towards the Chair, we had to phrase our questions in such a way that did not attack or undermine the speaker’s opinions. Doing so encouraged thoughtful and respectful dialogue.” Fellow debater James Gao remarked, “I appreciated that Braver Angels’ debate style allowed so much time for questions. . . . their tough, pointed questions forced me to reconsider many of my own beliefs.”

In an interview with Doug Sprei, ACTA’s vice president of multimedia & campus partnerships, Professor Rose said, “I spend a lot of time thinking how we . . . can help equip all Duke students . . . to engage in exercises where they really develop citizenship skills” and learn “how to engage in authentic, transformative, generative discussion.”

Since the founding of ACTA’s College Debates and Discourse Program in partnership with Braver Angels and BridgeUSA, we have held over 90 debates with over 4,000 students at colleges and universities across the country. ●



Duke University debate participants with Professor Deondra Rose and ACTA’s Doug Sprei.



H E A R D

C A M P U S

GWU Resists Cancel Culture

George Washington University (GWU) rejected demands to fire U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, who holds a post at the university as an adjunct professor of law. A student petition with thousands of signatures called for his termination, saying, “With the recent Supreme Court decision that has stripped the right to bodily autonomy of people with wombs . . . it is evident that the employment of Clarence Thomas at George Washington University is completely unacceptable. . . . Judge Thomas is actively making life unsafe for thousands of students on our campus.”

In a June 28 email to the university, Provost Christopher Alan Bracey and Law School Dean Dayna Bowen Matthew said that the university had “received requests from some members of the university and external communities” to terminate Justice Thomas and cancel his constitutional law seminar. They wrote, “Because we steadfastly support the robust exchange of ideas and deliberation, and because debate is an essential part of our university’s

academic and educational mission to train future leaders who are prepared to address the world’s most urgent problems, the university will neither terminate Justice Thomas’s employment nor cancel his class in response to his legal opinions.”

The email continued, “. . . like all faculty members at our university, Justice Thomas has academic freedom and freedom of expression and inquiry.” ACTA commends GWU for adhering in this case to its guidelines on academic freedom and sending a clear message to students that the university protects free expression.

No Intellectual Diversity at Harvard

An annual survey administered by *The Crimson*, Harvard University’s student newspaper, has found that more than 80% of Harvard’s faculty identify as “liberal” or “very liberal.” In the survey of 1,100 members of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, just 1% of respondents described themselves as “conservative,” and none at all claimed to be “very conservative.”

According to *The Crimson*, “When asked whether they would support increasing ideological diversity among faculty by hiring more conservative-leaning professors, only a quarter of respondents were in support. In contrast, 31% opposed hiring conservative professors to increase ideological diversity.”

ACTA Hero of Intellectual Freedom and AEI Fellow, Samuel Abrams, a Harvard graduate, observed: “This anti-intellectual posture is unbecoming of faculty who are supposed to be disciplinary leaders, for they are all well aware of the fact that diversity of thought and disagreement makes ideas and theory better, which is the keystone of America’s higher education system.”

In the echo chambers that increasingly define elite institutions, the wide-ranging debate and civil deliberation that are indispensable to an excellent education are all but impossible. Students should choose a school that encourages free expression and prioritizes hiring faculty with diverse perspectives. ●

Meet ACTA’s 2022 Summer Interns

Eleven interns joined the ACTA team this summer. The interns conducted reviews for the 2022–2023 *What Will They Learn?* report and also contributed to research for ACTA’s *No U.S. History?* project and the creation of a video interview series on free speech. The interns participated in a weekly reading group; enjoyed lunches with higher education policy experts; and toured the National Gallery of Art with ACTA President Michael Poliakoff.

Intern **Kaitlyn Beckett** studied sociology and criminology at Otterbein University. **Monica Boryczewski** is a senior at Franciscan University of Steubenville where she is majoring in English with a concentration in writing. **Elissa Buckles** graduated from Azusa Pacific University in 2020 with a double major in the humanities and interdisciplinary studies. **Ashley Dummitt**, our Robert Lewit Fellow in Education Policy, recently graduated from Washington College and intends to pursue her Ph.D. in political science. **Peter Flanders** is a junior at Arizona State University where he is studying in the School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership. Hillsdale College senior **Jack Golden** is majoring in politics and minoring in mathematics. **Sarah Martin** is a senior at the University of Mississippi where she is studying public policy leadership and minoring in psychology. **Hattie Murray** is a junior at Palm Beach Atlantic University pursuing a double major in politics and pre-law with a minor in philosophy. **Alexander Ruszczynski** is pursuing a master’s degree in American Studies at the University of Virginia. **Nicholas Schau** is a junior at Christendom College where he is double majoring in political science and economics. University of Texas–Austin senior **Tien Vo** is double majoring in math and political science.

Speaking of her time at ACTA, Ms. Murray said, “I have loved working at ACTA and appreciate the fact that the interns are doing important work on the WWTL project. I have also really enjoyed working with the other interns and taking part in all of the excursions and speakers that they had planned for us. I couldn’t have asked for a better first internship!” ●

IN MEMORIAM: David McCullough

The United States, indeed, the world, lost an intellectual giant this week. And the American Council of Trustees and Alumni lost a longtime friend and ally in the effort to promote the teaching of U.S. history. David McCullough was one of our most extraordinary historians, teachers, and authors, more so because his life's work became the narrative of our own national story. His accomplishments and accolades are too numerous to list.

Reading his work taught us about ourselves. He brought America's story and its characters to life in vivid color, while he practiced the historian's craft of meticulous scholarship. He had no patience for teaching history from dry textbooks, noting, "most of them are inconceivably dull, and their political correctness is sometimes ludicrous." He advocated and practiced "the detective work of history, the excitement of the hunt, the thrill of discovery."

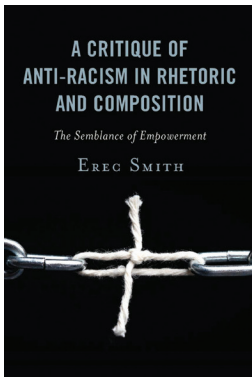
At ACTA's 2011 gala, where he received the Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education, he gave a speech entitled "On Teaching History and History Teaching." It is both a homage and a roadmap for teachers: "I think our teachers are the most important people in our society. I think they are doing the work that matters most and will matter most in the long run. . . . We have to know who we are and where we come from."

David McCullough was, at heart, our teacher, and abundantly earned renown as a "heart-wise historian." We at ACTA will endeavor to preserve and build on his enormous contributions to the core of the liberal arts: putting before us the monuments of the ages to shape our minds and hearts and characters. ●



FROM THE BOOKSHELF: A Review of Erec Smith's *A Critique of Anti-Racism in Rhetoric and Composition: The Semblance of Empowerment*

By Steven McGuire, ACTA's Paul & Karen Levy Fellow in Campus Freedom



Contemporary anti-racist theorists often accuse their critics of perpetuating structures of oppression and inequality. They argue that either one agrees with them, or one is complicit in racism. However, as Erec Smith shows in *A Critique of Anti-Racism in Rhetoric and Composition: The Semblance of Empowerment*, it is quite possible to critique contemporary anti-racism without being guilty of this charge. He denies neither the existence of racism nor the value of anti-racism

rightly understood but recognizes the currently dominant form of anti-racism for what it is: a misguided ideology that undermines the proper function of the university and offers students a false sense of progress and empowerment.

Dr. Smith observes that contemporary anti-racism is grounded in what he calls "the primacy of identity," according to which "the recognition and expression of identity takes precedence over other considerations, and is almost immune to critique." This places it at odds with the purpose of a university because these "other considerations" are some of the essential components of the academic enterprise: critical thinking, dialogue and debate, and independent thought. For the orthodox anti-racists Dr. Smith is critiquing, the "lived experience" of minorities cannot be questioned and takes precedence over critical inquiry and reasoning. Self-expression is more important than adapting to audience expectations (a key feature of rhetoric). Racial

identities are essentialized, and people are judged as authentic or inauthentic versions of their groups rather than being allowed to think and communicate as individuals.

Dr. Smith's central critique is that contemporary anti-racism infantilizes those it is meant to help. Members of certain groups are taught to think of themselves as perpetual victims. Rather than giving minority students tools to succeed in college and afterward, they are taught that doing so (learning to communicate in Standard English rather than African American Vernacular English, for example) would be a violation of their identities and a concession to their oppressors. Unchallenged and untrained, the students of anti-racist pedagogues are left insulated but disempowered.

Dr. Smith offers an alternative based on empowerment theory. In short, he argues that students should be taught to be confident agents who understand their environment, have the tools to interact with it, and are prepared to act productively within it. In a university setting, this means teaching students to think, write, and speak effectively according to the standards of the day.

In sum, Dr. Smith argues that contemporary anti-racism is counterproductive and damaging to our institutions of higher education. Its proponents remain "satisfied with the world constructed in the bubble of a particular field, campus, or even department," and their refusal to engage with other perspectives is a defense mechanism that holds students back and undermines the basic function of the university. ●



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INSIDE ACADEME

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Patrick Henry College Receives an ACTA “A”

As ACTA conducts reviews for the 2022–2023 edition of our annual *What Will They Learn?* (WWTL) report, we are pleased to announce that Patrick Henry College (PHC) has joined our prestigious list of “A” schools. WWTL rates the core curricula of over 1,100 colleges and universities on an “A” through “F” scale based on how many of seven core subjects they require students to study. Out of all the schools we evaluated this year, just 24 institutions require at least six of the seven subjects and qualify to earn an “A” grade.

Patrick Henry College is a private, Christian institution in Purcellville, Virginia. Its wide-ranging core curriculum emphasizes close study of the “great texts and ideas that have stood the test of time.” By gaining mastery of the foundational liberal arts, students develop the skills to think critically and have the opportunity to exercise their “whole range of talents.”

Every student, regardless of major, takes 63 credits in the core curriculum along with intermediate proficiency in a foreign language. A few of PHC’s outstanding core courses include History of Western Civilization, Theology of the Bible, and Economics for the Citizen. ●



Look for the release of our 2022–2023 **What Will They Learn?**[®] ratings this fall.