

**Testimony of Anne D. Neal, President
American Council of Trustees and Alumni
Before the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity**

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I am president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, a national education nonprofit founded in 1995 with a bipartisan network of college and university trustees and alumni across the country. ACTA is dedicated to academic freedom, academic excellence and accountability in higher education. One of our programs, Trustees for Better Teachers, focuses specifically on the ways trustees can help reform teacher education.

We are pleased to appear before you today concerning the petition for renewal of recognition of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE).

At the outset, I should make our position clear. In recent testimony before the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, ACTA called for the elimination of the existing federal accrediting system. In doing so, we cited our booklet, *Can College Accreditation Live Up to its Promise?* where we outline in considerable detail our criticisms of the existing system. While accreditation evolved to assure educational excellence and competence, there is quite a bit of evidence that, in fact, it undermines those values. Rather than focusing on performance, accreditors are more interested in inputs. Rather than focusing on academic quality, numerous examples suggest accreditors are interested in imposing extraneous social and political agendas instead.

That issue is what brings me here today. In practice, current guidelines issued by NCATE result in the imposition of extraneous social agendas that are inimical to the First Amendment and the robust exchange of ideas central to a liberal education. While, as we

have just heard from NCATE, removing “social justice” from the NCATE Glossary is a start, it is not enough.

Let me examine why.

Current guidelines issued by NCATE oblige member schools to evaluate students on attitudes and values and outline the expectation that member schools establish “dispositions” for students to possess *and then enforce them*.

According to these standards, “dispositions” encompass “beliefs and attitudes related to values such as caring, fairness, honesty, responsibility and social justice.” We understand that NCATE president Arthur Wise has stated that NCATE “does not prescribe specific dispositions” that institutions must follow. **However, these amorphous value standards, as applied, give schools unlimited power to control what their students think and do. Eliminating the illustration of “social justice” will not change that or change the significant number of schools which have already adopted this disposition as a veritable political litmus test.**

By focusing on dispositions, NCATE is clearly highlighting—if not promoting—adoption of what can be political viewpoint tests for students seeking teacher certification. And that is surely borne out by even a perfunctory examination of accredited education programs where one can find “disposition toward social justice” has taken a firm hold, even though it has never been mandatory.

The **Penn State College of Education** has one of its goals “to enhance the continuing commitment of faculty, staff and students to diversity [and] social justice.”

In a job description, **Penn State Capitol College’s School of Behavioral Sciences and Education** requires that the position of professor and associate director have a “willingness to advocate for social justice.”

Adelphi University's NCATE-accredited Education School states on its website that “Social justice is a core value ... as reflected in the basic social and philosophical courses offered to our students. ... we remain steadfast in engaging students in dialogue about the economic, social, political, gender, and ethnic inequalities that exist in today's society. ... We teach students to challenge the conventional ways of thinking about mathematics, science, history, English, and language arts. ... Students who are imaginative and empowered become teachers keenly aware of the social injustices of our world, willing to explore ways to alleviate those inequalities.”

In a professors' syllabus, at **Oswego State University**, we find the following description: “The School of Education (SOE) at Oswego State University has recently adopted a conceptual framework that includes a commitment to teaching for social justice in order to ‘prepare individuals who will continually strive for personal growth and become socially conscious catalysts for change’ (SOE, 2000). ... This new initiative is an indication that there are some recognised (sic) sites of social injustices that need to be challenged ...”

According to the **University of Alabama Education School** website: the “College of Education is committed to honoring diversity, respecting differences and promoting social justice...”

What does “social justice” mean? According to the University of Alabama's own description: The College of Education is “committed to preparing individuals to promote social justice, to be change agents, and to recognize individual and institutional racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism. ... It includes educating individuals to break silences about these issues, propose solutions, provide leadership, and develop anti-racist, anti-homophobic, anti-sexist community and alliances.”

Excuse me. Have these schools ever heard about reading, writing and 'rithmetic?

The privilege of academic freedom and considerable autonomy that the public grants to higher education presumes that academic life will be governed by professional norms of scholarly inquiry and education, not advocacy.

But as these verbatim descriptions show, taxpayer funded ed schools—using the amorphous guidelines of NCATE approved by the U.S. Department of Education—are viewing themselves as activist institutions and are confusing social engineering with their job of preparing the next generation of teachers.

Ever since the National Commission on Excellence in Education released the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative of Education Reform*, there has been a growing awareness that our K-12 educational system is not performing well.

On today's standardized tests of basic knowledge and skills, American students compare poorly with those of other industrialized nations—and even some non-industrial ones—ranking close to last out of 21 countries. Nearly one-third of entering college students need to take a remedial course in math or English. And employers report that they have to spend more and more resources on teaching newly-hired workers how to do simple tasks involving reading, writing and arithmetic.

There is no single culprit for our educational weaknesses, but the American Council of Trustees and Alumni—as well as many experts in the field of education—have identified a primary cause: American teachers do not receive good preparation in the teacher training programs they take.

In her book, *Ed School Follies*, education expert Rita Kramer was the first to highlight that prospective teachers are taught little of practical classroom strategies and little academic content. There is instead a real obsession with the ills of society, racism and sexism, with little focus on actual accomplishment and learning.

Are federal accreditors helping to turn this around? Far from it, they are in fact contributing to the problem. As we have heard and can see from our discussion today, the primary accreditor for teacher education—NCATE—has by simply providing a list of possible dispositions been the motivating force behind schools everywhere adopting nonacademic assessments such as “disposition toward social justice.” Even though specific dispositions are not mandated, let there be no mistake: federally approved accreditors, even when making suggestions, wield immense power since they are the gatekeepers for federal funds. Taking the lead from NCATE’s standards, accredited institutions across the country now zero in—**NOT** on academic rigor and academic goals, not on producing teachers who actually know something—but instead on politicized nonacademic assessments such as “dispositions towards social justice.”

What happened to our concern about promoting knowledge and learning?

This focus on fostering teacher “dispositions” is difficult to square with academic freedom and the historic strength of American higher education—namely, a diversity of approaches among institutions.

More importantly, as we have heard and will hear, it is inviting a political ideological litmus test as a condition for a degree or entry into a profession.

According to the *New York Sun*, students at Brooklyn College recently expressed fears that new guidelines were being used against prospective teachers who did not share the political view of their professors. Several students complained they were penalized in a course on high school literacy when they sought to challenge the education professor’s assertion that grammatical English was a language of oppressors.

To do so is patent discrimination against college students on matters of conscience, a violation of the First Amendment and hostile to the very essence of a college education—the robust exchange of ideas.

At a time of reported shortages of teachers with knowledge and skills necessary to address the challenges in K-12, it is surely troubling that NCATE—and by extension, the Department of Education which approves NCATE—is promoting “disposition” standards which, in practice, ignore academic goals and predictably lead to a politicized determination of who is qualified to be a teacher, whether NCATE specifies “disposition to social justice” or not.

We agree with Rep. John Boehner and Education Committee Chairman Rep. Buck McKeon, who after ACTA informed them and others of the “dispositions” standards, contacted NCATE (see attached letter) with their concern that these standards effectively promote a social or political litmus test for prospective teachers—even if they were not originally intended to do so—and urged NCATE to **make clear that teacher preparation programs are not expected to judge the values and political beliefs of teacher candidates. NCATE’s eliminating an example that has already been widely adopted does not do that.**

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni asks you today to refuse to renew NCATE, at a minimum, until it affirmatively makes clear that teacher preparation programs are not expected to judge the values and political beliefs of teacher candidates and asks that its members review and revise their standards accordingly. The Department of Education should demand clearly defined principles which relate directly to a prospective teacher’s future success—namely skills and subject matter knowledge—not feelings, values, and “dispositions.”