

# Students, Citizens and Our Nation's Future

## Alaska State Senate Finance Committee Hearing on SCR1 March 25, 2015

Michael Poliakoff

American Council of Trustees and Alumni



# James Madison 1822

Learned Institutions ought to be favorite objects with every free people. They throw that light over the public mind which is the best security against crafty & dangerous encroachments on the public liberty. ...

What spectacle can be more edifying or more seasonable, than that of Liberty & Learning, each leaning on the other for their mutual & surest support?

# **National Perspectives on Historical Illiteracy**

## *ACTA, Losing America's Memory* (February 2000)

Survey of 556 college seniors at the “Top 25” National Universities and the “Top 25” National Liberal Arts Colleges.

- Beavis and Butthead 99% identified correctly
- Snoop Doggy Dog 98% identified correctly
- George Washington as general at Yorktown 34% identified correctly
- James Madison as Father of the Constitution 23% identified correctly
- Abraham Lincoln as author of the words:  
“Government of the people, by the people,  
for the people” 22% identified correctly

# It Gets Worse

Results of a 2012 survey of recent college graduates  
(GfK Custom Research North America)

**How Long Are Terms for Members of Congress?**

**38.4% identified correctly**

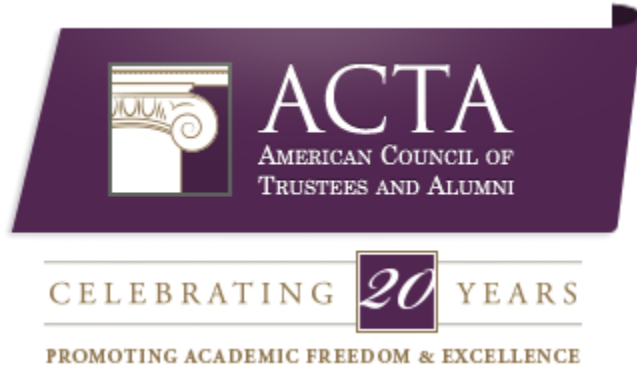
**Who is Lady Gaga?**

**96.2% identified correctly**

# Cause and Effect ...

## ACTA'S Study of the Core Curriculum: What Will They Learn? <sup>TM</sup>

**82%** of four-year colleges and universities do **not** require foundational study of American history or government



**To be ignorant of history, wrote Cicero, is to be a child forever. Centuries later, Thomas Jefferson admonished our young republic that freedom and ignorance can never exist together.**

American higher education has generally abandoned its obligation to prepare graduates who have the knowledge and understanding to take up meaningful roles in our free society. ACTA is working hard to change that.

## **WHAT WE ARE DOING**

### **Understanding the Problem**

Our first task is to help the American public and higher education trustees and policymakers understand the extent of the problem. In 1999 ACTA commissioned the Center for Survey Research and Analysis at the University of Connecticut to survey seniors at the nation's 55 most prestigious colleges and universities to see if they could answer basic questions on the nation's history. These questions were typical of a standard high school curriculum, many of them replicating questions from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The shocking results—81% of these seniors from elite institutions received the equivalent of a “D” or “F”—would soon reverberate through the U.S. Capitol itself.

"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 at Harvard University**

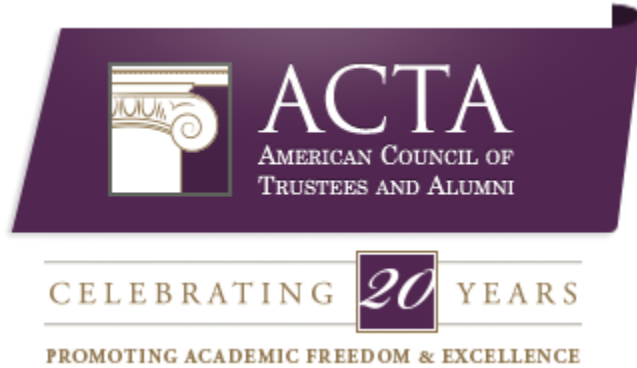
On President's Day, February 21, 2000, ACTA reported the findings in its report, [\*Losing America's Memory. Historical Illiteracy in the 21st Century\*](#), with the endorsement of historian David McCullough. Congress moved quickly. On June 30 of that year, [Concurrent Resolution 129](#), introduced by Senator Joseph Lieberman on behalf of Senators Gorton, Smith, Cleland, Byrd, Conrad, Bennett, and Grams, and unanimously adopted, took note of ACTA's survey. The Concurrent Resolution called for boards of trustees and college administrators, as well as state officials responsible for public higher education, to review their standards and add requirements for the study of United States history.

## **What Will They Learn?™ Project**

ACTA continues to monitor the state of historical knowledge among college students. The What Will They Learn?™ project takes note of which schools require American history or government and which do not. In 2012, we commissioned Gfk Roper OmniTel to [survey college graduates](#) again. Unfortunately, the findings were as dismal as the initial survey. Only 17% of college graduates could identify Lincoln's Gettysburg Address as the source of the phrase, "Government of the people, by the people, for the people." Only 20% could identify James Madison as the "Father of the Constitution." Nearly two-thirds were unaware that the term of a U.S. Senator is six years, and 43% could not even identify the Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

## **Engaging the Public, Trustees, and Policymakers**

In 2012, ACTA testified before the U.S. Congress, endorsing the restoration of a day of commemoration on George Washington's actual birthday. In 2008, ACTA coordinated the publication and release of *E Pluribus Unum*, a report by The Bradley Project designed to start a conversation about America's National Identity. The product of a two-year study involving a number of our nation's leading academics, public figures, journalists, educators and policy experts, it has attracted hundreds of thousands of viewers to its [website](#). In 2003, with support from the Daniels Foundation, ACTA quickly responded to a call from civic leaders and scholars at the White House Forum on American History, Civics, and Service and issued [We the People, A Resource Guide to Promoting Historical Literacy for Governors, Legislators, Teachers, and Citizens](#). Through op-eds and newspaper opinion pieces, ACTA reminds the public of all that our nation loses if it forgets its past. We are in constant contact with trustees, making them aware of the need to ensure a general education requirement for all students that ensures their basic understanding of this nation and its free institutions. And little by little, colleges and universities are rising to the challenge.



## Americans' Limited Knowledge of the Roosevelts Shows Need for Colleges to Restore American History

39% of Americans Don't Know Franklin D. Roosevelt was President During World War II

September 17, 2014

### Only 18% of Colleges Require Even a Single Course in American History or Government

WASHINGTON, DC—As Ken Burns' documentary "The Roosevelts: An Intimate History" airs this week, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni today released [a survey](#) that shows how little Americans know about Theodore and Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

According to the study, 39% of Americans don't know Franklin D. Roosevelt was president during World War II; 59% don't know Theodore Roosevelt had a role in the construction of the Panama Canal. College graduates didn't do much better on the survey. Nearly half didn't know Teddy Roosevelt had a major role in the Panama Canal; one-third didn't know FDR spearheaded the New Deal and almost three in five didn't know he was elected four times. Examine the full survey [here](#).

The survey underscores a problem of historical amnesia made worse by the weak curriculum of many American colleges and universities. According to the *What Will They Learn?*<sup>TM</sup> study, only 18% of institutions require students to take a course in American history or government.

This survey is the latest in a series conducted by GfK Custom Research. Previous studies have included [a 2014 survey](#) on D-Day that found that a quarter of Americans don't know D-Day occurred during World War II, and [a 2012 survey](#) that found only 57% of college graduates know John Roberts is the chief justice of the United States.

#### CONTACT:

Daniel Burnett

Director of Communications

202.467.6787

[DBurnett@goacta.org](mailto:DBurnett@goacta.org)