

SB117 Testimony – Nick Down, The American Council of Trustees and Alumni

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to speak before the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee in support of Senate Bill 117, to establish the Salmon P. Chase Center for Civics, Culture, and Society at The Ohio State University, and the Institute of American Constitutional Thought and Leadership at the University of Toledo. My name is Nick Down, and I am a senior program officer at The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA for short), a national nonprofit that has advocated on behalf of high academic standards, accountability, and the free exchange of ideas at our nation's four-year public and private colleges and universities. Prior to joining ACTA, I spent the better part of a decade working on higher education issues as a senior legislative assistant to former New Jersey Congressman Frank LoBiondo.

23 years ago, my organization brought attention to this problem through a published report, *Losing America's Memory: Historical Illiteracy in the 21st Century*. Since then, ACTA has watched with alarm the continuing decline of knowledge of American civic institutions and the history of their development. We are not alone in monitoring this trend either. The issues that SB117 seeks to address are a matter of bipartisan concern, and we enthusiastically support the proposed legislation because it provides a commonsense solution to this problem.

Few have articulated the imperative better than President John F. Kennedy:

“There is little that is more important for an American citizen to know than the history and traditions of his country. Without such knowledge, he stands uncertain and defenseless before the world, knowing neither where he has come from nor where he is going. With such knowledge, he is no longer alone but draws a strength far greater than his own from the cumulative experience of the past and a cumulative vision of the future.”

Those words went unheeded. In a 1987 survey, about half of the American citizens polled thought that the phrase, “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs,” came from the U.S. Constitution. Regardless of what one thinks of that sentiment, it would improve political discourse to identify it correctly as classic Karl Marx. Flash forward 34 years, a 2021 *Newsweek* poll revealed that 24% of college students had a positive view of capitalism while 32% of survey respondents favored socialism. Given these survey results, it is no wonder that 3% of the 1,100 schools ACTA surveys through our *What Will They Learn?*[®] Program

require a foundational economics course and only 18% a foundational course in American history.

To further illustrate the necessity of SB117, I'd like to point out that Central State University is the only public institution of higher learning in Ohio that requires a foundational course in U.S. Government or History. And here are two more alarming statistics of nation-wide college graduates.

- Only 18% of college graduates could identify James Madison as the “Father of the Constitution”—on a multiple-choice question, and 51% couldn't identify term lengths of U.S. Senators and Members of Congress (<https://www.goacta.org/resource/americas-knowledge-crisis>).
- 10% of college graduates thought that Judith Sheindlin-“Judge Judy”—was a U.S. Supreme Court Justice.

In March last year, a Quinnipiac University poll asked adults across America if they would stay and fight if Russia invaded our borders. Only 45% of men between the ages of 18 and 34 said they would stand and fight, instead of leaving the country. President Kennedy was right: “defenseless before the world.” Let us be clear: ignorance and contempt for our freedoms and civic institutions go hand in hand. Those who do not understand the value of freedom, or the price paid to guard it will not have the will to foster and defend it.

Derek Bok, who served as Harvard's 25th president, diagnosed the problem in a 2020 interview:

“It is widely agreed that an informed and engaged citizenry is important, many would say essential, in order for democracy to flourish or even survive. There is also abundant evidence from national assessments of civic knowledge and from studies of the attitudes and behavior of college-age adults that large numbers of students are neither very knowledgeable nor convinced that government and politics are worth much of their time and attention.”

We have not seen remedies coming from existing university departments. It is noteworthy that at The Ohio State University and University of Toledo, the two institutions that would be privileged through SB 117 to receive state funding, an undergraduate could graduate with a major in history without taking a course on the history of the United States.

Thus, it falls to legislators and governors to bring new resources and new voices to campus. Not infrequently, new institutes and centers pride themselves on the intellectual diversity that is so often lacking on the contemporary campus. In 2021, Tennessee Governor Bill Lee called for an institute committed to “informed patriotism.” The website for the nascent center at University of Tennessee tells us: “Lawmakers from both parties spoke in favor of the Institute’s mission to strengthen civic education and participation while reviving thoughtfulness, civility and respect for opposing viewpoints in national discourse.” The University of Florida’s Hamilton Center, “will highlight the value of debate and disagreement based on a core commitment to the search for truth and will resist the current push to ‘deplatform,’ ‘cancel,’ or professionally destroy those with whom we may disagree.” Arizona State University’s School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership’s website reads: “The School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership is dedicated to fostering a culture of intellectual diversity to facilitate the open and free contest of ideas that are a foundation to a healthy constitutional democracy.”

I would like to leave you with a quote from former President George W. Bush:

“Our history is not a story of perfection. It’s a story of imperfect people working toward great ideals. This flawed nation is also a really good nation, and the principles we hold are the hope of all mankind. When children are given the real history of America, they will also learn to love America. Our Founders believed the study of history and citizenship should be at the core of every American’s education.”

Members of the committee, I need hardly rehearse the devastating reports of deplatformings and shout-downs from Yale to Stanford that have received national attention, just in the last 12 months. Or repeat the disheartening statistics of civic illiteracy. We have before us a strong remedy. Senators Cirino and McColley have done a great service in crafting SB117, and ACTA enthusiastically supports this legislation.