

College Education

College commencement addresses often are collections of bromides and boring advice.

You know what I mean: Go forth, graduates, and save the planet. You are the nation's hope. You have worked hard and learned much from devoted faculty. And don't forget to floss and to use sunscreen. Bor-ing.

Just once, a commencement speaker should puncture the smug complacency and cloying self-congratulation on campuses. Someone should give the following commencement address: Members of the Graduating Class: You who are about to receive your diplomas should also receive an apology from this university – and a refund of a large portion of the tuition you have paid.

You have been cheated, bilked, propagandized and badly educated. Your tuition has been much too costly, for which you can blame the federal government and the avarice of the university.

Washington has produced a bubble in higher education just the way it produced the bubble in housing. Some government planners decided that too few people owned homes. So the planners decided to force an increase in home ownership. They lowered lending standards for people seeking a mortgage. This produced a glut of sub-prime loans – and subprime borrowers. And then a crash.

Next, some government geniuses decided that there were too few college students. So government made student loans and other tuition subsidies easier to get. Of course, colleges and universities responded by increasing tuition to capture these government subsidies. Which is why the cost of college has been rising four times faster than the rate of inflation. The cost of college has increased faster than the cost of health care. There is now well over a trillion dollars of student loan debt. There is more student loan debt than credit card debt or than auto loan debt. Most of you are graduating today with debt. In effect, you are graduating with a mortgage – but no house.

And what did you get for all this expense? A sub-prime education. Today's students study many fewer hours a week than students did a generation ago – but they are getting higher grades. This, too, is a result of government creating perverse incentives. The government money gives colleges and universities a powerful incentive to admit more and more students. Inevitably, this means more and more students who are marginally qualified – or unqualified. Many of these will pay tuition for a few semesters and then leave school with debt – but no degree. Others will plod along, paying tuition, piling up debt, and eventually getting a degree – but not in four years. You have seen the T-shirts that read: "College – the best seven years of my life."

GRIFTING ITS WAY TO GOMMORAH

Those of you who majored in gender studies – or women's studies – or ethnicity studies – or cinema deconstruction – or any other of today's academic fads – to you, I have this advice: When this commencement ceremony is over and you take off your cap and gown, do not bother looking for a job. Instead, go straight to the unemployment office. This university did not equip you to add value to the American economy.

Soon, this university's office in charge of alumni giving will ask you for money. Your response should be: Are you kidding? Instead of sending money to this university, just send a schedule of your student loan repayments.

If this campus is like most campuses, you have been living in a community of enforced conformity.

When you leave, and enter the real world, you are in for a shock. If this is a typical campus, it has a speech code. It has forbidden and punished speech that did not conform to fashionable political pieties. If this is a typical campus, it has used its speech code to teach you that you have a special entitlement. That you are entitled to pass through life without hearing any speech that annoys, depresses, confuses, offends or otherwise distresses you. If this campus is like many campuses, it has a "free speech zone," a small, isolated, inconvenient space where students are allowed to exercise their First Amendment Rights. But guess what? Off campus, out in reality, no one recognizes this entitlement.

You are going to discover that the Constitution makes the rest of America – all of it – a free speech zone. This school has restricted speech in order to protect your tender sensitivities and to protect your feelings from being hurt. When you leave this campus, you will have to unlearn the silliness you have been taught here – the idea that you deserve to be treated as a frail flower.

So, graduates: You have been saddled with debt and bad ideas. Good Luck. You're going to need it.

There. That would be a commencement address worth hearing. But a university sensible enough to invite such a speaker would be a university that does not need to hear such an address.

– George Will

