

The best commencement speech you will never hear

Thursday was graduation night for Ogden High School students. Davis High and Northridge High students graduated on Friday. Spring is the season of graduation. Over the past few weeks, millions of high school and college graduates attended commencement ceremonies.

These students have all heard a commencement speech. Some of the speeches were good. Some were mediocre. Some of the speeches were delivered by celebrities, prominent business leaders and respected political leaders. Some speeches were delivered by those little known outside their home towns.

High schools and colleges select their commencement speakers carefully because the choice of a commencement speaker reveals something about the priorities of the school. This year, the list of those delivering commencement speeches included: President George Bush, U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, former President Bill Clinton, author Maya Angelou, talk-show host Oprah Winfrey and comedian Bill Cosby.

Ironically, some truly great commencement speeches could be given by those who fail in their effort to earn a degree. Graduates could also discover a great deal from the lessons of regret and failure. The author Wallace Stegner, who spent many years in Utah, observed, "The lessons of life amount not to wisdom, but to scar tissue and callus."

Take a moment to consider the commencement speech that could have been given by one of the Duke MBA students expelled for cheating just a few weeks ago. The message would have been lamentable but powerful. I believe it could have been a truly great speech.

In case you don't know the details, 34 first-year MBA students were recently found guilty of academic dishonesty in the largest known cheating incident in Duke's history. Nine of the MBA students were expelled and 15 other students were suspended for one year.

As a commencement speaker, the student could talk of the dream of earning an MBA from one of the most prestigious universities in the world. The student could also talk about the sacrifices made to attain that degree.

Because the MBA is a graduate degree, most of the students in the program are married and many have started families. It is likely that the student had to relocate a spouse and children to support the dream of a Duke MBA. With annual tuition and fees exceeding \$49,000, Duke is one of the most expensive universities in the nation, so it is likely that the student took out loans to finance the dream. The student may have been granted a leave of absence from a good job to pursue the MBA.

The student could explain in painful detail how all this work, effort and sacrifice was lost due to poor judgment. I believe the student would have a compelling message for the graduates of 2007.

Unfortunately, there are many different students at different universities who could give this speech. Just last month, 15 cadets at the U.S. Air Force Academy were expelled for cheating by sharing examination questions on a social-networking Web site. The Indiana University School of Dentistry recently expelled nine students who hacked into the school's password-protected computer system to gain access to test questions before an examination.

These incidents only draw national attention because of the large number of students involved. On hundreds of college campuses, students were disciplined for cheating during the past academic year. Habits of dishonesty that are established in college are likely to develop into lifelong habits.

There is a cliché that you can always tell a Harvard graduate, but you can't tell them very much. It is easy to urge students to be honest. It is more difficult to have this message put into practice. Yet, somehow I suspect that hearing from one of the students expelled from Duke would provide the class of 2007 with a memorable final lesson on integrity as they prepare to pursue their futures.

Top of Utah Voices



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■ Commentary

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