

Are grads stifling free speech?

When I graduated from Earlham College in 1981, the senior class selected its own commencement speaker.

Earlham, a small liberal arts, Quaker college in Richmond, Indiana, encourages students to embrace the values of non-violence, service to others and personal integrity. Thus, we chose a beloved political science professor, whose life and career reflected those same values.

Though not a nationally known figure, or even a Quaker, he proved to be a perfect choice. After celebrating the achievements of the graduating class, he shared some of his experiences at the college, all of which spoke to the school's Quaker mission.

He concluded with the words of the great humanitarian Albert Schweitzer, who encouraged his own students to strive to become "persons of value who give to life, rather than persons of success who simply take from it."

That commencement address was not only personal, but it made a profound impact on me. It was the capstone of an education that changed my life.

Sadly, the annual ritual of choosing a commencement speaker is much more contentious these days.

Disgruntled students and

faculty protest the administration's choice. Perturbed by the conflict, the speaker withdraws and the controversy goes virile. I guess the scenario is unavoidable in an age during which free speech and political correctness inevitably collide on the nation's



William C. Kashatus
Contributing Columnist

college campuses.

This year, Rutgers University in New Jersey and Haverford College, located in suburban Philadelphia, have claimed the ignominious spotlight. At Rutgers, some students and faculty objected to former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's role in the Iraq war during the George W. Bush administration. A resolution calling for the board of governors to "rescind its misguided decision" was passed by the faculty council.

Rice, wanting to avoid a public spectacle, withdrew from delivering the address. Angered by her decision, several student groups complained that Rutgers is not a place where "free ideas and diversity of opinion are encouraged."

What both sides fail to understand is that for all the good Rice

accomplished in foreign policy, she is also an intrinsically divisive figure. The Iraq war created an ideological divide for the American people, including the Rutgers community and their families. Thus, Rice is not a poor choice because she is potentially alienating, but because the controversy surrounding her would have drawn attention away from the achievements of the graduates.

Haverford College's case is slightly different. As a small liberal arts college, Haverford's commencement speakers usually do not generate much national publicity. But Robert J. Birgeneau, who was scheduled to speak, changed that tradition.

Birgeneau, former chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley, is known for his support of undocumented and minority students. But he created a firestorm in 2011 when university police used riot batons and bean-bag guns on students protesting the state's higher education system.

Excoriated for violating students' rights to free speech and assembly, Birgeneau became a symbol of police brutality against student protesters.

That example didn't play well among some faculty and students at Haverford, a Quaker-founded school where non-violence and

free speech are a part of a long and distinguished tradition. Despite that fact, the administration invited Birgeneau to deliver the commencement address.

Outraged by the decision, a group of 50 students and professors wrote to Birgeneau stating that they would support his appearance only if he met certain conditions, including a public apology for his actions, supporting reparations for the victims and writing a letter to Haverford students explaining his position on the controversial events and "what you learned from them."

Predictably, Birgeneau refused and, last week, withdrew from speaking.

The Rutgers and Haverford controversies remind us that free speech works both ways. Sometimes those who protest a speaker are the very ones violating someone's First Amendment rights.

At the same time, a commencement speaker should not overshadow the true responsibility and purpose for which he or she has been invited. That is, to celebrate the graduates and share experiences, values and advice that complement the mission of the institution conferring the degrees.

William C. Kashatus, of Hunlock Creek, is a historian and writer. Email him at bill@historylive.net.