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Charlie Oredigger, the Montana Tech mascot, taking a swing at creationism.

In 1999, [President Clinton spoke at the commencement at my university](#) [7]. For various reasons, students at both ends of the political spectrum were uncomfortable having him at their commencement, and there were vigorous debates about what they should do. To boycott their own graduation would mean letting Clinton ruin the momentous occasion. To protest during the ceremony would ruin the day for their fellow students and families. To attend and say nothing would mean letting their objections go unvoiced, and give the appearance of assent to policies they found problematic.

In the end, the critics attended. Many pointedly refused to shake the president's hand after receiving their diplomas, and they joined the protests before and after the speech when they could. But they wore their robes and mortarboards, celebrated with their friends and family and beloved professors, and sat politely through the commencement address. It struck me as a thoughtful, measured, and effective response that gave voice to their concerns while ensuring that the graduation would be a celebration for the students and their parents, which is ultimately what it's all about.

I'm reminded of that event as I read [stories about Montana Tech's commencement](#) [8], where the commencement address will be delivered by Greg and Susan Gianforte. The Gianfortes are engineers and entrepreneurs who live and work in Bozeman, near where Montana Tech is based. They are also major donors to a range of causes that many [Diggers](#) [9] find abhorrent, including a sizeable donation to a creationist pseudomuseum in Glendive, Montana, as well as local anti-gay efforts, anti-public-education organizations, and religious conservative groups linked to Focus on the Family. Students and faculty at Montana Tech (and Rocky Mountain College, [where they'll also speak](#) [10]) are considering how to respond, with some contemplating a boycott.

Based on my own experience, I'd urge them not to boycott. [The Gianfortes told the Billings Gazette](#) [11] that their speech will not be about politics, but about their careers in high tech, engineering, and

business, topics surely of interest to the students. The Gianfortes ought to, and seem to, realize that they are guests on the campus, and that a political harangue would be inappropriate. Students and faculty may still find the Gianfortes' mere presence offensive, but at least the Gianfortes apparently are not planning to actively antagonize the campus on this day of celebration.

While the idea of a boycott has its appeal, I hate to see students miss their graduation, to have faculty not be there for the students they mentored, or to have students in attendance somehow disrupt the celebration. If the Gianfortes' mere presence ruins the event for a given student or faculty member, obviously that person should celebrate the graduation some other way. But the best way to address bad speech, like what the Gianfortes fund in Glendive, is with better speech. Students and faculty should organize teach-ins to discuss the various aspects of the Gianfortes' politics that they find problematic, including discussions of the errors of creationism.

And the best way to address badly-spent money is to spend more money on good things. The [Montana Human Rights Network](#) [12] does great work, and has helped NCSE and local teachers in battles over evolution just as they've fought to defend the civil rights of many other victims of bias in Montana. The [Montana Academy of Sciences](#) [13] has been a vocal and effective opponent of proposed creationist policies in Montana. And, of course, [we at NCSE](#) [14] monitor creationist activity in Montana and around the country, stopping pseudoscience from undermining science classrooms. Students and their families can frustrate the efforts of those like the Gianfortes by raising money for those groups and others that fight for those students' values.

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[8] [http://www.salon.com/2014/03/27/right\\_wing\\_billionaires\\_creationism\\_and\\_pseudo\\_science\\_why\\_is\\_a\\_wing\\_nut\\_giving\\_com\\_mencement\\_speech\\_at\\_montanas\\_best\\_tech\\_college/](http://www.salon.com/2014/03/27/right_wing_billionaires_creationism_and_pseudo_science_why_is_a_wing_nut_giving_com_mencement_speech_at_montanas_best_tech_college/)

[9] <http://mtech.edu>

[10]

<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2014/03/montana-techs-contentious-commencement-speaker-also-coming-to-rocky/>

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[http://billingsgazette.com/news/state-and-regional/montana/faculty-students-to-boycott-tech-graduation-over-speakers/article\\_77007489-325b-566b-9eb8-ae4796cc1572.html](http://billingsgazette.com/news/state-and-regional/montana/faculty-students-to-boycott-tech-graduation-over-speakers/article_77007489-325b-566b-9eb8-ae4796cc1572.html)

[12] <http://www.mhrn.org/>

[13] <http://sciencemt.org/MAS/>

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