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Rutgers commencement controversy resolved by Rice withdrawal

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Quad 136

Resolved by Rice Withdrawal

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Rutgers Commencement Controversy Resolved by Rice Withdrawal

The ongoing controversy at Rutgers University over the invitation to former Secretary of State (and Stanford Provost) Condoleezza Rice has **ended with her withdrawing** from commencement activities. In a statement released over the weekend Rice said:

Commencement should be a time of joyous celebration for the graduates and their families. Rutgers' invitation to me to speak has become a distraction for the university community at this very special time.

I am honored to have served my country. I have defended America's belief in free speech and the exchange of ideas. These values are essential to the health of our democracy. But that is not what is at issue here. As a Professor for thirty years at Stanford University and as its former Provost and Chief academic officer, I understand and embrace the purpose of the commencement ceremony and I am simply unwilling to detract from it in any way.

Good luck to the graduates and congratulations to the families, friends and loved ones who will gather to honor them.



Rice correctly notes that there are at least two competing values here: free speech (and research) that are essential to the open exchange of ideas, and the purpose of commencement, which is to honor the work and success of students.

The criticisms of Rice's political views and actions should have zero traction in an academic world built on academic freedom, but this particular invitation to Rutgers came at commencement—which must center on students. While the university gets some credit for not bowing to the pressures from politically motivated faculty and students to disinvite Rice, in the end the critics got their way as Rice provides a lesson in grace by stepping aside for the sake of the students and their families.

The lesson from this episode, and others like it, is that commencement's appropriate emphasis on celebration is likely to encourage moderate, uncontroversial speakers who can focus on inspiration. More controversial speakers like Rice, who has a pretty inspirational life story to share, are relegated to lower profile campus events where academic freedom is the

prevailing value.

Like many choices in life, tradeoffs are necessary, though the outcome in cases like this may be to the educational detriment of students and their families celebrating at commencement.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | May 8th, 2014 | Categories: [Higher Education](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).