

# UT commencement: A sliver of idiocracy

Have you ever seen the movie "Idiocracy"? The comedy came out in 2006, directed by Mike Judge, creator of "Beavis & Butt-Head" and "King of the Hill." In "Idiocracy," a completely average (in intelligence, talent, ambition, personal appeal) Army clerk (Luke Wilson) and a prostitute (Maya Rudolph), who has bargained her way out of charges, are guinea pigs in an experiment to send human beings a year into the future.

Instead this odd couple is sent 500 years into a broken-down future. In the year 2505, consumerism and know-nothingism have brought society to ruins after five centuries of satirically depicted "reverse Darwinism."

People with lower IQs, talents and personal motivation have out-bred people who have natural abilities to serve society. However, the future is also in ruins because the so-called high-IQ educated class cares for no one but themselves.

"Idiocracy" is a horror film, too, if you are worried about where our hyper-materialistic culture is heading with our problems in government, education, health care, public services, political leadership and neglect of the common good.

What scared me, when I watched a recorded version, was fast-forwarding on mute through commercial breaks. The commercials blend seamlessly with scenes in the movie. It was hard to tell when today's valueless, mind-numbing commercials ended and the movie about our whole society become terminally bored, self-centered and addicted to mindless consumerism started again.

Returning to the here and now offers little comfort. Let me give one recent example of idiocracy writ large and put up in lights.

This May, I was part of the high faculty turnout for the general spring commencement ceremony at the University of Texas at Austin. While graduates at other universities were being addressed by J.K. Rowling, Bill Cosby, Stephen Colbert, President Barack Obama and Denzel Washington, we listened to Olympic sprint champion and Texas Ex Sanya Richards-Ross, who attended UT for two years a decade ago, talk about herself for 23 of the 25½ minutes her commencement address lasted.

Richards-Ross congratulated graduating students for "fighting the urge to go to Sixth Street every night." We were told that other schools are pretty cool, but the 40

Acres has "one of the best business schools, a national champion football team and the mascot with the most swag." Graduates learned, "It's all about you. The world is your oyster. Failure is temporary. Giving up is permanent." And for 23 minutes, we were given examples of this me-centered, succeed-at-all-costs philosophy. We heard about her training habits, health problems and a few setbacks from grade school onward. She thanked briefly her father, her husband, her family and a nameless ninth-grade teacher, but did not talk about a single coach, teacher or teammate who helped or inspired her along the way.

As for intellectual or cultural content, besides Bevo, the night life on Sixth Street and the 2005 national champion, naturally, version of Longhorns football, we heard one online quote from Aristotle about practicing making perfect and another from Mary Kay Ash, founder of Mary Kay Cosmetics, about never giving up.

One person, besides President Bill Powers, was mentioned by name, but only by first name. Both Powers and Richards-Ross made reference to "Vince," as if everyone in the world should know who Vince is.

Powers explicitly congratulated Vince at the start of the evening for completing his degree. This turned out to be Vince Young, a poster child for lots that is wrong with NCAA and professional sports in our country.

It is good that Young, like other student athletes who get far off track, has persevered to get his degree. But I also thought of all the graduating seniors who struggled unsung to get their degrees on-time in education or social work or engineering, those with UTeach degrees who are already giving back or those headed for Teach for America to give back. I thought of graduates who admire the beauties of calculus, a Faulkner short story, a Maya Angelou poem, a speech by Martin Luther King, a rap song by Lil Wayne.

Our flagship institution of higher education should single out those who will never know fame and fortune, but will win many successes working with people who need what they have worked hard to learn.

True idiocracy may be 500 years away, but a sample was right here, up close, looking at itself in the mirror, at UT commencement this year.

And we politely applauded.

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