LOCAL NEWS: Rockford

Democracy, civility debated at college

A reporter says watching reaction to his speech was ‘heartbreaking.’

By CARRIE WATTERS, Rockford Register Star

ROCKFORD — The Rockford College family debated Tuesday what went wrong at its spring graduation ceremony that featured New York Times reporter and antiwar advocate Chris Hedges.

When do people listen to ideas, and when do they think critically and disagree? When do people sit respectfully, and is there a time for civility to be lost? These and more questions were discussed during a meeting Tuesday on the campus, the alma mater of social activist Jane Addams.

Students, faculty and staff didn’t reach a consensus. And it’s unlikely much of the public will either.

College President Paul Pribbenow maintained that students should be challenged by commencement speakers.

“Commencement is one of the last moments you have with students,” Pribbenow said. “I want commencement to be more than a pop speech.”

Hedges was the keynote speaker for Saturday’s graduation of more than 400 students, but he found an unreceptive audience to a speech peppered with harsh
criticism of the United States’ policy in Iraq.

Hedges’ microphone was twice unplugged. Some guests shouted for him to leave, and others chanted patriotic slogans. A few tried to rush the podium, and at least one graduate tossed his cap and gown to the stage before leaving.

Hedges’ oration was trimmed to 18 minutes as the ceremony threatened to become out of control. The 20-year war correspondent said Tuesday he was disturbed by the emotional response to his speech.

“I didn’t expect that. How can you expect to have anyone climb on stage and turn your mike off,” Hedges said Tuesday during a telephone interview. “Watching it in my own country is heartbreaking.”

Commencement speakers being booed is not new. Former TV talkshow host Phil Donohue was jeered while giving a commencement speech Saturday. He shared liberal views, including those on war, at North Carolina State University.

But this comes at a time when the New York Times is in the spotlight because Jayson Blair, a former reporter resigned under fire. Blair was questioned about deception and plagiarism in his stories.

College officials have attempted in the past year to revive the ideal of civic engagement espoused by 19th-century graduate and Nobel Peace Prize winner Jane Addams. It’s an activist mindset of caring and being active in one’s community, Pribbenow said.

They launched a marketing campaign with the slogan “Think. Act. Give a damn.”

Some would say that’s what some students did.

“Damn, we’re not apathetic anymore,” said 16-year professor Hank Esponsen.

People are deliberating. A father anticipating his daughter’s graduation instead found himself protesting at a bookstore Monday to read Hedges’ book on war.

More than 400 e-mails poured in from across the Rock River Valley and the world, surpassing the small, private programs in 31 majors and master’s programs in business and teaching. It’s one of only 10 institutions in Illinois with a Phi Beta Kappa chapter. Jane Addams graduated from Rockford Seminary (what is now Rockford College) in 1881.

The well-known alumnae is the founder of Chicago’s Hull House, a social reform center. In 1931, she became the first American woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

* As of the fall 2002 semester, the college had 864 full-time undergraduate students from 10 states and 27 countries.

* The average ACT score for freshmen is 23, and the campus population is 62 percent women and 38 percent men.

* A racial breakdown: 84 percent white, 7.5 percent black, 4 percent Hispanic and 3.5 percent Asian.

There are 80 full-
liberal arts college in northern Illinois. Faculty, staff and students wrangled over questions as deep as democracy and as varied as Americans’ views on Iraq.

Professor of economics Michael Sullivan disliked Hedges’ stereotyping of soldiers as people who serve their country because other jobs are not available. The professor entered the military in 1977 with a fellow recruit who was a Ph.D.

Sullivan said a liberal arts education nurtures critical thought about what’s said and whether to buy into it. Saturday’s commencement is a consequence.

Other faculty members countered that respect for a speaker and civility must be maintained, even if the speaker is a poor choice.

“Critical thinking isn’t to heckle a speaker after his first two sentences,” said professor of economics Fred Rezazadeh.

Students at the meeting requested an apology from college administration. A day of accomplishment became a debacle.

The graduation was Pribbenow’s first commencement at Rockford College. An informal group, including the college president, agreed on the speaker. Already, he is creating a formal committee of faculty, staff, board members and students to make recommendations of speakers next year.

Hedges was paid less than $5,000 to speak at the ceremony, Pribbenow said.

Pribbenow regretted the emotional toll the event had on graduates and their family members.

“We had no intention of turning the commencement into a circus.”

Gov. Rod Blagojevich originally was scheduled to give the commencement address, which historically hasn’t stirred much controversy. Most cannot even remember past keynote speakers.

The governor canceled in March, and a New York agency recommended five speakers, among them

Chris Hedges

New York Times reporter Chris Hedges has spent 15 years covering conflicts in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Algeria, Iraq, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in Israel, Kosovo and Sarajevo. He holds a bachelor of arts degree in English literature from Colgate University and a master of Divinity from Harvard University.

Hedges was the Central American bureau chief for the Dallas Morning News and later the Middle East bureau chief for that newspaper, based in Jerusalem, from 1988 to 1990. He was the Middle East bureau chief for The New York Times, based in Cairo, from 1991 to 1995 and later, the Balkans bureau chief from 1995 to 1998. He was a member of The Times team that won the 2002

Source: www.rockford.edu

There are 80 full time faculty members. The ratio of faculty to students is 1 to 9.

Source: www.rockford.edu
Hedges.

Pribbenow should have known what to expect, Hedges said Tuesday. “You don’t invite a speaker like this if you want ‘climb every mountain.’ ”

A glossy send-off is not what the graduates got.

Hedges opened with: “I’m here to talk about war and empire.”

He said the United States was an occupying force, rather than a liberating force. He predicted Iraq would become a cesspool for the United States as it was for the British in 1917.

Some faculty members questioned whether civility is a two-way street and Hedges should have at least acknowledged that he was speaking to graduates on the cusp of a great achievement — a college diploma.

“We did expect him to frame his remarks to a particular people on a particular day,” Pribbenow said.

Campus security tried to calm angered students and audience members, one was a soldier just home from Iraq and about to ship out to Korea.

As graduates crossed the stage to receive their diplomas, a campus security vehicle whisked Hedges off the grounds.

Hedges said what he knew about Rockford was the progressiveness of Jane Addams. What he discovered was uncomfortable and disturbing, although he said he couldn’t paint the entire community with the broad brushstroke of protesters’ actions.

His book, called “War is a Force that Gives us Meaning,” explores the fervor that takes over individual thought in times of war. People no longer feel alienated, but instead, feel they belong to something larger than themselves, Hedges said in his speech.

He viewed what happened Saturday as a manifestation of the phenomenon.

“I find it always frightening when that happens in war time,” Hedges said.
George Kehoe, a 66-year-old father from rural Boone County does not view his reaction as closed-minded. He approached the front of the stage in protest.

He was disturbed, too. Veterans who sacrificed their health were in attendance, Kehoe said.

Kehoe spent more than an hour reading Hedges’ book at a store on Monday night. He didn’t walk out with a purchase.