One big boo

• Wrong speaker, wrong reaction at Rockford College

“Think. Act. Give a Damn.” That’s the new motto of Rockford College. By that measure, this year’s commencement speech was a success.

But when the audience booed the speaker off the stage for his antiwar views, it sent a less noble message. Intolerance. Closed minds. Group-think.

New York Times reporter Chris Hedges had to cut his message short Saturday after he was interrupted by shouts of protest, foghorns and students rushing the aisle in protest. His microphone was unplugged twice. The second time, college President Paul Pribbenow urged Hedges to wrap it up.

Pribbenow made a poor judgment by inviting Hedges to speak at the commencement, a time of comfortable words, pride and reflection on accomplishments. That’s not the tradition at every college, although Rockford College has followed that model.

Pribbenow might have thought he was shaking things up. Challenging the common wisdom. Giving students one last, best chance to exercise their liberal arts education and to learn from other people, even if they don’t agree with them.

These are important messages, but a graduation is not the right place to send them. It’s likely to end up just as Saturday did. Badly.

Rockford College is not the first school, by any means,
to see controversy over commencement speeches. On Sunday, one in eight graduates of Saint Joseph’s University in Pennsylvania walked out in protest before U.S. Sen. Rick Santorum spoke. In earlier comments, Santorum compared homosexuality to incest and bigamy.

Two years ago, President Bush returned to Yale University for a commencement speech. Graduates held up “Yale Women Against Bush” signs. People protested the death penalty. They did, however, give the president a chance to talk — a courtesy not given Chris Hedges.

Hedges said U.S. policy in Iraq amounted to tyranny over the weak. He said the war was betrayal. He said heroic ideals were the failure of original thought. Overcome, a Rockford College graduate from Capron left in tears. Another graduate threw his cap and gown at the stage before leaving. A 66-year-old Boone County man, the father of a graduate, said it hurt to hear his country criticized.

The strong emotions are understandable. What is not understandable is the urge to silence Hedges, to deprive him of the right to share his ideas and deprive other people of the right to hear them.

Where did Rockford lose its tolerance? Where was the danger in hearing what Hedges had to say?

The reaction to Hedges’ speech has made Fox News and the online Drudge Report. More people have clicked on the story on rrstar.com than on all stories on the Web site combined.

We hope the protest reflects emotions that are still raw on the war and that it is not a sign of growing intolerance of unpopular or unorthodox ideas. That’s not Rockford.

And that’s certainly not Jane Addams, Rockford College’s famous graduate and social reformer. She was a pacifist. She opposed World War I, even after the United States entered the war in 1917. Fourteen years later, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Would she have been booed off the stage at Rockford College?