

Folklore pokes fun at college graduates

Special to the
Capital Times

PSH
Faculty
Contribution



Dr. Simon J. Bronner

"Say Something to Them in Algebra:
The College Graduate in American
Humor"

Have you heard this one?

A farmer asks a fellow farmer and father of a recent college graduate, "Well, since Tom has a college degree, can you see any change in the way he plows?"

"No, he plows the same but he talks different," was the reply.

"How do you mean?" the first farmer pressed.

"Well, when he gets to the end of a row, instead of saying 'Whoa, Gee or Haw,' he says, 'Halt, Rebecca, pivot and proceed.'"

If you have heard that one, it was probably from an earlier day. The story is only one of hundreds in the annals of American folklore pitting college graduates against the common folk they left behind.

There's the one about the farmer from West Virginia who sent his son off to college. As soon as the boy came home after graduation, the farmer couldn't wait to take him down to the country store and show him off.

The boy was a little embarrassed by it all, but he loved his dad and was grateful to him for helping him to finance his education. So, he went along with it.

As soon as they got to the store, the farmer proudly exclaimed, "Here's my son, fellers, home from college with a degree in algebra!"

He turned to his son and said, "Well don't be bashful, say something to them in algebra."

The son blushed and said, "Okay...pi-square."

The farmer became flustered when he heard that, and blurted, "Don't be silly boy, pie are round. Cornbread are square!"

In northern California, students like to say that in response to a professor's greeting of "Good morning," a University of California at Davis class writes the greeting down. At Stanford, the reply is "Good morning, professor." But at Berkeley the class retorts, "Hey don't lay your trips on me!"

A variation is told in New England where Smith students typically write down the greeting. Mount Holyoke students stand up and salute, the ones at Amherst bark back, "Prove it." And those at the University of Massachusetts respond, "Will that be on the final exam?" Finally, the students at Hampshire look at one another and say, "Hey man, far out!"

In the Big Ten, rivalries revolve around the most public representatives of our schools--college athletes. There's an old story in the Midwest about how athletes at different big-time colleges introduce themselves to pretty coeds.

A Northwestern player shakes the girl's hand. A Michigan player shuffles his feet. An Indiana player asks her for a date, and the Purdue player phones the coach for instructions.

The joke is related to the old Ivy League test of chivalry when a lady enters a room. A Yale man asks if someone shouldn't bring a chair for her. The Princeton man dramatically brings one,

and the Harvard man sits on it.

The variety and extent of jokes told about American college graduates finding and deriding identities should make us stop and listen for the themes they express about the cultural meaning of colleges in American life. Our jokes and other forms of narrative folklore reveal our perceptions of a very American enterprise--going to college. Jokes about college are particularly common in the United States where more Americans are college-bound than any other nation in the world.

Another farmer questions his son at the dinner table about what he learned in college is told "the study of logic." Asked to demonstrate, the son vows to prove that three chickens lie on the plate when it appears that only two are there. The son sticks his fork in one and says, "Here's one, right?"

"Yes," says the boy's dad. Poking the other one, the boy says, "And this is two?"

"All right," the father follows. "Well, don't one and two make three?" the grad beamed.

"Tell you what," said the old man. "I'll give Mom one of the chickens to eat, I'll take the other and you can have the third. How's that?"

In a day when the return of the college graduate was a special event, jokes circulated widely on the theme of the farmer and the uppity graduate. We have the one about the farmer going into the

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"Certainly, how did you guess?"

"I noticed your class ring when you picked your nose."

town bank for a meeting with a loan executive.

The bank executive asks him, "Are you a farmer?"

"Why sure, how did you know?" the farmer replied.

Proud of his perceptiveness, the exec explained, "I smelled the manure on your shoes."

After the meeting the farmer asks the exec, "Did you go to Harvard?"

Flattered, the executive said "Certainly, how did you guess?"

The farmer shot back, "I noticed your class ring when you picked your nose."

Today, one is more likely to hear the joke told on them of school rivalry. The landscape is jammed with colleges and jokes that help to set them apart.

In North Carolina, one hears about the state grad and another fellow on an airplane.

As they were about to get off, the State grad says, "I bet you went to Carolina."

The other guy says, "I sure did. How did you know? Was is my noticeable macho appeal, my high level of intelligence, my good taste for food and women or what?"

"No," says the State grad. "I saw UNC

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on your class ring when you picked your nose."

Rather than the older lore of culture shock facing the college graduate, most of today's jokes question the value of a degree at a time when the university and its

"It only cost \$2 to make," the former math major said. "I sold it for \$4, and with that 2 percent profit, I built a great business."

culture are so widely accessible. With masses of students attending universities, the humor suggests that colleges have lowered standards and narrowed knowledge.

"After all," students smirk, "you get a B.S., and you know what that stands for. Then, M.S. is more of the same and Ph.D. is the same thing piled higher and deeper."

On the subject of degrees and what they mean, the joke is told about college graduates registering for rooms at a hotel. The first signed "L.B." after his name.

"What does the L.B. stand for?" the clerk asks.

He eloquently explains, "I am a law school graduate and the initials indicate that I have earned my degree as a Bachelor of Law."

The second man put B.J. next to his name and when the clerk asks him about the initials, he answered that he received a Bachelor of Journalism degree.

The third fellow signed his name with an "S.I."

"What on earth does S.I. mean?" the clerk asks.

"Hey, I got my degree in civil engineering," the fellow declares.

Engineers, accused of pursuing profitable careers despite a lack of

imagination and literacy, are the most frequent butts of humor. One circulated sheet going around campuses shows an overgrown oaf holding a diploma in one hand and a slide rule in the other. The caption reads, "Golly, six weeks ago I couldn't even spell 'Enjaneer'--NOW I ARE ONE"

At West Virginia, students walk around in T-shirts emblazoned with the message "I are a college student." This humor is sometimes coupled with the observation that academic success in college doesn't insure prosperity in life, and that in fact, those who fail often come back millionaires.

From Wisconsin, for example, comes the story of the math major who graduated only by the skin of his teeth and the charity of his teachers. At his class's twenty-fifth reunion, he drove up in a Cadillac, wore expensive clothes and showed all the trappings of wealth. When amazed classmates asked him about his secret to success, he explained that he had invented a little gadget which he manufactured in his own plant.

"It cost only \$2 to make," the former math major said. "I sold it for \$4, and with that 2 percent profit, I built a great business."

The college graduate of today's humor is an average sort taking advantage of the system that rewards credentials. We ridicule them, even as we honor the elitist collegians of the past with their classical pursuits. As we have opened up the campus to all who seek to enter and, in the process brought the curriculum down to ear, our humor reveals a questioning of whether we have devalued what we sought to value.

Want to know what our society thinks about college life?

"Say something in folklore."

Simon Bronner is a Distinguished Professor of American Studies and Folklore.

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