

This 1840 Quote Explains Why Black Graduation Ceremonies are Getting So Much Attention

By now you may have heard about the trend of separate graduation ceremonies. These separate ceremonies are reserved for student groups who feel marginalized on campus and opt to walk for their diploma with those who are most like them.

The alternative ceremony with the highest profile occurred in May of 2017, when Harvard held its first graduation solely for black students. As *The New York Times* [notes](#), other colleges are following similar paths:

“The spring, tiny Emory and Henry College in Virginia held its first ‘Inclusion and Diversity Year-End Ceremonies.’ The University of Delaware joined a growing list of colleges with ‘Lavender’ graduations for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students. At Columbia, students who were the first in their families to graduate from college attended the inaugural ‘First-Generation Graduation,’ with inspirational speeches, a procession and the awarding of torch pins.”

Regardless of whether one agrees with these alternative ceremonies, one has to admit that they are being trumpeted as victories of epic proportion – the little man standing bold and brave in the face of immense opposition. According to Alexis de Tocqueville, there’s a reason for this attitude.

In 1840, Tocqueville wrote his famed work, *Democracy in America*, containing a variety of observations on the unique nature of American life. One of these unique aspects included the freedom of association. But as Tocqueville [explains](#) in the following paragraph, a country which has an absence of freedom of association will trumpet any association, no matter how

small, as a huge victory:

“When some kinds of associations are prohibited and others allowed, it is difficult to distinguish the former from the latter beforehand. In this state of doubt men abstain from them altogether, and a sort of public opinion passes current which tends to cause any association whatsoever to be regarded as a bold and almost an illicit enterprise.”

We certainly seem to be treating today’s separate graduation ceremonies like “a bold and almost illicit enterprise,” and we do so largely because they celebrate diversity and equality, traits highly sought after in this day and age.

The irony is, it is this same quest for diversity and equality that seems to have pushed freedom of association (or the freedom not to associate) to the sidelines. Such can be seen in incidents such as the [bakers](#) who refused to make a cake for a gay wedding, or the more recent example of the [farmers](#) banned from market for their similar stance on gay marriage.

If we’re going to give students the freedom of association at their graduations on the grounds of promoting diversity, then don’t we also have to pass along this same freedom to those who hold differing viewpoints, thus violating today’s quest for diversity and tolerance?

Perhaps it’s time we recognize that we can’t have it both ways.

Image Credit: Sgt. Eben Boothby, [U.S. Army](#)