



# High School Graduation

June 7, 2018

Speech by Jessie Schwalb, Class of 2015

We're used to answering questions at GDS: The integral from zero to one of the function quantity  $(3-x)^2 dx$  is equal to what value? Which of the following words means "lofty, pompous language"? Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood. Where are you going to college next year?

There are few questions we haven't been asked to answer during the past four years. Our teachers and administrators asked us about capillary action and completing the square; they've prompted us to think critically about political messaging, about the Eurocentric nature of the history we study, about the biases that shape our politics and Facebook newsfeeds. Our amazing parents have also peppered us with questions: not just about whether we've finished our homework or submitted our college applications, but about who we are going out with, will their parents be home, whether we remember that nothing good happens after midnight.

Luckily this graduation ceremony marks the end--we did it. We're done. No more APs, no more CollegeBoard, no more DBQs. We've wrapped up our high school days and put in our rearview those never-ending questions, standardized or otherwise. We've spent the last four years of our lives, the last 18 really, being told what boxes to check, what questions to answer, "how high" to jump. Isn't it time we, pardon the pun, graduate from that?

High school is about checking boxes, about tasting samples from a menu that our parents and our school and our community and our friends prepare for us. We all tried on lots of personas in high school: I dabbled in theater (lots of eyeliner), ran very slowly with the track team (I still have shin splints), and edited for the Augur Bit. Speaking of the Augur Bit, make sure you check out the latest edition, which is now online! You can find it at [www.The--Forum.Blogspot.com](http://www.The--Forum.Blogspot.com). We're in the process of shedding some of those labels, clinging tightly to others--deciding which to keep and which to leave at home with the extra shoes and stuffed animals. But those boxes, those labels, don't have meaning unless we make them our own. The process of graduating means we get to step away from the parental and predetermined. We've checked other people's

boxes for a long time, subscribing to an outsider's definition of success: an SAT score, a math grade, a soccer goal. But now we must find meaning in a phase of life that doesn't come with pre-created boxes for us to check, or with instructions of "yea high" to jump or "complete this" to succeed. Are we ready to create our own boxes to check, our own menus to order from? If so, we'll need to find space between t-shirts and toiletries to pack the willingness to be vulnerable--that intangible, powerful stuff that will help us figure out for ourselves what is really important, what does success look like, how will we find fulfillment and happiness without someone else giving us the multiple choice to pick from.

There's this weird thing at GDS where we actually enjoy being tested. Our teachers, parents, and friends assume that we'll push ourselves to do more, to do better. But in our passion for learning and doing and succeeding, we sometimes become too focused on the next assessment, too invested in what our grades say about who we are. We check so many other people's boxes that we neglect to create our own. On this, I defer to the ever-eloquent John Green. In one of his CrashCourse lessons, study videos that saved many an AP US history grade, he pretends to be an overeager student.

"Mr. Green, Mr. Green! Is this going to be on the test?" Green answers the grade grubber as follows: "Yeah, about the test. The test will measure whether you are an informed, engaged, and productive citizen of the world. It will take place in schools and bars and hospitals and dorm-rooms and places of worship. You will be tested on first dates; in job interviews; while watching football; and while scrolling through your Twitter feed. The test will judge your ability to think about things other than celebrity marriages; whether you'll be easily persuaded by empty political rhetoric; and whether you'll be able to place your life and your community in a broader context. The test will last your entire life, and it will be comprised of the millions of decisions that, when taken together, make your life yours. And everything--everything--will be on it."

A test with everything on it seems overwhelming, to say the least. We've proved in these past four years that we're really good at pushing ourselves (and succeeding in doing it) in the context of GDS and ACTs, the tests and challenges that others give to us. But we're about to enter a world where the tests – the true tests – are not going to be given to us, but created and voluntarily chosen, by us. And that, in and of itself, is a pretty daunting test.

On MLK Day, our keynote speaker Pastor Lamar remarked, "Privilege endows us with the

responsibility to use it productively.” Privilege endows us with the responsibility to use it productively. We are fortunate to have been at a high school where our questions are not only answered, but encouraged. Some would say too readily encouraged, for I’ve seldom finished an English class without someone questioning the validity of the author, whether we really “need” to read this poem or do that homework. To be productive, we can start by acknowledging privilege: we are lucky to be able to ask questions at GDS. We have been surrounded these past 4 years by teachers, parents, friends, and family who are compassionate, creative, and caring – who have patiently indulged us, and who have created a safe, supportive environment where we are encouraged us to ask. I hope we will continue to question even, and especially, in places where we are discouraged from asking. Privilege is an inescapable part of our identity as GDS students; but it isn’t bad unless we don’t talk about it. When we do, we start to question and think critically about our time at GDS itself: what things are we given growing up where we do, getting the education that we did, experiencing GDS at this moment? We are privileged to be able to check all kinds of boxes, to be successful in ways others cannot. Have we taken this for granted? Having had the benefit of such privilege, how are we now going to use it productively and responsibly?

We’ve seen the power in taking this responsibility to heart: our most meaningful moments as a class and a school have been ones of discomfort, of discussion and change, of times when we stepped back and looked big picture about what it means to be a student here. (When we took time in each grade to talk about Ferguson, or to talk about gender with over 100 students and faculty.) We’ve even begun to push back against GDS norms. A heated argument on the Class of 2015 Facebook page featured more tough questions: Should we conform to the long history of white dresses symbolizing purity and virginity? Are we perpetuating a limited expression of gender through our graduation apparel? We began to ask questions not only of the world, but of ourselves.

Yet we still have another question to answer: are our actions consistent with our aspirations? We talked big about changing the culture and starting a new cap and gown tradition, but here I am in a white dress. We asked the question, but stopped there. We instill a passion for diversity in GDS community members but have selected two white students to speak at graduation. Are our actions consistent with our aspirations? More important than asking good questions is acting on them: which requires we be aware of our privilege, roll up our sleeves, and get a little

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vulnerable. Perhaps the most challenging question we are about to face is this: Are we ready to institute the values we've been taught?

As we move forward, we keep testing ourselves, creating our own boxes. And soon, the test that Mr. Green talks about is less about being right than it is about showing up, being aware, pushing and learning and testing in a way that goes beyond Socrates and subintervals. The point isn't that we'll always win or be successful: it is, hopefully, that we've learned how to ask the right questions, how to look at ourselves critically.

We didn't just learn integration and imperfect subjunctive here: at GDS we've begun to ready ourselves for a different type of test, one that Mr. Green assures us doesn't end anytime soon. This test asks whether we arbitrarily let others ascribe meaning--or if we create that meaning ourselves, enabled by the privilege we have. It questions whether we are eager and driven for things other than multiple choice. It forces us to prepare for the fact that we have to start grading ourselves now, and sometimes we might not do so well. It is filled with the questions that strike to the chest, that force us to evaluate the person we're creating and what work remains to make ourselves better.

We need not fear that next test. We're ready for it. GDS and our parents have prepared us well and, perhaps most poignantly, we have prepared ourselves. So I say to the class of 2015: Good luck. I know that we'll begin asking the difficult questions, and I'm confident that, on balance, we'll get the answers right. Congratulations, you deserve it!