

Graduation speeches in the US are turning flashpoints. Mathures Paul reports

Why GenZ is hating on AI

Spring in the US has long meant pomp, circumstance and platitudes on university campuses. This year, it means something different — open revolt. Industry bigwigs stepping up to the commencement podium expecting applause are instead being drowned out by a chorus of boos. The Class of 2026 isn't buying what's being sold and two words in particular are setting them off — artificial intelligence.

Companies attributed nearly 1,00,000 layoffs to AI between 2023 and March 2026, according to global outplacement and coaching firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas. Parents fret about AI's role in education and its effect on children's mental health. A recent Gallup poll found that seven in 10 Americans oppose the construction of data centres in their local areas. Nearly half of all proposed data centre projects this year have been scrapped or delayed.

And yet, industry executives keep getting the messaging wrong, widening the divide between AI enthusiasts and sceptics at the very moment a little humility might go a long way.

From tech bosses to music moguls, AI is striking a raw nerve. At the University of Arizona, former Google chief executive Eric Schmidt was met with loud jeers the moment he touched on the subject.

"There is a fear in your generation that the future has already been written — that the machines are coming, that the jobs are evaporating, that the climate is breaking, that politics is fractured

and that you are inheriting a mess you did not create," he said, pausing repeatedly as the boos washed over him.

This has not deterred executives from pressing ahead with their AI evangelism. Scott Borchetta, chief executive of Big Machine Records and the man who first signed Taylor Swift, told graduates at Middle Tennessee State University, "This industry will change on you in a heartbeat... Streaming rewrote the economics, social media rewrote the discovery model. AI is rewriting production as we sit here."

His response to the inevitable jeers? A breezy "I know it. Deal with it. It's a tool." Not exactly the rallying cry of the moment.

Several theories have emerged to explain why commencement speeches are becoming such flashpoints. The first centres on jobs, specifically the disappearance of entry-level ones. Junior-level job postings on the platform Indeed fell seven per cent in the US in 2025. Graduating into that climate, it's little wonder young people are on edge.

A second theory suggests that graduates, bombarded by alarming headlines, feel

threatened and misled — even if, in time, they may be best placed to adapt to and benefit from AI. A third holds that young people, yet to land their first proper job, simply don't want to be told by someone considerably older and considerably wealthier that they must embrace the very technology they fear will replace them.

A fourth theory reaches beyond AI altogether. According to the World Happiness Report, in a ranking of happiness changes for under-25s, the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand rank between 122 and 133 in the list of 136 countries (though US overall is on number 23). When an entire generation is that unhappy, scepticism about any new technology is perhaps inevitable.

Graduates heading into creative fields face particularly pointed threats from generative AI tools. The president of the California Institute of the Arts, Ravi S. Rajan, was met with jeers

from students in mid-May

— not surprising, given that CalArts has long been a beloved incubator of animation talent, an industry now staring down an existential challenge. Rajan has faced criticism pushing AI adoption at the university through corporate partnerships with tech companies.

Things took a more farcical turn at a commencement ceremony for Glendale

AI & You



Scott Borchetta of Big Machine Records

Community College in Arizona, where the mood turned openly hostile after it emerged that the college's new AI system had failed to read out more than half the students' names as they crossed the stage. If you were looking for a metaphor for AI's limitations, you'd struggle to find a better one.

A rare bright spot came from Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak, who read the room beautifully at Grand Valley State University in Michigan. Rather than lecturing graduates, he offered them a knowing wink. "You all have AI — actual intelligence. My entire life in the technical world, I've been following people trying to figure out how to make a brain — software, hardware, synapse chips. And I was at a company where the engineers figured out how to make one. It takes nine months."

Wozniak has also said he doesn't use AI tools much, finding their output too smooth, too polished, too impersonal. "I want something from a human being," he said, "and I'm often disappointed."

That sentiment is precisely what this generation seems to be asking for.



Apple's Steve Wozniak addresses students at Grand Valley State University in Michigan, US