

EDITOR'S PICK

MY VIEW: Want to be a Valedictorian? Please reconsider

By BRIAN MCGEE President, Quincy University Aug 15, 2021



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Each year, at most high school commencement ceremonies across the country, two students are recognized as having the highest grades in their graduating class. The student with the highest grade-point average is the valedictorian. The student with the second-best record is the salutatorian. Occasionally, thanks to unbreakable ties, multiple valedictorians or salutatorians are named.

As president of Quincy University, I value the recognition of academic excellence, and I always want to congratulate students for their accomplishments.

A problem, though, is that recognition of valedictorians and salutatorians has taken a dysfunctional turn.

In May, a Texas high-school graduate was told she finished third in her class. She thought she had finished first – and sued her school district. Days later, a news story told of a Mississippi high school where another tense dispute over how to calculate grade-point averages led to co-valedictorians and salutatorians being recognized.

These stories are distressing because, as I will explain, valedictorian or salutatorian status has no meaningful impact for the great majority of the people who receive those honors.

First, you may be surprised to know that high schools don't agree on how to calculate class rank. One high school's methodology might rank a student first, while the same student would be fourth at another school. There is no consistency or rigor in the calculation of class rank.

Second, the differences between first, second, and tenth can be trivial, with only a few fractions of a point separating students. As a practical matter, there is no meaningful academic difference between a grade-point average of 4.155 or 4.147. Encouraging students to believe these differences are important is unhealthy.

Third, and most fundamentally, people sometimes think finishing in one of the top two spots will help them get accepted at elite universities. However, universities make their admission decisions long before the spring academic term ends and final grades are calculated. Valedictorian status, for example, never matters where college admissions are concerned.

A very few universities do give extra scholarships to students who earn valedictorian honors. In my view, these scholarships are a bad idea, but these extra scholarships are the only benefit I have ever identified where a valedictorian's title is concerned.

A few high schools have recently stopped designating valedictorians and salutatorians. Given the recent cases in Texas and Mississippi, I am inclined to encourage this trend.

Finally, a confession: Long ago, I was a high-school co-salutatorian. There's a gold sticker on my diploma that says so.

Did being a salutatorian have any effect on my life?

No. None at all. None whatsoever.

So, for those of you who are part of the Class of 2022: Study, do your best, act with honor in all things, and earn the highest grades you can. But, please, don't worry about your class rank, and, whatever you do, don't file a lawsuit over it.

Dr. Brian McGee is the 24th president of Quincy University. He is a Midwest native with over 20 years' experience in higher education. Prior to coming to Quincy University, he was provost and executive vice president for academic affairs at the College of Charleston (South Carolina), where he worked for nearly fifteen years.

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