

## Best in Class

### MARGARET TALBOT

A senior fellow at the New America Foundation, a nonpartisan think tank, Margaret Talbot (b. 1961) writes about the cultural politics of the United States in the twenty-first century. She has been an editor at *Lingua Franca* and the *New Republic*, and currently she is a staff writer for the *New Yorker*. In the following selection, which appeared in 2005 in the *New Yorker*, Talbot examines the impact of naming a single valedictorian, multiple valedictorians, or none at all.

Daniel Kennedy remembers when he still thought that valedictorians were a good thing. Kennedy, a wiry fifty-nine-year-old who has a stern buzz cut, was in 1997 the principal of Sarasota High School, in Sarasota, Florida. Toward the end of the school year, it became apparent that several seniors were deadlocked in the race to become valedictorian. At first, Kennedy saw no particular reason to worry. “My innocent thought was What possible problem could those great kids cause?” he recalled last month, during a drive around Sarasota. “And I went blindly on with my day.”

The school had a system in place to break ties. “If the G.P.A.s were the same, the award was supposed to go to the kid with the most credits,” Kennedy explained. It turned out that one of the top students, Denny Davies, had learned of this rule, and had quietly arranged to take extra courses during his senior year, including an independent study in algebra. “The independent study was probably a breeze, and he ended up with the most credits,” Kennedy said.

Davies was named valedictorian. His chief rivals for the honor were furious—in particular, a girl named Kylie Barker, who told me recently that she had wanted to be valedictorian “pretty much forever.”

Kennedy recalled, “Soon, the kids were doing everything they could to battle it out.” As we drove past sugary-white beaches, high-rise hotels, and prosperous strip malls, he told me that the ensuing controversy “effectively divided the school and the community.” Kennedy took the position that Davies had followed the school’s own policy, which he had been resourceful enough to figure out, and whether he should have been allowed to load on an easy extra class was beside the point. He’d done it, and he hadn’t broken any rules. Davies’s guidance counsellor, Paul Storm, agreed. In an interview with the Sarasota *Herald-Tribune* at the time, he said of Davies, “He’s very clever. He said, ‘I want to be valedictorian. I’ve figured out I need to do this and that. Can you help me?’ Denny had a good strategy, and this strategy was available to anyone who was a competitor.”

Barker’s supporters argued that what Davies had done was a sneaky way of gaming the system. “It never crossed my mind to approach it as a *strategy*,” Barker, who is . . . pursuing a Ph.D. in chemistry at Northwestern University, said. “I just

thought it was something you worked really hard for.” Kimberly Belcher, who was ranked third that year, and who is now studying for a doctorate in theology at Notre Dame University, told me, “Among our friends, who were sort of the Academic Olympics and National Honor Society types, it was a big deal. Most of the people I knew thought that it was unfair of Denny to use what we thought of as a loophole to take a class that was too easy for him, and to do it secretly. We felt betrayed. I’m not angry anymore, but, boy, I was angry then.” Davies, who is now a captain in the Air Force, and is stationed in Germany, said that he didn’t care to comment about the dispute, except to say that he was a “firm believer in the idea that people benefit from healthy competition.”

During the final weeks of the school year, Kennedy was meeting with both sets of riled parents, and students were buttonholing him in the hallway. “I’m telling you, it was hostile!” he said. Some teachers considered boycotting graduation; students talked about booing Davies when he walked out onstage. Kylie Barker’s mom, Cheryl, said that she recalls getting a call in the middle of the day from Kylie’s chemistry teacher, Jim Harshman, who asked her to pick up Kylie from school, saying, “She’s in a pressure cooker here, and she’s about to burst.”

Kennedy tried to broker a compromise. Davies had suggested that he and Barker be named co-valedictorians, and Kennedy embraced the idea. But the Barkers weren’t excited about it. “The principal was trying to make everybody happy, and when you do that there’s always somebody who isn’t,” Cheryl Barker said. “I guess it was me.”

Kennedy remembers finally “convincing everybody to agree reluctantly—and I do mean *extremely* reluctantly—to have co-valedictorians.” He went on, “I have been in education basically my whole life, and I’ve been to a lot of graduations in my time. But I dreaded this one. Sarasota High is a big school—three thousand kids—and there were probably seven thousand people in the audience. At that time, it felt like half of the students in the room hated one of those two valedictorians and half hated the other. The tension was so thick that I was sitting up there in my cap and gown sweating buckets the whole time.” In the end, both students got through their speeches—Kylie’s was about integrity—without incident. But Kennedy, a likeable traditionalist who has been married to his childhood sweetheart for thirty-seven years, concluded that it was time to get rid of valedictorians at Sarasota High.

Kennedy convened a committee to consider various alternatives, and it was decided that from then on all students in the top ten per cent of the class—which at Sarasota means about seventy-five people—would march in first during graduation and have an asterisk printed next to their names on the program. “Students and parents got to see more kids recognized,” Kennedy said. “It made everybody feel better.”

Sarasota is a competitive school district—while visiting the area, I saw a car with a bumper sticker that read, “My Child Was Student of the Month at Tuttle Elementary”—but most of the local high schools have followed Kennedy’s lead.

Riverview High School has also eliminated valedictorians and salutatorians; Booker High School ended the tradition last year. Four years ago, North Port High opened near Sarasota. George Kennedy, its principal, recalled thinking that it “would be easier to just start out without valedictorians, so we wouldn’t be taking something away later on.” He added, “There’s an awful lot of clawing and scratching to get to the top. You have families at some schools coming in freshman year saying, ‘How can my kid get to No. 1?’ And the pressure that puts on teachers is inexcusable. ‘Valedictorian’ is an antiquated title, and I think it has more negative connotations and effects than positive ones.”

When Kennedy left Sarasota High to form a charter school, the Sarasota Military Academy, in 2001, he did not even consider having a valedictorian. Kennedy has an amiable way about him, but he’s not kidding when he says, “My advice to other principals is, Whatever you do, do *not* name a valedictorian. Any principal who does is facing peril.”

At one time, it was obvious who the best students in a school were. But now the contenders for the valedictorian title, especially at large, top-performing suburban high schools, are numerous and determined. Many schools offer Advanced Placement courses—and sometimes honors and International Baccalaureate classes—extra weight when a student’s G.P.A. is calculated, so that an A earns 5.0 points, versus 4.0 in a regular class. Students who fill their schedules with A.P. classes, as the ambitious ones tend to do, can end up with G.P.A.s well above 4.0.

Jim Conrey is the director of public information at Adlai Stevenson High School, in Lincolnshire, Illinois—a public school with forty-five hundred students that is well funded enough to have such a thing as a director of public information. Students at the top of their class, Conrey said, are often separated by one thousandth of a decimal point. A few years ago, a school committee issued a report saying that “parents routinely phone the principal’s office to express their concern over the competitive nature of our numerical ranking practice. Minuscule differences between the ranks of two students can often be perceived as major differences. Is a student ranked No. 1 in a given class really the ‘best’ student in that class?” As of this year, Stevenson High will no longer have a valedictorian and a salutatorian. Instead, students can apply to speak at graduation, and a faculty panel will select two winners. “If you go to a really good school, you could be ranked a hundred and thirty-fourth in your class and still be a really good student,” Conrey said.

Between 1990 and 2000, the over-all mean G.P.A. of high-school students increased from 2.68 to 2.94, which is attributable in part to grade inflation and in part to the fact that students are working harder. Last year, more than a million students took at least one A.P. course. During the nineteen-nineties, the percentage of students taking A.P. or International Baccalaureate classes in math more than doubled, from 4.4 per cent of graduating seniors to 9.5 per cent. My own high school, North Hollywood High, in Los Angeles, had three or four A.P. classes when I graduated, in 1979 (a time when we were told that our most illustrious alumnus

was Bert Convy, the game-show host; Susan Sontag had gone there, too, but nobody mentioned her). Now it has twenty-two.

Some schools, responding to the critique that competition has got too bruising, have decided that naming a single valedictorian is part of the reason that today's students have become so anxious. (Many small private schools came to this conclusion long ago, and never adopted the valedictorian tradition.) An organization called Stressed Out Students, which is headed by Denise Clark Pope, a Stanford education professor, has a list of about twenty-five schools, mostly in the Bay Area and Silicon Valley, that have pledged to try to make students and their parents less driven. Pope told me that "it would be healthier to eliminate valedictorians or change the rules, so that, for example, anyone who wants to can put their hat in the ring, and then there can be a vote for the best graduation speaker. Then you get a person who really wants to give a speech. It's not an academic contest."

15

A number of schools now call everyone who gets a 4.0 or higher a valedictorian. At Cleveland High School, in the San Fernando Valley, there will be thirty-two valedictorians this year. At Mission San Jose, in Northern California, there will be twenty-three. "We have such an outstanding student body that it was just hard to get that definitive," Stuart Kew, the principal of Mission San Jose, said. "Occasionally, we get the criticism that it's so watered down it doesn't mean anything. But the students don't feel that way." On graduation day, each of the school's many valedictorians will speak at a ceremony, where, one hopes, the chairs will be comfortable.

The single-valedictorian tradition is also being endangered by lawsuits. In 2003, Brian Delekta, who narrowly missed having the highest G.P.A. in his class, sued his school district, near Port Huron, Michigan, asking that he be credited with an A-plus, instead of an A, for a work-study class that he took at his mother's law firm. (In addition, Delekta asked for a restraining order on the publication of class rankings.) In another case that year, Blair Hornstine, a senior at Moorestown High School, in New Jersey, and the daughter of a New Jersey superior-court judge, sued the local board of education to be named the school's sole valedictorian; she also asked for two hundred thousand dollars in compensatory damages and more than two million dollars in punitive damages. Hornstine had an unspecified illness that caused "substantial fatigue," and, with the consent of the school district, she had taken many of her classes at home, with private tutors. Her transcript showed twenty-three A-pluses, nine A's, and a single A-minus; two-thirds of her classes were A.P. courses. Her weighted G.P.A. was 4.6894, which reportedly put her .055 points ahead of her closest competitor, Kenneth Mirkin.

The school board, however, decided that Hornstine's home instruction had given her an unfair advantage and that she should share the valedictorian title with Mirkin. Judge Freda Wolfson sided with Hornstine. The defendants, she wrote, "should revel in the success" of their accommodation to a student's disability "and the academic star it has produced," instead of seeking "to diminish the honor that she has rightly earned." In her ruling, Judge Wolfson nevertheless made a larger

point about the insidious effects of naming a top student. “The fierceness of the competition in Moorestown High School is evidenced by the widespread involvement of parents in this dispute, which may have been fueled by the school’s emphasis on grade-based distinctions,” she wrote. “While the school’s Handbook states that it seeks to minimize competition by no longer reporting class rank . . . elsewhere it heightens the levels of competition by naming a valedictorian.” The case inspired a mocking Web site, the Blair Hornstine Project, and a flood of vitriolic Internet commentary; Hornstine was so excoriated by critics in her home town that she did not even attend graduation. The Moorestown Board of Education acknowledged no wrongdoing but eventually agreed to an out-of-court settlement, under which Hornstine was reportedly paid sixty thousand dollars. (Harvard, which had admitted her to the Class of 2007, rescinded the offer not long after a local paper for which Hornstine had written a column revealed that she had plagiarized material.)

I recently spoke to some students who had been involved in legal actions over the naming of a valedictorian, and they seemed to share a common attitude toward the experience. On the one hand, they shrugged off the importance of the honor—they had gone on to colleges where valedictorians were so plentiful that to have claimed bragging rights would have been seriously uncool. On the other hand, they could easily recall their high-school state of mind, and feel indignant all over again, utterly convinced that they had done the right thing. In 2003, Sarah Bird, a senior at Plano West Senior High School, in Plano, Texas, requested a hearing before the local school board. Another student, Jennifer Wu, had been named sole valedictorian, although her G.P.A. was virtually identical to Bird’s. Bird had played on the school’s basketball team. The sport was treated like a physical-education course by the school, and for several semesters she had been given unweighted A’s. This had put her at a disadvantage, Bird felt. The hearing, at which Bird’s lawyer asked that the two students be named co-valedictorians, involved some very close parsing. Brent William Bailey, Bird’s lawyer, told me, “Going in, the other girl had a G.P.A. of 4.46885 and Sarah had 4.46731—so that was a difference of .00154. Then the calculations were redone and Sarah came out with a G.P.A. of 4.47647.” The school board granted Bird’s request. “I was prepared to go ahead with a lawsuit if it hadn’t gone our way,” Bailey recalled. Wu, who expressed unhappiness over the decision to the *Dallas Morning News*, then requested a hearing of her own, to question the way the process was handled. Wu is now a sophomore at Harvard, where she is a premed student. We spoke just before finals, and she clearly had other things on her mind. “Nobody in college cares about your having been valedictorian,” she said. “My roommate had no idea I was valedictorian. It doesn’t come up, and I don’t think about it.” Still, when I asked Wu why she had complained to the school board, she said, “I wanted to make sure the school knew how traumatic something like this can be—thinking you’re competing under one set of rules, and having an expectation because of that, and then finding out you’re competing under another.”

\* \* \*

Stephanie Klotz's academic ambitions made her stand out at Valley View High, in Germantown, Ohio, from which she graduated in 2001. "We weren't from here originally," Klotz told me. "My dad had been in the military, and we'd lived in Pennsylvania, Idaho, Texas, and upstate New York. I knew there was a big world out there, and I was going to go out and conquer it. I wasn't going to get married right out of high school and be a housewife with twenty kids." Klotz paused, but not for long. "I mean, Germantown is a place with only three stoplights. I come from a very educated family, and expectations are set at a higher level than they are in a small farming town." Then, too, Klotz said, she was always kind of a "nerd—a science nerd, a nature nerd." She continued, "My dad went deer hunting when I was three years old, and they were cutting up the deer next door, because my mom wouldn't let it in the house, and I was, like, 'Daddy, can I play with the head?'" As a young girl, she loved accompanying her father, an anesthetist, to the hospital, where she was allowed to observe surgeries. At Valley View, where football is very popular—T-shirts bear the slogan "Valley View Football Is Life. Nothing Else Matters"—Klotz was often unhappy. She doesn't like football, and was captain of the dance team, which, she said, "got me made fun of—that and being smart. I'd say, 'I want to see *you* do a kick line for an hour!'" She also worked with the town's rescue squad ("I was so service-oriented; I did hundreds and hundreds of hours of service work"), loved science, and hated English and history. She was often "bored to tears" in classes that she found insufficiently challenging, but she got straight A's anyway, as well as tens of thousands of dollars in college-scholarship money.

Several weeks before the school year ended, the principal of Valley View told Klotz that she and four other students would share the valedictorian title. Klotz thought the decision was odd—as she recalled, one of the girls had got a B—but she let it go. "Notices were sent out, relatives notified," her father, Randy Klotz, said. Three of the students had G.P.A.s above 4.0 because they'd taken at least one A.P. course, whereas Stephanie, whose G.P.A. was 4.0, had not. (Instead of taking A.P. history in her junior year, Stephanie, who hoped to become a doctor, had decided to take another chemistry course.) Three weeks before graduation, Stephanie was told that the school was reversing its decision: she and Megan Keener, another girl with a 4.0 G.P.A., wouldn't be valedictorians after all. (Keener, too, lacked A.P. credits, though she had been taking classes at local colleges.) Two students with G.P.A.s above 4.0 would be named co-valedictorians, and a third would be salutatorian. "I would be nothing," Klotz recalled.

When Klotz told her parents, they complained first to the principal, then several times to the school board. Finally, the family hired a lawyer and sued the school district, the superintendent, and the principal of Valley View. A judge in the Common Plea Court of Montgomery County, Ohio, sided with the Klotzes, and, days before graduation, issued an order reinstating Klotz and Keener as valedictorians.

"At first, I was, like, I'm seventeen, I can't be dealing with this before I graduate from high school," Klotz told me. "I'm not strong enough. And then I thought,

I need to fight for the people who are coming after me, who really aren't strong enough to fight." Graduation day, she recalled, "was kind of a comedy event, really. I was sitting there, bored, twirling my tassels." Klotz said that she wasn't allowed to speak, because the decision to reinstate her title was made just before graduation day. One of the valedictorians who did speak, she recalled, "read that Dr. Seuss book 'Oh, the Places You'll Go!' to the audience. I mean, she read practically the entire book." Klotz remembers being given "so many academic awards and plaques, it was ridiculous. Every time I sat down, I had to get up again to get an award. I had so many plaques I literally couldn't carry them off the stage, and I'm, like, 'Oh, yeah, right, I'm not valedictorian?'"

Klotz graduated magna cum laude from the University of Dayton in May, and will start medical school at the University of Cincinnati in August. At college, Klotz realized that she was "a little fish in a big sea with a lot of valedictorians." But she's glad that she sued: she learned that she could be a fighter when she needed to be, and she showed Germantown that she couldn't be "walked all over." Klotz, who is engaged to be married to a social worker, is working as a waitress until school starts. To her fiancé's chagrin, she's been watching a lot of "trauma-and-E.R. shows" at home. (He lacks her strong stomach.) "There's so much focus on all the terrible things youths in our society do—murdering each other, using drugs—that I think it's good to focus on the positive things, as opposed to people who are dropping out and are failures," she said. "There are all these special programs to keep kids in school, give them a special experience, make them feel special. So much of classroom experience is focused on these kids who are *lacking*. There's nothing to reward the kids who are self-motivated and are working hard."

The first public high school in the United States, Boston's English Classical School, was founded in 1821. Within a few decades, the practice of designating a valedictorian had become an established tradition in American high schools. There was little public financing of secondary schools and a good deal of hostility to them, at least until the eighteen-eighties. High schools were so widely criticized as palaces of privilege, teaching Latin to the children of the rich, that Horace Mann, the education reformer, tried for a while to come up with a new name for "high school," reasoning that perhaps the phrase implied "superior and exclusive," William J. Reese notes in his 1995 history *The Origins of the American High School*. (In fact, many high-school students in the nineteenth century were middle-class girls training to support themselves as teachers.) By 1900, roughly ten per cent of American adolescents were enrolled in high school, and public funding remained relatively small.

25

The graduation ceremony, and in particular the valedictory, served an important purpose for proponents of publicly funded secondary education. A clever graduate declaiming loftily was something to show off to the local taxpayers, and, besides, graduation ceremonies were popular entertainments in an age that lacked television and radio and honored elocution and oratory. "By the late eighteenth-fifties, approximately four thousand spectators attended the graduation exercises

at Philadelphia's Central High School—and twice that number was turned away,” Reese writes. “Eight to ten thousand citizens arrived for the event in Cleveland in the eighteen-seventies.” In smaller towns, five hundred or more people might show up to see five or six graduates.

The valedictorian prize also celebrated people who weren't often publicly recognized: studious girls. In the nineteenth century, young women largely outperformed young men in American high schools. They generally won more prizes, graduated at higher rates, and displayed lovelier penmanship. At graduation, girls would read while sitting or standing on a low step, since it wasn't considered proper for them to speak from a platform. Still, the opportunity to appear before an audience of hundreds or thousands, to be singled out for one's academic achievements, must have been heady at a time when modesty and self-effacement were the constant counsel for young women.

In 1981, two professors, Terry Denny and Karen Arnold, began following the lives of eighty-one high-school valedictorians—forty-six women and thirty-five men from Illinois. (Their sample is, admittedly, narrow.) According to Arnold's 1995 book *Lives of Promise: What Becomes of High School Valedictorians*, these students continued to distinguish themselves academically in college; a little less than sixty per cent pursued graduate studies. By their early thirties, most were “working in high-level, prestigious, secure professions”—they were lawyers, accountants, professors, doctors, engineers. Arnold totted up fifteen Ph.D.s, six law degrees, three medical degrees, and twenty-two master's degrees in her group. The valedictorians got divorced at a lower rate than did the population at large, were less likely to use alcohol and drugs, and tended to be active in their communities. At the same time, Arnold, who stays in touch with her cohort, has found that few of the valedictorians seem destined for intellectual eminence or for creative work outside of familiar career paths. Dedicated to the well-rounded ideal—to be a valedictorian, after all, you must excel in classes that don't interest you or are poorly taught—the valedictorians had “used their strong work ethic to pursue multiple academic and extracurricular interests. None was obsessed with a single talent area to which he or she subordinated school and social involvement.” This marks a difference, Arnold said, from what we know about many eminent achievers, who tend to evince an early passion for a particular field. For these people, Arnold writes, a “powerful early interest evolves into lifelong, intensive, even obsessive involvement in the talent area.” She goes on, “Exceptional adult achievers often recall formal schooling as a disliked distraction.” Valedictorians, by contrast, conformed to the expectations of school and carefully chose careers that were likely to be socially and financially secure: “As a rule, valedictorians relegated their early interests to hobbies, second majors, or regretted dead ends. The serious athletes among the valedictorians never pursued sports occupations. Most of the high school musicians hung up their instruments during college.”

Becoming a valedictorian at a top high school is a grueling trajectory—involving perhaps a dozen A.P. classes and hours of study each night. Sometimes students

cave in to the pressure. In 2002, Audrey Lin, one of Mission San Jose's many valedictorians, admitted that she had cheated to get to the top in high school, and gave back her valedictorian plaque. Lin, who is now a student at Berkeley, made her confession in conjunction with the release of a study by the Josephson Institute of Ethics, in which three-quarters of the high-school students surveyed acknowledged having cheated on a test the previous year; ten years earlier, the number had been sixty-one per cent.

In some ways, it seems that the valedictorian is a status designed for a simpler time, when few people aspired to college. It isn't entirely suited to a brutally competitive age in which the dividing line between those who go to college and those who don't may be the most significant fissure in American society, and in which the children (and parents) of the upper middle classes have been convinced that going to an exceedingly selective college is the only way to insure wealth and happiness.

Still, perhaps something is lost if schools eliminate valedictorians. Like spelling bees, the contest for valedictorian offers a pleasing image of a purer meritocracy, in which learning and performing by the rules leave one hard-working person standing. It seems sad to abolish the tradition—and faintly ridiculous to honor too large a group. (If we're trying to be more sensitive, doesn't it make ordinary students feel *worse* when they can't be one of several dozen valedictorians?) Maybe the answer is to stick to one valedictorian but to make the rules of the contest clear, and to be sure everyone knows them. Maybe the honor should go to the student who is not necessarily the smartest but the most adept at running a peculiarly American kind of academic marathon, one that requires prodigious energy, tactical savvy, and a Tracy Flick-like determination. (Remember the Reese Witherspoon character from *Election*?)

"Over the past ten years, a lot of school districts have been abolishing the valedictorian, and I'm against that," Karen Arnold told me. "On the day we allow anybody who's always wanted to be a quarterback to play on the high-school football team, *then* we can get rid of valedictorians. If we rank anything, we ought to rank what we say is most central to school, which is to say, academic learning."

A few weeks ago, I met Cheryl Barker, the mother of Kylie, the girl at Sarasota High School who, as it turned out, was one of the last two valedictorians at the school. Her daughter went to Furman University, in South Carolina, then to Northwestern. Cheryl Barker was a waitress when Kylie was in high school, and she is now the manager of a family-style restaurant in Sarasota. Her husband owns a print shop, and they have two younger children, a daughter who is graduating from Florida State this year and plans to go to law school, and a son who just graduated in the top ten per cent from Sarasota High.

Cheryl Barker still marvels at how hard Kylie worked, how determined she was, how she never missed a day of school, how she'd go to the library all the time to use the computer because they didn't have one at home. Barker thinks that it was

a mistake for the high school to stop naming a valedictorian and a salutatorian. “Those kids all know who the No. 1 and 2 are, anyway,” she told me over coffee. “Everyone’s so afraid of getting sued or losing their jobs these days that they try too hard to candy-coat things.” But, she added, “there are some kids who what they’re good at is studying. That’s what they do. They deserve something special to strive for. They do.”

.....