



# Class rank weighs down true learning

Teaching and grading schemes that work to select the most talented students often fail to benefit all students and to notice promising students.

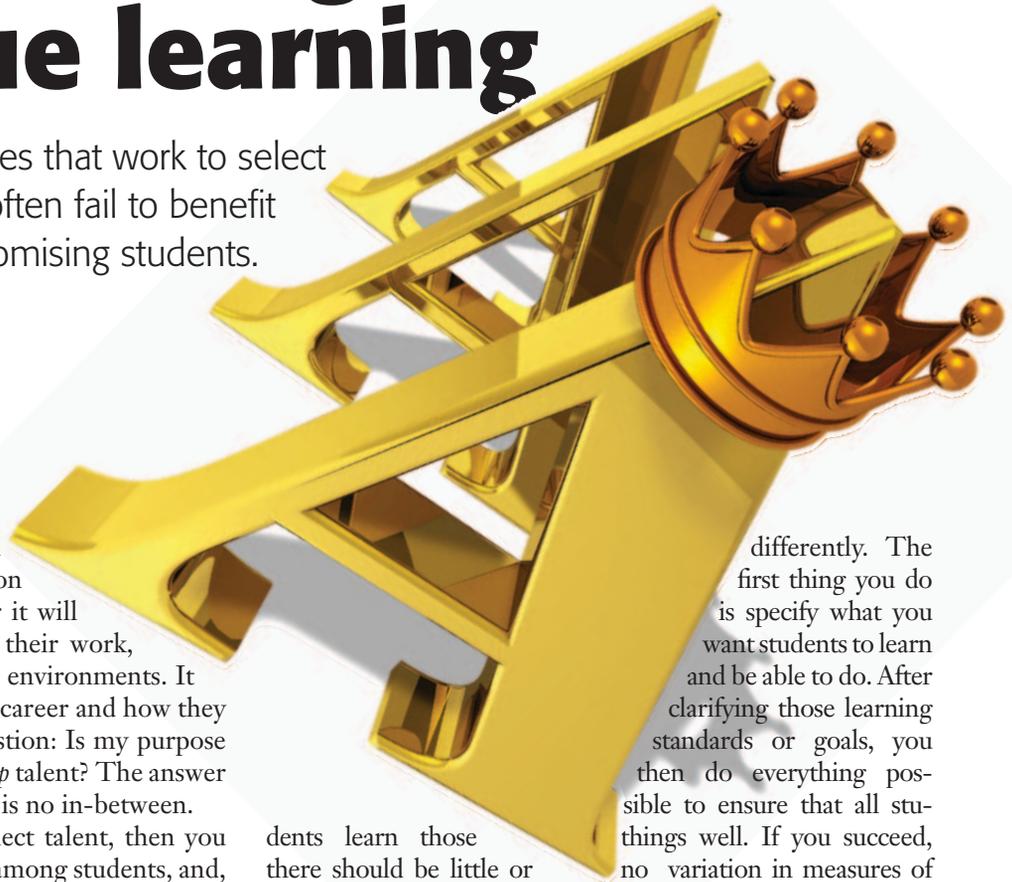
**By Thomas R. Guskey**

As they consider reforms in policy and practice, educators face one basic question about their purpose. How they answer it will largely determine how they go about their work, especially in standards-based education environments. It also will establish the direction of their career and how they judge their success. The one basic question: Is my purpose to *select* talent, or is my purpose to *develop* talent? The answer must be one or the other because there is no in-between.

If you decide your purpose is to select talent, then you must work to maximize the differences among students, and, on any measure of student learning, you must try to achieve the greatest possible variation in student scores. If lots of students score at the same level on a measure of their learning, discriminating among them becomes very difficult. In order to select the most talented students you must teach and assess learning in ways that allow you to distinguish those students with greater talent from those with less. You must spread out the scores.

Unfortunately for students, the best way to maximize differences in their learning is poor teaching. Nothing does it better. If you want to accentuate the differences among students, then teach them as poorly as possible. A few students will be able to direct their own learning and achieve at a high level, regardless of what the teacher does. But the vast majority of students need guidance and direction in their learning. To learn well, they need to engage in structured learning opportunities and receive support from their teachers. Without such opportunities and support, they're likely to learn very little. Differences in student learning will be maximized, and this variation will be evident in any measure of learning.

On the other hand, if you decide your purpose as an educator is to *develop* talent, then you go about your work very



differently. The first thing you do is specify what you want students to learn and be able to do. After clarifying those learning standards or goals, you then do everything possible to ensure that all students learn those things well. If you succeed, there should be little or no variation in measures of student achievement, and all students will attain similar high scores on assessments of their learning. When your purpose is to develop talent, this is precisely what you strive to accomplish.

Standards-based approaches are built on this premise. In standards-based education environments, teachers and students unite in efforts to have everyone learn well. This doesn't mean that standards-based teachers treat all students the same. On the contrary, standards-based teachers adapt instruction to individual student needs in order to help all students develop their talents and master agreed-upon learning goals.

## Why class rank?

This fundamental question about purpose relates directly to computing students' class rank. Why do we do it? Why do we believe rank-ordering all students in every graduating class is important and necessary?

In most high schools, students are ranked according to their cumulative grade-point average (GPA). The procedures used to calculate students' GPAs vary from school to school. Some high schools consider grades from all of a student's courses while others include only courses in designated academic areas. Some schools assign equal weight to grades from all courses in computing student GPAs, while other schools employ complicated weighting strategies that attach higher

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value to grades attained in courses perceived to be more academically challenging (Downs, 2000).

If we go back to the original question about whether our purpose is to select talent or to develop talent, then the answer as to why we calculate cumulative grade point averages to determine students' class rank is clear. Rank-ordering the students in every graduating class has nothing to do with developing student talent. Rather, it is unquestionably about selecting talent.

Determining class rank does not help students achieve more or reach higher levels of proficiency. With the possible exception of the top-ranked student, class rank also does nothing to enhance students' sense of self-worth, their confidence as learners, or their motivation for learning. On the contrary, evidence indicates ranking students may diminish student motivation (Covington, 1992). If we say our purpose is to develop talent, then computing class rank is unmistakably counter to that purpose.

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High school educators argue that they're compelled to rank-order graduating students because selective colleges and universities require information about class rank on applications. But, although that might have been true in the past, it is not nearly as prevalent today.

In a recent survey, Eric Hoover (2012) found that only 19% of colleges and universities give class rank "considerable importance" in the application process. Most admission officers expressed serious skepticism about the meaningfulness of class rank. Among the traditional measures of student quality, class rank was "widely described by admissions officers as the fuzziest" (Hoover, 2012, p. A1).

The importance of class rank has changed significantly in recent years because college and university admission officers recognize the striking differences in student populations at different high schools and the tremendous variation in the way high schools compute class rank. Every state has high schools that serve advantaged student populations and send over 80% of graduates to some form of higher education. Every state also has high schools that serve primarily economically disadvantaged students and, often due to factors over which students have no control, less than 30% of graduates go on to higher education. The GPAs and class ranks of students at these schools can

reflect significantly different levels of achievement.

David Lang (2007) offered further evidence skeptical of class ranking. In a survey of 232 of the 500 largest public high school districts in the U.S., he discovered that schools varied widely in their ranking procedures. Many systems had inherent flaws that provided incentives for students to enroll in less rigorous classes or to avoid taking additional classes due to potentially detrimental effects on their class ranking. Some high schools used unweighted GPAs while others applied different weights to classes of varying perceived difficulty.

Such differences are especially problematic with the recent rise in scholarship programs for students based on class rank. Several states and state universities offer scholarships to students who graduate at the top of their class or maintain a high GPA throughout high school (Downs, 2000). Other states have "percent plans," where students in a specified top percentile of their graduating class are guaranteed acceptance to a state college or university. In most instances, these plans are a response to the removal of affirmative action policies previously used in the admissions process at state universities (Lang, 2007). By guaranteeing that a certain top percent of students in each high school's graduating class can attend a state university, policy makers can ensure that students from poor and sometimes segregated high schools have access to public universities and will continue to be represented in college classes.

Selective colleges and universities have a vested interest in high schools rank-ordering their graduates. Ranking helps admission officers at these institutions discriminate among the applicants so they can more easily choose the few they will admit. It is the job of college and university admission officers to select talent. The question for high school educators, however, is this: Is your purpose also to select talent? If that is not your job, then why do college and university admission officers' jobs for them? Why compute every graduate's class rank when ranking helps nobody but perhaps the very top ranked students and could be hurting the majority?

### Selecting the valedictorian

A related issue to rank-ordering high school graduates is the process of selecting the class valedictorian. Most educators today recognize the negative consequences of grading "on the curve" and have abandoned the practice. They understand that when student grades depend on their relative standing among classmates, learning becomes a highly competitive endeavor in which students must compete against each other for the few scarce high grades awarded by teachers. But these same educators fail to recognize that the same negative consequences



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accompany the process used in most schools to select the class valedictorian.

There is nothing wrong with recognizing excellence in academic performance. All educators champion the idea of acknowledging students' outstanding scholastic achievements. All also want to provide incentives for students to work hard and do their very best. But, in most U.S. high schools, the student chosen to be the class valedictorian is the one who attained the highest, weighted grade-point average by whatever procedures the school uses to make those calculations. In other words, the selection process is based on the rank-ordering of graduates with each student pitted against all others for that singular distinction. This often results in aggressive and sometimes bitter competition among high-achieving students to be that top-ranked individual.

Early in their high school careers, top-achieving students analyze their school's selection procedures for picking the class valedictorian. Then, often with the help of their parents, they find ingenious ways to improve their standing in comparison to classmates. Gaining the honor requires not simply high achievement; it requires outdoing everyone else in the class. And sometimes the difference among these top-achieving students is as little as one hundred thousandth of a decimal point in their weighted grade-point average. Stories abound of students gaming the system in order to gain some advantage; about friendships among students ruined by the fierce competition; and about students avoiding classes in dance, music, or the arts because even an A in an unweighted class can bring down their GPA. There are also numerous reports of parents threatening lawsuits because they believed their child had somehow been wronged in the process (Valedictorians, 2012).

Some high schools address this issue by identifying the top 10 ranked students in the class. But while this policy may ease the tension among those top 10 students, it does little for the student ranked eleventh. Plus the choice of 10 is quite arbitrary. Why not 12? Or 20? Or the top 10%, as is used in the percent plans described earlier? Regardless of the number or percent chosen, the result is the same. Excellence is not defined in terms of rigorous and challenging learning criteria. It is defined in terms of a student's relative standing among classmates.

Ironically, the term valedictorian has nothing to do with achievement. It comes from the Latin, *vale dicere*, which

means, "to say farewell." It is the individual selected from the graduating class to deliver the commencement ceremony's farewell address, which is called a "valedictory."

The first reference to the term "valedictorian" appeared in the diary of the Rev. Edward Holyoke, president of Harvard College in 1759, who wanted to include a student among the speakers at the graduation ceremony. Wanting to ensure fairness in the selection process, he turned the responsibility over to the students and later noted that "Officers of the Sophisters chose a Valedictorian." Lacking any established criteria, the Sophisters (senior class members) selected the graduate with the highest academic standing.

Shortly thereafter, colleges and universities moved away from competitive ranking procedures to identify honor students and instead adopted the criterion-based Latin system, graduating students *cum laude*, *magna cum laude*, and *summa cum laude*, — with honor, with great honor, and with highest honor. Such status is generally awarded based on students' cumulative GPAs, typically 3.50 to 3.74 for *cum laude*, 3.75 to 3.99 for *magna cum laude*, and 4.0 for *summa cum laude*. In turn, most colleges and universities also altered their procedures for selecting the student commencement speaker.

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Depending on the institution, the valedictorian at a college or university commencement ceremony might be selected by a vote among high-achieving graduates. In some cases, the entire graduating class nominates and then votes for the person who best represents the ideals of the class. Sometimes, the faculty appoints the valedictorian based on a system of merit that takes into account not only grades but also involvement in service projects and extracurricular activities. At some institutions, students compete in an essay contest to give the valedictory speech; at others, the faculty members nominate students for the honor. Only high schools maintain the competitive practice of selecting the valedictorian based solely on students' cumulative grade-point averages.



**Do current policies for selecting the class valedictorian foster development of the traits we most value in students?**

#### **After the speech**

An interesting aspect of the valedictorian selection process is the kinds of students who gain the honor and what happens to them after they graduate. One of the most comprehensive studies of high school valedictorians is the Illinois Valedictorian Project, a longitudinal study of the life paths of 81 high school valedictorians, 46 women and 35 men. This investigation followed the progress of these top high school achievers for 14 years to study the nature of their academic success, its costs and rewards, and its effects on their careers and personal lives. Karen Arnold (1995) summarizes the results in her book, *Lives of Promise: What Becomes of High School Valedictorians*.

In analyzing over 11,000 pages of interview transcripts, Arnold (1995) found that while most valedictorians were successful, well-adjusted, and psychologically healthy, they were seldom at the head of the class in their careers. Most chose conventional careers as accountants, physicians, lawyers, engineers, physical therapists, and healthcare professionals, and worked well within the system. But few were risk takers or mold breakers, and they were unlikely

to change the system. They worked hard and followed the rules, but rarely proposed innovations or explored unfamiliar areas. Arnold summarized the results saying, "Just because they could get A's doesn't mean they can translate academic achievement into career achievement" (Howe, 1995, p. 2).

The question this leaves for educators: Do current policies for selecting the class valedictorian foster development of the traits we most value in students? And if not, what policies might?

Clearly, we should honor outstanding academic achievement, hard work, and perseverance in academic tasks. But what about service, caring, compassion, and a sense of social justice? We certainly want students to understand the system and be able to work within it. But should we reward those who find clever ways to game the system? Do we want students who merely follow the rules, or do we want them to question the rules and propose ways to make the rules better? Do we want students to be risk takers who persist in the face of occasional failure, or do we want them to avoid taking chances and be reluctant to explore new areas for fear that they might not be as successful as hoped?

#### **Alternatives**

An increasing number of high schools have resolved this problem by adopting the Latin honor system similar to that used by colleges and universities, requiring a specific GPA to graduate cum laude, magna cum laude, or summa cum laude. Wilson High School in Reading, Pa., made this change after hearing from past valedictorians that they felt victimized by the competition to maintain the highest GPA and that it made high school an unpleasant experience. Under the new policy, Wilson rewards students for academic achievement measured against a standard of excellence instead of comparing them to their peers (Heesen, 2013).

The response of both parents and students to the change at Wilson High School has been overwhelmingly positive. In describing the change, one high-achieving Wilson student said, "I feel that the new system puts the focus on your education instead of competing for a name" (Heesen, 2013, p. 2). The valedictory at the graduation ceremony is delivered by a student chosen by a committee of faculty members, and any senior can audition.

Other high schools have addressed the problem by naming multiple valedictorians. Similar to the Latin honor system, this distinction is based on rigorous academic criteria rather than a ranking of classmates. West Springfield High School in Fairfax County, Va., for example, typically graduates 15 to 25 valedictorians each year. Every one of these students has an exemplary academic record that includes earning

the highest grade possible in numerous honors and Advanced Placement classes. Instead of trying to distinguish among these exceptional students, the West Springfield faculty decided that all should be named valedictorians. All of the valedictorians are named at the graduation ceremony, and one student, selected by his or her fellow valedictorians, delivers the commencement address.

Some might object to a policy that allows multiple valedictorians, arguing that colleges and universities give preference to students who attain that singular distinction. But current evidence indicates that this is not the case at the most selective institutions. Duke University, for example, recently rejected 58% of valedictorians who applied; the University of Pennsylvania rebuffed 62%.

In reviewing admission applications and making decisions about scholarships, a recent report by the National Association for College Admission Counseling (Clinedinst & Hawkins, 2012) shows that colleges and universities are more interested in the rigor of the curriculum students have experienced. The top two admissions factors were grades in college prep courses (Advanced Placement) and the strength of the curriculum. Other research similarly revealed that an index composed of the number of Advanced Placement courses taken, the highest level of math studied, and the total number of courses completed is a much stronger predictor of college success than grade-point average, class rank, or standardized test scores (Adelman, 1999). The rigor of the academic program experienced by the valedictorians from West Springfield High School helped them gain admission and win scholarships to many of the most selective colleges and universities in the nation.

## Conclusion

Recognizing excellence in academic performance is a vital aspect of any learning community. But such recognition should not be grounded on norm-based criteria that lead to deleterious competition, especially in a standards-based environment. Instead, it should be based on clear models of excellence developed from standards that represent our highest aspirations and goals for students (Guskey & Bailey, 2010). Educators more concerned with developing talent than with selecting talent should take pride in helping the largest number of students possible meet these rigorous criteria and high standards of excellence. Students will too. **K**

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"Remember me, Mrs. Falzone? The kid you always yelled at for leaning back in his chair during class?"