

Emma Stone plays a high school valedictorian in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*.



# Should Schools Have Valedictorians?

Some schools have abolished this traditional honor for the top senior

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**YES** Recognizing the top graduating student is one of the few ways American schools publicly reward scholarship and hard work.

Academic effort and achievement are all too often not at the center of high school culture, with friendships and athletics usually higher on the prestige scale: In the high school hierarchy, wearing an honor society graduation tassel isn't nearly as cool as wearing a varsity letter jacket.

But being valedictorian is the one academic honor that does matter to students. We understand that athletes and performers merit special honors because their achievements represent hard work, focus, and motivation. So why shy away from awarding honors to students who succeed in academics?

Opponents of naming valedictorians point to problems with competition for the top spot. Maybe the answer is to increase the number of scholastic honors; it doesn't mean we should do away with the only meaningful academic award currently offered in many schools.

In 1995, I co-authored a book on what becomes of valedictorians later in life. We studied 17 years of data and determined that valedictorians become hardworking, productive adults whose educational and career achievements remain outstanding.

As a nation, we have a vital stake in developing the talents of our young people. That's why we should keep recognizing educational achievement by continuing the valedictorian award and establishing other meaningful academic honors. •

**—KAREN ARNOLD**

Professor of Education, Boston College

**NO** The process of selecting a class valedictorian based on the highest weighted GPA harms more students than it helps. It pits students against each other in sometimes bitter rivalries. Stories abound of students gaming the system to gain advantage, friendships being ruined by the fierce competition, and students avoiding classes in the arts because even an A in an unweighted class can bring down their GPA.

Outstanding academic achievement should certainly be recognized. But what about other qualities, such as commitment to service, compassion, integrity, and a sense of social justice? Where do curiosity, initiative, and creativity come in? Should students be reluctant to explore new areas for fear that they might not be as successful as hoped? Or should they be inquisitive risk-takers who explore new areas and persist in the face of occasional failure?

Many colleges no longer name valedictorians. High-achieving students can graduate *cum laude* (with honor), *magna cum laude* (with great honor), or *summa cum laude* (with highest honor).

Some high schools have moved to an honors system similar to that used by colleges: All students who meet the criteria qualify. These schools find that achievement goes up as more students begin striving for honors, and morale improves as students begin helping each other attain honors.

By abolishing the selection of a valedictorian, schools can take pride in helping the largest number of students possible meet the highest standards of excellence. •

**—THOMAS R. GUSKEY**

Professor of Education, University of Kentucky

**Selecting a single valedictorian pits students against each other.**