



# Top Student, Top School?: How Social Class Shapes Where Valedictorians Go to College

*Alexandria Walton Radford*

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Most of us think that valedictorians can write their own ticket. By reaching the top of their class they have proven their merit, so their next logical step should be to attend the nation's very best universities. Yet in *Top Student, Top School?*, Alexandria Walton Radford, of RTI International, reveals that many valedictorians do not enroll in prestigious institutions. Employing an original five-state study that surveyed nine hundred public high school valedictorians, she sets out to determine when and why valedictorians end up at less selective schools, showing that social class makes all the difference.

Radford traces valedictorians' paths to college and presents damning evidence that high schools do not provide sufficient guidance on crucial factors affecting college selection, such as reputation, financial aid, and even the application process itself. Left in a bewildering environment of seemingly similar options, many students depend on their parents for assistance—and this allows social class to rear its head and have a profound impact on where students attend. Simply put, parents from less affluent backgrounds are far less informed about differences in colleges' quality, the college application process, and financial aid options, which significantly limits their child's chances of attending a competitive school, even when their child has already managed to become valedictorian.

*Top Student, Top School?* pinpoints an overlooked yet critical juncture in the education process, one that stands as a barrier to class mobility. By focusing solely on valedictorians, it shows that students' paths diverge by social class even when they are similarly well-prepared academically, and this divergence is traceable to specific failures by society, failures that we can and should address.

Watch an interview of Alexandria Walton Radford discussing her book  
here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F81c1D1BpY0>



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