

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Even high school valedictorians need career guidance, study shows

CHAMPAIGN, Ill. — A 14-year study of high school valedictorians finds that stellar academic achievement doesn't necessarily mean the sky's the limit. Earning straight A's doesn't guarantee high career aspirations, a smooth transition from school to work, or outstanding professional success, says the leader of the national study, adding that part of the "fault" lies with higher education.

"The promise of higher education to develop the talents of bright, motivated students is not always kept," says Karen Arnold, who is in charge of the Illinois **Valedictorian Project**, a study of 81 former Illinois high school valedictorians from the class of 1981. A professor of education at Boston College and a visiting scholar at Radcliffe College's Murray Research Center, Arnold began the study of academic success when she was a graduate student at the University of Illinois. Her findings will be released in a forthcoming book, "Lives of Promise: What Becomes of High School Valedictorians."

While the broad story of the valedictorians is one of "continued success," Arnold said, certain students have been far less able to transform their academic talent into professional triumph. Arnold found that minorities, women and first-generation college students are the most likely to fall short vocationally because they lack knowledge of occupational alternatives and career-management processes, and because no one at their college or university provided it.

"For *all* students, a network of career-exploration opportunities, sponsors and mentors is a critical accompaniment to course work," Arnold said. "Without a web of faculty involvement and nonacademic opportunities, even the best grade-earners do not acquire the tacit knowledge needed to travel exceptional career pathways."

Put another way, the process of translating academic skills into career achievement requires "finding an appropriate vocational channel and knowing how to negotiate that channel," she said.

Arnold also has found that the valedictorians she studied went on to perform magnificently in college and graduate school, to establish successful personal lives and attain fairly high levels of professional work. However, most of the former academic stars, now in their early 30s, "appear unlikely to end up as mold-breaking, transformative leaders." Eighty percent of the former valedictorians chose educational and career paths "leading to secure, prestigious, well-paying professions" that offered "scant possibilities for creative eminence," Arnold said. Only two people chose alternative lifestyles or creative occupations. Other findings of the study include:

- Child-rearing – anticipated or actual – continues to "define" female achievement.
- The most vocationally successful former valedictorians are those who "approached college intellectually, letting intrinsic interests guide their choices and following a process of extended exploration, deepening self-knowledge and gradual career-focusing," Arnold said.

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CHAMPAIGN, Ill. -- Two high school graduations and two valedictorians, both intelligent, ambitious and certain to succeed in college. Both also plan brilliant careers; one of them, though, will likely fail.

That one is the woman.

Researchers at the University of Illinois have found that while female high school valedictorians typically outperform their male counterparts all the way through college, the chances that they will fulfill their original career goals are slim.

Family considerations and the lack of opportunity to test their abilities will keep the women from forming critical "career identities" and from "forging ahead with their ambitious plans," say Terry Denny, emeritus professor of education, and researcher Karen Arnold.

"Although some valedictorian women are studying and working at the highest levels," Arnold said, "high-academic-achieving women as a group are currently working and studying at lower levels than high-achieving men.

"We're losing the talents of some of our best women, and if this is happening to those who have everything going for them, who have every conceivable credential, one can only imagine the handicaps and barriers that women in general are facing."

In the sixth year of a 10-year study of high school whiz kids -- the first project of its kind -- Denny and Arnold have discovered a number of striking gender differences.

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Among them:

--As early as their sophomore year in college, two-thirds of the women in the study had begun compromising -- reporting lower levels of intellectual self-esteem and less ambitious career aspirations than when they had graduated from high school.

--Today, with undergraduate days behind them, many of these women have "come to a halt while they try to figure out how they are going to combine all of their adult roles," Arnold said, "while most of the valedictorian men are sailing smoothly ahead."

--Only one-third of the women plan continuous full-time work, compared with all of the men.

--In making plans, most of the women, but none of the men, take into consideration the multiple roles of worker, spouse and parent.

Arnold reported her latest findings recently to national education conferences in Chicago and Washington, D.C.

Denny and Arnold have been following the lives of 80 people who graduated at the top of their Illinois high school class in 1981. The 46 women and 34 men hail from communities large and small, and from all social and economic backgrounds. Their parents are police officers, janitors, factory workers and research scientists. Seventy of the students are white, six are black, three are Latino, and one is Chinese-American.

Face-to-face interviews, conducted annually, form the basis for the study, which is trying to determine the factors contributing to valedictorians' academic success, and to explore their emotional and intellectual growth. Information also is gathered from questionnaires, post cards, visits and phone calls.

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All but six of the valedictorians have completed their undergraduate education -- 60 percent of them having majored in business, engineering and science.

Their "stunning" academic performance supports the hypothesis that "top high school achievement is a predictor of outstanding college achievement," Arnold said. The average college grade-point, with 4 equaling A, was 3.7 for the women, 3.5 for the men.

Still, six years after high school graduation, "the valedictorians' story is one of gender differences in career aspirations," Arnold said.

Even though the women are more likely than the men to be in graduate school five years after high school, most of them are pursuing terminal master's degrees, rather than working toward Ph.D.s.

Four of the men and four of the women are certified public accountants. One woman accounting major is working as a bookkeeping clerk for little more than minimum wage, and another intends to leave the profession. Women from the study group are working as engineers and in business, but in smaller percentages than men.

Moreover, only 35 percent of the women, but all of the men, plan continuous, full-time work. Those women who plan such work are distinguished by having had many opportunities to test their abilities and "significant" interaction with faculty and professionals in their field. They also tended to plan on postponing marriage and child-rearing, "a strategy which allows them to form their goals without taking marriage into account," Arnold said.

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"While they expect to fit marriage into their lives, they plan just that -- to add marriage to work, rather than to fit work around marriage," she said.

"These women perceive and act in the expectation of control over their career paths."

The majority of the women, however, anticipate "the contingencies of multiple roles" as career women, wives and mothers, and respond by scaling down their goals.

The repercussions of multiple-role expectations began early for the women -- around age 18 or 19 -- even for those who planned professional careers, Arnold said. To address the problem, she said, educators must understand "the centrality of family-role expectations in determining women's career paths."

Such considerations remain a "non-issue" on college campuses today -- rarely discussed "even among professionals who are themselves managing families and careers," Arnold said. "That is a crime."

Colleges should offer women the experiences that will allow them to begin to develop a professional identity -- including jobs, internships, and research fellowships. Significant relationships with faculty as mentors and supporters are "incredibly important" for female valedictorians, Arnold said, while not as vital for the males.

The valedictorian study, she said, underscores the necessity of "encouraging able young women to continue their outstanding achievement after college."

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CHAMPAIGN, Ill. -- In America, where being "No. 1" is everything, much remains to be learned about the nature of success, says Terry Denny, an educational psychologist at the University of Illinois.

Denny is in the third year of a 10-year study of high school valedictorians who have "succeeded in a system and been anointed 'the best,'" he said.

He is looking at "the antecedents of academic success, its prices, its rewards and its relationship to career and personal life adaption" in the first systematic, long-term study of its kind, he said.

He has found that valedictorians tend to be "God-centered." They are highly competitive -- a notion often rejected by experts. And they seem to be motivated by fear of failure.

Even more surprising, by the age of 19 or 20, very successful female valedictorians -- those who are "tearing their curricula apart" -- have begun to lower their opinion of their intelligence as well as their career aspirations, mainly in anticipation of future family-job conflicts.

His sample consists of 81 Illinois valedictorians, salutatorians and top scholars from the class of 1981.

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Valedictorians----2

The 44 women and 37 men hail from diverse communities, ranging from rural schools with a total enrollment of 25, to massive inner-city and suburban schools with graduating classes of 600 or more. They attended six Catholic, one Lutheran, two private and 25 public high schools.

And they come from all social and economic backgrounds. Their parents are police officers, janitors, factory workers and research scientists. Some of the parents have sixth-grade educations, while others have gone beyond the Ph.D.

Seventy-two of the valedictorians are white; five are black; three are Mexican-American and one is Chinese-American.

"And they are continuing to succeed very well," Denny said.

Annual face-to-face interviews form the basis for Denny's study.

The students "give of themselves in a very deep, intimate way," said Karen Arnold, U. of I. graduate student and project assistant. "They tell us things they don't have to."

Questionnaires, personal correspondence -- postcards, Christmas cards, photographs -- and phone calls supplement the interview data.

"There's no question about this being an ego-trip for some," Denny said. "After all, they are already polished tap dancers. We just turn up the house lights and they're off."

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Valedictorians----3

Armed with a "standard protocol" of 50 to 60 questions, the researchers ask:

"What is the ultimate for you?"

"What are the toughest things?"

"What are you afraid of?"

"What are your New Year's resolutions?"

"That last one is a dandy," Arnold said. "From it we get answers like, 'This year I'm going to relax and have a good time.' 'I'm going to find a man.' 'I'm going to make a 4.9992 grade point average and get into one of the top eight firms in the city.'"

"They'll take you from 'Fantasy Island' to the center of Chicago," Denny said.

The fear question is just as revealing.

"These students have never experienced academic failure in their collective lives," Denny said. "So when you ask them what it is that haunts them -- that puts them right up against the wall -- they'll say they're afraid they aren't going 'to make it.'"

By the time the valedictorians reached the fifth grade, 50 percent knew they were top students; 75 percent knew by the eighth grade.

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Valedictorians----4

Valedictorians are anything but "eggheads" or "grinds," Arnold said. They include former cheerleaders, football stars and class officers. They played in the school band and wrote for the school newspaper. In college they are involved in "every conceivable type of extracurricular activity," she said.

"They are terribly normal people and very, very practical," she said. "If you ask whether their classes are 'turning them on,' they'll say that isn't an issue. Some are genuinely fascinated by their subject matter, but many others regard college as a job to prepare them to make money."

So far, few are politically or socially conscious.

"Two handsful aren't even registered to vote," Denny said. "The low incidence of idealism and the high evidence of materialism suggest that these students have their eyes on themselves first, on others second. Making a contribution to society and working to correct social and economic inequalities are not, as yet, important goals."

Valedictorians are a highly competitive group, and they tend to be "specifically competitive," meaning that wherever they go, they pick out a person or group with whom they will compete.

And they are religious -- "a most surprising finding for me," Denny said. "Fifty percent see God as being central to their lives. For 25 percent, God 'defines' them."

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Moreover, about one-third of the sample -- "an improbably high number" -- are Roman Catholic. More than one-half are Protestant.

Their academic achievement is now beginning to "diverge," Arnold said. Some are doing "magnificently." Others have become "straight-B" students.

One shift, especially among women, is to lower career aspirations, "in view of what they think are going to be family commitments and conflicts," Arnold said.

"These women want to have 'normal' families. They don't want to have to 'put off their lives' until their mid-30s," Arnold said.

"Men don't seem to struggle with this issue even though they also picture 'the ultimate' in terms of families and financial security," she said.

With seven years to go, "we're just coming around the first curve now," Denny said.

"We have 81 stories to tell. But I also feel we are going to have an even larger story someday."