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Preserve the Pirates' purple, gold

East Carolina University's colors are purple and gold. Yet, in recent years some of our athletic teams have added black to their uniforms. Although this black-added trend extends to some other schools' athletic wear also, such doesn't justify ECU's Pirates doing likewise.

Our school's colors are purple and gold. This is our heritage. This is our tradition. Let's preserve it.

BARTOW HOUSTON
Washington
Tying for top GPA doesn’t bring gig as valedictorian

BY T. KEUNG HUI
STAFF WRITER

Don’t assume the valedictorian is the high school student with the best grades — at least in Wake County and parts of the Triangle.

Some area high schools don’t wait until the final grades are in to name their valedictorian and salutatorian, the two awards that go to the seniors with the highest grades. That help explains why Jeffrey Fowler wasn’t named the co-valedictorian at Southeast Raleigh High School despite ending the school year first in the highest grade-point average.

"They should just do away with valedictorian and salutatorian if they can’t do it right," said Fowler, 18, of Apex.

High schools in the Wake school system name valedictorians and salutatorians based on where students rank at the end of the third quarter, the midway point of the spring semester. Some Triangle districts wait until the end of the year, while others are like Wake and do it earlier in the school year.

The competition for the top spots is extremely competitive, with rankings being decided by thousandths of a decimal point. Top students take many Advanced Placement and honors courses that can boost their GPAs.

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VALEDICTORIANS SECTION COMING

Check out the Triangle’s 2006 valedictorians in a special section included in Friday’s News & Observer.

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What especially hurt Fowler is that Southeast Raleigh didn’t count the honors-level math course he took in the spring semester at N.C. State University.

Beulah Wright, principal of Southeast Raleigh, said the class was omitted because no third-quarter grade was available. Universities don’t normally issue midterm grades.

The problem, Fowler said, is that he and other students didn’t find out until after they had enrolled that the spring college courses wouldn’t be used for naming the valedictorian.

Without the college course, Fowler was out of the running for Southeast’s valedictorian or salutatorian.

"They need to tell students ahead of time that taking college courses means they won’t become valedictorian," said Tina Fowler, Jeffrey’s mother.

Wake school officials were uncertain how other high schools handle spring college courses when determining valedictorians.

‘An offhand remark’

Knowing that his final grade in the math class was an A, Fowler and his mother asked Wright whether some kind of acknowledgment could be made at the graduation ceremony May 31. His GPA at the end of the year was 5.0938, the same as the school’s official valedictorian.

Tina Fowler said they would have been satisfied with Jeffrey introducing the dignitaries and being seated on the stage with the valedictorian and salutatorian.

Instead, Wright announced the names of five students, including Fowler, who she said were at the top of the class.

"I truly regret that this has caused him and his family any anguish," Wright said.

Wright’s gesture fell short of what the family wanted. "It didn’t address the situation," Fowler said. "It was an offhand remark."

It was bittersweet receiving his final transcript Friday showing he was indeed tied for first.

"Students don’t work to be first on their final transcript," Tina Fowler said. "They work to be first to be the valedictorian to make the speech."

Wright promised to avoid repeating Fowler’s situation, but she didn’t lay out any specific steps she’ll take at the school.

"I realize that all the students who took college courses worked hard," Wright said. "Going forward, I will make sure that the students get their due recognition."

Wright stood by the decision not to wait until the end of the school year to name the valedictorian, although she acknowledged that it has resulted at times in the rankings changing between the third quarter and the final grades.

Wright said that waiting until the end wouldn’t give schools enough time to print their graduation programs or allow students to work on their speeches.

"You have to plan for graduation in advance," Wright said.

Wake isn’t alone in its approach. High schools in Chatham County and some in Durham announce their valedictorians before the final grades are in.

But some high schools in Durham and all of them in Orange County, Johnston County and Chapel Hill-Carrboro wait until the final grades are in before naming the valedictorians. "We want to make sure that it represents the actual ranking of the students," said Keith Beamon, Johnston County’s associate superintendent for curriculum and instruction services.

If Wake had waited, Fowler said, his 500 fellow seniors would have known the true rankings.

"Many of them will probably never know," he said.

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Jeffrey Fowler holds a 'valedictorian certificate' put together for him by friends at Southeast Raleigh High.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TINA FOWLER
Ins and outs of higher ed

This spring’s hundreds of college graduation ceremonies typically featured tightly packed rows of begowned graduates who look as though they’ve been together since freshman year.

It’s mostly an illusion.

At the typical college, only 40% of students earn their degrees in four years. The six-year graduation rate of 57% is better, but hardly impressive. Among African-American students, less than half graduate within six years. Overall, nearly a third of people older than 25 who have entered college end up with no degree (but often piles of debt) to show for it.

These statistics point to an issue that gets far too little attention. Students, parents, college counselors, educators and legislators obsess about getting students into college, while relatively few focus on who actually gets out of college with a diploma.

This suggests a change of focus for both the consumers and the providers.

When considering colleges, students and parents should look beyond rankings, grade point averages and SAT scores. What are a school’s dropout and graduation rates? How satisfied are the students with their classroom experiences? Do they get jobs after they graduate?

Colleges, meanwhile, should ensure that these statistics are readily available and learn from them. What’s striking is how quickly universities can improve graduation rates — if they make the effort.

At the University of Alabama, for example, the graduation rate for black students improved by 12 percentage points from 2002 to 2006. Alabama did that by targeting first-year students, developing freshman learning communities, redesigning its math curriculum and reaching out to students in academic trouble.

Florida State succeeds with a special unit that oversees a battery of programs, including one that advises prospective students as early as sixth grade what courses should be taken to succeed in college.

Other schools can also improve the numbers who make it to commencement in four years, if only they pay as much attention to retention as they do to admission.