

The college admissions scandal and the rigged system of admissions at elite universities

By Gabriel Black
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On Tuesday, federal prosecutors unsealed charges against 50 individuals involved in what they described as “the largest college admissions scam ever prosecuted by the Department of Justice.”

According to federal agents, wealthy parents paid tens and hundreds of thousands, and, sometimes, millions of dollars to secure their children’s entry into top American universities. Thirty-three parents have been charged, including Manuel Henriques, CEO of Hercules Capital—a Silicon Valley hedge fund—and actress Lori Loughlin, known for her role on *Full House*.

Run through a company called “The Edge College & Career Network,” employing dozens of insiders, the scam allegedly faked standardized test exams and facilitated direct bribes to university coaches and administrators disguised as charitable donations.

The operation was allegedly run by William Rick Singer, who worked with parents to fabricate students’ participation in sports teams and elite clubs. Singer has pled guilty to four charges, including running a fake charity to facilitate money laundering from the parents.

Singer says he would fly students out to schools in Texas where they could take standardized tests required for entry into college in rooms overseen by bribed individuals. Other times, Singer would arrange for tests to be taken by entirely different people, fabricating the results completely.

These services did not come cheap. Being falsely given a learning disability and then taking the test with a bribed proctor, prosecutors state, cost one family \$50,000. Another family, which paid for their teenager to be recruited via the soccer team at Yale by forging her sports credentials, paid \$1.2 million—a cost which included substantial bribes to the coach.

According to prosecutors, the largest bill paid by a

family was \$6.5 million. This is about seven times the amount of money an American with only a high-school degree is expected to make in his or her lifetime.

Several points should be made about the scandal.

The first is that these crimes are only one window into an entire world of anti-democratic admissions processes in higher education. If the allegations are true, the actions constitute criminal fraud, but it exists alongside of and is nurtured by more “legal” forms of influence-buying and admissions-rigging.

“Affirmative action” for the children of wealthy donors and alumni, at the expense of more qualified children, is the rule, not the exception, in the Ivy League and at similar colleges. A Harvard investigation recently found that applicants with parents or grandparents who attended the college were five times more likely to be admitted.

Bribes, in the form of “donations,” are commonplace in higher education. Singer, the founder of the operation, told one parent that his operation provided a “side door in.” He explained, “The back door is through institutional advancement [millions of dollars of donations to the school’s endowment], which is 10 times as much money.” A 2017 story by the *Washington Post* exposed how University of Virginia officials kept wait lists for wealthy donors. “\$500k. Must be on WL [wait list],” read one file.

Richard Reeves, author of a book titled *Dream Hoarders*, wrote in the *Guardian* that, “The children of big donors seem to get an almost automatic admission.” He noted, “The difference between this illegal scheme and the legal ways in which money buys access is one of degree, not of kind.”

The top institutions of higher education are dominated by money, with presidents and administrators paid like corporate CEOs. Significantly,

at the time the scandal broke out, Olivia Jade, the daughter of Lori Laughlin, was reportedly on a cruise on a yacht owned by billionaire real estate developer Rick Caruso, who is the chairman of the board of trustees of the University of Southern California. Caruso's daughter also goes to USC.

C. L. Max Nikias, the president of USC until he resigned last August, was the third-highest-paid college president, with an annual salary of more than \$3 million.

A second point that should be raised about this scandal is what it expresses about the whole upper-middle class and upper class milieu of the United States.

The extraordinary means of advancing their children reflects the intense competition within the top layers of the population. The cut-throat college admissions process, which, in wealthy neighborhoods, begins with constructing portfolios for a five-year-old to get into a prestigious elementary school, express the ferocity of the struggle within this layer.

While there are many students attending elite institutions because of their academic achievement, getting into Harvard, Yale, etc., is often not about accessing a good education per se, but rather accessing social networks that lead to the highest echelons of society. The elite higher educational system acts as a sorting for the top layers of the population, determining the pecking order of this rich, yet still deeply divided social layer. Meanwhile, it bars millions of young people from lower classes, even those who are relatively well-off, from breaking into this upper-class world.

Today, while \$6.5 million is found by the ultra-rich to pay to secure a spot at a top university, tens of thousands of students in Oakland, California, last week received a \$22 million budget cut—money that will come out of funds for homeless students, nutrition, music and college preparation. It is no coincidence that this scandal follows a year of mass teacher struggles around the world. The entire public education system is under attack by the rich.

The corporate assault on education must be halted. The trillions of dollars, locked away in the hands of the ultra-rich, must be confiscated and used for massive social programs to provide free, high-quality education for all students. All students, no matter what their

background, have the right to advanced higher education. Likewise, all workers, regardless of what school they attend, deserve to have a high quality of life, with good benefits, dignity and respect.

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