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College Admissions Scandals: What Would a Just Admissions Policy Look Like?

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College Admission Scandals: What would a just admissions policy look like?

Kathleen A. Bogle
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College Admissions Scam

What happened?

On March 12, 2019, the Department of Justice brought charges against 50 people in the largest college admissions scam ever prosecuted.

Allegations:

College admission was secured through:

- Cheating on the SAT or ACT
- Bribing college coaches to pretend a person was being recruited as a top-athlete (although the person did not even play the sport)
College Admissions Scam

- Who was charged?
  - 3 people who orchestrated the scam
  - 3 SAT/ACT administrators or proctors
  - 1 college administrator
  - 9 coaches at elite colleges
  - 33 parents
    - Parents were accused of paying thousands of dollars in bribes to get their children into elite colleges
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- Which colleges were involved?

- University of Southern California
- Yale University
- University of California, Los Angeles
- Georgetown University
- The University of Texas at Austin
- Stanford University
- University of San Diego
- Wake Forest University
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The Ringleader: William Singer:

“The 59-year-old consultant, who worked in the college counseling business for the better part of three decades, was behind an elaborate effort to bribe coaches and test monitors, falsify exam scores, and fabricate student biographies — all to help wealthy parents secure slots for their children at desirable colleges.”
College Admissions Scam

How did they pull off the scam?

Parents would pay between $15,000-$75,000 for higher standardized test scores to William Singer, who controlled The Edge College and Career Network.

Singer would arrange:

- Someone else would take the SAT or ACT exams for the student
- A person in on the scam would serve as the proctor and guide the students to the right answers
- Someone would correct the students’ answers after the tests were taken
College Admissions Scam

How did they pull off the scam?

- University coaches and administrators were paid large bribes to secure admission for students who may not have even played the sport.

- Athletic achievements and images were falsified.
  - Students’ faces were photoshopped onto real athletes’ bodies.
  - False athletic achievements were added to their college applications.
College Admissions Scam

- How did they pull off the scam?
College Admissions Scam

The college coaches accused included:

- USC – Women’s soccer; Men’s & women’s water polo
- Yale – Women’s soccer
- Georgetown – Men’s & women’s tennis
- Stanford – Sailing
- U of Texas, Austin – Men’s tennis
- Wake Forest – Volleyball
- U of San Diego – Men’s basketball
College Admissions Scam

- Parents charged included:
  - CEOs and other business executives
  - Owners of highly successful businesses
  - A doctor; a lawyer
  - Two Hollywood actresses: Lori Loughlin (and her fashion designer husband) and Felicity Huffman
College Admissions Scam

- The penalties for those charged are still being determined. Some have pleaded guilty; others plead not guilty.
- Felicity Huffman will be sentenced on Friday, September 13, 2019.
College Admissions Scam

- The internet is filled with memes about the scandal.
Questions

- Why do you think wealthy parents went to such extremes to get their child into an elite college?
- What is at stake in college admissions?
College Admissions Scam

- Why cheat?
  - At some of the colleges involved in the scandal, it is extremely competitive to get accepted.

- Acceptance rate:
  - Stanford – 4.3%
  - Yale University – 6.5%
  - University of Southern California – 11%
  - Georgetown – 16.8%
  - Wake Forest – 28%
  - University of Texas – 38.5%
Questions

- Why did the college admission scandal that was first reported in March 2019 get such a strong reaction from op-ed writers and perhaps from the public in general?

- What type of advantages did the students involved in the college admission scandal already have (even if their parents had not cheated the system)?
New York Times …

“Bribes to Get Into Yale and Stanford? What Else Is New?”

A new college admissions scandal is just the latest proof of a grossly uneven playing field.

“It may be legal to pledge $2.5 million to Harvard just as your son is applying … and illegal to bribe a coach to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars, but how much of a difference is there, really? Both elevate money over accomplishment. Both are ways of cutting in line.”
Op-Ed/Author: Frank Bruni

New York Times …

“Bribes to Get Into Yale and Stanford? What Else Is New?”

A new college admissions scandal is just the latest proof of a grossly uneven playing field.

“What a message it sends to the children: You’re not good enough to do this on your own. You needn’t be. Your parents and your counselors know the rules, and when and how to break them. Just sit back and let entitlement run its course.”
So, if people were outraged that children of the wealthy got into elite colleges due to factors other than their own merit …

What factors do you think should be considered in college admissions that are merit based?
What counts as merit: GPA?

- High school GPA (grade point average)
- But …
  - We know some people get to go to much better elementary and high schools than others. Why?
  - Question: How are public schools funded?
What counts as merit: GPA?

- Public schools are primarily funded through local property taxes.
- NPR: “Why America's Schools Have A Money Problem” (2016)
- https://www.npr.org/2016/04/18/474256366/why-americas-schools-have-a-money-problem
What counts as merit: SAT/ACT?

- Standardized tests are thought of by some as a way to level the playing field.
- Others say, these tests are unfair (and poor predictors of success in college).
  
  - Question: Why do some people argue that standardized tests are unfair?
What counts as merit: SAT/ACT?

“Inside the Pricey, Totally Legal World of College Consultants”

Source: *New York Times*; Authors: Dana Goldstein and Jack Healy

For prices up to $1.5 million, parents can buy a five-year, full-service package of college admissions consulting from a company in New York City called Ivy Coach. The service — all of it legal — begins as early as eighth grade, as students are steered toward picking the right classes and extracurriculars to help them stand out from the crowd. Then comes intensive preparation for the SAT or ACT, both “coachable exams,” explained Brian Taylor, the company’s managing director, followed by close editing of college essays.

“Is that unfair? That the privileged can pay?” Mr. Taylor asked. “Yes. But that’s how the world works.”
What counts as merit: Athletic ability and achievements?

- At the center of the admissions scandal was children of wealthy parents getting into elite colleges by faking their athletic achievements.

- **Question**: Should athletic ability alter admissions standards?

- **According to NCAA.org …**
  - “More than 460,000 NCAA student-athletes – more than ever before – compete in 24 sports every year. Member schools support their student-athletes' academic success by providing state-of-the-art technology, tutoring and access to academic advisors.”
There are other factors that can be considered merit based, such as taking AP (advanced placement) classes, musical talent and extra-curricular activities.

Even some of these factors are controversial. Who has more time to practice an instrument and engage in extra-curricular activities rather than having to work for pay?

Put merit based controversies aside …

*Question*: Should colleges consider any factors that are not directly linked to the merit of the applicant? If so, what factors?
Other factors to consider …

- Race/Class
- Gender
- Geographic region
  - *Question*: What regions might a college prioritize in admissions?
  - *Question*: What do state funded colleges have to consider?
- Overcoming adversity
- Very competitive high school
- Legacy
  - *Question*: What is a legacy admission?
Controversies in Admissions

- Race as a factor in college admissions …
  - Affirmative action policies were put in place in the early 1960s to ensure that women and racial minorities had equal opportunities in education and employment.
  - President John F. Kennedy was “the first president to use the term in an Executive Order.” (Source: CNN.com)
Controversies in Admissions

- Race as a factor in college admissions …
  - In 1978, the U.S. Supreme Court rules that “colleges cannot use racial quotas.”
    - However, colleges can consider race as one factor among many.
  - In 2003, the U.S. Supreme Court rules that race can be a factor in admissions, but not an “overriding factor.”

Question: Why might colleges want to use race as one factor among many in admissions decisions?
Controversies in Admissions

- **Class + Geography + GPA = Top 10% Rule in Texas**
  - The state of Texas came up with a solution to ensure diversity without using race as a factor in admissions.
  - Any person who graduated in the top 10% of their high school would gain automatic admission to one of the colleges in the University of Texas system.

- **Question:** How did this rule help make sure that U of Texas had a diverse student body?

- **Question:** Why do you think the top 10% rule was controversial?
Controversies in Admissions

- Legacy as a factor in college admissions …
- *New York Times* / Editorial Board / 9-7-19 …
  - “End Legacy College Admissions”
    - A country struggling with deeply rooted inequality need not continue an affirmative action program for successful families.

Of the country’s top 100 schools (as determined by the editors at U.S. News & World Report), roughly three-quarters have legacy preferences in admissions. These … policies have been called “affirmative action for the rich” and “affirmative action for whites.”

*Question*: If you are the son or daughter of someone who went to the college you are applying to it significantly increases your chances of getting accepted. Should this practice be legal?
Question

- Given all the “merit” based factors that go into college admissions and all the non-merit based ones …
- Given the amount of inequality in society that affects your quality of education in elementary and high school …
- Given that we want to have college admission policies that are as fair as possible …
- What would a just admissions policy look like?