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FEATURED: Dozens Charged in Admissions Bribery Scheme

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Bribery Scandal Reveals 'Weak Spots' in the Admissions System. Don't Look So Shocked.

By Eric Hoover | MARCH 13, 2019 ✓ PREMIUM



Craig F. Walker, The Boston Globe, Getty Images

Andrew Lelling, the U.S. attorney in Massachusetts, speaks at a news conference on Tuesday at which he discussed charges against dozens of people involved in an admissions-bribery scheme.

When Beverly Low read the news on Tuesday, she felt her blood pressure spike.

The Justice Department had just charged 50 people in an admissions-bribery scheme that got dozens of privileged applicants into big-name colleges over several years. The perpetrators' alleged crimes included cheating on the ACT or SAT, and paying college coaches to falsely designate some applicants as athletes, all but guaranteeing them a spot.

Low, director of guidance and college counseling at Manchester Essex Regional

Middle/High School, in Massachusetts, spends a lot of time demystifying the admissions process, trying to calm anxious families and help them feel as good about the nerve-racking ritual as they possibly can. Then federal authorities unveiled a trove of evidence describing how a college consultant and wealthy families had rigged that process to their own benefit — through fraud. How could anyone who cares about fairness feel good about that?

The details angered Low, who used to work in admissions, but they didn't really surprise her. "I wanted to be shocked," she said, "but I wasn't."

Many other experts had similar reactions.

Nearly a dozen admissions officials, college counselors, scholars, and independent educational consultants all described the incident as a troubling exaggeration of a well-understood fact: In the relentless chase for status and prestige, some people will do anything to get their kids into elite colleges, throwing

all their resources at a system that, in one way or another, so often rewards the wealthiest participants.

Sure, the details of the scheme's scale and complexity were eye-popping. So were the revelations about alternative paths to an acceptance letter. But the themes of the unfolding story were familiar.

"What occurred here is outrageous," said Marie Bigham, director of college counseling at the Isidore Newman School, in New Orleans. "But as we're expressing all this outrage, I don't see us acknowledging what we do in admissions and accept as standard operating practice. This fraud has just taken standard operating practice to a grotesque level."

Money exchanged for a slot? "That's nothing new — there are offices for that on campuses," said Bigham, the founder and co-leader of an organization called Admissions Community Cultivating Equity and Peace Today. "How many of us worked hard to get rid of pay-for-play development admits?"

A 'Side Door'

Anyone who's heard of a big donor's kid getting special treatment knows that the system is far from fair, by any measure. For some applicants, there's a back door that can — but by no means always will — lead to an admission offer.

For the parents implicated in the scheme, that apparently wasn't enough. They wanted a guarantee of admission, and were willing to pay big-time for it, according to court documents. So William (Rick) Singer, the alleged mastermind of the scheme, apparently offered them a "side door in."

Singer, the founder of The Key, a college-admissions consulting company in California, might have trafficked in deceit, but he also understood how to exploit what admissions officials interviewed by *The Chronicle* on Tuesday called "weak spots" in the admissions process. One is the recruitment of athletes to non-revenue-generating sports teams, which typically attract far less attention than football and men's basketball programs do.



Admission Through the 'Side Door'

Dozens of people, including famous actors, college coaches, and a university administrator, have been charged by federal prosecutors for their alleged roles in an admissions-bribery scheme involving Yale, Stanford, and other elite institutions.

- 8 Universities. Millions in Bribes. 10 Corrupt Coaches. What You Need to Know About the Admissions-Bribery Scandal.
- Photoshopped Scenes and Fake Athletic Profiles: How the Internet Is Picking Apart the College-Admission Scandal
- An Alleged Admissions-Bribery Scheme Is Roiling Higher Ed. Here's How It Worked.



Jessica Rinaldi, The Boston Globe, Getty Images
William (Rick) Singer, the alleged mastermind of the scheme, walks into the U.S. Courthouse in Boston on Tuesday.

According to the U.S. attorney's office in Boston, Singer conspired with parents and athletics coaches to secure spots for his clients' children. A former head coach of Yale University's women's soccer team, for instance, allegedly took a \$400,000 bribe to put an applicant on the soccer team even though that student had not played competitive soccer, court documents show. The applicant's parents paid more than \$1 million in bribes, federal law-enforcement officials said on

Tuesday. It was just one of many examples of coaches who allegedly took money in exchange for helping an applicant get in through the "side door" of lower-profile sports teams.

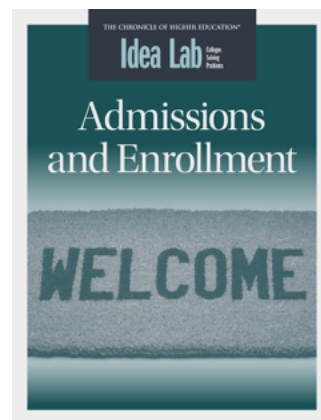
It's important to note here that — so far, at least — no admissions officials have been implicated in the scheme. In fact, the authorities on Tuesday did not accuse a single university of wrongdoing.

So it's possible that all of this fraud went down without the knowledge of each college's admissions office. But how?

Because on many campuses admissions officials don't know everything about each and every athlete who coaches say they want, according to several enrollment experts. "It all gets a little fuzzy, especially with the minor sports," said the dean of admissions at one prominent university, which wasn't named in Tuesday's court documents.

Each year, the dean said, his institution sets aside a specific number of slots for all athletes. The athletics department regularly turns over a list of prospective students that coaches are recruiting, and the admissions office conducts an initial review of their files. As long as an applicant is qualified and nothing goes amiss later, the dean said, his office commits to enrolling each athlete coaches want. In the end, it's up to them.

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"To a large degree, we are just trusting our athletics department," he said. "We're not telling them who to recruit. We have no way of knowing who's a good athlete, or whether a walk-on's going to walk off the team. I could see how an admissions office wouldn't know that a rogue coach is doing something wrong."

In short, no one in a given admissions office is likely to check if that tennis player who's admitted early in December ends up on the team many months later.

Money and Influence

The charges on Tuesday brought renewed scrutiny to admissions practices at the University of Texas at Austin, where the head men's tennis coach is alleged to have accepted a \$100,000 bribe to help a student gain admission. Michael Center, the coach, was placed on administrative leave on Tuesday.

There have long been concerns about money and influence in admissions on the flagship campus. An independent investigation, in 2015, found that top officials advocated on behalf of well-connected applicants and literally shredded the evidence of their deliberations.

That's different than the clear criminality described by the Justice Department, but critics of university admissions practices see undue influence as part of a troubling continuum.

During his tenure as a Texas regent, Wallace L. Hall Jr. sought to expose problems in admissions at Austin. What he found, he said, was that no one with power wanted to upset a system that favored the powerful.

"Boards never do their jobs, because they all have family, business relations, and kids that they want to get into those schools."

"That's where boards never do their jobs, because they all have family, business relations, and kids that they want to get into those schools," said Hall, a private-equity investor. "If you cross the Don, your kid doesn't get in, so nobody does it."

Hall, whose term on the board expired in 2017, said he felt some vindication when he learned that the FBI had taken

a hard look at corruption in admissions.

"I would have liked to have done more to have put out the fire," said Hall. "But I think we were able to bring attention to a real problem in higher ed. Some people's eyebrows were raised, and I'd like to think the action the feds have taken in some way is related to that."

Shaun R. Harper, a professor and executive director of the University of Southern California's Race and Equity Center, is an eloquent critic of the admissions profession. At the National Association for College Admission Counseling's annual conference in 2017, he delivered a forceful speech in which he noted that an overwhelming percentage of admissions leaders are white.

"For me, this scandal is like a trifecta of whiteness," Harper said. "Most admissions deans are white, most head coaches at Division I colleges are white, and I can guarantee that the overwhelming number of people who benefited from this bribery are white."

'A Fixer, Not a Counselor'

Singer, the man at the center of the scandal, benefited plenty. He took in \$25 million from 2011 to 2018, using some of the money to pay off coaches or testing proctors and keeping the rest, according to court documents. He pleaded guilty on Tuesday to racketeering conspiracy, money-laundering conspiracy, and other charges in federal court in Boston.

On The Key's website, Singer once described the stress of the admissions process. The text beneath his photograph says that he spent many years "helping students discover their life passion," and that his company could "help unlock the full potential of your son or daughter, and set them on a course to excel in life."

Only he didn't really do any of that, said Arun Ponnusamy, a managing partner and chief academic officer at CollegeWise, a college-advising company based in California. "This guy was a fixer, not a counselor," he said. "It doesn't resemble the work that 99 percent of people who call themselves counselors do."

Sometimes, Ponnusamy said, potential clients express an interest in having someone else write their son's or daughter's college essays. "We let them move on and take their business somewhere else," he said.

In a written statement, Stefanie Niles, president of the National Association for College Admission Counseling and vice president for enrollment and communications at Ohio Wesleyan University, called the alleged scam an "extreme response to the commodification of the college-admission process — one that is focused on college acceptance as an end unto itself." The association urged its members to "redouble their commitment to integrity."

Meantime, Low, the college counselor in Massachusetts, had a more immediate concern. She has begun to anticipate the questions her students will surely have about the scandal, especially juniors, who just took the SAT.

"They're good humans," she said. "I don't want them to get jaded by this."

Jack Stripling contributed to this article.

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