**I Learned in College That Admission Has Always Been for Sale**

*The bribery scandal is no more abhorrent than the completely legal industry that helps many wealthy kids get into the schools of their dreams.*

By Rainesford Stauffer

Shortly after my freshman year of college, when I was debating whether to transfer to another college or drop out and venture into the work force sans degree, I met with an older friend who had attended an Ivy League-adjacent school. I wanted her advice on whether to apply to her alma mater.

I’d love it there, she assured me, with one caveat: You have to be really smart, she said. It became evident that her “smart” and my “smart” were different things. She casually rattled off hours she’d logged with a personalized standardized test tutor, paid to boost her score. Her parents opted not to pay an editor to work with her on her application essay, but plenty of her classmates’ families had.

I suddenly felt as though I’d failed a test I didn’t know I was taking. I was even more gobsmacked when I realized how common her experience was. Asking around, I learned that a subset of my peers had been carefully groomed with tools I hadn’t even known existed. I came to realize that my “A” in Literature from my freshman year and a job between classes and on weekends were not going to compete with pedigrees buffed to application perfection thanks to highly compensated college admissions coaches.

I did end up transferring, not to my friend’s school but to The New School, where I finished my degree remotely while working full time, and I graduated in January 2017. Now I talk to young people, including my own sister, who agonize over the fact that, no matter how hard they study, they will never compete with students who have test and application boosts. Even so, I know I’ve enjoyed benefits that many other students haven’t because I’m white and have parents who are college graduates. I’m more angry on behalf of those with fewer resources than me who have to compete with those gaming the system.

So when news broke that celebrities, top university coaches and other ultrarich individuals were accused by the Justice Department of engaging in [college admissions bribery](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/12/us/college-cheating-scandal.html?smtyp=cur&smid=tw-nytimes&module=inline), my initial thought was that this latest round of revelations is no more abhorrent than what happens every day.

It’s obviously a scandal when rich people are accused of breaking the law to get their kids into top schools. But the bigger outrage should be that a legal version of purchasing an advantage happens every college application season and that there’s an entire industry supporting it.

Anyone can see the kinds of things outlined in the indictment —  [bribes paid by wealthy parents](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/12/us/college-admissions-cheating-scandal.html?module=inline)in exchange for their children’s admission to top universities, and accompanying schemes to secure athletics scholarships for teens who didn’t even play high school sports — are unacceptable. But what about the standardized test prep industry, [worth around $840 million](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-column-weston-testprep/resist-the-urge-to-go-overboard-on-college-test-prep-idUSBREA3K0J120140421), which involves parents forking over up to [$200 an hour for Ivy League tutors tasked with increasing their children’s score](https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/01/are-tutors-the-new-waiters/384745/)s. That doesn’t include [application essay writers](https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2017/10/16/worries-grow-about-application-essay-help-may-go-too-far), who coach students on what to write about, edit their writing and, in some cases, write for them. It doesn’t include college coaching firms, which [charge up to $40,000 to strategize an applicant’s entire process](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2007-10-21/i-can-get-your-kid-into-an-ivy).

[Donations made to schools by the parents of legacy students](https://www.npr.org/2018/11/04/663629750/legacy-admissions-offer-an-advantage-and-not-just-at-schools-like-harvard) can essentially buy acceptance letters. Meanwhile, there are some students who don’t have a parent to skim their essay for typos or can’t afford to pay to enroll in a prep course or to repeatedly take a standardized test until their score rises.

Natasha Warikoo, a professor at Harvard Graduate School of Education and the author of “The Diversity Bargain,” says while there’s no debate that the actions the people involved in this week’s admissions scandal are accused of are reprehensible, there’s actually very little agreement among Americans or admissions officers about what is and isn’t O.K. in terms of application assistance.

“A fair system to me would produce an outcome in which people who are selected are representative of 18-year-olds overall in the United States,” Ms. Warikoo said, noting that while wealthy students are overrepresented, working class and poor students, black, Latino, Native American and first generation students are underrepresented on most campuses. “We don’t have consensus in the United States about what is a fair system of selection.”

“If you had to design a system that would give rich, white kids the best odds of getting into prestigious colleges and universities, look no further than the current system,” said Nikhil Goyal, author of “Schools on Trial” and a doctoral candidate at the University of Cambridge. His research has found that universities ending legacy admissions and making standardized tests optional “would boost class and racial diversity and signal to youth that their worth is less defined by test scores and more by their creativity and passions.” It’s no coincidence that one of these can be bought: the test scores. Creativity and passion cannot.

Perhaps it wouldn’t sting so much if we scrapped the college rankings, or if we didn’t bill college as the foremost experience for young people, one that sets the tone for their entire lives.

This newest admissions scandal is infuriating, but the ongoing, perfectly legal one that lets wealthy families pay for the things that lead to greater chances of admission hurts even more. It sends a message to any student who can’t take advantage of the current system that no matter how hard he or she has worked, it will always be possible for someone else to buy a better life.

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