

Nothing new about college admission bribery, scandal

Last week federal investigators revealed that William Singer, founder of the California-based Edge College & Career Network, was paid an estimated total of \$25 million by dozens of ultra-rich families to gain admission for their children to some of the most elite universities in the country.

Together with co-conspirators, Singer secured admission for these unworthy students by rigging standardized test scores and falsely promoting some as heavily recruited athletes.

News of the college admissions bribery scandal has provoked national outrage over the influence of wealth and privilege in higher education. But there is nothing new about elite colleges and universities accepting money to admit the children of wealthy parents.

The only difference in this case is that Singer created a lucrative business out of the practice and he got caught.

Having spent most of my professional career teaching in urban prep schools or universities, I realize that higher education is a business where the bottom line matters more than the quality of the product. I am also familiar with the "pay-to-play" practices of the wealthy and privileged. Prep school teachers take an active role in the college admissions process, counseling senior advisees as well as writing recommendations.

Occasionally a low-achieving student is admitted to a prestigious college because one of their parents is a "legacy," an alumnus who is usually a huge donor. While their son or daughter may not have the grade point average or test scores to meet the rigorous admissions standards, there is a tacit understanding that the institution owes the alum a favor for their financial contributions and admits their child regardless of their worthiness.

Some of the most prestigious prep schools even enjoy an appointment or two to an elite university, much like a member of Congress can appoint a high school student to the service academies. Whereas the congressional appointee must meet rigid academic requirements, the prep school appointments are awarded by a headmaster, who almost always favors the child of a wealthy board member and/or large donor to the prep school regardless of their worthiness.



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Although these practices are not as widespread as they used to be, they do exist. Wealthy parents who use these advantages feel justified because of affirmative action programs that favor less privileged students.

The children of poor and working-class families often enjoy a distinct advantage in the college admission process. Because these students come from disadvantaged circumstances, they do not always have to meet the same academic standards for admission as students from middle-class and wealthy backgrounds. In addition, disadvantaged students receive more need-based financial aid than those from privileged backgrounds. That is especially true for gifted athletes.

Since most of the elite small colleges compete in Division III of the National Collegiate Athletic Association, which does not award athletic scholarships, a disadvantaged student-athlete who is recruited by the coach at a small college stands to gain even more need-based financial aid. The same is true for the Ivy League universities, which also do not award athletic scholarships.

The students who suffer most from these practices are those who come from the struggling middle class. Their parents do not have the money to exercise any influence in the college admissions process. Nor are they beneficiaries of affirmative action programs.

Until higher education creates a more level playing field that benefits students from all social and economic backgrounds, the integrity of the admissions process will continue to be compromised.

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