

An Investigative Journalist on How Parents Buy College Admissions

By Isaac Chotiner

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This week's college-admissions scandal is an outgrowth of a system that allows the rich and famous to accrue unfair advantages in order to send their children to élite schools.



Photograph by Timothy A. Clary / AFP / Getty

On Tuesday, the Department of Justice charged fifty people in the largest college-admissions scandal in recent memory. According to the indictments, dozens of rich and well-connected parents, including two television stars, participated in a criminal scheme run by William Singer, the founder of a college preparatory and counselling business. Singer allegedly helped his clients to insure their children's admission to selective colleges by bribing university staff and coaches to misrepresent their children as athletes or by recruiting administrators and proctors to help falsify their children's scores on admissions tests. The schools targeted included Yale, Stanford, U.S.C., U.C.L.A., and more; the uproar over the story, and the lengths that the government claims the parents went to, suggest that college admissions, especially at élite schools, continue to be a topic of immense interest and angst.

To discuss the scandal, I spoke by phone with Daniel Golden, the author of the 2006 book “The Price of Admission: How America’s Ruling Class Buys Its Way into Elite Colleges—and Who Gets Left Outside the Gates.” Currently a senior editor at ProPublica, Golden showed how the wealthiest parents, including Jared Kushner’s, have wheeled and dealt their way into gaining admission for their children, often via large gifts to their university of choice. My conversation with Golden about today’s blockbuster story and its larger meaning, which has been edited for clarity and length, is below.

How does this scandal change, if it does change, your understanding of the larger issue that your book addresses?

I think that it’s kind of a logical outgrowth of the scandal that my book exposed. What my book showed was that the rich and famous exploit the college-admissions system by using private college counsellors who serve as conduits for donations, by benefitting from the various admissions preferences, like the preference for athletes, because there are so many patrician sports in which their kids participate, like crew or sailing or fencing or equestrian events. In this case, they take it to the extreme, through pretense. Normally, students from rich families benefit from athletic preference because they actually row crew or sail or fence, which is a preference in itself, because those sports are not played at most inner-city high schools. But here the kids did not even engage in those activities. Instead, it was a sham.

Similarly, the private college counsellor here went beyond all the bounds of accepted behavior, if we can believe the allegations. He didn’t just facilitate the admission by hinting to college officials that the family might be inclined to be philanthropic if the kid was accepted. Instead, he appears to have flat-out bribed test administrators and college coaches and the like. They pushed, to the fullest extent, an unfair system that has been in place for a long time. It’s the fantasy, extreme version of an endemic problem.

When you say that it’s been in place for a long time, does that mean since American colleges were founded, or was there a golden era when this stuff was not going on?

I don’t think there was ever a golden era. College admissions has evolved over the years. Initially, back before there were standardized-test scores, and when elite schools, like Harvard, mostly recruited from their own areas, they just straightforwardly preferred candidates from wealthy, well-established families. But then there were various efforts towards meritocracy, like standardized tests, and the system we have now. And there was also entry by high-achieving groups, like Jews, that the colleges didn’t want to let in, in perhaps the numbers that they deserved.

So, in response to the pressure for meritocracy, this crazy-quilt complicated system developed, which appears, on the surface, to be merit-based but actually includes quite a few hidden boosts for the wealthy. And that system has been in place for some decades. But it's post-World War II.

Do you have reason to think that this sort of thing we saw with the indictments today has been going on for a long time, and, if it is increasing, why might it be increasing?

I don't know if this kind of criminal activity is widespread. There are widespread practices that are unfair and benefit the wealthy. One of the puzzles of this case is: Why did these families bother to go to this extreme? Why did they pay so much money to fake their kids having athletic preference, or have somebody else take their tests? Why didn't they simply contribute a lot of money to the university? Maybe their kids were so far underqualified that they couldn't get in no matter how much was donated. Or, possibly, it was less expensive for them to pay these kinds of bribes. But there are so many advantages anyway, and giving money usually meets such a receptive audience, that it is a little puzzling why they would have to engage in this kind of criminal activity.

Colleges obviously still rely a lot on legacy admissions. Are they relying on it less than a decade or two ago, and might this lessening be causing admissions or the rich and famous to be more desperate to get their kids in by any means necessary?

Actually, regarding legacy admissions, what's happened in the last couple decades is two contrasting things. The first is that, yes, the percentage of legacies admitted has declined. It's less of a guarantee of admission than it used to be. On the other hand, the over-all acceptance rate at these elite schools has declined even more. So legacy, proportionally, is a bigger advantage than it once was. If you take a typical Ivy League school, maybe twenty or thirty years ago, they might admit two-thirds of legacy applicants. Now they might admit one-third of legacy applicants. But, at the same time, their over-all acceptance rate has probably gone down from between twenty and twenty-five per cent to between five and ten per cent. So, proportionally, being a legacy is even more of an advantage. But, in any particular case, a legacy is less likely to get in than they used to.

Now, the pressures over all are generally working a little bit the other way. They are working for the benefit of donors rather than to their detriment. What's happened is that other sources of income for universities have stayed level or declined. The percentage of small, grassroots donors—alumni who give a little bit—has declined, and universities are more dependent on big donations, the kind that often carry a kind of admissions tit for tat. Similarly, there hasn't been big growth in terms of federal funding for research and other sources of income for universities.

So universities are actually more dependent on big gifts than ever before, or at least in recent memory, and, as a result, donors are even more in the driver's seat.

Did you have any other takeaways from the story today?

The other thing that is interesting is that, in my book, I wrote about preferences not just for the rich but for celebrities—how Brown University had gained buzz by admitting the kids of celebrities.

I assume celebrities are rich?

It's sort of a separate preference. It's an additional benefit. They might not be hugely rich, but they have a kind of cachet. There might be someone at Goldman Sachs who is worth ten times as much as a television personality. But there is a cachet to having the kid of a television personality. I thought it was interesting, in that regard, that this case involved both the traditionally rich—chief executives and securities investors—and television actresses. My book focussed on those groups as somewhat separate, overlapping but distinct.

Is there anything you think your book got wrong or understated?

I think the general themes were right on point, and I don't think it's because I was so brilliant. I think it's because this was a system that was hidden in plain view and was in front of your nose if only you looked, and also because it was so offensive to most people's idea of what America is about. The fundamental ethos of America is equal opportunity and upward mobility and everybody gets a chance. The people who perform the best are supposed to rise to the top, and college education is supposed to be the driving force in upward mobility. So the idea that the wealthy can perpetuate their own privileged status through college admissions, that it's not an equal gateway for everybody but a way to perpetuate American aristocracy, is a real affront to people. And that's the resonance a case like this has.

The *Times*' Ross Douthat had a long Twitter thread about this, in which he wrote, in part, "This is not proof that meritocracy is somehow 'broken.' Quite the reverse: It shows that the desire to claim some measured 'merit' to legitimize success extends to parents who by merely financial measures don't need the Ivy stamp to ensure their kids' success. Like 'James Gatz' becoming 'Jay Gatsby' in the Main Line/social-register dispensation, a CEO or TV star buying an Ivy admission and even a fake test score for their lackluster scion is the homage that mere money plays to the gods of the resume and the SAT." What do you think of that?

I think it's nicely written. And I also think that he is correct in saying that the perceived value of an Ivy League degree goes beyond money. It does have to do with social status and bragging rights and an aristocratic identification. So I think that's true.

Also, there are a lot of debates about how much an Ivy League degree affects financial gain in future years, and I don't pretend to know or even understand the math on which those debates are based. All I can say is that some people are extremely desirous of an Ivy League degree. It's easy for people on the outside to say, "What does it matter if your kid went to the Ivy League or School X?" but it does seem to matter an awful lot to an awful lot of people. If you look at the hallways of power in our society—the U.S. Senate, the Supreme Court, places like that—you will find a lot of people with undergraduate or graduate degrees from elite schools.

I also think that, often in our society, the great entrepreneurs, the great originators of success, are not necessarily Ivy League graduates. They may be dropouts like Bill Gates or people who didn't go to college at all, or went to a school that doesn't have as high a reputation. But then they often want to cement that status by making their family a permanent part of whatever passes for aristocracy in America, and they often see the Ivy League degree that they didn't get themselves as the imprimatur for their children or grandchildren. You will often see at these Ivy League the second or third generations of a great business family rather than the first generation.



*Isaac Chotiner is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, where he is the principal contributor to *Q. & A.*, a series of interviews with public figures in politics, media, books, business, technology, and more.*