

The College Admissions Scandal That Shook Higher Education



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- A new documentary, "Operation Varsity Blues," details the 2019 college admissions scandal.
- The scam involved wealthy families paying to have their children recruited as fake athletes.

- Many point to the bribes as signs of systemic problems in U.S. higher education.

A new Netflix film sheds light on the ugly side of [competitive college admissions](#). "Operation Varsity Blues: The College Admissions Scandal" unveils in gory detail the absurd lengths to which people will go to gain access to America's elite institutions — including breaking the law.

The documentary traces the activities of William "Rick" Singer, a California-based independent college admissions counselor who worked with wealthy families hoping to get their kids into top schools. Singer operated the Edge College & Career Network (known as "The Key"), his college counseling business, along with the Key Worldwide Foundation, a nonprofit he established as a charitable organization.

From 2011 to 2019, families nationwide paid Singer a total of \$25 million to guarantee their children admission to top-tier schools such as Stanford University, Yale University, the [University of Southern California](#), and Georgetown University.

The problem was that none of it was legal.



How Did the College Admissions Scheme Actually Work?

Here's how the scam worked: A parent would donate a large sum — normally between \$250,000 and \$400,000 — to Singer's foundation (and receive a tax benefit), ostensibly to "unlock the door to academic, social, personal, and career success" for underprivileged youth, according to [The Key's \(now defunct\) website](#).

Singer would then funnel money to college coaches and athletic administrators, bribing them to designate these students as recruited athletes, thereby exponentially increasing their chances of gaining admission.

In reality, none of these students were actually athletes. Many had never played the sports they were being "recruited" for. To circumvent that inconvenient problem, Singer would stage shots of these students participating in the sport in question or simply edit their faces onto existing photos of athletes in action.

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Coaches who represented lesser-known sports, such as sailing, fencing, and water polo, would then present these students as their recruits to admissions committees and advocate for their acceptance.

And if the students didn't have [great SAT](#) or [ACT scores](#), Singer covered that up, too. Normally, it's difficult to cheat on a standardized test, but if you claim you have a learning disability or other special circumstance, you can take the test one-on-one with a proctor and have more time to complete it.

Singer's bribes extended to those proctors, who, for \$10,000, would alter students' answers to achieve scores in the 1500 range on the SAT and the mid-30s range on the ACT. (The film didn't mention any manipulation of grades, which, presumably, wasn't feasible.)

Administrators across the country were on the take, including the sailing coach at Stanford, the women's soccer coach at Yale, and an assistant athletic director at USC who was paid \$20,000 per month for her work on Singer's behalf.

Wealthy Families Take the "Side Door" Into College

The families involved in the bribes included several high-profile figures, such as actress Lori Loughlin, former star of "Full House," and her daughter Olivia Jade Giannulli, a popular social media influencer; actress Felicity Huffman, of "Desperate Housewives" fame; the Hot Pockets heiress; and a slew of CEOs, venture capitalists, lawyers, and [real estate](#) developers.

They all wanted the same thing for their children: guaranteed admission to an elite school. Never mind that their kids had all the advantages wealth and privilege confer. No, these parents wanted to circumvent the angst-ridden admissions process and fast forward to an acceptance.

Enter Singer, who promised them a "done deal" through his foolproof process. He called it the "side door" of college admissions. Entering through the front door meant you were applying like everyone else and taking your chances.



Another option was the "back door," or making a sizable contribution — typically in the \$40-\$50 million range — to the [college of your choice](#), hoping to grease the skids for your child. No guarantees there, of course. Singer's method offered the greatest likelihood of admission at a "bargain-basement price."

We learn of such parental obsession through wiretapped conversations organized by the FBI. The film is part documentary — featuring admissions experts, journalists, and legal authorities speaking on camera — and part reenactment of the events.

The dialogue is repeated verbatim from the wiretapped evidence, adding verisimilitude to the production. Parents are heard agreeing to the scam, though at times seeming concerned — not about the illegality or immorality of the venture, but of the prospect of getting caught. Clearly, they're all in.

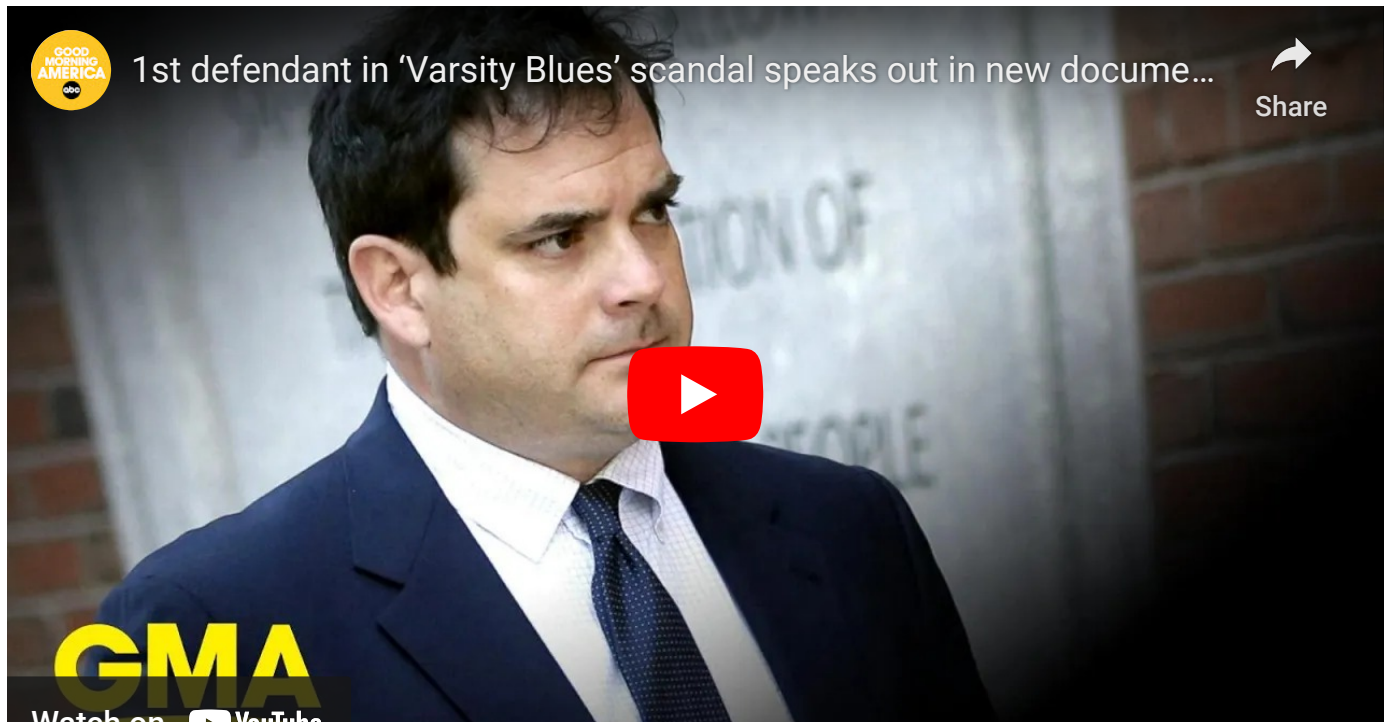
A "Foolproof" Operation Slowly Unravels

The FBI learned of the scam by accident. In 2018, a suspect in a securities fraud case told federal investigators in Boston that the Yale women's soccer coach had asked him for \$450,000 in exchange for getting his daughter into the school as an athlete. That coach eventually led authorities to Singer, who agreed to participate in wiretapped calls with clients and wear a bug to capture in-person meetings. Each conversation was tantamount to a confession.

One by one, the families were outed. And the media ate it up, adopting the "operation varsity blues" tagline created by the feds. The public watched with glee and contempt as Loughlin and Huffman walked into court surrounded by lawyers, a sea of cameras, and journalists asking why these celebrities

thought they were somehow above the system.

Axes fell on administrators as well. Yale fired its soccer coach, Georgetown fired its tennis coach, and USC terminated the assistant athletic director. Proctors who doctored the standardized tests were also indicted.



Stanford fired John Vandemoer, the sailing coach who accepted bribes — though in his case, the money flowed directly into the program rather than his pockets. Vandemoer maintained that Stanford officials were aware of the arrangement with Singer all along.

All told, 50 families were implicated, along with about a dozen administrators, Singer, and his co-conspirators, making it the largest college admissions scam ever prosecuted by the Department of Justice. [Formal charges](#) include racketeering, mail fraud, wire fraud, and tax fraud. Singer, who faces a maximum of 65 years in prison, has yet to receive his sentence. Others served [a couple of weeks to a few months](#).

"There will not be a separate admissions system for the wealthy," [said Andrew Lelling](#), U.S. attorney for Massachusetts, "and there will not be a separate criminal justice system either." But the real sentencing occurred in the court of public opinion.

Operation Varsity Blues' Impact on Higher Education

People were outraged by the brazen use of wealth and status to steal seats away from students more deserving of those coveted spots. The celebrities involved even received death threats.

It's bad enough that, as one commentator suggested, admissions advantages "skew rich and white" through better high schools, private counselors, SAT prep courses, and [legacy status](#), and that wealthy

applicants [apply early decision](#) without worrying about comparing financial aid packages.

These parents considered themselves above the competitive fray, divorced from the common tactics of the [application process](#). They sought to acquire academic prestige vicariously through their children — even despite them — and to associate themselves with the university brands befitting people of their social standing.

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The biggest loser here, of course, was higher education itself, particularly the elite institutions that willingly played along with the scam, sullyng their reputations in the process. Gone was any pretense of meritocracy, which we cling to as an ideal but deep down realize never truly existed. We assume athletes and rich kids get preferential treatment, yet seeing the injustice of it all on full display offends our sensibilities and incites us to cry foul.

Nevertheless, despite the backlash, the film claims the "back door" is "still available for those willing to pay," while also noting Stanford's denial that "any amount of money can have an influence on admissions." We know better.

"Operation Varsity Blues" exposes painful truths about the intermingling of wealth, privilege, and elite higher education, illuminating the hypocrisy of universities claiming to level the playing field. Repairing their image certainly remains an uphill battle.

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