

Does It Matter Where You Go To College? Some Context For The Admissions Scandal

NPR, March 13, 2019

It's no secret that wealth brings advantages when it comes to sending your kids to college. Rich and famous parents can donate large sums of money to schools or lean on their names and connections. Some ritzy colleges explicitly prefer the children and grandchildren of alumni — at Harvard University, an investigation found last year that these "legacy" admits were over five times more likely to get in than the average Joe.

Yet federal prosecutors say that for 33 wealthy parents, these advantages were not enough. A college consultant named William Singer, of Newport Beach, Calif., pleaded guilty in federal court Tuesday to a cheating scheme that included bribing SAT test proctors and college coaches on behalf of these families.

The indictment names prominent actresses and business leaders. It alleges crazy stunts — like having a stand-in take a college entrance exam, photo-doctoring to paste a student's head onto the body of an athlete, bribing college sports coaches and paying up to \$75,000 for falsified exam results, all in the name of getting their kids admission through what Singer called "a side door" to schools like Yale University, the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Southern California.

To better understand this story, here are a few things to know about the fraught history of college admissions.

When a high school junior in Spokane, Wash., or Sutherland Springs, Texas, goes to Yale's application website, she reads this: "As we carefully and respectfully review every application, two questions guide our admissions team: 'Who is likely to make the most of Yale's resources?' and 'Who will contribute most significantly to the Yale community?'"

The existence of legacy admissions and even athletic recruitment puts a dent in this shiny image. This bribery scandal could tarnish it for good. A detail that some critics have found especially galling: In some cases, payments that were effectively bribes to university officials were funneled through charitable foundations to the universities, meaning that the bribers also could claim tax exemptions.

This controversy comes amid a broader debate over affirmative action.

Last year, Harvard University's admissions process — and the very concept of merit at the most selective colleges — was put on trial. Asian-American students alleged discrimination because they are consistently admitted at lower rates than their SAT scores and grades might predict. Harvard denies the allegations.

At stake are the procedures that elite, highly selective colleges, which are generally overstacked with white and rich students, try to use to improve diversity without running afoul of the law.

Despite battles over affirmative action stretching back decades, research has shown that low-income students make up just 3 percent of America's most selective colleges and that racial diversity is lacking too.

These inequities in American education go back all the way to kindergarten. Access to college counselors and advanced courses is inequitable by class and race. According to a recent report from the nonprofit EdBuild, predominantly white school districts as a group receive \$23 billion more than districts that serve mostly students of color, though both have the same number of students.

Low-income students who do manage to get into top colleges graduate at high rates and do nearly as well financially as their silver-spoon peers.

Meanwhile, many tech billionaires are better known as college dropouts.

For a broader view, a 2014 survey of tens of thousands of graduates by Gallup found that college selectivity correlated not at all with later satisfaction in work or fulfillment in life. As NPR reported in 2014, "Those percentages did not vary based on whether the grads went to a fancy name-brand school or a regional state college, one of the top 100 in the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings or one of the bottom 100."

No word yet on what it means for long-term happiness to find out your parents lied to get you into college in the first place.