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OPINION | REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The College Admissions Racket

Universities are more than innocent victims in this scandal.

By The Editorial Board

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A Stanford University student walks in front of Hoover Tower on the Stanford University campus in Palo Alto, Calif. PHOTO: PAUL SAKUMA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Coming soon to a theater near you: The movie about wealthy and famous parents who paid a California fixer to cheat their child’s way into universities. Many readers have heard about the charges against 50 or so people on Tuesday for this real-life fraud that is a political and cultural indictment of the racket known as college admissions.

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The college admissions fraud scandal, and the Senate and Donald Trump’s emergency.

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The details feature William “Rick” Singer, who ran a college-admissions outfit in Newport Beach. Among the portfolio of illegal services he’s admitted to providing: Helping students cheat on standardized tests, sometimes by paying a proctor to correct answers later.

Actress Lori Loughlin allegedly paid a \$500,000 bribe to pretend her daughters were recruits for the University of Southern California crew team. The fake-athlete line seems to have been popular and has ensnared coaches at Yale, Stanford and elsewhere. Prosecutors say more indictments are possible.

Yale University said the Justice Department “believes that Yale has been the victim of a crime,” and no doubt other colleges involved see themselves as the victims, too. But not so fast. At Stanford a bribe was passed off as a donation to Stanford’s sailing program. That should have attracted scrutiny. It’s fair to let coaches recruit talent. But coaches seem to be meting out admissions slots with little oversight from administrators.

And Mr. Singer had no problem finding coaches willing to take bribes. He says he created a “side door” into schools that worked “every time.” He understood his market on both ends of the transaction, and the opportunity for corruption.

All of this will invite more political intervention by making the admissions process look like the racket it too often is. Asian-Americans have argued for years that “holistic” admissions processes are de facto quotas against qualified Asian-American applicants.

A recent lawsuit against Harvard has revealed that admissions criteria exist inside a proprietary black box that no outsider is allowed to see. The days when college admissions was largely a merit-based system disappeared long ago. Now merit merely gets your foot inside an admissions labyrinth with passages marked race, gender, geography, legacy, athletics, sexual identity, trustee relationships, social-justice work and so forth.

The political left is predictably spinning this case as proof that college opportunity is rigged and that racial preferences are necessary to help applicants who can’t pay their way into schools. It’s true that many parents shell out thousands of dollars for an SAT tutor or summer trips to build houses in Guatemala. This adds to the perception that elite admission can be bought even without committing crimes.

Yet plenty of the competition in admissions is fueled by pitting applicants against each other based on race and not on the quality of test scores or thinking skills. It isn't enough to be intelligent or creative, but to stand out students now have to be a world-class fencer or have started a charity that does clean-water microfinance in Africa. Talented high-school students marinate in a pressure cooker of activities and achievements that does little to stimulate intellectual development.

Progressives will also use the episode to claim that standardized tests can no longer be trusted. The SAT isn't a perfect test but is perhaps the last semi-objective measure of student aptitude. High schools have inflated grades to the point of meaninglessness.

The college fraud ring is also a sign of the cultural times. Some of the children involved appear not to have known their parents were paying bribes to get them into college. That suggests the scandal is about obsessive parents who view elite schools as a status symbol and networking opportunity, not merely a path to upward mobility or achievement.

The schools know this and make prestige a large part of the product they're peddling. You'd think that kids admitted on false pretenses with junk test scores wouldn't flourish at top schools. No one seems to have worried about that. What does that say about the supposedly rigorous academics at these schools?

The universities don't seem to appreciate that they're risking political backlash. Republicans are already eager to go after the academy for its free-speech follies and high costs. Universities are especially vulnerable since so much of their business model relies on student loans and other federal subsidies. They will have to clean up their own houses or face political intervention that could get uglier than even these fraud indictments.

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