

TRENDING: ‘This time, they got caught.’ Cheating scam rankles, doesn’t surprise

Kristine Hanniford started preparing for college the minute high school began. Since then it has been nearly four years of tough courses, tutoring to prepare for entrance exams and little time for fun.

“I couldn’t be in as many clubs as I wanted, and I had to stop playing club volleyball just because I don’t have a lot of time,” said Hanniford, who also gave up orchestra. “I’ve been killing myself with this workload. Prioritizing college and taking the right classes has taken a few things away from me that I wish I still did.”

This week’s bombshell announcement that authorities have charged 50 people in a nationwide college admissions bribery scheme has infuriated students such as Hanniford, their families and educators. At the same time, they aren’t surprised.

“People with money will always get what they want,” said Hanniford, who will attend Elon University in North Carolina. “At the same time, it feels like we’re being cheated.”



Roswell High School senior Kristine Hanniford plans to study psychology at Elon University.

U.S. Attorney Andrew Lelling said during a news conference that the \$25 million federal bribery case is the biggest college admissions scam ever prosecuted by the Justice Department. Parents including actresses Felicity Huffman and Lori Loughlin, university coaches, testing officials and alleged ringleader Rick Singer — who has pleaded guilty — are among the accused. Authorities say parents allegedly bribed test administrators to change answers, paid coaches to “recruit” kids who weren’t athletes, and in some cases falsely claimed their children had learning disabilities.

“It’s unfair to people who work really hard,” said Abby Hayman, who attended Mill Springs Academy, an Alpharetta school for students with learning disabilities. She’s at Chattahoochee Technical College now, completing core course requirements with the help of regular tutoring, and will attend Kennesaw State University in the fall. “You can just cheat your way up? I don’t think that’s the way to do it.”



Abby Hayman at Ivory Thread, an Acworth boutique where she models, attended a school for students with learning disabilities and hopes to transfer to Kennesaw State University this fall.

No Georgia colleges or universities were named in charging documents released this week. Still, the issue is resonating at campuses everywhere. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution sought comment from the admissions offices of several of the state's top institutions, with limited success.

"We will not be able to accommodate an interview for this piece," a Spelman College spokeswoman said in a statement.

A Morehouse College spokeswoman said the school's admissions vice president was attending a college fair in California and couldn't be reached.

Greg Trevor, executive director of media communications for the University of Georgia, said in a statement the university was "disappointed" at news of the scandal and that "UGA will continue to be thoughtful in our thorough and holistic review of applicants, and we continuously review all of our policies and procedures to ensure consistency and integrity."

The AJC had not received responses from Georgia Tech or Emory University as of Friday afternoon.

Crisis communications expert Philip Hauserman said speaking out would be "a tremendous opportunity to show some leadership."

"I think there's a ton of scrambling behind the scenes," said Hauserman, head of the Atlanta office of the Castle Group, a Boston-based public relations and events agency.

"You have an outstanding opportunity when you're not involved to reach out and basically say, 'Look, we're aware this is going on. As far as we know, we're not involved. Here's our admissions process,'" he advised. "It would go a long way toward creating trust."

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Rick Clark, director of undergraduate admissions at Georgia Tech, appeared in "How I Got Into College," a 2013 episode of the radio show "This American Life." He shared amusing anecdotes about overeager parents pretending to be their kids for purposes of demonstrating interest in the school and using words such as "cool" and "awesome" in emails or phone calls.

The allegations leveled this week are far more serious — as is the pressure on many students. Atlanta psychologist Dina M. Zeckhausen has practiced for about 25 years, and in the past five she has seen an increase in college-bound adolescents experiencing anxiety, panic attacks and eating disorders.

"Some of them are drinking to cope," she said. "Their parents are not tuned in to how these pressures are negatively impacting their kids."

News of the FBI investigation dubbed "Operation Varsity Blues" didn't stun her, though.

“A lot of this stems from how narrowly we define success,” she said.

In addition to criminal charges, Operation Varsity Blues has spurred class-action litigation. Students suing Yale University, Georgetown University, Stanford University and other schools caught up in the wide-ranging scheme contend the elite institutions “took the students’ admission application fees while failing to take adequate steps to ensure that their admissions process was fair and free of fraud, bribery, cheating and dishonesty.”

Todd Rose, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, predicts more revelations to come and doubts the charges will put an end to attempts to game the college-admission system.

“Anytime you create a system that has a very singular view of success, this will always happen,” he said. “It sort of guarantees not only cheating and corruption, but really, unhappy kids. As long as we treat higher ed like a designer handbag, it creates these incentives for corruption.”

Rose, who’s also co-founder of the Boston-based think tank Populace, thinks reform could start from the private sector. Top firms that make it clear they hire for ability and work ethic instead of focusing on a certain diploma, he said, could ease the frenzied competition for limited spots at a handful of prestigious colleges and universities.

“If we’re not willing to have the conversation about how we define success, this problem isn’t going away,” he said.

Rose also advocates changing the admissions policy so students who meet stated admissions criteria are selected by lottery administered by a third party.

“This rigged system is terrible,” he said. “We can do better.”

For one metro Atlanta family, talk of higher education this week has been all positive. Douglas County High School senior Jordan Nixon has received 39 acceptance letters and more than \$1.6 million in scholarship offers.



Douglas County High School senior Jordan Nixon has been accepted at 39 colleges and universities and has received more than \$1.6 million in scholarship offers.

“We sat on it for a very long time,” her mom, Angelia Nixon, said of the incredible news. “What was more overwhelming for her father and I was the total in scholarships. I was like, ‘Do you even say anything about this?’”

Jordan’s academic triumphs were featured in a Channel 2 Action News broadcast this week, a stark and happy contrast to the cheating scandal.

“She is not your typical teenager,” Angelia Nixon said during an interview while her daughter, who hasn’t yet decided which offer to accept, was in class. They’ve been attending college fairs since Jordan’s sophomore year, and always kept an eye on the kitchen calendar, marked with which college application was due when.

“She had to put forth a lot of effort. We’re very proud of her for doing so,” Nixon said. “There were many evenings when she was on her laptop. She wanted to go out with her friends but she couldn’t.”

As for Operation Varsity Blues?

“It doesn’t shock me,” Nixon said. “That’s just the way the world is if you have prestige, if you have money. Just this time, they got caught.”

WHY IT MATTERS

No Georgia schools were named in charging documents, but the largest college cheating scheme prosecuted by the U.S. Justice Department is resonating on campuses everywhere.