



Cheating Ourselves

US college bribery scandal shines a light on the price parents are willing to pay for their children's education

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The college system in the US has been embroiled in a cheating scandal where the rich and famous have been accused of paying vast sums of money to ensure that their children are admitted to elite universities.

The plot was uncovered by the FBI and unsealed court documents show that more than forty people have been charged, including CEOs of large companies and celebrities. US Attorney Andrew Lelling

described the accused as 'a catalogue of wealth and privilege'.

Widening Corruption

The alleged scheme involved helping students cheat on entrance exams, as well as having non-athletic students admitted on fake athletic scholarships.

One of the most high-profile subjects implicated was *Desperate Housewives* actress Felicity Huffman, who is alleged to have made a 'charitable contribution' of \$15,000 (£11,500) to participate in the scheme on

behalf of her eldest daughter.

The scheme was alleged to have been run by William 'Rick' Singer, through his company Edge College & Career Network. In federal court, Mr Singer pled guilty to charges including racketeering, money laundering, and obstruction of justice.

He could receive a maximum of 65 years in prison and more than \$1m in fines. He will be sentenced in June and told the court 'I am responsible. I put all the people in place'.

The scam appears to have been widespread and involved vast sums of money. The

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FBI claimed that athletics coaches at various institutions were also involved, and recommended fraudulent applicants internally and then pocketed bribes in return.

The head women's football coach at Yale University was allegedly paid \$400,000 to accept a student who did not even play the sport. The same parents also gave Mr Singer \$1.2m for arranging the bribe.

Mr Lelling stated that: 'This case is about the widening corruption of elite college admissions through the steady application of wealth, combined with fraud'.

'There can be no separate college admission for wealthy, and I will add there will not be a separate criminal justice system either'.

The high profile universities involved were not aware of the bribes and in the majority of cases, neither were the students.

Widespread Cheating

Although the US case has made headlines

around the world, it is far from an isolated incident. There have been worldwide instances of academic cheating including 2,440 pharmacists being accused of using earpieces in a Chinese national licensing test in 2014.

In 2015 several hundred people were arrested in connection with mass school exam cheating in the Indian state of Bihar. Parents were caught scaling two and four-storey buildings to pass answers through the windows to their offspring. Students were seen copying answers from smuggled-in notes, whilst the police posted outside of the test centres were bribed to look the other way.

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The issue of where responsibility for preventing such behaviour was questioned by the then state education minister, PK Shahi, who asked: 'Is it the responsibility of the government alone to manage such a huge number of people and to conduct a 100% free and fair examination?'

The UK has had its own issues, with the exams regulator, Ofqual, claiming last year that instances of cheating in GCSE and A-Level exams have increased by a quarter year on year. The majority of which was centred around pupils taking mobile phones into examinations.

Giving a Leg-up

This type of cheating is abhorrent to the vast majority of us, who like to believe that it is a relatively low number of people who would perpetrate this kind of dishonesty. But by limiting our idea of what cheating is, are we really cheating ourselves?

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Robust schools and academy governance can help alleviate these issues, but society is not meritocratic, and as such, there are many ways that people will seek to give their nearest and dearest a proverbial leg-up. Many of which may be considered morally dubious.

In an ironic twist, it is the very person who coined the term 'meritocracy', Michael Young, Lord Dartington, who gave a perfect example of this kind of behaviour, when he called an Oxford admissions tutor to complain that his

son, Toby Young, had not been admitted. Following the call he won a place at the prestigious institution.

US universities are open about this in a way that we are not in the UK, with students with family connections to Ivy League schools being dubbed 'legacies'.

These students are seen as a good future source of alumni donations and have a 45% increase in the likelihood of being admitted. Donations to institutions are a contentious issue, as social media users were quick to point out to rapper and mogul Dr Dre, after he posted on Instagram, following his daughter's admission to the University of Southern California 'My daughter got

accepted into USC all on her own. No jail time!!!'

The apparent reference to the university admissions scandal was somewhat undermined by those who quickly pointed out that in 2013 Dr Dre and his business partner donated \$70m to USC to fund the Jimmy Iovine and Andre Young [Dr Dre's birth name] Academy for Arts, Technology and the Business of Innovation.

It is not just such obvious means of making sure the odds are in your child's favour. A 2012 YouGov poll showed that 6% of atheist parents had attended church services, purely to try and ensure that their child could enter a well-performing faith school.

In 2015, a similar poll found that this number had doubled for oversubscribed Church of England schools.

A 2018 report by the Sutton Trust found that almost one in three parents from higher socioeconomic backgrounds knew a parent who had cheated the school admission system by using a relative's address or renting a second home in the catchment area for a desirable school.

In fact, conducted on behalf of Santander bank, a survey found that one in four British families had moved home to be nearer to their chosen school, paying on average 18% higher on their house price to do so.

Cheating, is an unfortunate fact of life but perhaps the real scandal is the myriad of ways that it is possible to abuse the system, as long as you have the financial means to do so. [n](#)