Spring 4-9-2019

School Admission Scandal Underscores Significance Of Transparency

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School Admission Scandal Underscores Significance Of Transparency

Federal prosecutors recently uncovered a massive fraud and bribery scheme in which parents paid lavish sums to ensure their children received admission to certain highly competitive academic institutions. As part of this scheme, university coaches and school officials received payments, and students were instructed to falsely claim to have learning disabilities to qualify for testing privileges on college entrance exams.

This scandal is a dark moment in the history of higher education. In its fallout, however, there lies an opportunity to implement more transparent admissions standards that can benefit students and schools alike.

Students applying to college encounter a perplexing set of criteria and standards for admission, without a clear understanding of how their applications are evaluated. Even students who meet the stated criteria may still be rejected for reasons they will never know.

Even with preparation, applicants face an uncertain future

As the cheating scandal proved, wealth has historically contributed to a positive admissions outcome for students. The old cliché of rich parents who donate a library or new football jerseys to a university in exchange for their children’s admission still rings true today. Additionally, a student’s cultural background could prove to be beneficial or disadvantageous, as some universities seek to increase the population of certain ethnic groups among their student bodies in particular years.

“There’s no magic formula when it comes to college admission decisions,” The College Board says. Students could be rejected by their backup schools while receiving generous scholarship packages from their top choices. A profound, compelling essay might have pushed one school to grant admission to an underperforming student, while another school might not have even bothered to read the essay of someone with a high GPA.

The only thing that is certain about college admissions is uncertainty. The level of fraud and the extensive lengths that wealthy parents went through in order for their children to be admitted to top schools have alarmed the public. But if it were a more transparent process — in which defined guidelines stated that a $1 million donation guaranteed acceptance or a $50,000 gift increased a student’s admission chances by 20 percent — would there be any less outrage?

The U.S. needs to improve its system, but where can it find inspiration?

Past landmark court cases regarding admissions criteria, as well as examples from other developed countries, can give the United States a roadmap for creating a more transparent and effective admissions process. In Fisher II, the Supreme Court upheld the University of Texas at Austin’s affirmative action program, acknowledging the school’s “holistic” approach to assessing candidates. UT Austin’s broad criteria focus more on applicants’ potential to contribute to its overall mission than on their merit.

Some may interpret this holistic approach as an easy way for schools such as UT Austin to not have to justify admitting or rejecting certain applicants. During the oral argument in Fisher II, the justices voiced concern over a lack of transparency in this holistic review.

In Australia, the Admissions Transparency Implementation Working Group addresses this very issue by requiring institutions to meet nationally consistent standards in education delivery, including admissions criteria. For example, the Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR) aims to “ensure that Australian
students are provided real information on what they need to do to be admitted to a course at a particular institution.” Ideally, if the only admissions criterion for an advanced degree program at an Australian school were holding High Distinction marks (similar to an A) in all previous coursework, any applicant who met that standard would be granted admission.

**What universities need to do**

Students can’t rely on the efficacy of certain government legislation or initiatives alone to ensure the admissions process is transparent. Schools need to hold themselves responsible to ensure each applicant gets a fair shot, regardless of whether the applicant receives admission.

A school could provide examples of past applications, both successful and unsuccessful, to give students a clearer picture of what it is seeking. These examples could contain extracurricular activities, test scores, transcripts, and essays, as well as which criteria the school weighs or values more heavily than others.

Additionally, universities can take the extra step to disclose to rejected applicants why they failed to receive admission, noting how a student’s test scores, GPA, or lack of leadership positions, for example, did not support his or her application. Schools could also apply the same effort to newly admitted students, noting the specific traits or qualities that elevated their applications.

Of course, this type of transparency isn’t easy to practice. Schools that offer examples of past applications may set unrealistic guidelines or lead students down a wrong path. Applicants may try too hard to emulate the style of a certain example essay rather than craft their own independent narratives. If an applicant receives information from a university about why he or she was rejected but then finds out another applicant was admitted with similar credentials, the rejected student would be just as uninformed about the school’s decision.

Complete transparency may not be possible, but modest disclosure would still go a long way toward addressing today’s opaque admissions process. The collective outrage in response to the college cheating case amplifies the call for transparency, both to mitigate the likelihood of further fraud and to provide students with greater insight into the current process.

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