

Beyond Varsity Blues:

Merit, Wealth, and College Admissions in an Era of Hyper-Inequality

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Snapshot: *This case examines the influence of family wealth on college admissions in the wake of the 2019 college admissions bribery scandal. While bribery is plainly unethical, the moral status of other instances where families spend money to help their children secure spots at selective colleges is less clear. What are the ethical implications of family expenditures—from music lessons to SAT tutoring to private*

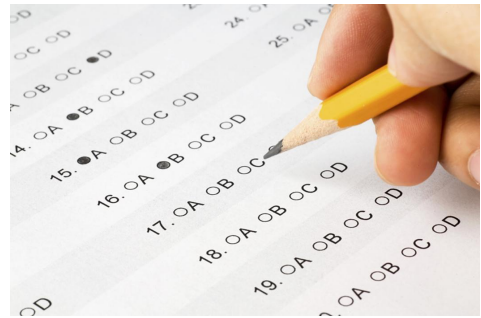
schooling to large donations—that can make students more attractive to colleges and universities?

Case Description: In 2019, news broke that a number of wealthy parents had secured admission for their children at prestigious universities by paying off standardized test officials to falsify their students' scores and university team coaches to recruit their children—many of whom had little or no experience with the sport. These cases plainly represented instances of morally impermissible bribery: wealthy parents paid college counselors and university officials to provide illicit support for their children's college applications. Unsurprisingly, Americans responded to this news with a mix of outrage, disappointment, and a dose of cynicism—don't all wealthy families pay to get their children into elite colleges one way or another?

This case study aims to do two things: (1) offer an entrypoint for thinking about the ethical dilemma(s) raised by both the 'Varsity Blues' scandal as well as the more routine ways that wealth can tilt the college admissions process towards the wealthy and (2) provide resources—including discussion questions and links for further reading—that readers can use to help facilitate their own discussions of the ethical dilemma(s) that wealth and income inequality pose for college admissions.

Case Study:

While much of the reporting on what came to be known as the 'Varsity Blues' scandal focused on the boldness and scope of the plot, including the involvement of more than one celebrity couple, this news also started conversations about the other, legal ways parents use money to improve their students' college admissions prospects. Some parents, for instance, hire SAT and ACT tutors to raise their kids' test scores and college counselors to workshop their application essays. Others send their students to expensive sports clinics or pay for years of music lessons, knowing full well that extracurricular excellence will almost certainly help their child's application stand out. Many upper-middle class and wealthy families choose where to live and pay premium housing prices to gain access to highly-ranked public schools—or they simply buy their way out of the public system altogether by sending their children to highly-regarded private schools. Those with the means may even offer generous donations to universities in order to curry favor with admissions officers. Each of these examples represents a legal way to use wealth to improve a student's college admissions chances. Together, they raise questions about the ethics of the college admissions process as a whole in an era of economic hyper-inequality.



This case splits the ethical dilemmas concerning wealth inequality and college admissions into three thematic areas. The first page explores the aims of higher education as well as the urgency that some families feel about sending their students to elite universities. The second probes ideas of meritocracy and equity to uncover some of the ways that wealth in effect buys merit. The third attempts to navigate the blurry line between family autonomy and state regulation that policymakers may encounter when responding to these ethical dilemmas. Each page provides some context followed by links to relevant articles, as well as a set of discussion questions. Readers may find the discussion questions most useful after reading the articles since the questions are tailored to the perspectives provided in the linked texts. Readers may also want to review the Justice in Schools [discussion protocol](#) as an additional resource for facilitating meaningful discussion on ethical dilemmas.

The Aims of Elite Higher Education



The families implicated in the 'Varsity Blues' scandal were willing to pay large sums of money (and, not to mention, their integrity) to secure admission to highly-ranked colleges for their children. Many of those whom the FBI caught now face prison time. That these families decided elite higher education may be worthy of such extreme measures should give us pause. What exactly is so valuable about admission to a selective college? And what specifically is the purpose of elite universities?

For some families, elite universities matter because they offer abundant academic, extracurricular, and financial resources; a robust professional and social network; and the promise of upward mobility, especially for less privileged students. The texts below, however, indicate that elite universities have largely prioritized maintaining prestige over elevating their students, particularly less privileged ones. The first two texts below highlight the ways that elite universities have failed to support their first-generation and low-income students. The third questions whether elite universities actually contribute to their students' successes or simply select for students who are likely to succeed anyway.

Jack, Anthony Abraham. *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students*. Harvard University Press, 2019.

Though elite universities have created increasingly diverse student bodies over the last few decades, they continue to draw students from privileged backgrounds. Jack argues that college policies and culture fail to distinguish between these “privileged poor”—low-income students from elite, private high schools—and the “doubly disadvantaged.” As a result, Jack reveals the challenges that the doubly disadvantaged face on campus, which threaten their chances of success.

[“These colleges are better than Harvard at making poor kids rich.”](#) Dylan Matthews

While students from underprivileged backgrounds receive substantial benefits from attending elite universities, Matthews draws on research from the [Equality of Opportunity](#) project to argue that it's really colleges beyond the Ivy League that foster the American dream more, in large part because elite universities accept very few low-income students.

[“How Much Does Getting Into an Elite College Actually Matter?”](#) Kevin Cary

After controlling for SAT scores, economic backgrounds, and college ambitions, researchers found that students “poised to succeed” do well, independent of their acceptance into an Ivy League university. However, they find an exception in the data: students from less privileged backgrounds receive huge boosts from selective colleges.

The following articles suggest ways that colleges can re-orient themselves toward the goal of providing high-quality education and resources to more students and minority students in particular, specifically by reforming admissions practices.

[“One Way to Stop College-Admissions Insanity: Admit More Students.”](#) Adam Harris

Harris argues that elite schools should admit more applicants in order to reduce the prestige of an elite college diploma. Doing so, he believes, would reduce the mania around college admissions that fosters corruption in the system.

[“Why Stanford Should Clone Itself,”](#) David Kirp

Kirp argues that if elite universities truly wish to diversify their student populations and limit the role that wealth plays in admissions, they should open satellite campuses in new cities. Rather than acting like luxury brands that purposely limit their accessibility, elite schools should aim to educate more students. “If Yale can open a campus in Singapore,” Kirp wonders, “why can't it start one in Houston?”

[“I'm for Affirmative Action. Can You Change My Mind?”](#) Gary Gutting

Gutting argues in favor of affirmative action by claiming that it is “sufficiently worthy” to prefer minority applicants over majority ones. He writes that minorities are severely underrepresented at the top 100 universities because racial inequalities leave minority students with fewer resources and opportunities to achieve the admissions criteria. Gutting claims that universities are morally obliged to “compensate for the damage done to minorities” by the United States' dismal record of racial marginalization.

[The Single Biggest Fix for Inequality at Elite Colleges](#), David Denning. Examining controversies surrounding legacy admissions, Denning argues that rather than eliminating legacy admissions, universities should consider how current admissions practices privilege wealthy students across the board, not just the children of wealthy alumni. He suggests that the U.S. Department of Education should require colleges to share data about the income level of their admitted students as a way to create pressure for elite universities to admit more economically diverse cohorts.

Questions for discussion:

- Does attending an elite college matter to you? Why or why not?
- For you, what should be the purpose of higher education? Do you think universities' visions for the purpose of higher education align with yours?
- Do you think universities' admissions practices are consistent with your ideas about the purpose of higher education?
- What can universities do to improve their admissions practices to make them more consistent with the aims of higher education?
- For example, should elite colleges accept more low-income students, as Denning suggests?
- Does Harris's solution to admit more students align with the aims of elite higher education? What about Gutting's argument for affirmative action? Or Kirp's solution to have elite schools open satellite campuses?
- Regarding Harris's argument in *The Atlantic* article, what factors stop colleges from accepting more students?
- How can elite colleges better support the "doubly disadvantaged" students that Anthony Jack described in *The Privileged Poor*?

Meritocracy and Equity

Conversations about the aims of higher education may also lead to questions about how effectively these elite institutions promote meritocracy and equity—and whether “merit” is a fair metric for admissions officers to use in the first place. While many hold the widely accepted view that the only legitimate basis for college and university admissions decisions is individual merit, a closer examination suggests that merit itself may well rest on facts about a student that have more to do with their background than their talent or work ethic. Wealthier students are able to hire tutors to help them in classes they struggle with and coaches to sharpen their skills on the soccer field. For these students, these factors will inevitably translate to impressive resumes by the end of high school. Students from less privileged backgrounds, on the other hand, may need to forgo extracurricular activities and even some studying time in order to



work to provide for their families. In short, “merit” may reflect wealth more than talent or hard work.¹

The following three articles question the practicality of a meritocratic system in a country where money can buy so many opportunities and where the elite continue to use their wealth to protect their status.

[“The Case Against Meritocracy.”](#) Ross Douthat

Douthat argues that society should not glorify meritocratic ideals over the old aristocratic system. A meritocratic society, Douthat believes, inevitably reverts back to an aristocracy because the wealthy’s children will have more access to resources, allowing them to achieve “merit” more easily. Meanwhile, meritocracy convinces the upper class that it earned its privilege rightfully, causing it to lack the sense of duty to help the less fortunate that the old aristocratic class harbored. Douthat ultimately embraces aristocracy because acknowledging the role of wealth in achieving merit and mobility is “more clear-sighted and effective” than holding onto a broken meritocracy.

[“The 9.9 Percent Is the New American Aristocracy.”](#) Matthew Stewart

Often, critiques of American wealth inequality point toward the top 0.1%, the uber rich. However, Stewart shifts the narrative toward the rise of the 9.9% aristocrats—that is, the other Americans in the top 10%. He reveals how rising inequality leads to more immobility and suggests that this self-proclaimed “middle class,” which consists mostly of lawyers, doctors, dentists, and other professionals, protect their wealth and preserve the broken status quo.

[“They Had It Coming.”](#) Caitlin Flanagan

Flanagan argues that the college scandal is a manifestation of the white, entitled rich feeling as though they’re losing their established power as elite colleges start admitting more minority applicants. Flanagan compares this to low-income white Americans supporting Trump for his anti-immigrant rhetoric.

The three texts below offer commentary on ways to adjust the college admissions system to account for the ethical dilemmas surrounding meritocracy and equity in higher education.

Fishkin, Joseph. *Bottlenecks*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

While equality of opportunity is an intuitive and broadly celebrated goal, Joseph Fishkin argues that it needs to be reimagined. Rather than focus on literally equalizing opportunity, Fishkin offers a new theory of equal opportunity focused on what he calls “bottlenecks”—those places in our opportunity structure where the few are separated out and given greater access to opportunity than the many. Fishkin argues that policymakers ought to loosen the “bottlenecks” in today’s society—such as SAT scores, college degree, and class—that constrain the number of opportunities people have at all stages in their lives.

[“How to Fix the College Admissions Scandal \(Warning: You Might Hate It.\)”](#) Robert Samuelson

Samuelson proposes a new, transparent system where elite colleges auction off a percentage of their seats to the highest bidders. Knowing that the idea sounds absurd, Samuelson adds nuance to his suggestion to justify why he believes that it would actually make the system more fair.

[The Painful Truth About Affirmative Action](#), Richard Sander and Stuart Taylor, Jr.

¹See Sean F. Reardon, “The Widening Achievement Gap Between the Rich and the Poor: New Evidence and Possible Explanations,” in *Whither Opportunity?: Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children’s Life Chances*, ed. Greg J. Duncan and Richard J. Murnane (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011).

Sander and Taylor suggest that affirmative action fails to accomplish its goal because it tends to neglect lower-income minority students in favor of minority students from higher income backgrounds. They also claim that affirmative action programs falter because of what they call the “mismatch” effect: when universities accept less qualified students, these students struggle to thrive and are more likely to fall behind.

Questions for discussion:

- Do you feel that your peers’ family wealth has given them an unfair advantage in school over you? Or otherwise, do you feel that you have an unfair academic or extracurricular advantage over your peers because of your family wealth?
- Should America continue to view itself as a meritocracy? Is an ideal meritocracy possible?
- Is it ethical for wealthy families to use their money to pass certain advantages down to their children? Why or why not?
- How could colleges quell the elite’s fears about losing their power without admitting fewer minority applicants?
- Should universities accept concerns that affirmative action favors wealthier people of color over lower-income minority groups as reason to ignore disparities in the equality of opportunity in the college admissions process?
- For some readers, Samuelson’s proposal in *RealClearPolitics* is unsettling. What about this proposal creates discomfort? How is it different from the admissions system currently in place? How is it similar?

Family Autonomy vs. State Regulation

Wealth inequality has undoubtedly created injustices in the college admissions process, but policy solutions to level the playing field often present a tension between state regulation and family autonomy.



Although many individuals might agree that certain expenditures related to college admissions—like donations to universities or spending on private college counsellors, for example—should be regulated, the line becomes rather blurry when considering the sorts of expenditures throughout and before high school that can boost a student’s college admissions prospects. Meanwhile, families might perceive state regulation on some of these expenditures as an infringement on an individual’s basic liberty interest in supporting causes important to them.²

This [worksheet](#) invites readers to explore their own opinions on which sorts of expenditures are permissible and which ones ought to be regulated, and the following article explores some ways in which family wealth and spending can undermine the equality of opportunity in college admissions.

["Need Extra Time on Tests? It Helps to Have Cash."](#) Dana Goldstein and Jugal K. Patel

² See Harry Brighouse et al., “Educational Goods and Values: A Framework for Decision Makers,” *Theory and Research in Education* 14, no. 1 (March 2016): 3–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878515620887>.

High-income communities have a much higher percentage of standardized testing accommodations than lower-income communities. Goldstein and Patel argue that data like this suggest an unfairness in the process of acquiring accommodations. While some wealthy students may simply be abusing the system, more significantly, they reason that lower-income families don't have the resources to acquire the up-to-date evaluations needed for their children to qualify.

["Worries grow about application essay 'help' that may go too far,"](#) Scott Jaschik

Jaschik points out that families with the means are able to hire expensive essay coaches to help workshop students' college essays to near-perfection. The article raises questions about the ethics of allowing students to submit these workshopped essays that may not truthfully reflect the student's writing capabilities or ideas.

In addition to paying for services that boost their children's applications, some particularly wealthy families are able to donate large sums of money to universities, donations that can be hard for admissions committees to ignore when making their decisions. Although legal, these donations raise significant ethical questions about the fairness of the college admissions process. For some, there's little difference between donations like these and bribes. The following articles consider the morality of donations.

["Turns Out There's a Proper Way to Buy Your Kid a College Slot"](#)

The *New York Times'* Editorial Board suggests that wealthy families can essentially "buy" their children's way into elite colleges through generous donations to a university, calling into question whether a true meritocracy in the U.S. would be impossible even if everyone abided by the law.

["In Admissions, Harvard Favors Those Who Fund It, Internal Emails Show,"](#) Delano R. Franklin and Samuel W. Zwickel

In 2014, Harvard University was sued by Students for Fair Admissions, an anti-affirmative action group accusing Harvard of engaging in racially discriminatory admissions practices. In 2018, as the case continued to drag through the courts, emails emerged detailing some of the ways that Harvard's admissions practices favor children of big money donors. Among other findings, the emails reveal a former Dean of the Kennedy School of Government thanking Dean of Admission William Fitzsimmons for accepting the children of three individuals, one of whom had "committed to a building."

["Felicity Huffman Is Guilty, but So Are University Shakedown Artists,"](#) Frederick M. Hess and Hannah Warren

Hess and Warren argue Felicity Huffman is clearly guilty for her role in the 'Varsity Blues' scandal. However, they are critical of the fact that she was prosecuted for her crimes, while admissions officials who admit students whose parents have donated to schools have suffered no consequences. For these authors, giving big-dollar donations and committing bribery of the sort Huffman and other parents were charged with are ethically comparable practices.

Questions for Discussion:

- In your experience, what sorts of family expenditures are most common in the college admissions process? Which of these expenditures do you think are acceptable? What sorts of expenditures cross the line?
- Is there a way to restrict the sorts of family expenditures discussed in the articles above? How?
- Is there a difference between donations and bribery? If so, what is that difference?
- Should private donations to colleges and universities be more strictly regulated? How?

- Should we assume that we cannot control or restrict how families spend their money and instead hold admissions teams responsible for maintaining the equality of opportunity in the admissions process by expanding programs like affirmative action?
- Or given this assumption, should we eliminate selective admissions altogether in favor of students attending their local universities? Or, perhaps, in favor of an outright lottery?³
- Should we reform admissions to resemble the British system, which ignores everything other than academic performance?

³ See Lani Guinier, *The Tyranny of Meritocracy: Democratizing Higher Education in America*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015).