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College Admissions Scandal:

Are We Surprised?

By Jeremy M. Evans

The college admissions scandal shocked the American populace. Top universities, wealthy celebrities and current college students saw their names tarnished. Even college graduates were affected, as the scandal could perceivably discredit or weaken their own degrees and accomplishments.

Although recent actions were disgraceful, college admission scandals are nothing novel. Consider the NCAA recruiting and apparel deal scandals, or the litigation over paying college athletes for not licensing their images. Morally questionable threads weave through the education sector, including the increasing emphasis on wealth.

Government debt reports have shown the costs of tuition rising, but salaries remaining stagnant. There has even been talk in Congress about legislation to lighten the debt load of American college graduates. In turn, the benefit of a college education has largely changed in the collective American mind — specifically, as it pertains to the value of the degree outweighing its costs.

With ongoing collegiate affairs and increasing tuition costs, we must ask ourselves: Are we really surprised by the college admissions scandal?

Parents often give financial gifts to schools as part of legacy and other programs. Even if only conceptually, those gifts have some effect on college admissions. For example, an alum or donor may donate money to name a building after their family. Years later, the donor's child, grandchild, niece or nephew applies to the school. For the most rigorous of institutions, the applicant will still have to comply with and complete admissions standards, but the truth is, money talks. At the very least, that donation and that name on the building highlight the applicant.

Many wonder what will happen to the parents and administrators who fabricated admission credentials of applicants. Unlike a donation, a fabrication involves concealment as part of the admissions application process. Although criminal elements are at play for fraud by the accused, first-time offenders in criminal cases are often given diversion or community service programs with hefty fines. It is therefore conceivable that a wealthy Hollywood star would simply pay a fine and do community service. What is often overlooked is the ironic nature that a payment would be made to a charity or even the institution (where the university was not at fault) to construct a building with the family name.

Unfortunately, the entire college model has become so expensive that the situations described above are commonplace. The focus for state and private educational institutions is based on fundraising for survival and excelling in the competitive marketplace for education providers.

In the end, the college admissions scandal is a symptom of the increasing competition of admissions and the rising cost of education. Consider that the students admitted through their parents and administrator assistance actually performed well academically. Despite having an illegal assist to entry, the students did well. What does that say about the admissions process — who gets in, who doesn't and the weight of financial means?

In a free market economy, costs would increase with salaries. In this case, costs in education have risen, but salaries have not. This makes some sense because education does not fully compete in the free market. Subsidies, federal student loans and tax-free benefits of the 501(c)(3) nonprofit model make education somewhat immune to change and perfect competition. If educational institutions were forced to compete and become more innovative, what would happen?

It is possible, and likely, that educational institutions would lower the cost of tuition and find innovative ways to educate students if required to compete like other businesses. Perhaps they would be regulated to keep costs low because the same institutions receive the government benefits mentioned above.

I have often argued, especially with low bar passage rates in the state of California, that the most successful and imagined law school in the country (or state) would be an institution that (1) offered low cost tuition, but (2) guaranteed (within reason and data) bar passage. Students would be flocking through the proverbial doors. Student success and bar passage rates are why

The unfortunate part about the college admissions process is its emphasis on money. That is why the college admissions scandal, as disheartening as it is, is not surprising.

Harvard, Yale and Stanford are such popular schools. The Ivys alone have a 80-90% bar passage rate.

Bar passage rates are similar to success in any industry. For example, the best schools would be able to say (1) here is what we offer for the price, and (2) here is what you will get (a job, opportunity, etc.). Many schools do this of course, but not to the specified level of a free market business. Some schools even offer merit-based scholarships where the applicant knows their financial burden when applying and can get tuition help for being a good student.

As we all know by now, the unfortunate part about the college admissions process is its emphasis on money. That is why the college admissions scandal, as disheartening as it is, is not surprising. College is expensive and the institutions need money. Those who pursue education will look for any edge on admissions they can get.

This is not a call for moral indifference or lack of ethics. Far from it. If there is to be a better college admissions system, there must be a change. The system cannot encourage admissions by dollar amounts and influence. What we currently have is the tragedy of admissions, followed by a scandal of admissions. ‡



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