

# US College Admissions Scandal. “Affirmative Action for the Rich”

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

*In the 1961 Hollywood film *Splendor in the Grass*, the protagonist's oil-wealthy father got his academically unqualified son admitted to Yale.*

Though unexplained in the film, he likely bought his admission, his influence not enough to prevent his son's expulsion for failing grades.

Nor did the film explain if the father was a Yale alum, wanting his son given preferential legacy treatment, commonplace in the US.

According to Inside Higher Ed, 42% of private colleges and universities, as well as 6% of public ones consider legacy status a factor in admissions.

At the same time, MIT, Caltech, the University of California, and other US schools say legacy isn't an admissions practice. At many other schools, it's somewhat advantageous.

Overall, legacy freshmen have lower GPAs and SAT scores than others admitted. Their academic performance is poorer. Wealthy parents use money and influence to assure admittance of children to preferred higher education destinations.

Harvard is one of many examples of how the system works, 29% of its incoming class of 2021 comprised of legacy students. Applicants of university alums are three times more likely to be admitted than others.

At most of the nation's elite schools, applicants of alumni have a significant leg up on others. Most often, they're white with wealthy parents, able and willing to donate substantially to fundraising drives.

Money can't buy everything, but all too often it's a way to buy entrance to elite US colleges and universities.

Author **Chad Coffman** called the system “Affirmative Action for the Rich: Legacy Preferences in College Admissions” in his book by this title.

It discusses the origin and history of legacy preferences, including their impact on alumni fundraising, philosophical issues of the practice, and their civil rights implications.

A personal note: In 1952, I was admitted to the Harvard class of 1956 with no preferential legacy help. To this day, I consider it the luck of the draw.

Though my good grades and extracurricular activities qualified me for admittance, many

others turned down were equally or more qualified.

Neither of my parents attended college. I had nothing special going for me – other than growing up in Boston across the river from Harvard in Cambridge.

Proximity helped. Many of my classmates were from greater Boston, Massachusetts, New England, and the northeast overall.

My mother later earned a Harvard degree, attending evening classes for \$5 a course. She and I took some of the same courses with the same professors, I during daytime hours.

My freshman tuition was \$600, \$1,000 my senior year. Anyone could attend evening classes. My mother yearned for the degree she never had, graduating with me in the same class – the total cost of her degree around \$175.

To this day, I believe we were the only mother and son to be members of the same Harvard graduating class – a routine achievement for me, an extraordinary one for her with everything on her plate at the time, a master juggler giving proper attention to all her obligations.

On March 12, federal prosecutors disclosed indictments and complaints against 50 individuals. They followed an investigation into alleged bribery and mail fraud by wealthy parents to secure admission for their children to at least eight universities.

The most extensive case of its kind indicted prominent individuals – allegedly paying universities over \$25 million between 2011 and 2018 – the investigation nicknamed Operation Varsity Blues, taken from the 1999 Hollywood film of the same name.

Allegations include bribing college entrance exam administrators to facilitate cheating on exams.

Other charges include bribing varsity coaches to choose unqualified applicants, aiding their admission to schools, and using charitable organizations to conceal to the source and nature of money laundered bribes.

FBI special agent **Joseph Bonavolonta** called the scheme as “a sham that strikes at the core of the college admissions process.”

Preferential treatment given legacy applicants, along with the power of money in the US made the scheme possible – what level playing field admissions practices could have prevented.

Affirmative action isn't the same thing – US colleges and universities giving special consideration to racial minorities, women, and other discriminated against groups to counter generations of unfair practices.

The landmark 1954 Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* held that “separate educational facilities (are) inherently unequal” and unconstitutional.

The 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibited discrimination against students and college applicants on the basis of race or gender.

In *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003), the Supreme Court upheld the University of Michigan's Law School affirmative action admissions policy.

In *Fisher v. University of Texas* (2016), the High Court preserved the constitutionality of race-based admissions.

Writing for the majority, conservative **Justice Kennedy** highlighted the importance of "student body diversity," calling it "central to its identity and educational mission."

Yet in July 2018, the Trump regime ordered the practice abandoned, falsely calling it "beyond the requirements of the Constitution."

The US Commission on Civil Rights accused Trump's Justice Department and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos with "repeated refusal" to enforce federal civil rights, calling their actions "particularly troubling."

Regardless of US constitutional and statute laws, preferential treatment is the American way.

In dozens of elite US colleges and universities, more students from the top 1% of families by income comprise their student bodies than all others from households earning \$65,000 or less annually, according to an Opportunity Insights report.

Money may not buy happiness, but it can buy admittance to top US colleges and universities, even for unqualified students.

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