Admissions Scandal Underscores the Problem of Wealth Concentration

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By Richard Cherwitz

As a faculty member for over forty years, I was shocked—though perhaps I shouldn’t have been—and saddened to learn about the incredible admissions scandal exposed on Tuesday by the Department of Justice (DOJ). The DOJ implicated many of the nation’s premiere institutions of higher learning.

Federal authorities issued 50 indictments in a scheme allegedly involving faux athletes, coaches who were bribed, cheating on the SAT and ACT, million-dollar bribes and "guarantees" that certain applicants would be admitted to highly competitive colleges.

Unfortunately, this story hit very close to home, including my own university: The University of Texas at Austin, where the tennis coach already has been placed on administrative leave and an unnamed student is referenced.

Aside from the obvious magnitude of this story, perhaps unparalleled in history of university admissions, we all should be concerned about the larger and more endemic problem underscored by this scandal—a problem far greater than the limited and partisan attention it too often receives.
First, the charges of admission fraud come at a time when many call the practice of race-based admissions (which some label “affirmative action”) unfair and discriminatory. For decades, numerous students, parents and politicians have complained that unqualified African American and Hispanic applicants are admitted to college each year simply because of their racial/ethnic identity.

However, unlike the latest admissions scandals, which involved placing a heavy thumbprint on the scale, it must be remembered that race and ethnicity can be used as only one factor among many in reviewing an applicant’s credentials. Regardless of one’s views about this policy, the Supreme Court ruled it to be perfectly legal.

Ironically, we also must wonder how this story psychologically impacts underrepresented minority and economically-disadvantaged students. As a faculty member, I frequently witness how many of these students, who comprise a small percentage of the University’s population, enter college worrying that they will be perceived by their peers as undeserving of and unqualified for enrollment. Just imagine how they now must feel knowing that students from wealthy families can buy their way into college without experiencing the same kind of skepticism.

Second, as Robert Reich (former United States Secretary of Labor) and others observe, the overarching crisis revealed Tuesday is economic; it is a consequence of the “concentration of wealth in America.” For example, it now appears that buying admissions is merely one symptom of the larger problem of how those with money can buy elections, healthcare, justice and even citizenship—privileges often beyond the reach of those without sufficient assets.

As tragic as the admissions scandal may be, my hope is that Tuesday’s news will have a positive result. Perhaps Americans from all backgrounds and political perspectives will recognize the need for the country to have a serious, open-minded, and civil conversation about the interrelated issues of wealth distribution, entitlement, inequality, meritocracy and personal responsibility. Without this kind of conversation, cases of inequality will only increase, exacerbating anger and frustration—something not in the best interest of any of us or the basic principles upon which our country was founded.

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