

19050 College Admissions: Vulnerable, Exploitable, and to Many Americans, Broken

By Anemona Hartocollis, *The New York Times*, March 15, 2019.

Standardized test scores are manufactured. Transcripts are made up. High-stakes admissions decisions are issued based on fabricated extracurricular activities, ghostwritten personal essays and the size of the check written by the parents of the applicant.

American universities are often cast as the envy of the world, august institutions that select the best and the brightest young people after an objective and rigorous selection process.

But the bribery scandal unveiled by the Justice Department this week — and a number of other high-profile cases that have captured the headlines in recent months — has shown the admissions system to be something else entirely: exploitable, arbitrary, broken.

At the heart of the scandal is a persistent adulation of highly selective universities.

The case, in which dozens of parents are accused of buying spots at elite universities for their teenagers, comes amid already heightened scrutiny of college admissions.

Last summer, a trove of secret files in a lawsuit against Harvard was made public, outlining special admissions preferences and back doors for certain applicants.

Then the news broke last fall that a Louisiana preparatory school had fabricated stories based on racial stereotypes to get its students into selective colleges.

The court papers released this week say that the organizers of the bribery scheme identified and abused weak spots in the admissions process: special accommodations in standardized testing and a system of reserving slots for students favored by athletic coaches. The parents paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to get higher test scores for their children and to have them fraudulently recruited for boutique sports.

Parents accused in the scandal took advantage of extra-time allowances on the ACT or SAT exams, court documents said, and bribed test administrators to allow someone else to take the tests or to correct students' answers.

The tests, which also routinely face attacks that they heavily favor affluent students who can afford coaching, are becoming optional at a growing number of selective schools.

Colleges say they use a “holistic” admissions system — weighing factors like hardships and service to the community — in part to account for the edge given to those who can attend better schools or pay for test coaching.

But the bribery crisis simply reflected problems in broader society. America has become more and more unequal, affluent parents have become desperate to pass on their privileges to their children and avoid downward mobility at all costs. Fair access to education, the engine of upward mobility, is the casualty.

(407 words)