

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection.

### College Admissions Scandal Is News, but Not New

Source: Mitch Albom, *Detroit Free Press*, March 17, 2019

*Note: This is an editorial—someone’s opinion. This is not a news story.*

There’s a famous scene in “Casablanca” where the corrupt police chief played by Claude Rains shuts down Humphrey Bogart’s casino.

“I’m shocked — shocked — to find that gambling is going on in here!” Rains deadpans.

A croupier then hands him a wad of cash. “Your winnings, sir.”

“Oh, thank you,” Rains says.

Are we really shocked — shocked! — to learn that a small group of very rich people paid stupid money to make their kids look smart? The college scandal dubbed “Operation Varsity Blues” has been a huge story this past week, but are we really that stunned that 33 parents are accused paying a con artist named Rick Singer to hire a phony test taker or bribe college coaches in order to open “side doors” for their kids’ admission?

To judge by the headlines — and the breathless class-warfare commentaries — you’d think this was the first time someone tried to improperly get into a college. Try that idea on any veteran sportswriter. You’ll get a laugh.

In the interest of perspective, may we offer this:

First, there are nearly 20 million students enrolled in American colleges and universities. The vast majority of them got in through hard work and study. The vast majority took their own SAT and ACT tests. The vast majority of their coaches, teachers and administrators do things properly. The students mentioned in this recent scam scandal — which has been going on, reportedly, for eight years — represent fifteen-ten-millionths of the American college population. Double it. Quadruple it. It won’t qualify as a blip.

**This is corrupt. So are college sports.**

Next, while Operation Varsity Blues was stunning in its brazenness — a 36-year-old man taking the test for your kid? Having a sailing coach endorse a fake recruit? — we should be honest about the whole college admission process.

Its only consistency is that people are consistently unhappy with it.

Some feel it favors the rich. Some feel it favors the poor. Some feel it favors athletes. Some feel it favors ethnicity. And all of those things, depending on the who, when and where of it, have, at times, been true.

And now this allegedly is true: a slimy 58-year-old ringleader who posed as a college admissions advisor got wealthy clients — including a couple of well-known actors — to give him stupid money to get their kids into schools like USC, Stanford and Yale. Some paid tens of thousands. Some paid more than a million. Singer used the money to make himself rich. He paid off certain coaches. He paid a guy to take the tests.

That’s a big news story for sure. But you wonder if Felicity Huffman and Lori Loughlin weren’t in this, would it have gotten anywhere near the coverage? One thing we love even more than scandal, after all, is celebrity scandal.

What Singer did was awful. But is it more awful than money being sent to a college recruit in a Federal Express envelope? More awful than cars being purchased, strippers being hired, or jobs being arranged for family members of potential attendees — by school coaches or their underlings?

Is it more awful than thousands of student-athletes taking sham classes or committing academic fraud — as was accused at University of North Carolina?

More awful than a self-described madam setting up sex parties to entice potential recruits — as was accused at the University of Louisville?

So far in this Varsity Blues case, there are eight universities implicated. There are more than twice that many being investigated in the FBI corruption probe into college sports recruiting.

In all of those cases, the accusation is essentially the same: someone was offered a spot at a school for the wrong reasons. Reasons other than academic achievement.

### **Side doors are always open**

But now let's be equally candid about that practice.

What about rich donors who give enough money to build a lab or a library? Do you think their kids, relatives or friends don't get preferential admissions treatment with a phone call?

What about wealthy alumni? It's well known "legacy" applicants get an unfair advantage on the competition. And it's not just about money. What about famous athletes, politicians, world leaders? Do you think phone calls haven't been made on their kids' behalf?

Now take fame and wealth out of it. Has every applicant written his or her own essay? Or did they get help?

Has every applicant only gotten letters of recommendation from people who truly knew them or employed them — or did family friends and connections earn them more impressive endorsements?

Has every applicant truly done the stellar community service they claim on their form? Or did they exaggerate with someone's blessing? Did they only join certain clubs or associations for the illusion of being well-rounded?

Now, none of these things come close to the unabashed wrongdoing of the Singer scandal. But they do raise a related question: how fair is any "edge" towards getting into college? Cheating is clearly wrong. But is legal donating a more fair ticket through the door? Is bending, exaggerating, or embellishing the truth on an application something to be overlooked?

### **All of this, to gain an edge**

The saddest part about this story is that the whole chase is largely perceptual. There are plenty of universities and colleges in this country. And studies have shown that the "prestige" of a school may have little to do with the success of the student later in life. Students who work hard can come out of state schools or community colleges and do extremely well. Lazy kids with Ivy League degrees are not guaranteed a rosy future.

Famous-name schools charge ridiculous prices for tuition — and get it. Parents are way too caught up in the "get into a good school" ideology for their children. This has not stopped the student-as-victim mentality from jumping to the forefront. Two Stanford students already filed a \$5 million class-action lawsuit claiming they were denied admission to two of the schools in the Singer scandal (USC and Yale) and that, had they known, they wouldn't have spent the money to apply. They also claimed they were not given a "fair admissions consideration process."

Of course, there's no proof they would have been admitted otherwise. Nor is there any evidence, as they claim, that their Stanford degree will now be tarnished because potential employers can't be sure if it was honestly earned. And how \$5 million is the price for this is a head scratcher. Then again, another lawsuit has been filed by a mother who claims her son was denied admission to Singer-touched schools despite a high grade point average. How much is she seeking? \$500 billion. That's right, \$500 billion.

Good luck.

What Singer did was awful, what the coaches did was awful, and what the parents did was selfish, reckless and stupid. But to think this is some original idea, that people use their connections and influence to get ahead in America, is to pretty much ignore a constant plot line of American history. It's true of all people and all classes.

It's even true of the perpetrators of this scandal. Are we forgetting that Singer wore a wire to help authorities ensnare other participants? For what reason? To trade what he had for what he wanted: a lighter sentence.

To gain an edge.

The whole story is disgraceful. But the shock and outrage — like Claude Rains' line to Bogart — is a little disingenuous. The truth is, from the small to the large, there have been so many attempted side doors to college admission, it's hard to keep track of who's trying to go through them.

### **Possible Response Questions:**

- What is your reaction to Mitch Albom's argument?
- Pick a passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a "move" made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.