

# *Operation Varsity Blues: The College Admissions Scandal* and the blight of social inequality

Joanne Laurier  
6 April 2021

*Directed by Chris Smith; written by Jon Karmen*

The Netflix original film *Operation Varsity Blues: The College Admissions Scandal*, directed by Chris Smith, documents and dramatizes the largest college admissions scandal ever prosecuted.

The criminal conspiracy involved influencing undergraduate admissions decisions at several elite American universities. The US Justice Department investigation into the conspiracy was codenamed “Operation Varsity Blues.” The investigation and related charges were made public on March 12, 2019, by federal prosecutors.

Some 50 people—including 33 wealthy parents, SAT and ACT administrators, one exam proctor, nine college athletics coaches and one college administrator—were charged. The arrest and conviction of Hollywood personalities such as actresses Lori Loughlin and Felicity Huffman dominated the headlines.

The new docudrama focuses its attention on William “Rick” Singer, played by Matthew Modine, the founder and mastermind of the scheme. The government’s case was built on the series of recordings Singer made after agreeing to cooperate. He pleaded guilty to all charges brought against him—racketeering conspiracy, money laundering conspiracy, conspiracy to defraud the US and obstruction of justice. While many of the parents and college employees indicted in the scandal have been charged and sentenced, Singer has yet to receive a sentence.

The movie features interviews with experts and former clients of Singer’s, as well as reenactments, drawn from the actual wiretapped phone conversations between Singer and various “clients.”

From 2011 to 2019, parents paid as much as \$6.5 million to Singer, who ran a college prep business in Newport Beach, California. He created phony athletic profiles for their children with fake credentials. Singer also bribed standardized test administrators and college coaches.

“There is a front door of getting in where a student just

does it on their own and then there’s a back door where people go to institutional advancement and make large donations, but they’re not guaranteed in,” Singer asserted in his testimony. “I created a side door that guaranteed families to get in.”

A couple of Singer’s “side door” operations included falsely giving a student a learning disability for a testing advantage and having him or her take a test separately with a bribed proctor. As noted, his services did not come cheap. One family paid \$1.2 million to forge credentials so that a potential student could be recruited via the soccer team at Yale. Stanford’s sailing coach John Vandemoer, a substantial presence in the movie, admitted to accepting \$270,000 to classify two applicants as prospective “sailors.”

Harvard alumnus Mark Riddell (Graham Outerbridge) was paid by Singer to fraudulently take admission tests, impersonating various clients’ children. For large fees, Singer promised parents entry, in addition to Yale and Stanford, to such institutions as Georgetown, Boston College, Georgia Tech, the University of California, Los Angeles, the University of San Diego, the University of Texas at Austin, Wake Forest University and the University of Southern California (USC). The higher up the educational/status rung, the higher the cost.

Dominated by money and oriented toward serving the needs of the financial oligarchy, prominent universities pay their presidents and administrators like corporate CEOs and expect them to behave like the latter. Significantly, at the time the scandal broke out, Olivia Jade Giannulli, one of Lori Loughlin’s daughters, was reportedly on board a yacht owned by billionaire real estate developer Rick Caruso, the chairman of the USC board of trustees. Loughlin and her husband, fashion designer Mossimo Giannulli, paid Singer \$500,000 to arrange to have their two daughters accepted at USC as members of the rowing team, although neither girl had ever participated in the sport.

As the documentary points out, former President Donald

Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner gained admission to Harvard University in 1998 after his father made a legal \$2.5 million donation to the school.

Regardless of illicit or officially legal “bribes,” elite college campuses “are almost entirely populated by the students who benefit the least from the education they receive there: the ones who were already wealthy when they arrived on campus ... The worst offender: Princeton, which according to the 2016 data is 71 percent rich and only 2.2 percent poor,” *Quartz* reported in a 2019 article.

More than 70 percent of those “who attend the hundred or so most competitive colleges in the United States come from the top quarter of the income scale; only 3 percent come from the bottom quarter,” the piece continued. “At Ivy League colleges, Stanford, Duke, and other prestigious places, there are more students from the wealthiest 1 percent of families than from the entire bottom half of the country. At Yale and Princeton, only about one student in fifty comes from a poor family (bottom 20 percent).”

“Affirmative action” for the progeny of wealthy donors and alumni, at the expense of more or equally qualified children, is the rule, not the exception, in the Ivy League and at similar colleges. Legal and moral barriers are non-existent for the rich. As far as they are concerned, they should be able to use their riches to obtain anything they want—that is, after all, what the money is for.

In a society suffused and saturated with economic inequality, as the WSWS commented in 2019, would it not be the height of naïveté to imagine that a truly “level playing field” could “possibly be maintained in any important sphere of life?” The very rich in America, we went on, “awash with unimaginable quantities of money, live in a separate universe from the rest of the population, and consider themselves—as the feudal nobility once did—above the law or a law unto themselves.” What would possibly prevent them, the WSWS asked, “from extending that attitude toward the education and careers of their offspring?”

Smith's *Operation Varsity Blues* is a “ripped from the headlines” movie, a genre that does not, unfortunately, guarantee that a given work will go much *beyond* those headlines. And this one does not.

The eruption of the college admissions scandal in 2019 fed into the growing popular outrage at the levels of inequality blighting and disfiguring every important sphere of life in America, and the increasing hostility toward the entire social and political set-up. Very little of that anger finds reflection here. The entire enterprise is rather tepid and as narrowly focused as possible. Moreover, even the concentration on Singer and celebrities such as Huffman and Loughlin, as unsavory and selfish as some of their actions may have been, can divert attention from the far, far greater criminals in

Washington, Wall Street and elsewhere.

The various comments by director Smith (*Fyre: The Greatest Party That Never Happened*) to interviewers are not especially encouraging. Smith has a tendency to reduce the project to banalities about fostering “some sort of dialogue and discourse” and “opening up different points of view and ideas that, hopefully, can start a conversation.”

What is the actual situation for the majority of young people who sacrifice for a college education? They confront astronomical tuition and, as a result, often find themselves choked with student debt. Meanwhile, colleges and universities rely more and more on contingent faculty, sharply reducing full-time employment and tenured positions. They collect millions of dollars, legally and otherwise, to educate the children of the wealthy, while they deprive and oppress their student teachers and employees. Strikes of graduate students at schools such as University of Michigan, the ongoing bitter struggle at Columbia University and a potential strike at New York University underscore the harsh reality.

Numerous commentators in the documentary and those who investigate the phenomenon have no problem identifying an environment of acute social polarization as the culprit, but never openly indict capitalism. They generally maintain the hope that somehow, in the name of democracy, the wrongs will be righted. One has to regard the absurd, self-deluded comment of Daniel Markovits, Guido Calabresi professor of law at Yale Law School, in a September 2019 *Time* magazine column, that “America’s top universities face a stark choice between equality and eliteness. They should choose equality,” in this light.

The entire ruling elite, from right to “left,” has been further corrupted and transformed, shifted far to the right, by financial parasitism and social inequality. It will only be dislodged by the revolutionary efforts of the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**