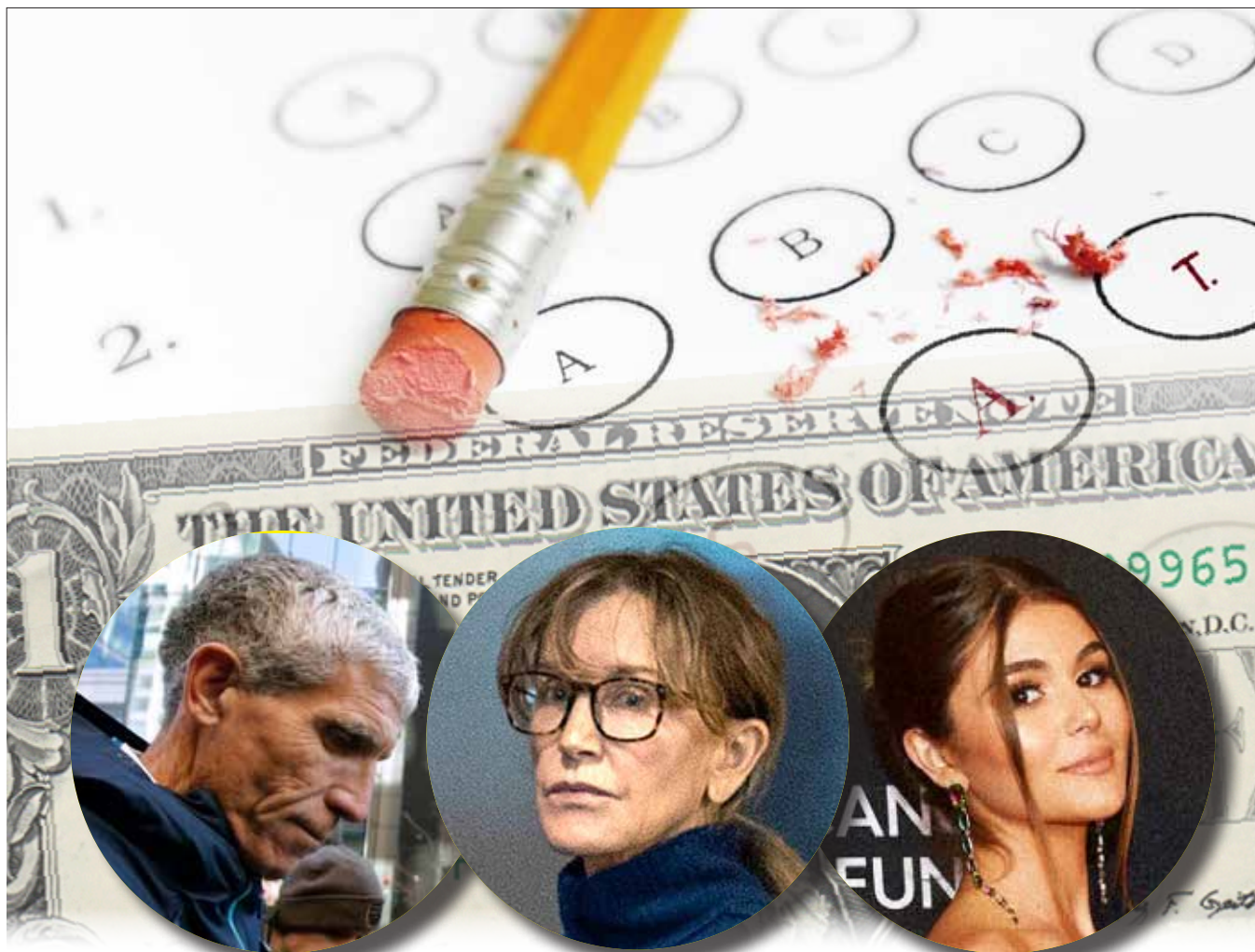


An Integrated Curriculum For The Washington Post Newspaper In Education Program

Essays and Decisions



- Post Reprint: Cutthroat Competition
- Teachers Notes: Admissions Essays — The Thought and the Lede
- Student Activity: Model Your Ledes After These Ledes
- Post Reprint: “The real college admissions scandal isn’t bribes and cheating. It’s how wealth tilts the playing field.”
- Post Reprint: “The college admissions scandal isn’t just about rich, entitled people”

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Essays and Decisions

The writing of the college essay — whether to a specific question or an open-ended response — is often stressful for the student. With three decades of experience working with high school juniors and seniors and writing recommendation letters, the editor of *The Post*'s NIE curriculum guides advises all to remember the lede. Capture the attention of the reader with a crisp statement, anecdote, description or engaging quotation.

For models, turn to ledes of news, feature and commentary whose writers are using variety ledes. The selection of ledes in this guide are annotated to demonstrate the potential. Teachers are encouraged to have students rewrite a draft of their college essays experimenting with these types of first paragraphs.

Also included in this resource guide are articles that focus on the ethics and quandaries surrounding college applications and the decision itself of school selection. “Cutthroat Competition” begins with an example of parental sabotage at a highly respected private school. This might be coupled with a discussion of the appropriate level of parental assistance in the process.

Post columnist Michelle Singletary takes a look at the bottom line in “The college admissions scandal isn’t just about rich, entitled people.” She asks readers to consider the financial cost to parents and students. As part of her persuasion, she quotes *New York Times* op-ed columnist Frank Bruni: “[T]he nature of a student’s college experience — the work that he or she puts into it, the skills that he or she picks up, the self-examination that’s undertaken, the resourcefulness that’s honed — matters more than the name of the institution attended.”

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Cutthroat Competition

To decrease potential rivals for spots at top colleges, some parents turn to sabotage

BY CAITLIN GIBSON

• Originally Published April 3, 2019

The message was stern, no-nonsense, with the sort of tone that an adult might use to rein in a group of misbehaving teenagers. But the message wasn't directed at teenagers.

"Dear parents of the class of 2019," began the December email from Patrick Gallagher, director of college counseling at Sidwell Friends School, one of the country's most prestigious private schools, with campuses in the District and Bethesda, Md. The note that followed, which was obtained by The Washington Post, was restrained and discreet — no names were named, no specific incidents disclosed — but certain transgressions could be inferred from a bulleted list of new policies that would go into effect "immediately." Among them:

"The College Counseling Office will not answer phone calls from blocked numbers."

"The College Counseling Office will not open any mail without a recognizable return address."

"If a parent ever feels the need to inform me or my colleagues



WASHINGTON POST ILLUSTRATION: ISTOCK

regarding the actions of a child that is not their own — I will ask you to leave my office or end the phone conversation."

The message seemed to confirm the vague rumors that had circulated for weeks — murmurs about parents behaving badly, even going so far as to disparage other students, presumably to give their own teens a leg up in the high-stakes college admissions competition.

The intense pressure surrounding the admissions process — and the corrosive effect it can have on a parent's tether to reality and morality — has

been a hot topic in the aftermath of the recent college admissions scandal that led to indictments against 50 people, including 33 parents, two of them television stars. The alleged multimillion-dollar bribery scheme was said to be aimed at helping less-than-stellar students gain entry to elite colleges and universities.

Even among the most affluent and privileged families, such blatantly illegal acts are rare and widely shunned. But that doesn't necessarily preclude other underhanded tactics, including attempts to sabotage students who are also competing for

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coveted spaces at the nation's most selective schools.

"I can tell you that every single parent that I know who has heard about [these rumors] has reacted with shock and horror," said one Sidwell parent, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive subject. "Whoever did this is a really good example of somebody who has lost all perspective and all sense of control, and I don't think they represent our community, but I do think they represent the extremes that we're seeing in the news — that absolute loss of any sense of normalcy around a process that shouldn't be so intense."

Officials at Sidwell emphasized that the incidents would not be tolerated: "Instances of disrespect are anomalous and often anonymous, but have nevertheless become increasingly intense and inappropriate," Head of School Bryan Garman wrote in a January email to senior class parents, a message that Sidwell shared with The Post. "The circulation of rumors about students and/or the verbal assault of employees are antithetical to the School's values."

This sort of behavior is hardly the norm, school counselors and college prep experts agree — but neither is it as rare as one might hope.

Sue Moller, a high school guidance counselor in Long Island and president of the Nassau Counselors' Association, remembers feeling skeptical in 2008, when she first heard a mother voice concern that other parents would comb through her son's social history or tell college

admissions officials about his jaywalking citation.

"I said, 'Why would you think anyone would do that?' And she said that one of their friends' kids had been the target of an anonymous, disparaging letter; the admissions office had called them about it," Moller recalled. "The parent in my office was petrified that someone was going to sabotage her kid, and I was like, 'Oh, that doesn't actually happen.'"

But she wanted to be sure about that. So she posted a question on the message board for the National Association for College Admission Counseling, asking whether anyone else had heard of this type of behavior. And more than a dozen replies swiftly poured in to assure her that, yes, it does actually happen.

There were accounts of parents who had called admissions offices to spread gossip about another child's bad behavior, parents who reported long-ago run-ins with law enforcement, parents who sent anonymous tips about potentially compromising posts on students' Facebook or Twitter pages.

"I couldn't believe it," Moller said. But the stories kept coming. Just last year, she said, an admissions officer told her about a mother who demanded that her child receive scholarship money: "This woman said, 'My nephew got in here, and he got scholarship money, and he's not even that bright!' This woman discredited her own nephew."

Moller laughed incredulously. "You just want to say, 'Look at what you're

doing! You're harming another child in this process,'" she said. "Is that really what we've come to?"

Behind every symptom in the broad spectrum of college admissions madness — from the parents who hire an SAT prep coach for their ninth-grader to the parents who were accused of paying corrupt test administrators to fix their children's answers — there is a common underlying cause.

"It's an almost animalistic fear," said Brennan Barnard, the college admissions program manager for Making Caring Common, a project of the Harvard Graduate School of Education that encourages students to develop a sense of empathy and commitment to the common good. "There is fear that their children will miss out, this fear that they won't have opportunities because of the rank or selectivity of their college, and it's just not reasonable. These parents lose all perspective."

Barnard has spoken to admissions officers who told him of sabotage attempts by teens and parents alike: "It's not common, but it's more common than you would hope for," Barnard said. These efforts aren't usually successful, he added, and can potentially backfire on a student or their high school if a college is able to figure out from whom an anonymous call or letter came.

The toxicity of this behavior is contagious, added Richard Weissbourd, faculty director of Making Caring Common.

"This is like an arms race, and people keep ratcheting each other

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up,” he said. “It fuels the constant competition that a lot of parents feel in this process, and it lowers the bar for unethical behavior. If you’re a parent who is just helping a kid on an essay too much, which is not a good thing to do, you might feel like, ‘Well, compared to these other parents, what I do is really benign.’”

These worst offenders are outliers, Barnard said, typically concentrated in the most elite schools and the most affluent communities. But there are subtler methods of sabotage that are more pervasive, such as what he refers to as “opportunity-hoarding.”

“Instead of embracing the opportunity to share resources with students who might not have as many resources, some parents are guiding their students to not reveal where they’re applying, to not talk about college visits, or not share information about summer programs or opportunities that might help other kids be stronger applicants,” he said. “I think that sends damaging

messages to young people about individualism versus commitment to others.”

Ned Johnson, founder of D.C.-based tutoring service PrepMatters, is familiar with this phenomenon. Years ago, he asked the parent of one of the students he was coaching for an introduction to the teen’s school counselor, “because things generally work better when I’m on the same page with the child’s school,” he said.

The mother said she’d be happy to make the introduction — but only after her younger child had graduated from high school. “She said, ‘I don’t want other people to know about you,’” he said. She made the comment with a smile, he added, but it wasn’t a joke: “She was serious as a heart attack.”

Barnard wishes these kinds of parents would stop to question themselves and to listen to their children about what “success” really means. “There’s tons of stories about

students who have gone to community college, get a four-year degree, and are running companies and are super successful. They aren’t in debt, and they are thriving,” he said.

Parents should look to data about how school choice doesn’t necessarily determine students’ success, Barnard said. “And I would encourage them to also look at mental-health data and suicide rates and ask themselves: At what cost are they pushing this?”

It’s a point that was echoed in the follow-up email sent to Sidwell’s senior parents as they prepared to begin the year their children will graduate and head off to college.

“In this new year, I hope we will reaffirm our commitment to the well-being of our students and to the common good,” Garman wrote. “I hope that we will recommit to helping children understand that college is merely the next destination on a lifelong journey, not their destiny.”

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Admission Essays — The Thought and the Lede

As we focus on college admissions and required essays, here are some ideas and resources teachers may find helpful.

It is most helpful for students to know what areas of study are offered at community colleges, small colleges, and large universities. If students know the career path they plan to pursue, it will be easier to narrow the choices. Likewise, what scholarships, internships and research opportunities are available for first-year, transfer, upper-class students may narrow the school to which students apply.

The College Essay Advisors website (*collegeessayadvisors.com*) provides insight into the essay prompts given by many universities. You might review the following four universities with students, then let them search three to four colleges that are found in the supplemental essay prompt guides list. The following examples are from the 2018-19 prompts.

- *University of Chicago*: In addition to the required essay, the selection of prompts are fascinating. They range from Melbourne, Australia’s “tree-mail service” to falling off the edge of the Earth in the thirteenth century to coining a word — even an opportunity for a visual learner. Which one would your students try?
- *University of Virginia*: Gives examples from the Arts and Sciences, Engineering and Applied Sciences, School of Architecture, School of Nursing and Kinesiology Program as well as the more open questions such as “What’s your favorite word and why?”
- *Harvey Mudd College*: In its two essays, Harvey Mudd asks STEM-oriented students to make connections with the humanities, arts and creative side. For example: “Tell us your dream HSA class.”
- *Harvard University*: In their request for a long essay and two 150-word essays, Harvard has directed-but-open prompts. For example: “Your intellectual life may extend beyond the academic requirements of your particular school...” Review the list of suggested topics for the “important information about yourself” prompt — perhaps ask students to select one of these to respond to in 15 minutes of class time. Note there is also a question for international students.

The following resources add more insight into writing the essay. Of course, take advantage of any visits by representatives from admissions departments who may visit your school.

- How to Write a Winning Ivy League Essay
<https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-to-write-a-winning-ivy-league-essay>
- MIT | How to Write a College Essay
<https://mitadmissions.org/blogs/entry/how-to-write-a-college-essay/>
- What Tips Should I Know About My College Essay? | US News & Report
<https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/apply-to-college>

Examples of ledes from *Washington Post* news, opinion and feature stories follow. They serve as models or approaches that students could use in the first paragraphs of their essays. Remember, thousands of students are applying. It is essential to grab the interest of the reader. The essays are an important component of the admissions package in which students are given an opportunity to express ideas, relate significant experiences, demonstrate creativity and use their authentic voices. Draw the reader in to read the entire essay and meet a future student.

LEDE 1

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A study in unearthing civil rights cold-case files

By Tom Jackman
February 23, 2019

State the circumstances, problem or query.

Others who have not succeeded to solve the problem or number of attempts.

There are family members who still want to know why Willie Edwards, a 24-year-old husband and father, was abducted and beaten by members of the Ku Klux Klan in 1957, then forced to leap to his death from a bridge over the Alabama River near Montgomery, Ala.

There are still friends of Louis Allen, a farmer and father of four in Liberty, Miss., who want to know why he was shot to death on his own property in 1964, possibly by the county sheriff.

The deaths are just two of 128 lynchings of black Southerners in the decades after World War II that have been investigated by the Justice Department. But its civil rights division, and a unit formed specifically to revisit such cases, analyzes the episodes solely with an eye toward prosecution. Most of the participants and witnesses are now dead, leading the department to rule most of the cases “closed.”

But a group of high school students in New Jersey learned that many families want another kind of justice: The information about how their loved one died. How it was investigated. Why it wasn’t prosecuted. Why it happened.

So the Hightstown High School Advanced Placement government and politics class set out to make sure details of the long-ago cases were not hidden forever. The students drafted a bill requiring all the civil rights cold-case files to be collected in one place and released to the public, without the bureaucracy and delay of the Freedom of Information Act. The class lobbied to line up sponsors, get the bill out of committees in both chambers of Congress, have it voted on and approved just before Christmas, and then signed into law last month by President Trump. ... [287 words]

Word count may not allow for a “who cares” paragraph.

Your approach or involvement in solving the dilemma or changing the approach.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/crime-law/2019/02/23/students-high-school-all-way-presidents-desk-how-government-class-fought-release-unsolved-fbi-civil-rights-case-files/?utm_term=.d677dcf10dd1

LEDE 2

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You may add a title to provide a summary or to focus on your response.

Hemingway's World War I savior is anonymous no more

By James McGrath Morris
January 18, 2019

Pronoun is an unstated promise that the reader will know "he" by the end of your essay.

He may be one of the most important figures in the history of 20th-century literature, yet he never published a word. Instead it was in dying that this man made his mark. He was an Italian soldier stationed in a trench along the Piave River in northern Italy during World War I. On a summer's night in the final year of the war, he stood directly in front of 18-year-old Ernest Hemingway, who was distributing candy and cigarettes as a Red Cross volunteer. When an Austrian mortar landed near the soldier, he was killed instantly. Hemingway sustained extensive wounds but survived because the soldier's body took the brunt of the explosion. Had it not been for the soldier there would be no *The Sun Also Rises*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *The Old Man and the Sea*. [138 words]

Why "he" is important.

Details unfold and get more specific.

—Who was involved? This could be a real event or a scene from a work that left an impact on you. Note: The prompt may have asked for a topic, idea or concept that you found engaging. This gives you an opportunity to show your intellectual curiosity.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/hemingways-world-war-i-savior-is-anonymous-no-more/2019/01/18/d3dbbb32-0ea0-11e9-831f-3aa2c2be4cbd_story.html?utm_term=.fb938116a9b1

LEDE 3

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Dominant Red Sox leave no doubt

By Dave Sheinin
October 29, 2018

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Jon Franklin used time throughout his “Mrs. Kelly’s Monster.” The surgeon was operating to save her life.

Chronology can emphasize maturing, crucial decisions or events that had an impact on you.

LOS ANGELES — The 2018 Boston Red Sox opened their spring training camp on Valentine’s Day, notched the season’s first win on Good Friday, and by Mother’s Day were playing at a .700 clip. By Independence Day, when they shut out the Washington Nationals, they were in first place to stay, and by Labor Day they were 51 games above .500. On the final day of the regular season, they notched their 108th win, and on Columbus Day they crushed the New York Yankees by 15 runs in the playoffs’ opening round.

And on Sunday night at Dodger Stadium, 2,600 miles from home and three days shy of Halloween, the Red Sox put the finishing touches on one of the great seasons in recent baseball history. A 5-1 victory over the Los Angeles Dodgers in Game 5 of the World Series completed a methodical, 11-3 march through this postseason — annihilating three excellent teams along the way, the Yankees, Houston Astros and now the Dodgers — and pushed their win total, regular and postseason combined, to 119. [174 words]

Underline the significant days. How do they form a rhythm for the article?

How does this organizing device support the main idea?

https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/red-sox-close-out-dodgers-in-game-5-to-win-fourth-world-series-title-since-2004/2018/10/28/9b947e62-dad9-11e8-b732-3c72cbf131f2_story.html?utm_term=.ddb974baf436

LEDE 4

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Jamaica takes aim at the trash crisis that is ruining paradise

Details reveal your travel. No need for a "I traveled to many countries, including Jamaica" sentence.

By Kate Chappell
October 13, 2018

You may add a title to provide a summary or to focus on your response.

Description brings reader immediately into the event or experiences.

KINGSTON, Jamaica — When Neville Hall dives into the waters of Kingston Harbor searching for conch and fish, he sees a lot of black. Black plastic bags waving like seaweed, black sludge coating the ocean floor — the degraded remnants of all sorts of plastic waste. But not as much conch or fish as he used to see when he started fishing in 1979.

Underline terms that convey "darkness" or "danger."

— Contrast

Hall knows firsthand the toll that plastics and Styrofoam take on the ocean and the environment at large.

— Direct statement of authority or knowledge.

Quotation from someone who had impact on you or your statement of the problem or how a particular major at the college will prepare you for your goal.

"The pollution kills out the mangroves, and in certain places where you would have pretty sand, mud is there. All different things happen," Hall said. [105 words]

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/jamaica-takes-aim-at-the-trash-crisis-that-is-ruining-paradise/2018/10/11/2bba4f90-c80a-11e8-9c0f-2ffaf6d422aa_story.html?utm_term=.a306181ec049

LEDE 5

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Fears raised of racist behavior at Va. school

By Morgan Smith
February 24, 2019

Title summarizes and draws reader to the story.

Details to place the reader into the situation — perhaps just as you were first made aware of the issue or its presence in your community.

Could put your school or community experience into the larger social context.

All it took was five minutes. “Meet by the trophy case,” a student at Jefferson Forest High School in Forest, Va., posted on Snapchat this month. Soon, about 20 students dressed in black and camouflage gathered in the hallway for an impromptu photo shoot with yellow Gadsden “Don’t tread on me” banners and Confederate battle flags. “Welcome to JF,” the caption reads.

In another photo, posted to Snapchat on Feb. 4, a girl poses in the school cafeteria with a Confederate flag draped over her shoulders. The photo’s caption reads: “If you got a problem with everything then suck it up, it’s history and heritage, wanna fight history then talk to Hitler I don’t care.”

The incidents have resurrected concerns about the high school’s culture and have come amid soul-searching on campuses across the nation about the persistence of racist imagery — images that once dwelled on the printed pages of yearbooks and that now spread like a toxic wildfire on social media. [162 words]

Begin with what drew you to the belief or idea or action that you challenged.

The essay word count may limit you to one incident — chose your words judiciously. For example, no need to say: “When I first heard the announcement I was ...”

https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/confederate-flag-incident-at-virginia-high-school-sparks-concern-of-racist-behavior/2019/02/24/ad988872-30a8-11e9-8ad3-9a5b113ecd3c_story.html?utm_term=.c4371f927363

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MONKEY CAGE • ANALYSIS

The real college admissions scandal isn't bribes and cheating. It's how wealth tilts the playing field.

If you can choose from 18 sports and 150 clubs, you have more chances to excel.

BY SCOTT E. PAGE

• Originally Published March 21, 2019

Last week, the Justice Department announced it was prosecuting a handful of wealthy parents who allegedly paid enormous sums to fraudulently get their children admitted to elite colleges. The idea that wealth can buy slots in the “meritocracy” offended many. But behind that overt cheating is a plethora of less obvious ways the college admissions system unfairly favors the children of the well-off. Most notably, college athletics scholarships are rigged in favor of kids from wealthy backgrounds — even if they don't cheat.

Athletics and extracurricular activities strongly influence college admissions

Here are some rough facts: Approximately two million high



LISA, 2019, WASHINGTON POST WRITERS' GROUP

school graduates apply to college each year. A handful of institutions — namely the Ivy League schools of Brown University, Columbia University, Cornell University, Dartmouth College, Harvard University, Princeton University, the University of Pennsylvania and Yale University, as well as Caltech, Stanford University, MIT, University of Chicago, Duke University and Northwestern University — are the most elite gatekeepers for the meritocracy. They collectively accept a little over 20,000 students. Thus, about 1 percent of the nation's students attend these most elite private schools.

These schools accept a substantial number of athletes. Princeton has

990 varsity athletes, nearly as many as the University of Michigan with 1,011 — even though Princeton's student population is five times smaller. Harvard, with a student population of 6,800, has 1,200 athletes. Demonstrated achievement in athletics, therefore, provides a significant route into elite schools and so do exceptional talent in music, theater and science. Participation in international piano competitions, winning a national science competition or captaining a champion debate team makes an applicant more desirable to elite schools.

It's obvious why elite schools want high achievers. These schools want students who will remake and improve the world. Past achievement is likely a good predictor of future success. A young man who can run a mile in 4 minutes and 10 seconds, or a young woman who can row 2,000 meters on a rowing machine in 6 minutes 45 seconds demonstrates a combination of natural ability and willingness to work hard. The same can be said of a champion juggler or Rubik's cube

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solver. If those applicants scored 1500 on the SAT, they become attractive candidates for admission.

Prizing exceptionalism helps kids from some schools – but not others

However, wealthy school districts — private and public — offer far more sports and extracurricular activities than do poorer schools. Consider New Trier, an elite public school north of Chicago, which offers 18 varsity sports — including fencing and bass fishing — along with more than 150 clubs. Students at New Trier can take dance, compete in forensics, row on a crew team or participate in model U.N. Similarly, Harvard-Westlake, a private prep school in a wealthy area of Los Angeles, offers 15 sports and more than 50 clubs. In contrast, students at Romulus High School in the Detroit metropolitan area choose from among only nine sports and fewer than 20 extracurricular activities. New Trier High is located in Winnetka, which has a per capita income of \$105,000 and a median home price of just under \$2 million. Romulus has a per capital income of less than \$45,000 and a median home value of just over \$100,000.

With these extra opportunities, students from elite schools have a far higher chance of showing exceptional abilities than students from poorer schools. That's not because the students from elite schools have more talent; rather, they have more opportunities to exhibit and develop their talents.

And this influences their chances of getting into a highly selective college.

Here's how we did our research

In a recent working paper, Uma Jayakumar and I identify three causes of bias in favor of students in well-off areas. First, a student who tries four times as many sports and activities will be four times as likely to show exceptional results. We call that an “opportunity effect”: more opportunities increase the likelihood of success. Thus, the New Trier student or Harvard Westlake student, who has the opportunity to try more sports, has a higher likelihood of showing exceptional abilities.

Second, students at wealthy schools have the chance to try elite sports — which results in a “specialization effect.” Becoming a college-level water polo player requires having the opportunity to play water polo — which is available to approximately 22,000 high school boys. By comparison, more than a million boys play football; more than a half million play basketball; and another half-million run track. If Princeton has roughly the same numbers of admissions slots for each sport, then the water polo player is more than 40 times more as likely to become a Princeton athlete.

Third, students at elite schools have access to better coaching, better facilities and more family support — which offers them what we call a “support effect.” With more support, they are more likely to excel.

These three effects combine to

produce a substantial advantage. Our crude initial estimate suggests that kids from advantaged schools may be 10 to 20 times more likely to show the exceptional talent desired by elite colleges. Once we undertake a more nuanced and careful analysis, that range will probably tighten. We expect to find huge advantages in particular sports like fencing, skiing, and crew.

Yes, William Singer — the college admissions adviser at the center of the current fraud scandal — claims to have altered the test scores of potentially hundreds of students per year. But that focus on overt cheating and fraud may distract attention away from a much broader bias toward wealthy families: the emphasis on exceptionalism in elite college admissions.

Wealth cannot purchase innate talent. But it can provide access to elite — and less competitive — sports and activities like fencing, water polo, crew, classical music, debate and dance. It can provide better coaching, counseling, stronger familial support. As a result, students from wealthy families are much more likely to get into elite colleges — not through cheating, but through the selective back door available primarily to those from wealth.

Scott E. Page (@Scott_E_Page), author of The Model Thinker (Basic Books, 2018), is the Leonid Hurwicz Collegiate Professor of Complex Systems, Political Science, and Economics at The University of Michigan and an external faculty member of the Santa Fe Institute.

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PERSONAL FINANCE • PERSPECTIVE

The college admissions scandal isn't just about rich, entitled people



BY MICHELLE SINGLETARY
Columnist

*Michelle Singletary writes the nationally syndicated personal finance column *The Color of Money*, which appears in The Washington Post on Wednesdays and Sundays. Her award-winning column is syndicated by The Washington Post Writers Group and is carried in dozens of newspapers nationwide.*

• Originally Published March 21, 2019

Please, let's stop pretending that the college cheating scandal is just an indictment of overindulgent, wealthy helicopter parents.

The Justice Department has accused dozens of super-rich parents of making \$25 million in illegal payments — and, in some cases, taking a tax break to boot — to get their children into selective colleges.

If true, these parents broke the law. They could face some prison time.

But in the coming weeks, a lot of parents and their children, who've been legitimately accepted to pricey colleges, will make a move to put themselves in another type of prison.

Certain madness takes over this time of year — between late March and early April — when the college acceptance letters are sent out. Hearts are elated if children are accepted to prestigious public and private universities. Then comes the financial reality: Going to these dream colleges often means taking on substantial student loans.

Outstanding student loan debt at the end of last year was \$1.5 trillion. Education debt ranks second in consumer debt nationwide behind mortgages.

Parents will sentence themselves and their children to decades of debt because they believe attending a select school is a must for their children to succeed. They will trade financial stability for the status symbol of a brand-name college education.

The recent admissions scam has been used to underscore the pressure parents and students are under to get into “better” schools, as if the



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thousands of other colleges and universities in the country just aren't good enough. Heaven forbid you suggest a student attend a community college first, if money is woefully lacking. The pushback is typically substantial — and illogical.

Dripping with disdain, parents and students say that if the acceptance to an elite college doesn't happen, there is always the "safety school." What's financially sound and safe about struggling under the weight of enough debt to equal the price of a home?

And the financial imprisonment is even harder for low-income families, particularly minorities. Many students from these homes run out of money before they can graduate. They end up with debt and no degree.

Last fall, I met a mother at a financial-literacy program in Delaware who was very concerned about how to pay her parent PLUS loans. She had taken out more than \$100,000 to help send her child to the top-rated University of Michigan to study to be a teacher.

I asked her why she didn't send her daughter to a school in her home state or somewhere close by so she could commute and reduce the cost

of attendance.

"It's where she really wanted to go, and she worked hard to get into Michigan," the mom said with pride.

But studies have shown that the determination and hard work that the child demonstrated would have helped her succeed wherever she ended up going to college.

"A sort of mania has taken hold, and its grip seems to grow tighter and tighter," wrote *New York Times* op-ed columnist Frank Bruni in his 2015 book *Where You Go Is Not Who You'll Be*."

It's the "elite edge" that drives many parents and students to put themselves in financial jeopardy, Bruni pointed out.

What about the connections a child will make at a premier institution, you might ask?

Gallup asked 5,100 graduates about the career helpfulness of their undergraduate alumni networks.

Just 9 percent of graduates said the school network has been very helpful or helpful to them in the job market, according to Gallup, which released the findings earlier this year.

Just 1 in 6 alumni from schools ranked in the top 50 by *U.S. News and World Report* reported that their

alumni network has been useful to them in the job market.

"While these alumni are slightly more likely than alumni from lower-ranked schools to perceive their alumni network as helpful, the differences are relatively minor and unlikely to offset the significant differences in tuition costs," Gallup said.

What can markedly make a difference in job success for a student?

What helps tremendously is an internship during college in which a graduate can apply what he or she is learning, Gallup said.

Long before the current admissions scandal, Bruni wrote, "The admissions game is too flawed and too rigged to be given so much credit. For another, the nature of a student's college experience — the work that he or she puts into it, the skills that he or she picks up, the self-examination that's undertaken, the resourcefulness that's honed — matters more than the name of the institution attended."

Stop the madness. Don't succumb to admissions mania that can condemn you and your kid to a life of crushing debt.