

## Discussion on the Lock between Donations and Admissions

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**Abstract:** Between the rich and the poor a huge gap is always prevalent in terms of social status, opportunities, and educational resources. There is no doubt that children with different family backgrounds considerably vary in how much educational resources they could receive. Elite schools in the United States provide different admission systems for the poor and the rich. The former can only choose the “front door”, i.e. regular admission, while the latter can secure admissions through the “back door”. This is by virtue of large donations or the identification as being the children of alumni, which is separately called development cases and legacy preference. This paper focuses on the 2019 College Admissions Bribery Scandal and extends a discussion on the negative relationship between donations and college admissions which, at the same time, arouses people’s reflection of education quality. The tendency of parents donating a large sum of money to gain a place at top universities for their children sparks an unease among children from families of average backgrounds. Based on this phenomenon, this paper wants to attract public attention to this issue, and discusses if it is necessary to ban the donation mechanism.

### 1. Introduction

“Can I buy my way into Harvard?” “How much should I donate to get into top universities?” Hundreds of questions like these are googled every year. In today’s world, people still link money with access and power. Education is no stranger to this. A common belief people hold is that wealthy children receive a higher quality of education because of monetary donations. It seems like money acts as a stepping stone for college and university acceptances, thus it gradually forms a tendency among parents to buy a place at top universities for their children. Basically, the donation mechanism increases parents’ and children’s anxiety, exposing the unfairness of the education system. In addition, the rich have more access to top colleges and universities, which reveals that quality educational resources seem to be monopolized by the rich. These fat cats want their “kitten” entering top universities to receive elite education and to get acquainted with those so-called old money to establish their positions in the society, finally realizing the upward mobility of their social class. The reproduction of elite class then results in a bigger gap between the rich and the poor to some extent.

### 2. The Universality of the Phenomenon

The practice of giving preference to students whose parents are wealthy is called a development case, which is an application to an undergraduate institution that is set aside during the admission process for further review. In these cases, the merits of admitting a student based on their academic performance, test scores, and extracurricular activities are lowered by the donations of the applicant's family. With development cases, a student whose academic performance and test scores are not enough to merit admission might instead be dependent on the donations the applicant's family may give. Thereby, applicants coming from wealthy families are more likely to secure a spot availing benefits from this case. Development cases theoretically have a better chance of acceptance. While there is no universal system for acceptance or rejection from a given university, most elite universities use numerical metrics to deal with the large number of applications, and the development case label can mean a numerical advantage or a tiebreaker in these metrics. This

numerical advantage is comparable to that of a star athlete or legacy applicant [1].

In 2019, a scandal arose over a criminal conspiracy to influence undergraduate admissions decisions at several top American universities, including Yale, Stanford, and University of California, Los Angeles. The investigation into the conspiracy was code named Operation Varsity Blues. The investigation and related charges were made public on March 12, 2019, by United States federal prosecutors. At least 53 people have been charged as part of the conspiracy, a number of whom pleaded guilty or agreed to plead guilty. Thirty-three parents of college applicants are accused of paying more than \$25 million between 2011 and 2018 to William Rick Singer, organizer of the scheme, who used part of the money to fraudulently inflate entrance exam test scores and bribe college officials [2]. Among them was the “Fullhouse” actress Lori Loughlin, who allegedly paid half a million dollars to get both her daughters admitted into USC. Dozens of wealthy people, including actress Felicity Huffman, as well as CEOs, high-profile lawyers, and college coaches were charged as part of the scheme. Elite institutions like Yale University, Stanford University, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), University of South California (USC) etc. were among the 11 universities associated in this scandal.

It is often thought that Ivy - league colleges have a rigorous schedule for admitting students each year on the basis of merit. However, differential attitudes have been prevalent since a long time. Darrell M. West in a piece adapted from his book *Divided Politics, Divided Nation: Hyperconflict in the Trump Era*, gives an overview of the admission procedure at Brown University. Certain exceptions have thus been made for children of the rich and famous or the children of alumni. Thus the legacy of donations and admissions is a phenomenon that has long since been existing.

As soon as the news released, a public outcry over the privileges of the rich, the admission system, and education equality reached a fever pitch. A study by Raj Chetty, a Harvard University professor, and his collaborators also found that 70% of Harvard students come from families with incomes ranking in the top 20% of the United States, of which 14.5% come from the top 1%, while students with household incomes in the bottom 50% account for only 13.5%, as the following figure [3] shows:

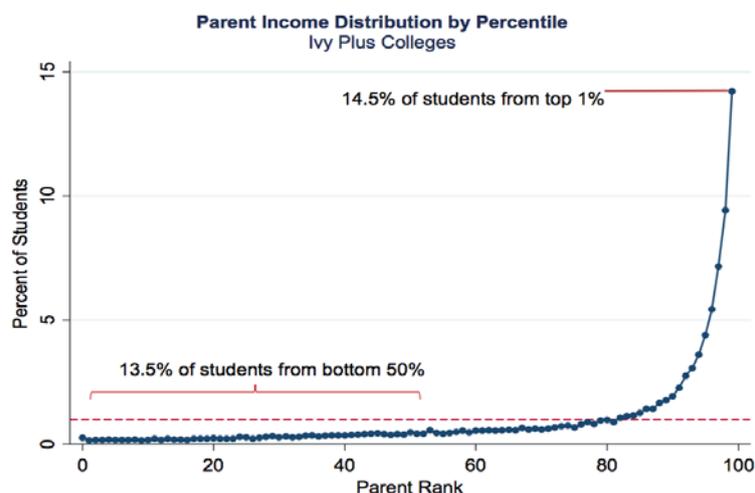


Figure 1 Parent Income Distribution Percentile.

Later, they analyzed the distribution of family income of Ivy-Plus college students, and came to a similar conclusion. People whose family income ranks in the top 1% of the U.S. have a much higher chance of attending an Ivy school than those with a family income from the bottom 20%, the former is almost 77 times the latter [3][4]. In other words, the rich does receive preference in college admissions.

Taking Duke as an example, under-endowed compared with rivals such as Harvard, Princeton and Stanford, the university has been particularly aggressive in snaring donors through admission breaks. Yet in recent years, Duke says it has relaxed these standards to admit 100 to 125 students annually as a result of family wealth or connections, up from about 20 a decade ago [5].

### **3. Clout for Donations**

Back in the admission season of 2005-2009, the University of Illinois- Urbana-Champaign got caught in a scandal as well. According to documents obtained by the Tribune under the state's Freedom of Information Act, over 800 students secured spots on the basis of favoritism [6]. The 1800 page document that was reviewed stated that trustees would push students of their friends, neighbors and relatives. Using clout is another form for parents and students to secure admittance into prestigious universities and does not pose in being any less than donations. Such a scandal allowed over 800 deserving students to be denied of an opportunity that they must have worked hard for. The depiction of a flawed admission system in these cases is apparent and needs to be fixed for a fair competitive atmosphere among students based on merit and skills.

### **4. Holding Funds**

Following up with the schools involved, the question being asked was ‘what is to be done with the money?’ As reported, the colleges involved in the scandal still have been holding the funds. Two of the schools were supposed to be donating the funds to local charities but hadn’t been able to do that yet. The other utilised the funds for a scholarship program run by the school itself. Stanford University that claimed to have \$770,000 in funds seemed to have it remained in a segregated account [7]. Since universities are not held on the same pedestal as political campaigns when it comes to such donations, the answer for them would not be the same. Many of the institutes have used the funds to make changes to their facilities.

### **5. The Drawbacks and Solutions**

Technically, donations should not be linked with returns, benefits, or acceptances, otherwise, it would dilute the student body’s intellectual vitality and undermine racial and economic diversity. What’s worse, donations that expect benefits in return would widen the gap in society between the different in-come classes, considering it is a way only targeted at the rich. The college admission scandal that happened in 2019 reminds us about how utilitarian donations can lead to inequality, starting with education. Education has always been regarded as a symbol of fairness and an opportunity for people from different income classes to succeed. Top U.S. universities like USC, University of Southern California, have been accused of leaving a number of applicants in recent years designated as “VIPs”. Donations often were made by those parents whose children were within a year of admission. Targeted donations even have promised people who have access to donations a bright future, leaving people who don’t have the ability to donate with uncertainty. One of my friends, a high-school student, whose biggest fear is not getting into a renowned college, had her college counselor suggest she donate money to help build a positive image for herself. Obviously, donations are used as a transformative tool for people who have access to donations for upward mobility. Tying donations to benefits defeats the purpose of altruism.

If donation receipts are revealed, it would foster an atmosphere of mistrust between students. Court evidence points out how parents mixed USC’s culture of admissions with fund-raising, most of which made donations to USC’s athletic department. After receipts were revealed, the athletic department reduced the number of athlete students being admitted every year. As a fencing athlete, the author personally has witnessed the mistrust spreading in the athletic departments, where a Harvard fencing coach was accused of taking bribes from parents. After the incident was exposed, it created a slowdown in the enrollment of athlete students, eventually exacerbating the unfairness of the education.

Utilitarian donations have brought a lot of mixed effects, especially widening the gap between the rich and the poor and damaging the education equality. Donations are also creating a divide between those who “buy their way in” and those who “earn their way in.” In order to combat unequal benefits and treatments towards students, it is necessary for colleges and universities to consider and ban donations as a means of accepting students, or at least to render a decline in the

cases of the development case admissions. However, development cases in colleges and universities are also a microcosm of the skewed benefits that wealthy people receive around the world. If education is made more equal, perhaps it could shrink the gap between income classes. Apart from this, setting standard guidelines and assessing the students based on their talents and skills, whether the application is genuine or not and having an identification system that checks to see the grading of the students are some ways that might help tackle these issues further.

## 6. Conclusion

Education equality has always been a hot spot of society. The 2019 college admissions bribery scandal sparked the public's reflection upon the nearly broken college admission system. However, the donation mechanism has been an underlying admission rule for a long time. The issue itself coincides not only with growing education inequality but also with economic inequality. Then, this paper also applied a study to prove the parental income segregation across colleges, especially Ivy Plus colleges. Although it is necessary to ban the donation mechanism, considering the states of some capitalist countries, it actually seems impossible to completely reduce the development case. In the long run, workable solutions should be found to alleviate the crisis. In conclusion, this paper only discussed the problems behind the 2019 event, from the perspective of the social equality in education and wealth, both of which also have a close relationship with each other. This paper also included two other scandals that have taken place in two separate institutions as well as the author's and her friend's personal experiences to demonstrate the mistrust created in the atmosphere by the donation mechanism.

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