

ADVICE

How much does it cost to buy your kid's way into the best private universities?

[Brian O'Connell](#) August 22, 2021

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Now that the dust has settled from the Operation Varsity Blues [scandal](#), college-bound families around the country are left wondering if there's a way *their* kid can get into A-list college using creative, yet legal, means to grease the wheels.

The scandal, which first broke in 2019, entangled celebrities like actresses Lori Loughlin and Felicity Huffman and led to a series of jail terms, fines, and penalties for guilty participants. All told, 33 parents were charged with paying millions to college admissions brokers and university employees in exchange for steering their children's fraudulent collegiate applications into admissions offers from top-flight schools like Stanford, Georgetown, and Yale.

"The Varsity Blues scandal illuminated just how many advantages wealthy students and families actually enjoy when it comes to college admissions," said Jed Macosko, president of Academic Influence, a collegiate ranking service, and a physics professor at Wake Forest University in North Carolina. "But this consulting scam just scratches the surface. Wealthy families can all but assure their child's acceptance into a top school by 'donating'



something in the range of \$500,000 to \$1.5 million over the course of a four-year education... This material 'generosity'— the kind that can be used to break ground on a new library, update a computer lab, or furnish a dormitory — can open the door a little wider for students attempting to gain entry into the most competitive colleges in the U.S.”

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And affluent parents are still looking to get underachieving children into name-brand colleges — as long as it's through legal avenues. That could mean forking over \$1 million

or more for professional collegiate admissions consultants or donating up to \$10 million to a school with the understanding that the college will accept the donor's son or daughter — good grades or not.

Below are several legit ways you can increase your kids' odds of getting into a "reach" school.

Admissions coaches

The **admissions** consulting sector offers an advantageous point of access for those with the means.

"In fact, for those interested in sending their children to Ivy League institutions like Harvard and Princeton, college admissions consulting can be just as costly as the donation strategy noted above," Macosko said. "That said, admissions consultants often have background and experience as admissions officers, which means they are in a great position to highlight the qualities that schools are searching for in an ideal candidate."

Admissions consultants can also help parents and students highlight admission qualities that upscale schools desire.

"In essence, you'll be given the kinds of secret admission hacks that can dramatically improve your likelihood of acceptance," he said. "The reason this qualifies as a major gray area in the admissions process? Because your wealth generally determines your access to such secrets."

Apply as a special case

Another collegiate admissions gray area is special consideration or development cases.

"Here, the admissions department receives a list from the administration or development office of students to take another look at due to their family's wealth, power, or fame," said Antonio Cruz, a mentor with Ivy Scholars, a Texas-based college-admission consulting company. "This does not guarantee admission but instead provides a thumb on the scales. Students who are tipped in this manner may be admitted in spite of poor grades, test scores, or extracurriculars, though they must still meet minimum benchmarks."

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Be a fundraiser

It's illegal to buy your child's way into any school, but it is possible to leverage wealth.

"A donation for admission violates the admission policies all major schools have shared with the school accrediting bodies," said L. Burke Files, president of Financial

Examinations & Evaluations, a risk management firm in Tempe, Arizona. "If the parent takes a tax credit for the donation as they donate to a charitable arm of the university, it becomes tax fraud. A donation in exchange for admission is a purchase of access. The purchase voids the charitable purpose."

That said, there is a workaround if the parent agrees to serve on a fundraising board and help raise money.

"If the child is not academically prepared, the school will suggest a one-year break to get to par with other students and to see if the parent can raise the promised money," Files said.

The going rate for a fundraising seat ranges from \$200,000 to about \$300,000. The harder the school is to get into, the more you'll have to get people to shell out in donations to the school.

"The more applications per student accepted, the more the contribution," he said. "After the parents' bona fides are proven, the child will receive an obscure scholarship for acceptance only. The parents will still have to pay tuition, room, board, and more."

Just a product of the system?

College admissions experts say parents playing outside the boundaries on behalf of their children is simply a product of the current collegiate admissions system.

"With tuition rates rising steadily over the last several decades and admission rates at elite schools dropping precipitously over the same period, the competitive aspects of higher education have been magnified," Macosko said. "For those with the means, it simply seems pragmatic to seize every possible advantage."



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