

## The Varsity Blues Scandal

Rick Singer was an independent college counselor who held the golden ticket for his clients. He had concocted a “side door” that guaranteed admission to the college of a student’s choice. Students could enter the “front door” of a college by using the normal admissions process, which meant making the necessary grades and test scores and engaging in the appropriate extra-curricular activities to gain a “thumbs up” from the college’s admissions committee. Or, students could enter the “back door” of a college when their parents donated large sums of money – say \$20 million or so – to the school, which pretty much guaranteed that the school would not deny their childrens’ applications for admission.

In Singer’s model, the “side door” was a little more complicated. He had learned that many universities’ non-revenue sports programs underpaid their coaches. These coaches had the ability to label applicants as “athletes,” which sent them to the front of the admissions line and made their admission to the school a near certainty. So, if Singer promised donations from parents that would go to these sports’ budgets and/or directly into the pockets of these coaches, he could tell his clients: “If we just pretend that your child is a fencer (or a rower, or a tennis athlete, or a soccer athlete, etc.), and you donate \$X to my foundation, I can funnel that money to Coach Y and admission will be guaranteed.”

Another way to use Singer’s “side door” was to improve standardized test scores, which he also rigged. Singer had bribed people who administered standardized tests at a site in Houston and a site in Los Angeles. If parents could get their child certified as needing special accommodations for taking the exam (ideally, extra time over several days), and could also make up an excuse for having their child take the test at one of these locations (instead of their normal site), then Singer could manipulate the child’s test score. He had a “ringer” who would either take the test for the student, or make enough corrections on the student’s test before it was turned in, to acquire the desired score.

Singer pursued clients of children who were rich. As the scheme progressed, he pursued richer and richer parents. He also cultivated relationships with coaches at more and more prestigious universities (Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Georgetown, USC, University of Texas at Austin, etc.). Singer was clever in playing on parents’ insecurities and devotion to their children. He would commonly begin by counseling students in the typical way—what courses to take, what activities to participate in, and so on. He would also advise students regarding their choice of schools, often getting their heart set on a particular school. Then, OMG!! He would tell the parents that their child had no chance of getting into their dream school on their own. But, TA-DA!! He had a “side door” that could do the job.

Singer suggested to parents that they simply take a picture of their child playing water polo



(or soccer or tennis, etc.) or Photoshop their child's face onto the body of someone playing that sport. He then advised parents to be prepared to make a sizeable donation (a little over one million dollars was the largest single donation he acquired) and admission to the school of their child's choice was guaranteed. Singer would funnel some of the donation to the coach and usually some to the school. The coach would request that the student be put on a preferred admission list for athletes, and admission was sure to follow. The student would show up at school the next year, claiming an injury, and later "retire" from the sport.

It turns out that wealthy people love their kids and want their dreams to come true, just like everyone else. And rich people are just as insecure about being parents as everyone else. While a couple of the parents Singer dealt with were jerks (and at least one was a criminal), most were good people and loving parents. For example, Douglas Hodge was a top executive at one of the world's biggest bond companies and a tremendous philanthropist. Gordie Caplan was the co-managing partner of a major law firm who constantly preached acting with integrity to his firm's young lawyers. Felicity Huffman was an actor who also blogged about being a mom, selling "Good Enough Mom" mugs, and advising her readers not to try to be "supermoms" or to raise perfect kids. Writer Jane Buckingham's mantra was to 'try to take joy in who my kids ARE not who I want them to be.'

But all these parents, and many more, actively engaged in Singer's schemes of fraud and bribery in order to get their children into the schools their children desired. Many had deep reservations about the morality of what they were doing. As Huffman drove her daughter to the site of the SAT test that was to be manipulated, she told herself: "Turn around, turn around, turn around." But she didn't.

Interestingly, most parents (though not all) went to great lengths to ensure that their children did not know about the cheating. They wanted their kids to believe that they had been admitted to these colleges on their own merit.

College admissions' processes have had scandals over the years, but the so-called "Varsity Blues" scandal is the biggest one in the history of the college admissions process. When Singer's schemes were ultimately discovered by the FBI, he went to prison. Many of the parents involved also went to prison, though for shorter periods. And many parents lost their jobs when their wrongs were publicized.

**Discussion questions:**

1. How did this happen? Why did the parents do it? With a couple of exceptions, most of Singer's clients led honorable lives and seem unlikely to have paid bribes in order to advance their own careers or financial situations. But these parents were willing to do so in order to get their kids into the college of their choice. Is it possible that while playing the role of "loving parent," these parents thought they had to do these things to protect their kids from disappointment and failure? Could role morality have played a part here? Explain.
2. According to Korn and Levitz, while working with Singer, mother Jane Buckingham wanted (more than anything) to help her son. Her main thought was: "If there's something I can do, I should do it." Does this sound like a person playing the role of "devoted parent"? Why or why not?
3. Psychologist Daniel Houser and colleagues ran an experiment where parents were given the opportunity to cheat under various circumstances. They found that parents were most likely to cheat when (a) it benefited their children rather than themselves, and (b) the children were not present. When children were present, parents cheated less, presumably to model good behavior for their kids. Does this experimental result seem to accord with the facts on the ground in the Varsity Blues scandal? Explain your reasoning.
4. Regarding role morality, psychologist Keith Levitt has explained: "When people switch hats, they often switch moral compasses. People like to think they are inherently moral creatures – you either have character or you don't. But our studies show that the same person may make a completely different decision based on what hat they may be wearing at the time, often without even realizing it." Does this passage help explain how Gordie Caplan could preach integrity while playing the role of head of a law firm, yet cheat while playing the role of devoted parent? Or how Douglas Hodge could be a great philanthropist while playing the role of "good citizen" while being a cheater while playing the role of devoted parent? Discuss.
5. Kweku Adoboli was a trader for UBS who went to jail after sustaining a \$2.3 billion loss. Later Adoboli commented: "I don't think at any stage I felt guilty of committing a crime," he said, "Everything I had done was for the bank and for my colleagues." In other words, he was playing the role of loyal employee, trying to make a profit for his bank and therefore felt justified in entering into the unauthorized trades that led to the loss.

Regarding the Varsity Blues scandal, Korn and Levitz wrote:

"[Jane] Buckingham didn't let herself think much about it. She knew that this was cheating, even if she wasn't picturing a federal crime. She told no one. But it also seemed like a straightforward way to solve a problem. Singer was going to help make this better. She knew it was wrong but not *that* wrong, right? [Her son] Jack would just

get into the schools he was supposed to get into if she and Marcus [her husband from whom she was separated] had been better parents.”

- a. Do you see parallels between Adoboli’s playing the role of “good and loyal employee” and Buckingham playing the role of “devoted parent”? Explain.
  - b. How did both use their roles to give themselves permission to do something they knew was wrong?
6. When parents told themselves that they needed to pay a bribe to prevent their kids from being crushed by the disappointment of being rejected by their favored school, is it possible that they were also strongly (if subconsciously) motivated by the disappointment they would feel if their kids didn’t get into the school of their choice, and by the desire to claim the bragging rights that go with your kids getting into prestigious schools?
  - a. Did the [self-serving bias](#) also play a part here? Why or why not?
  - b. Which do you think was the stronger influence – role morality or the self-serving bias? Explain your reasoning.
7. Was [framing](#) also an issue here? Did the parents’ overwhelming focus on the desired outcome—admission for their children—push moral considerations out of the parents’ frame of reference when they were deciding whether or not to go along with Singer’s schemes? What do you think and why?
8. According to Nicole LaPorte: “Singer was ‘good at getting inside these guys’ heads,’ said one source. ‘He’d talk about famous, wealthy kids who went to certain universities and say: You think they got in on their smarts.? He made it sound like everyone got into college through connections and giving money, building libraries.’” If this is accurate, might the [conformity bias](#) also have played a role here, making the frauds and bribes seem innocuous to the parents because “everybody does it”? Explain.

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