

Mintz: College admissions process is morally bankrupt



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By Steven Mintz

What do UCLA, Stanford University and the University of Southern California have in common? Yes, they are elite California colleges. They are also involved in the college admissions scandal that has shocked the nation.

At USC, payments were made to secure admission of the kids of wealthy people, and some kids were admitted based on falsified academic credentials. At UCLA, the soccer coach accepted money for admitting students who didn't play the sport. At Stanford, the swim coach did the same.

In each case, the government is charging the fraudsters with racketeering. These are serious charges, and colleges need to take them seriously. The university officials and board of trustees at all California colleges need to thoroughly investigate, make sure their house is clean, and set an ethical tone at the top.

Who's to blame for the college admissions scandal? There's enough blame to go around, but the parents are front and center. Their efforts to get their kids admitted to some of the most prestigious universities in the U.S. through the back door, side door, and every which way smacks of ethical relativism where they have defined what is right and what is wrong for their kids and themselves based on their own sense of morality — not commonly-accepted standards such as virtue, fairness and moral duty.

In all candor, for me the intention behind parents' actions in the admissions scandal smacks of "moral nihilism," which is a label attached to Friedrich Nietzsche's theory that there is no morality: no right or wrong, just what we do for our

own human development as we define it. When society regresses into a no-morality-exists philosophy, it's just a quick slide down the proverbial ethical slippery slope before we reach rock bottom. Guess what, folks, we're almost there.

Some claim these kinds of scandals are nothing new and that pay-for-play schemes have been going on in college admissions for years. Parents give cash donations to colleges and expect favored treatment when their kids apply for admissions, legacy admissions exist for the rich and well-connected, and donations are made to fund some activity with the quid pro quo that their kids will be admitted.

In most of these cases, while the intention of the gift can be questioned, the money is used for some definable purpose: improve programs to enhance learning experiences for students; fund scholarships for needy kids; endow professorships for highly-respected individuals, etc. I'm not saying this is always ethically right, but it doesn't rise to the level of the current scandal — bribery — where cheating and fraud was commonplace.

What can be done to improve the admissions process and make it more ethically centered?

- Those involved in the scandal should be sanctioned — fired when called for. A message has to be sent by the institutions that these scandal-laden admissions schemes are wrong and won't be tolerated.
- Colleges should use the events as a “teachable moment.” Ethics has become a lost art in society, and it's up to the colleges to integrate it throughout the curriculum.
- Congress needs to investigate. I'm not a big fan of congressional investigations because they oftentimes become political witch hunts but this is different. Republicans, democrats, and independents should all be up in arms about these scandals.
- Use the investigations to shine a bright light on all of college admissions processes. Look at admissions policies in general: do they discriminate against one group or another?

We need to eliminate the unfair advantage that kids of wealthy and well-connected parents now have. But the underlying causes of the problem need to be addressed, too. Many folks now ask why should they play by the rules when so many get away with violating them or making up their own rules with little or no consequence? The lack of a moral compass in society is shocking.

I'd like to think the college admission process is a meritocracy but know all too well from my 30-plus years of college teaching that money talks. My colleagues might say that's how the game is played and many payments are legal. I say just because something is legal doesn't mean it's ethical.

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