

MISSION & MOTIVATION

Finding Fit

Following Operation Varsity Blues, independent schools may rethink their role in college preparation.



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Early in my college admissions and counseling career, none of my family or friends understood what I did for a living. While I didn't have access to a magic lamp, I wished for more national awareness of the college admissions process. It took 40 years, but last spring I got my wish in the form of the Operation Varsity Blues scandal. Now I wish I could put the genie back in the lamp.

Operation Varsity Blues was a sophisticated criminal conspiracy by Rick Singer to "hack" the college admissions process through bribing athletic coaches and organizing testing fraud. The scandal has produced soul searching on college campuses. Do the flaws exposed by Singer and his clients require a patch or an entirely new system? Do the wealthy cut in line, and is that a college admissions issue or a societal issue? Is college admission about merit or privilege?

Operation Varsity Blues also provides an opportunity for reflection for those of us in independent schools. Several college counselors at our schools played central roles in exposing the scandal, but many of Singer's clients were independent school parents, in some cases trustees.

What can we in the independent school community learn from Operation Varsity Blues? And how do we keep college preparation from hijacking the rest of our missions? We might start by having a school-wide discussion about what we mean by college preparation. Is college admission the goal or a product of the school experience? And if so, is our goal preparation for admission to college or success in college?

Here's my perspective: the college process is first and foremost a journey of self-discovery for students, a chance to think about who they are, what strengths and talents they possess, and what they care about. That journey is more important than the college destination.

A college education is an experience, not a brand name. Operation Varsity Blues was based in part on the false belief that going to an "elite" college is the key to success and happiness, or at least parental status. Our goal should be to help every student find the right college fit, and we need to make sure that we celebrate every student's choice.

Language is important. Do we claim to be about college placement, college coaching or college counseling? "Placement" implies a focus on results, but college counselors are not Hollywood agents with the power to broker deals. "Coaching" implies an approach that is transactional and strategic, and helping families navigate a process that is confusing and time-consuming. "Counseling" sees the college search through a developmental, educational and process-oriented lens.

Regardless of our approach, we serve not only our students, but also our parents. And a school's responsibility is to give parents what they need rather than what they think they want.

The college application process is harder on parents than students. It tests basic beliefs, both about parenting (is a parent's job to help the child become independent or prevent disappointment?) and about life (is the playing field fair or uneven?). It is easy for parents to fall into the trap of believing that where their child goes to college is a measure of the parent's success. Parents are also susceptible to the college admission "truths" heard at the grocery store, on the sidelines and at social gatherings.

The Operation Varsity Blues parents brought to light two particularly troubling beliefs. One is that children's college enrollment is a metric of status or "family brand." More disturbing was their belief that their children were not capable of earning admission to college on their own. Many of those kids were innocent victims, with their parents engaging in illegal activities behind their backs. When actress Felicity Huffman's daughter Sophia found out about her mother's involvement, she broke out in tears and asked, "Why didn't you believe in me?" Why indeed?

Getting into college should be a source of pride and accomplishment for students, and they should take ownership of the process to the degree they are capable, with parents and school officials working together in a supporting role. College counselors serve as trail guides, pointing out potential pitfalls but also making sure that families aren't so focused on the destination that they miss the scenery.

I hope that Operation Varsity Blues is an anomaly. I also hope that it will serve as an opportunity for reflection and as a call to action. **N**

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