

## All Your Questions About the College Admissions Scam, Answered

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Vulture, Mar. 13, 2019



Photo: Getty Images

About 50 people (including more than 30 parents) have [been indicted by the U.S. Attorney](#) in what could become the biggest bribery scandal in college history. Among those charged are *Full House* star Lori Loughlin and Felicity Huffman of *Desperate Housewives* fame.

In addition, college test administrators and coaches at schools that include Yale, Georgetown, Stanford, UCLA, Wake Forest University, University of Texas, University of San Diego, and the University of Southern California have also been

indicted in the nationwide racketeering conspiracy case dubbed “Operation Varsity Blues.”

As we unravel details about this breaking news, we’ve answered some of the most immediate legal questions, and whether any of these celebrity parents could see real jail time.

### **What happened?**

During a press conference on March 12, U.S. Attorney Andrew E. Lelling announced that his office brought felony criminal charges against dozens of people, including parents, coaches and test-prep executives in a whopping federal indictment that spans multiple jurisdictions.

The allegations are that the indicted worked in conspiracy to get underperforming students into some of the country’s most prestigious colleges and universities using bribes ranging from [a few thousand dollars up to \\$6 million](#). The case spans six states between 2011 and 2019.

### **What are the allegations exactly?**

According to the indictment, which was made public on March 12, there are two distinct parts to this alleged scheme. The first is that parents supposedly paid an admissions consultant by the name of William Rick Singer (he’s the founder of a nonprofit college-prep company, [the Key](#), in Newport Beach, California) to bribe coaches at select schools to help recruit students into sports programs despite not having any proven athletic ability. It’s estimated that Singer, 58, was being paid an estimated \$25 million for his “services,” which fell under a purported charity.

The second part of the indictment accuses test-prep moderators of accepting bribes by Singer to correct student’s answers on ACT and SAT entrance exams.

“These parents are a catalogue of wealth and privilege,” said Lelling during the press conference. He believes Singer even went so far as to doctor photos to turn select clients’ children into athletes on paper. For example, Lelling alleges that outstanding athletic profiles were actually faked, and in some cases, photos of his clients’ children were Photoshopped onto the bodies of real athletes.

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The full criminal complaint can be found [online](#).

### **What are some of the charges?**

Singer, the man at the center of the indictment, is charged with racketeering conspiracy, money-laundering conspiracy, conspiracy to defraud the U.S., and obstruction of justice. It’s unclear how the clients became connected with Singer, or

if the indicted parties were connected to each other in any way. He already pleaded guilty in a Boston federal courtroom to racketeering conspiracy, money laundering, tax conspiracy, and obstruction of justice as of March 12.

“I created a side door that would guarantee families would get in,” Singer admitted in court. “I was buying coaches for a spot — and that occurred very frequently.”

He could face more than 60 years in prison and more than \$1.25 million in fines. His sentencing is scheduled for June 19.

The racketeering charge is especially notable because it can allow a court to try Singer for ordering a crime and not simply committing one. Known as RICO ([Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act](#)), it’s a federal law that was originally created in the 1970s to prosecute the American mafia. Under the law, a person charged with at least two acts of racketeering within a ten-year period can, if found guilty, be fined up to \$25,000 and sentenced to 20 years in prison per each count. If convicted, Singer would need to forfeit any money gained from the illegal activity, which, in his case, totals in the millions.

Singer’s charity account, estimated to be worth \$5.2 million, has already been seized by the Feds. His brother posted the \$500,000 bond.

Huffman and Loughlin are both charged with [conspiracy to commit mail fraud](#) and [honest services fraud](#) along with more than two dozen other parents. These are both felony charges that are punishable by fines and jail time (possibly up to five years for each charge).

### **Who is Singer?**

For the past two decades, Singer has positioned himself as a college admissions experts who has helped more than 90,000 clients seek degrees in higher education, according to his company’s website. He also created an online high school, University of Miami Online High School, for more than 18,000 students who each paid \$15,000 a year to attend before Kaplan College Prep purchased the rights to the school.

According to [CNN](#), prior to creating the college prep company, the Key, Singer worked at retail bank call centers for companies like the Money Store and First Union Bank, as well as West Corporation. He also wrote and self-published, [Getting In](#), a book about gaining admission to colleges and universities, in 2014.

[CNN](#) reports that the Key currently operates in more than 80 U.S. cities and five foreign countries. Consulting either takes place over the phone, email, videoconferencing, or in person at a client’s home.

### **What is Huffman being accused of?**

In Huffman’s case, prosecutors allege that Singer arranged for the actress’s

daughter to have extra time to take the SAT (double the time of the average student, prosecutors said) by claiming she had a learning disability. Singer allegedly hired someone to oversee the test and to correct the teen's answers so that she could reportedly earn 1420, which is at least 400 points higher than her PSAT score, prosecutors added.

Huffman reportedly paid \$15,000 to Singer.

Interestingly, though Huffman is married to actor William H. Macy, who has not been charged (he's simply referred to as Huffman's "spouse" in the indictment). This could be because (a) he had nothing to do with the alleged scheme, or (b) prosecutors can't prove he was involved. Obviously, this could change. [Here's more about this development.](#)

The actual indictment states that Huffman was caught in the scam after a cooperating witness recorded a phone call discussing the alleged bribery scheme in detail. It's believed that Singer had been working with authorities as the cooperating witness mentioned throughout the indictment.

**What about Loughlin?**

Loughlin and her husband, Mossimo Giannulli (creator of Mossimo clothing), allegedly paid bribes up to \$500,000 in exchange for their two daughters to become recruits on the USC crew team "despite the fact that they did not participate in crew," prosecutors said.

Prosecutors acknowledged that there are emails and calls between a cooperating witness (possibly Singer) and the couple in which a "game plan" is discussed for the daughters, neither of whom met the academic standards for acceptance at USC.

**How many others were charged?**

At least 50 people have been indicted. A full list of defendants and charges can be found [online](#).

**Has anyone been arrested?**

Yes. Those arrested include at least one exam proctor, nine coaches at colleges and universities, two SAT/ACT administrators, and 33 parents. These parents, said Lelling, include CEOs of major companies, a fashion designer, actresses, a winemaker, and a co-chairman of an international law firm.

Huffman was arrested in her Hollywood home, [Deadline](#) confirmed. [TMZ](#) reported that FBI agents visited her home with guns drawn while her husband and children slept. The Academy Award-nominated actress has since appeared in U.S. District Court in Los Angeles on March 12, at which time Huffman's bond was set at \$250,000. When she appeared in court with her husband, he signed for the bond. But because it's possible that Macy could become a witness in the criminal case (depending on rules of spousal privilege) the prosecutors would like to restrict communications between the couple, according to [the Blast](#).



Huffman was forced to surrender her passport and remain in the U.S.

Loughlin's husband, Giannulli, who also already appeared in court, was given a \$1 million bond after being arrested on March 12. Because of the high amount, he used his home as collateral, [the Blast](#) reports. He, too, had to surrender his passport and remain in the U.S. Both he and Huffman are expected back to court on March 29.

Loughlin, who avoided arrest because she was traveling to L.A. from Canada, is expected to turn herself on Wednesday morning, March 13, after her attorney negotiated what's called a "safe passage," basically a guarantee to avoid a messy airport arrest with the understanding that she would appear in court at a designated time. She will be appearing at a Los Angeles federal court on Wednesday at 2 p.m.

**Could they go to jail?**

Yes. If convicted, they could each face up to five years in prison plus fines.

Felony charges usually carry minimum sentencing that includes jail time. It will be up to the defendants and their attorneys about how to plead and if any deals can be made (the sums of money each allegedly paid could also dictate punitive damage). In some cases, people indicted on these types of charges can also face lesser penalties if they are able to offer useful information about other possible offenders.

**Could any students be charged?**

No students have been charged as of yet, though that could change depending on what the prosecutors find. It seems for now that the main focus is on Singer, the parents, coaches, and test-prep people.

**Have the students actually gotten into schools because of bribes?**

No information has been released about how many, if any, students were ultimately accepted at schools related to this particular investigation. But since 33 parents have been charged, there's a pretty good chance that there are students currently enrolled in schools who shouldn't be. And because Singer has been working with thousands of clients over the year, there could be additional indictments. The impact of this case could be even more far-reaching.

**Did the schools know what was happening?**

It's important to note that no schools were named in the indictment. Instead, coaches at select schools are the focus of the investigation. As such, there is no suggestion, in the court documents, at least, that Singer worked with anyone besides the coaches mentioned by name. Could that change? Of course.

**What could happen next?**

Given the scope of the allegations, which are centered on people and schools in several states, it's hard to quantify just how much this could impact both individuals and institutions. It's conceivable that a parent of a student who was bumped from admissions to make room for someone who bribed his or her way into the school may be able to prove damage, especially if the complainant can prove that he or she

possessed all of the skills and grades according to the school's standards of admission. These parties could also seek what's known as [treble damages](#), or money that is sometimes triple the amount of the actual damages, which could make civil cases very lucrative.

To put it into perspective, consider multiplying just one instance of someone being adversely affected by this scandal with the many different schools, coaches, and parents involved, and it could become a phenomenally expensive and lengthy case (or series of cases) well beyond the core criminal indictment. The civil cases alone could go on for years and impact the bottom line of many of the most respected educational facilities and people in the country.

U.S. Attorney Lelling even said during the press conference, "For every student admitted through fraud, an honest, genuinely talented student was rejected." This statement easily paves the way for at least a few dozen civil suits.

This case could snowball to ultimately impact many other people and organizations, including well-known sports associations, like the NCAA, that may have been adversely affected. In many ways, a lot of damage has already been done as educational institutions scramble to figure out how deep this probe reaches.

#### **What have the reactions been so far?**

So far neither Huffman nor Loughlin have issued formal statements. But in January, William H. Macy told *Parade* magazine that his family was ["in the thick of college application time."](#) He called the process "stressful," and noted that he and Huffman's elder daughter, Sofia, was thriving at her L.A. school for the arts, while younger daughter Georgia excelled in politics and science. "I'm the outlier in this thing," he said.

According to [TMZ](#), last year Loughlin's daughter became the target of intense criticism after she posted an online video in which she said, "I don't really care about school."

A few of the schools that have been implicated in the indictment have released statements.

USC also fired its senior athletic director and water polo coach, both of whom were indicted in the alleged scam. UCLA also placed its head men's soccer coach on leave.

Stanford's former head sailing coach already pleaded guilty to racketeering conspiracy in Boston's federal court. He [claimed](#) he never kept the payoffs he was given, and instead used the money to purchase new equipment for the school. He's expected to be sentenced in June.

Meanwhile the [College Board](#), the nonprofit that administers the SAT, said it's opening an investigation into the alleged cheating.