College Admissions After Operation Varsity Blues

Operation Varsity Blues uncovered a complex bribing and cheating scandal in elite college admissions. Guilty pleas, lawsuits, and a growing cynicism about the college admission process have raised lingering questions about access to higher education in the US. In this episode, Stefanie Niles, VP for enrollment and communications at Ohio Wesleyan University and current president of NACAC welcomes Angel Perez, vice president of enrollment and student success at Trinity College and Jim Rawlins, director of admissions at the University of Oregon in Eugene to talk about it all. Journalist Juleyka Lantigua-Williams moderates the discussion.

Stefanie Niles:

Hi. I'm Stefanie Niles, president of NACAC. Thanks for listening to College Admissions Decoded, our podcast for counseling and admissions professionals. We are an education association of more than 15,000 in the U.S. and abroad. Our members support students and families from across the country and around the world through the college admission process. We offer professional support to our members. But the public is welcome to attend one of over 90 NACAC college fairs, including some in the performing and visual arts and the STEM fields. If you'd like to learn more, please visit nacacnet.org.

Musical interlude.

Hello, and welcome to College Admissions Decoded, an occasional podcast from NACAC, the National Association for College Admission Counseling. I'm Stefanie Niles, Vice President for Enrollment and Communications at Ohio Wesleyan University and, also, the president of NACAC. We are an education association of more than 15,000 college admission professionals at both secondary and post-secondary schools. We support students and families from across the country and around the world through the college admission process.

In March, the U.S. Department of Justice announced indictments against dozens of wealthy parents, including some celebrities, for their role in a
bribing and cheating scandal officials called “Operation Varsity Blues.” The indictment sparked, and continued to spark, outrage and concern. What role does wealth and privilege play in the admission process? What can institutions do to reassure the public that the process is fair, that bribery and other illegal activities aren’t rampant on college campuses?

Joining me today are two friends who are also members of NACAC: Angel Perez, Vice President for Enrollment and Student Success at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. It's good to have you here, Angel.

Angel Perez: Excited to be here.

Niles: And Jim Rawlins, Assistant Vice President for Student Services and Enrollment Management and Director of Admissions at the University of Oregon in Eugene. Thanks for joining us, Jim.

Jim Rawlins: Thrilled to be here.

Niles: Moderating our discussion is Juleyka Lantigua-Williams, a veteran journalist with more than 20 years of experience in print and digital audio and film. Juleyka, I'll turn this over to you.

Juleyka Lantigua-Williams: Thanks, Stefanie. It's really good to be here for this important conversation. I sense that there's going to be two parallel discussions. One is internal for the pros, people in the know who shape these policies. And the other one is public facing, which is how do we address some of the lingering and new questions that this has brought about? So, Jim, what is something that you and your team are now wrestling with or thinking about in light of what has happened?

Rawlins: I think one of the main things we've worried about is really not so much the story itself or improprieties that may represent. Our bigger concern has been the many more students out there we serve who aren't students from families of means, and we don't want little distractions like this to get in the way of them feeling like we're all there for them. We're supporting them and their work. We want students out there who don't have wealthy families or didn't go to the right schools and all this kind of stuff to know that this doesn't indicate anything's wrong for them, and we want them to be just as positive and optimistic about their possibilities as ever.

Lantigua-Williams: Right, so business as usual because this is really a distraction in the grand scheme of things?
Rawlins: Correct. I wouldn't say it doesn't matter, but a distraction in the sense that it shouldn't take away from the other things that need to keep happening.

Lantigua-Williams: Okay. Stefanie, how has your membership reacted or what have been some of the threads that have surfaced?

Niles: I think the reactions have been really diverse. When I look at what people have said in social media and other professionals have commented in the press, it's been a range of personal reaction to what they've read, what they've seen, how this has grown to be such a phenomenon almost in the public news. One of the questions that I know I have been asked over and over again is, “Were you surprised? Were others in your profession surprised? Was this shocking?” What commonly has been my answer was I personally, yes, was surprised and shocked.

I know that what one might say is that people will do anything for their children, but this is taking it really a step beyond I believe what most of us have seen is-

Lantigua-Williams: I... broke the law.

Niles: Right. I haven't seen a legal activity. Families have taken, parents have taken in order to secure a place in a single institution where they believed that all future success of their child might hinge on that student having the opportunity to attend, I think we as professionals know that there's so many opportunities at institutions that can be considered a wonderful fit for students. And again, the combination of the illegal activity and the intense focus really took this so far beyond anything that I know I've seen.

Lantigua-Williams: Okay, so Angel, how do you get back to admissions as usual after something like this?

Perez: Yeah, I mean, I think I agree with Jim and Stefanie. The one thing I want to start with is I think there was a deep sense of sadness when this happened for particularly a lot of our team members because it takes away from the great work that actually is happening on both sides. We call it both sides of the fence, college counseling and college admissions. So we just felt this deep sense of sadness like the media is focused on this profession and blows it out of proportion like there is this massive rampant issue going on in American higher education.
We have to remember that over 90% of colleges and universities in America actually admit the majority of their students. So, I don't believe that this is a rampant issue, but of course it was a sexy story. There were Hollywood stars involved.

Now, having said all of that, I do think what is good about it is that it allows us to do some self-reflection at our own institutions and think about, "Is there anything about our process we really need to think about or change? Do we have enough measures in place to make sure that the system is as, quote-unquote, 'fair'?

I do not believe it is a fair system, but that at least every student who applies has a fair opportunity.

Lantigua-Williams:
So, how do we do that?

Niles:
I think one of the things that makes this complicated as the news started to proliferate over the first few days, there were so many layers to this, right? I mean, it was students whose test scores were falsified through testing agencies and individuals being given access to take those tests. It was athletics. Then there became issues around donors and legacy students, and the layers kept, I think, being peeled back as this was further explored.

So, our members were really reacting in so many ways to those different layers, and how they would affect them. To Jim's point about the easy button, there is no easy button in this situation, because there are so many layers. There isn't one simple fix, because there are so many challenges that this has now uncovered.

Lantigua-Williams:
So, how do you take back the message? What concrete steps has your organization suggested? What have some of the institutions that you're aware of implemented strategically? What do you guys do?

Perez:
I would go back to the message that this was the exception, not the rule, and that the majority of institutions of higher education in America have an ethical admissions process where students who do really hard work are all reviewed, and reviewed, by the way, in the context of their personal histories and backgrounds and opportunities. I think we take a lot of pride in that, and we take a lot of pride in training our staff members to be able to look for that.
But, I will say that what this represents: remember that colleges and universities do not operate in silos. We represent what is happening in America right now. America is struggling with privilege and opportunity, who gets access. So we are having that conversation in our own institutions of higher education, and this particular scandal focuses on the, quote-unquote, “elite sector,” and that is a question that institutions are grappling with: Who belongs here?

Also, how has American society changed over time? Do our demographics reflect American society on our college campuses?

Rawlins: One of the things I grapple with a lot is this question of, "Should we be talking about it as the exception versus the rule or not even dignify it by talking about as an exception?" I'm almost at the point sometimes when we speak with families where I wonder, "How many of them really are dwelling on this if they're not from those kinds of settings themselves?" If we really just use this as a chance to say, "Now that I've got your attention, we're going to tell you how admissions works," and just tell that story we've always been telling anyway knowing people may be listening with different ears or paying more attention or taking more notes now.

There's so much we're doing that's about balancing out the privilege, making sure the access is there. It's what we were doing the whole time. So, just more viewership for the topic, if nothing else, is potentially a good thing. It's a great time for us to turn around and tell those stories about all the things we look for to try to give a student an opportunity.

Lantigua-Williams:  
All right, so let's do that for two minutes right now. Let's demystify this mysterious, shrouded process of admissions. How do I get my kid into the best school that is a good fit for her?

Niles: Well, I think that's really key, right? It's the best school that's a good fit for her. So that's a pretty intensive process that families should start engaging in as soon as that child is ready in their high school career to begin really thinking about, "What do I want? Where do I want to be? What's important to me? What's going to make me happy? Where am I going to thrive? What are the opportunities that I want in front of me? Does it matter what part of the country I'm living in?"

There's all sorts of questions that every student and their family need to ask themselves including about money. What are the resources available to me as a student applying to the school? What family resources do I have to bring to this experience? There's so many questions that families need to
answer, but I think the key goes back to what you said. It's about fit. It's not about the name brand. It's about finding an institution where one can be successful where you will grow and develop and become intellectually curious, and you will take the steps needed to become a productive, thriving citizen and professional upon graduation.

Lantigua-Williams:
Okay, but that really sounds idealistic to me, almost like there's some sort of academic philosophical utopia. That's not the world that most of us live in. So, Angel, when you sit with families who maybe don't make the cut, how do you have a conversation about, "This is not a good fit. Your child is talented and hardworking and shows great potential." How do you have that conversation?

Perez:
Well, I do have that conversation often, but the challenge is that this particular conversation focuses on the most highly selective institutions in America. So, what's difficult is someone sitting in my role—and I'm only speaking for my sector and highly selective colleges—that when you look at the math, and you look at how many people apply versus how many seats we have, that you could do everything right as a student, you could be the most talented, and hardworking and shows great potential. How do you have that conversation?

So, my advice to families as they begin this process is you should have 10 first choices. The students who do this really well actually have 10 first choices. They say, "There are 10 colleges out there," and I'm making up 10 as a nice number. It could be seven, but students who put all their eggs in this highly selective basket are bound to be disappointed, because when you look at Stanford's admit rate, for example, I think it was 4 or 5%. I mean, the opportunity there probably is pretty slim to none.

But, if you say, like Stefanie was saying, "Here are 10 schools that I think are amazing and I would be happy." And those 10 schools, by the way, should represent a variety of admit rates, a variety of financial opportunities, as well. Because a big part of this conversation now is not only “Where do I fit?” Where can I afford? So, I think diversifying your actual list is really, really important.

Lantigua-Williams:
So, that brings up a question, though, of equality and access, because I remember when I was applying—many, many years ago—that we were so poor. I needed to get admissions vouchers, so that my cost of admission of applying was like $50, but we couldn't do that.
Rawlins: I think one of the great things about NACAC is it is meant to be... If I can pick on this metaphor of a fence, I never liked to say fence. I like to say two sides of the aisle because there isn't a barrier between the high school and the college side, and when we're communicating well with each other, they know, "Here's how this school does fee waivers," or "Here's what you can ask for." And whether it's about applying to those number of schools or getting a waiver for taking or sending your scores from the ACT or the SAT, there's a good bit of that that goes on out there.

I think about one in eight of our applicants gets a fee waiver based on need, and that's a number that we look at. We're like, "Is that where it should be? Should it be higher?" We think of anything, there's bound to be students out there that even once they hear you can apply for a fee waiver, whether there should be or not, there is a stigma, and students don't want to be the ones asking for that, or they're afraid they'll be looked at differently the minute they ask for that.

So, we've got to be out there in the schools, and especially close to home, we can do this more. We can't visit every high school in the country. We also don't want to walk into a high school, say my staff in, I don't know, Portland, Oregon, and claim we know how every other school in the country will deal with fee waiver requests. But, just talking about it demystifies it if nothing else, letting them know it's good. It's okay. It's there, and it's just part of the path. If you need it, we're here for you.

Perez: Yeah, I would take that one step further and say higher education has a responsibility to make this easier. So, at my institution, we remove the application fee for first-generation, low-income students. All they have to do is check a box. The reason why we did that is because we know there's a level of shame that comes with asking and, also, that a lot of kids just don't know to ask. So, we decided, Let's just remove that process. And, also, one of the fears I think people have is that people would just check the box regardless because they would get a free application.

We have seen none of that. The students who actually check the box really do need the assistance. So, making it easier I think is a way that higher education can move the needle.

Lantigua-Williams: So, how has that impacted the pool of candidates?

Perez: It's the higher number of first-generation, low-income students, and we've enrolled the highest number. I wouldn't say it's because of that. We do a lot of different kinds of things, but it's little steps like that that you can take to
begin to remove obstacles and barriers and also change the perception. I think particularly at certain colleges, low-income, first-gen students might feel like they don't belong there, but to see this box that opens up at the application and says, "If you are first gen and low income, actually, you don't have to submit an application fee." That sends a subliminal message of belonging.

Lantigua-Williams: I completely agree, Stefanie.

Niles: Jim mentioned the role that NACAC can play in being supportive in this process, and I think that's partly why we're here today. NACAC's really trying to listen to its members and to determine what is the role it should play. How can we be most helpful and supportive across all of our members? Our members are directly working with students and families, so we need to provide them with the resources necessary, the tools necessary to help them navigate this and the other challenges. We are really actively thinking about and trying to listen to our members about these concerns that they're facing in light of 'Varsity Blues.'

What should be those new sources, those new resources that can help us all best help families and best help students through this process.

Lantigua-Williams: What do you need to tell me as the parents? As the child? As the aunt who went to the school and really wants her nephew to get into that school? What do you need to tell me? What do I need to hear that I'm not hearing you say to me?

Niles: I think it goes back in some ways to that utopian situation that I created, but that's the message that I really hope to impart to families that there are lots of options that there isn't the holy grail. There isn't just one small set of institutions where students can thrive and be successful, and there's so many examples of outcomes and achievements of graduates from institutions of all types.

And I think that it's even those of us, those who work for highly selective institutions, public and private, need to convey that message to all of our constituents, all of the students who are college-bound.

Perez: There's actually a lot of research out there that shows that it's not about where you go to college. It's about what you do with the resources you have when you get there, right? So, I think the more we can do a better job in higher education, as well as associations like NACAC and others, to help
people actually see that—because oftentimes, the story, you're always told, "If you go to the Ivy League or this elite college over here, you can become a CEO." But no one's talking about, for example, little Albion College in Michigan where the CEO of American Airlines graduated from, right?

There are thousands and thousands of examples like that, and we need to do a better job informing the public. One of my favorite books that I read recently is *Robot-Proof* by Joseph Aoun, who is the president of Northeastern University, and he talks about up to 50% of the jobs that this generation of young people will have do not exist yet. So, the challenge that those of us who work in higher education have is: How do you train a generation of young people for jobs that don't exist?

So, we have doubled down on the transferrable skills, the critical thinking, the analytical data, the writing, the communication, the problem-solving, because those are the skills that we believe will carry you through all the different kinds of careers that you will have. But, this is one of the things that I think we're really trying to work on again, is how do we communicate that to the public to help them understand that higher education is still the best way for you to achieve these skills? Because at our price point as well, all of us regardless of whether you're public or private, we're expensive.

I understand that the public is now also worried about whether the investment is worth it, and we need to do a better job of communicating why.

Rawlins: Even at a campus like ours, we got all these great professional majors and everything. We'll point out to them, "Your major is not even half of your coursework you'll do with us, and it's about that broad base that'll serve you whatever you go into next."

Niles: I had a mother approach me at a reception a couple years ago who was just distraught because her daughter wanted to be a theater major, and she could not see a future career path for her majoring in theater. I said, "I actually was a theater major when I started college myself, and well, I then became an English major." I actually utilize the skills from both of those majors every day. I am constantly speaking in front of people. I'm having to read my audience. I'm having to understand the way in which I'm communicating and is it effective. And then of course moving into the written word and that type of communication as well through the English major.

But I hope that I was able to allow her to see—and it's not necessarily the major, it's the skills you're developing, and how you deploy them in the work you'll eventually do.
Perez: And that majors conversation is outdated as well. I keep like spewing book stats, but I read a lot. There's a book called-

Lantigua-Williams: We’ve noticed.

Perez: ... Designing Your Life, which everyone should read, but these two professors at Stanford wrote about the fact that only a third of Americans actually work in the major that they graduated from.

Lantigua-Williams: A third?

Perez: A third.

Lantigua-Williams: Wow.

Perez: So, I no longer ask students, "What do you want to major in?" I say, "What are the problems in the world you want to solve?"

Rawlins: That'd be a great-

Niles: That's a great question.

Perez: And then start to think about-

Lantigua-Williams: Love the question.

Perez: ... how you do that, because I deal with parents all the time who are freaking out about the English and the philosophy and the theater majors, who by the way do very well for themselves, like Stefanie.

Rawlins: I do sometimes worry that the stat about half the jobs that you may pursue aren't created yet over-sensationalizes the fact that half the jobs you could go for are out there, and you just have no idea you're going to wind up at them. They've been around forever. I mean, none of us went through college thinking, "Then when I work in admissions someday, I'll be doing this," and the job was there. So, I think there's plenty of us that go into paths that have been there all along. We just didn't realize they were for us yet.
Niles: But even within those pathways, there will likely be changes, new developments, new technologies. I mean, we've all experienced that, right?


Niles: What we do and how we do it has changed dramatically.

Perez: Agreed.

Niles: Young people will have to adapt even within those long-standing careers to changes that inevitably will affect them.

Lantigua-Williams: Give me a prognostication for the next decade in college admission. Be bold.

Rawlins: I think the profession... This is not necessarily from a student perspective, but for folks like Stefanie, Jim, and I who do this work every day, there will be challenges, because we're about to face a demographic cliff in 2026. There will be significantly fewer high school aged students to go around. So, I think that we will be thinking about our own models on our college campuses, also maybe rethinking who we serve, whether or not maybe we need to be increasing those quote-unquote "non-traditional" students, creating new kinds of partnerships and pipelines.

So, I think you can think about it two ways. You could say it's the most exciting time to be in the profession, or it will be one of the scariest times to be in the profession.

Rawlins: We've had the WICHI... It's an organization if you aren't familiar with it. The WICHI reports for years about the birth rates leading to certain numbers of high school graduates, but I think the work we're getting from Nathan Grawe out of Carleton now that really examines if students keep wanting the kinds of college experiences that they're getting at the same rates. And based on the subsets of those populations and those age ranges it seems like over these next 10, 18 years, we're going to have some really big shifts in which kinds of colleges attract which kinds of the students who are still in that pipeline.

So, I think for a lot of us, the truth is... And again, this is some brutal stuff. We've got some small, very enrollment-dependent campuses that are going to continue to close over these next 10 to 18 years. I just don't see any way
around that accelerating at least a little bit if not a lot. It's going to be interesting to see how many students go for the multiple schools or out in the community college system.

There could be some good stories that come out of this in terms of students considering more paths. The cost itself is going to really get in our way. I'll be fascinated to see if what seems like it might be the most serious momentum yet about going away from standardized tests picks up more speed, and the notion of fewer schools making less use of that piece of information to define who's a good fit for their campus.

Perez: And we also have to get through the politics. I mean, there is a very big anti-higher education rhetoric in this administration right now. So, we are feeling that, and we're also feeling that abroad. I mean, many of us have a fair number of international students on our campus. When I've traveled abroad more recently, it's no longer a question about, "Should I attend your institution?" Now, we start with the question of, "Why should I study in the United States?"

Lantigua-Williams: Wow.

Perez: So we have some really deep challenges that we're dealing with right now, politically as well.

Lantigua-Williams: Okay.

Niles: I think the demographic trends that that study support are challenging enough, but to Jim's point about cost, that's what keeps me up at night. When I look at the cost of my institution and other institutions for which I've worked, the cost that I will be paying for my son to go to college and my daughter following in two years, and I think about families who are having sleepless nights, considering those own issues. If we keep going on this trajectory, we already have, and we will continue to outpace what the public is able, and indeed willing, to pay. We are going to collectively, I think, have to address the college cost issue in the next 10 years.

Perez: Wow. This has been eye-opening. Jim, Angel, Stefanie, it's been wonderful. Thank you so much.

Niles: Thank you so much, Juleyka, for moderating today, and I'll add my thanks, Angel and Jim, for being here and for your insights, and thanks to you all for listening to us today.
Musical interlude.

College Admissions Decoded is a podcast from NACAC, the National Association for College Admission Counseling. It is produced by Lantigua Williams & Co. Paola Mardo is our sound designer. Emma Forbes is the show's intern. If you would like to learn more about our guests, our organization, and the college admission process, visit NACAC's website at www.nacacnet.org. I'm Stefanie Niles. It's been a pleasure being with you today.

CITATION
