Counseling Applicants and Families Amidst a Scandal

The Varsity Blues college admissions scandal sparked national concern among students, parents and counselors alike as students wondered if their qualifications would be delegitimized as a result. In this episode, we explore the messages the scandal unintentionally sent, and look at ways to assuage worries about getting into college. Incoming NACAC president-elect Jayne Fonash welcomes Sanjay Mitchell, Director of College and Alumni Programs at the Thurgood Marshall Academy, and Jim Jump, Academic Dean and Director of College Counseling at Saint Christopher School. 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.

Jayne Fonash: Hello and welcome to College Admissions Decoded, an occasional podcast from NACAC, the National Association for College Admission Counseling. I'm Jayne Fonash, president-elect of NACAC. I'm also an independent educational consultant who worked for many years as a college counselor at a public high school in Virginia. We are an education association of more than 15,000 college admission professionals at both secondary and postsecondary schools who support students and families from across the country and around the world through the college admission process.
News related to the college admission process is everywhere, news sites, television, social media, movies and so on. You, your kids or someone you know is either contemplating college, has just completed college or is wondering whether college is even worth the effort or the cost. And most recently, Operation Varsity Blues, the college bribery scandal that has ensnared dozens of wealthy families has captured the public’s attention and is having a moment in popular culture. We’ll talk about the scandal and its implications today.

Joining me are two colleagues and friends who are also members of NACAC, Sanjay Mitchell, Director of College and Alumni Programs at the Thurgood Marshall Academy in Washington D.C.

Sanjay Mitchell: Hi Jayne, thank you.

Fonash: Great to have you here. And Jim Jump, Academic Dean and Director of College Counseling at St. Christopher’s School in Richmond, Virginia.

Jim Jump: Thanks. Good to be here.

Fonash: It’s good to have you also. Moderating our discussion today is Juleyka Lantigua-Williams, a veteran journalist with more than 20 years of experience in print and digital audio and film.

Juleyka Lantigua-Williams: Hi Jayne.

Fonash: Good morning. I will turn it over to you.


Jump: Hi Juleyka.

Mitchell: Hi.

Lantigua-Williams: It’s really good to be here this morning. Though my kids are very young, I am already obsessed with how are we going to pay for college? What college will they want to go to, what kind of student are they going to be? They both have 529 plans in our state. So I can’t wait for this discussion to happen today. So I’m going to start
you off with a really soft question, which is, where were you the moment you found out about the scandal? Like think back for a sec. And, what was your gut reaction when you learned about it?

Jump: So I was on spring break, actually.

Lantigua-Williams: Of course.

Jump: I was at home, but I was in spring break and I happened to check email and had an email from a radio program in Los Angeles wanting to know if I would be interested in talking to them. And of course, I didn't know what they were talking about. So I scrambled to read what had just hit and was shocked.

Lantigua-Williams: Why were you shocked?

Jump: Because, I think that the scandal is so out of line with anything that I've experienced in a career of 40 years. And actually, one of the things that bothers me about this is the notion that, “Oh, this is business as usual.” This is not, this was an elaborate criminal conspiracy that's unprecedented.

Lantigua-Williams: Okay. Jayne, where were you?

Fonash: I was working on email at home and a post came up from the NACAC Exchange, an online network where all of us can chat with each other, throw out ideas, ask for help. And the news started popping up on the Exchange, and I was shocked like you were Jim, but I wasn't surprised. I was shocked that this level of deceit, intentional deceit had permeated what parents thought was appropriate behavior to advocate for their students.

But, I wasn't surprised because of the entitlement and the greed that's apparent in our culture overall. It's certainly not something that's specific to our work as college admission professionals, but it's certainly something that we see in our daily culture.

Lantigua-Williams: Okay. Sanjay, where were you?

Mitchell: So, I was in my office and it was an unusual day. It was very quiet in the office and a student just left the office, and we were talking about college plans and making a final decision, and my phone was on the desk and then it just kept buzzing. It was like, bzzz, bzzz,
bzzz, and I was like, “What is happening?” It was, as Jayne said, I was shocked but not surprised. I’m not surprised, because we’ve heard of things like this, like rumors and murmurs around and things like that.

But to see it to this magnitude, to see that there were so many different pieces of the admissions process involved in this in such an elaborate and intricate way, it was like, “Who has the time to do all of that and why?” The process can work if you trusted, if you believe in the process because it is a trustworthy process.

Fonash: What you said is so important. It is a trustworthy process that is made up of thousands and thousands of colleagues of ours whose goal is for students to have the opportunity for higher education at an affordable cost. And, it was especially sad for me that what makes the national headlines is a story about an abuse of that trust rather than some of the stories that need to be told about underserved students who need more advocates, who need opportunities, who need counselors like us. And, that’s what should be at the limelight in the news rather than this disgusting story.

Mitchell: Yeah, and the timeline was jarring too because it came out right before the last wave of admissions decisions were coming out for some colleges. And my students were sitting waiting on decisions and the questions just kept flying. It was like, “What does this mean for my admit? What does this mean later on?” And there were so many unknowns that were happening, and I tried to calm them to think that like, “This is really not about you. It’s not a situation that involves you. Like you know your credential and you know your materials are legit.”

It took away from a lot of the excitement that could have been brought around, the admit process, as Jayne mentioned and a lot of the good things that are happening. Students who are getting support in numerous ways who are really excited about these decisions only to have... although they went through the process legitimately, to have their entire process be questioned by folks who have no idea how this actually works.

Lantigua-Williams: This is great because I wanted to ask you, did you talk to your students about this? How did you talk to them about them? What did you say about this? Jim.
As I said, we were on spring break, so my students weren't there, but as soon as I got back the following Monday, this all broke on a Tuesday. The first thing I did was I was putting out a newsletter for students and parents, and I put an editorial as the lead to that talking about basically that it's unprecedented, that it was not typical of what had happened. I would describe it actually as the college admissions process got hacked, to use a word that has been used with other issues, that this group found a vulnerability which had to do with athletic recruiting primarily.

So I talked about that. But, then, I also used it as an opportunity to say that I'm grateful to be at a school where people trust the process and are rational about it.

Okay. So let's talk a little bit pre-scandal, because now it feels like there was college admissions before and then there's college admissions after. What in general are some of the anxieties and the preoccupations that your students have throughout the college admission process?

Well, the number one is: Can I get in?

Above everything else. And then, followed very closely is: Can I afford it? And with those two couplings, the process, we do a very good job of really carefully looking at those two lens when we're working with our students to figure out the right fit. Fit, of course, includes whether the student will be comfortable. If it's a great social environment, do they have their major? Can they see themselves thriving on the campus in the next four years? But the other objects of the game is: Are you going to be an academic fit here? Meaning, can you get in, and then, will you be able to afford it for the next four years? So, there was always a little bit of nerve racking around the college application process and rightfully so.

So Jayne, I'm going to go to you for the question of fit because it's something that I hear more and more from professionals on your side. How do you help a student understand--and sometimes the parents more than the students--how do you help them understand how to determine the fit, how to do this type of self-assessment?
Fonash: That process starts I think fairly early when you work with high school students. And one of our challenges is to set a path where these conversations start fairly early on in high school. Not for the purpose of gaming the system, not for the purpose of building up trophies and accomplishments, but getting to know a student and helping the student get to know themselves and understand what's important to them in their postsecondary education to begin to have some career sense of an area in which they would like to study and eventually work, to understand what other experiences they want to have during college.

If advocacy is important to them, or writing, or student volunteerism, helping to build a description of where they could be successful, where they could be happy, where they could thrive both in and outside the classroom. Because, these four years at college, for many students, provides tremendous personal growth as well. They need to live on their own, function on their own, make decisions. Hopefully, their parents have prepared them to be able to do that.

But, you spend time through the relationship that you build with students to help them develop a picture of where they think they would be academically safe and successful, where they can grow as a person, and where they can feel free and safe to pursue their interests both in and outside the classroom. And then ultimately, helping them to understand that our goal is not for them to find one school that's the be-all in the end all of where they should be but to come up with at least a half a dozen schools where all those criteria are met and that they can be happy. They can be successful.

They'll do a happy dance if they get a “yes” letter from that school and hopefully, they get five or six yes letters, and then they have a decision to make all from schools where they believe they could be happy and successful.

Jump: I actually think one of the challenges though is that fit is one of two, and I would describe these as worldviews with regard to the college process. The other one is the prestige worldview. The view that going to a name college is what determines success. And, I think that is promoted so much in media coverage of the college admissions process. It focuses on a small number of places that are highly selective, whereas 90% of the colleges in the United States are not and will take any qualified student.
I think the parents in this Operation Varsity Blue scandal focused on a small number of colleges. So, fighting against that myth of prestige, that it's where you go, not what you do as an experience wherever you go, that is the challenge for us as educators.

Mitchell: But, for a lot of my students, the conversation and the drive starting from ninth grade is “You can be as fit as a college student, period.” So it's not just who you are and all these things are essentially important, but for a number of my students, they can't even see themselves as being college students. So when this happened, it was like, “Oh well, this is clearly what means that I can't get in because I'm a poor black, I'm a poor brown, I'm a poor. I'm from Southeast Washington, D.C., I'm this.”

Lantigua-Williams: So, that speaks to a couple of things. One is the perception that college is not for everyone and that there are just a certain segment of the population that shouldn't even aspire to college. Because, the notion of an elite education has monopolized what it means to get a good education. But, it also brings to light the fact that there are multiple ways to get into college. And I love the idea, Jim, that you brought up of the system getting hacked, because there are multiple ways to get into college.

So, where's the middle ground where we can get the general public to understand what actually matters in the admissions process? Jayne, what matters in the admissions process?

Fonash: To answer your question, I'd like to comment a little bit on the parents because they're certainly central to this process.

Lantigua-Williams: Absolutely.

Fonash: The overwhelming majority of parents who we've encountered along the way love their children, want the best for them, have a hard time giving up control, everything from sending them off to the first day of kindergarten, to launching them to a postsecondary education. And so, I think part of where this starts for the middle is for our college counselors and our colleagues on the postsecondary side to nurture the relationships with our students as well as their parents. We need them to trust us.
And, I think that our ability on the high school side to nurture both of those relationships can help keep the process on solid, healthy, realistic ground moving forward. I think it's important for us not to leave the parents out of the equation. What went wrong in this recent scandal was that all of those qualities that I just described went to skew, and the ability of those parents to attempt to control their child's future became an unethical way out of hand behavior on their part.

Lantigua-Williams: Okay.

Jump: Yeah, I would agree. I think actually the college process is harder on parents than it is on students. One of the things I learned as a parent myself is that I find much more pleasure out of my children's accomplishments and feel more pain out of their disappointments than anything has happened to my own life. I think that is natural as a parent. The question is when do you go over the line and becomes your process, not your child's process, that it's about your status, not about helping your child. It's not their journey.

And I think in this case, you had people who were so bought into the status that they went out and did criminal things in order to achieve a certain result, sometimes without their child even being aware of it. And I think that's what's really sad, is that you had a group of parents that didn't trust their children to be able to handle a process that, once you become a high school junior and senior, you should be able to handle with help from parents and from counselors.

Mitchell: The interesting thing you said in your lead up, and I'm so torn by it, this idea of "Is college right for everyone?" And, I jokingly said to a colleague one day, "It's so interesting: all the people who are telling students, especially underserved students, that they don't need to go to college are people with college degrees." I've landed in this middle ground in terms of that, where I say to my families, "I want you to walk out of this building knowing that college was an option, period. Whether you exercise the option now or later, or never, it's up to you. But you walked out this door and knowing that you had the option to go to college."

Because, when I speak to my families and when I speak to most families who've never gone to college, the number one thing they say is, "I didn't even know I could, I didn't even know it was an
option. I didn't even think that I could because of my family circumstances, my grades, where I'm from,” et cetera. And so, I want our children to walk out in the world knowing that, “Oh yeah, I could have gone to college, but I chose not to.”

And so, the middle ground for me—going back into that middle ground tail-end of your question—the middle ground for me is for us as adults to not necessarily force A over B or a college over not, but present a lot of options for our children to then decide which one works best for them, and for them to understand that there is no right or wrong decision when you're making it, it's whatever decision you think works best for you, and we will support whatever it is that you're choosing.

It's up to college admissions folks on the postsecondary side to not discourage students from attending any particular school or even their own school.

Lantigua-Williams: What you guys are talking about is transforming the perspective of the parents, but you're also talking about empowering the students who make their own choices. And, sometimes culturally, it's very difficult.

Mitchell: Yeah.

Lantigua-Williams: So, how do you have that conversation where you want your bright student to take charge of her education while her parents are saying, “Oh no, you can't live more than 15 minutes away from my house.” Because that is a reality.

Mitchell: Listen, as a Jamaican whose mom is a lovely woman—and I completely understand that dynamic—and working in populations where I know, and not just here in Washington D.C. but also in New York, in populations where I know that our families are scared of what happens when their children go too far. And so, it's not that they don't want their child to be great, it's that they're afraid of what happens.

One of the things that I, and I think my colleagues will say this too, is that I really try to get my families to see the campus as much as possible. I get them to do the drive. So, I say, “Go for a drive up to wherever the school is.” And, a lot of the times they will come back and say, “Oh, you know what? That wasn't that bad.” And, I'm like,
“Yeah, it wasn't, because you're so used to doing things that are familiar that when the unfamiliar happens, it's like, ‘No, I don't want to do it.’ But then when you do it that one time it's like, ‘Oh, that makes sense.’”

Lantigua-Williams: When the scandal broke, did you see any impact on your students with special needs, special abilities, with learning disabilities? Did they say to themselves, “This is saying something about my status, my place, my belonging in these institutions”?

Jump: Well, I think the worry is that the families ... part of the scandal was misusing accommodations for students who legitimately have learning issues and need extra time. Anytime somebody takes advantage of a system and cheats on it, it potentially creates a tightening up of that system. And so, I think there was worry that kids who legitimately need that kind of time will find it harder to get credentialed for it.

I mean, there was an article in the Wall Street Journal in the past week that showed that the percentage of students qualifying for extra time is much greater in affluent communities than it is in other communities. Now, should we draw conclusions from that, that there are more kids with learning issues in affluent communities, or is that a gaming of the system? I think we can probably all agree that-

Lantigua-Williams: I'm winking at you silently.

Jump: But I think it penalizes potentially the kids who most need that help, and I think we have to work hard to make sure that doesn't happen as an outgrowth of this.

Lantigua-Williams: Jayne.

Fonash: Or, the other layer of what you mentioned, Jim, is: What does it mean that there's a greater number of students from affluent communities who have extended time? Is it a misuse of the system or is it better advocacy and access to the diagnostic work that needs to be done to enable the student to get an appropriate accommodation? There's probably some of both going on.

Jump: Well, especially because it costs a lot to get diagnosed with those issues, and if you're not affluent to start with, it's very hard to even get the diagnosis.
Lantigua-Williams: And I'm going to put this question to Jayne: Is a lot of the burden actually going to fall on you guys? And, I'm putting in to Jim and to Sanjay, which is that you sit at the intersection between the universities and your students, and you have to do the work of translating the policies in a way that makes sense and that doesn't prevent your student any further from applying. So, madam incoming president-elect, yes, as Jayne discussed herself, what do you think your organization can provide in terms of support to your membership to help navigate some of these very complex issues?

Fonash: There has been a fair amount of research that shows that students who have access to a counselor during high school as early as possible, to begin conversations about their postsecondary planning and college and career opportunities, are more likely to apply to a two-year or a four-year school to pursue those opportunities than students who don't have someone who opens that door for them.

So, I think it's there's a two-part answer to your question. The first part is that we have an advocacy arm at NACAC. We have the Government Relations Director, we have someone who oversees quite a bit of research and outreach. And so, for us to inform our legislators and our communities that there is a need in terms of the future of this country to have more high school counselors, more college counselors to advocate for students the same way that we do every day. Fulfilling that need can change this process for students and makes it more likely that they will have someone to support whatever they need along the way.

The second one is actually through podcasts like this, through looking at how we provide training and professional development to counselors who can get to regional and national conferences, as well as counselors who need more opportunities like podcasts or webinars or other online opportunities to strengthen their skill sets as counselors to be better informed about how they can do the work they need to support their students in postsecondary education.

So, advocacy and education for our legislators, both at a local and a national level, and continued professional development for more and more counselors to bring them to the point where they can confidently and securely support their students.

Juleyka, thank you so much for moderating today.
Lantigua-Williams: My pleasure.

Fonash: This has been a great conversation and to my friends, Sanjay and Jim, thank you for being here.

College Admissions Decoded is a podcast from NACAC, The National Association for College Admission Counseling. It is produced by Lantigua-Williams and Co. Paula Marto is the 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 Jayne Fonash, thank you for joining us today.

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