

The UC admissions disgrace; The regent who abused his or her position to help the admission of a friend's kid should come forward.

Los Angeles Times

September 24, 2020 Thursday

Final Edition

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Section: MAIN NEWS; Editorial Desk; Part A; Pg. 1

Length: 782 words

Body

First things first: Who is the UC regent who improperly helped the child of friends get admitted to Berkeley, and when will an explanation -- or resignation -- be forthcoming?

The number of students wrongfully admitted to four University of California schools was small, at least the number uncovered by a state audit -- 64 total over six years ending in 2018-19. But the outrage factor is major, especially at UC Berkeley, with highly qualified applicants shunted aside to make room for those who apparently did not belong at the school.

Of the 64, 22 were side-door applicants involved in the now-familiar Varsity Blues scandal, in which non-athletes were recommended by coaches who had been bribed by the families via an unscrupulous Newport Beach college consultant, or similar but legal situations in which donations got them in the door. They were accepted at Berkeley, UCLA, UC San Diego and UC Santa Barbara.

But 42 more -- all of them Berkeley applicants -- weren't athletes. They simply had some form of extraordinary privilege. Some were the offspring of parents who made big donations. Others had connections, family or otherwise, to campus staff, leaders or donors.

Unsurprisingly, most were white and well-off financially. And they were far from the best applicants.

"These applicants were less qualified than many others for whom the campuses denied admission," the audit said. "In fact, some of these applicants received the lowest possible scores on their applications."

The audit includes a graphic showing the outcomes for two white students who had benefited from their connections. Evaluators of their applications had recommended rejecting them, but they were accepted anyway. Meanwhile, a student of color who had been recommended for acceptance was rejected.

Among the less-qualified students who were accepted: the babysitter for a colleague of the former director of undergraduate admissions. The child of a prominent alumnus. The child of a high-level university staffer. Two children of donors. In addition, the audit said, a former UC Berkeley admissions director openly invited faculty and staff to suggest the names of offspring of their family and friends for her to review personally.

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This scandal helps make the case for Proposition 16, which would reinstate California's ability to use affirmative action. Merit has never been the only factor in college admissions. Opponents of Proposition 16 weren't objecting when it was white students who were given an extra leg up.

Make no mistake, at private colleges, students often are accepted because they have connections or parents who make big donations. Just having a parent who is an alumnus gives applicants a significant boost, a practice known as legacy admissions. But that isn't supposed to happen at California's public universities, paid for in part by taxpayers, with policies that call for fair, merit-based admission.

In fairness, the number of improperly accepted students is barely a blip. Berkeley admits about 14,000 freshmen a year. But at a time when the fairness of college admissions is under new scrutiny, it is galling to see privilege prevail over merit at a campus known for its commitment to social justice.

The worst example of all, though, involves not just Berkeley officials but also an unnamed UC regent. Regents are allowed to write standard letters of recommendation for applicants but otherwise aren't supposed to try to influence admissions.

In this case, the regent sent the letter not as part of the regular admissions process, but to the chancellor's office, after a certain less-qualified student had been wait-listed. The student's family were friends with the regent. The chancellor's office forwarded the letter to the development office, which should have nothing to do with admissions.

No matter how few applicants were admitted via their connections, Cal clearly has fed a system of ethical sloppiness. UC's internal reviews failed to find as many cases of admissions wrongdoing as the state audit. The university has put new admissions safeguards into place, but the issue here is more one of a problematic culture than a lack of rules. There were already rules in place for some of these situations; they simply weren't followed. UC needs regular reviews of admissions practices, which should be conducted by external entities that aren't beholden to the university.

Here's one rule we propose: No involvement of regents in the application process, including writing even regular letters of recommendation. The regents are simply too influential as well as the ultimate bosses of admissions officers.

And any regents who break the rules should be named publicly. Starting right now.

Load-Date: September 24, 2020