News



by Jesse Remedios

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The day after news broke of a national college admissions scandal that involved a tennis coach at Georgetown University, some undergraduate students expressed hope that the revelations will lead to deeper discussions about a system that unfairly benefits children of privilege.

The scandal was a main topic of discussion among the hundreds of students gathered on the school's main quad around club tables, picnic blankets and food stands that were part of a weekly on-campus farmer's market. In many aspects, the scene might have looked like the idyllic college experience to the number of prospective student groups touring the university on a warm and sunny afternoon.

Georgetown is one of more than five elite universities mentioned in the Justice Department's racketeering indictment that charged 50 people — including 33 parents — with illegally cheating the system to gain unqualified applicants' admittance to top universities. The scheme was orchestrated by William Singer, the founder of a college preparatory business known as The Key, who helped students cheat on standardized tests and used money from parents to bribe college athletics

coaches to secure spots for their children.

Michael Stricker, a junior from Westchester, New York, described the story as the type of thing "everyone is talking about."

"The conversations have really stemmed from people wanting to see, 'Oh this is the worst thing ever,' or on the other spectrum people being like, 'Well we kind of look at college admissions as an objective thing when in reality it's super subjective,' " Stricker told NCR.

Other students described a scramble among the student body to figure out all the details of the reports. Students interviewed by NCR said they want to know exactly how Georgetown was involved and what the university knew about the scheme before criticizing the university or calling for specific actions.

Gordon Ernst — head coach of Georgetown's men's and women's tennis teams for 12 seasons — was the first name listed in the indictment released by federal authorities March 12. The document alleges Ernst was involved in falsely designating 12 applicants as tennis recruits to help them be admitted. In a letter to the Georgetown community, university officials wrote that the university "was not aware of any alleged criminal activity or acceptance of bribes by Mr. Ernst until it was later contacted by the U.S. Attorney's Office." The letter stated that Georgetown then launched an internal investigation into Ernst's conduct and "he separated from the University in 2018."

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Some students said they were satisfied with the university's response so far.

"It's going to be interesting to see what they do about the students but the fact that the tennis coach was dismissed and Georgetown had an internal investigation. I think they did what they could once they found out," said George Ferridge, a junior from Massachusetts.

Ferridge said that he is interested to see what further actions the administration will take.

"I think their response will be very telling, and I think the entire reaction to the story is going to be telling of college applications heading into the future," he said.

Junior Rachel Eherhart from New Jersey described some concern with the language the university used in the letter from the administration.

"They used the word 'victim' to describe the university which I think is not completely accurate because I think the real victims are the people who didn't get in as a result of the scheme," said Eherhart.

Students say that the scandal has pushed some of them to reflect on the effect wealth plays not just in the college admissions process, but also campus culture in general.

"It's already had a strong impact in the 24 hours that it's been known," said Eherhart. "It's made a huge commotion, people are taking note of it more than the usual 'rich kids jokes.' "

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The New York Times reported that the median family income among Georgetown students is $229,100, with 74 percent of the student body coming from the top 20 percent of income percentile and 21 percent of the student body from the top 1 percent.

First-year student Taylor Kahn-Perry told NCR that "the culture of boarding schools" is very new to her, coming from a public arts school in Charleston, South Carolina. She said that learning about "this event in that new context is very interesting."

Multiple students expressed how conversations surrounding the scandal have pushed them to reflect on the more nuanced ways the college admissions process benefits the wealthy.

"I think we hope that this is a moment where we can start to have a conversation about the way that the college admissions process is really elitist and does favor the wealthy in a lot of ways," Kahn-Perry said. "And a lot of legal ways."

Stricker mentioned the "side doors" — an expression used in the New York Times article — where parents sometimes pay hundreds of thousands of dollars in the form of a donation to help their child's chances of being admitted. Being able to afford SAT and ACT tutors, support for learning disabilities, access to quality preschool, and

even having parents who read to you as a child were all mentioned as subtle ways wealth influences the admissions process.

"I think it all boils down to that income disparity that gives students unfair advantages," said Ferridge. "A lot of us may have capitalized on that, not to the point of fraud, but there are fundamental flaws in the college admissions process that I really think need to be ironed out."

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