

CA Lawmakers React to College Admission Scandal

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The news reports on Tuesday, March 12, 2019 were shocking and sensational: The FBI had busted the **largest college-admission scam in U.S. history**. Lots of lives and careers were ruined that day and it became the trending topic of conversation around the nation.

Four of the elite universities peripherally involved in this mess are in California. It was only a matter of time before lawmakers in the Golden State decided to poke their noses into the situation.

Some of the ideas and proposals for remedial legislation include **taking aim at the “side doors”**; that is, lax practices and loopholes that were exploited; for instance, athletics directors had leeway on admission of so-called athletes without much apparent oversight.

Among other proposals floated are “denying Cal Grants – the state’s financial aid program – to schools that offer preferential decisions for donors, and phrasing out standardized tests.”

Legislative Action on Admission

Just two weeks after the scandal erupted, on March 28, 2019, a six-bill legislative package was filed in the California Assembly, even though the schools involved **promised to launch internal investigations** and take action. Democratic Assemblyman Kevin McCarty, who proposed Assembly Bill 1383, explains: “I think some of the reforms are probably happening behind the scenes, but it’s **important for the legislature to speak up as well.**”

AB 1383’s purpose is to tighten the **“admission by exception” policy** that allows University of California school systems to “admit students who do not meet traditional academic eligibility requirements but who are determined to have the potential to succeed. Athletic recruits can fall under that category,” and according to the University of California system website, “another example could be students who are home-schooled and therefore don’t have formal transcripts.” Or

“maybe their life circumstances have prevented them living up to their promise. The list is endless.”

In the scheme closed down by the FBI, according to court documents, parents paid the ringleader large sums to “bribe coaches and university administrators to designate their children as recruited athletes.”

Proposed Assembly Bill 1383 could apply only to California’s public universities. It would mandate that these types of “admissions by exception” would have to be approved by at least three administrative staff members – not just the coach in question. This precaution should reveal anyone trying to rig the system.

“When a soccer coach asks the admissions team to let in somebody who allegedly has soccer talent but they’re not getting an athletic scholarship but they’re just getting into the university, then we should have double or triple checking to make sure that person is legitimately a soccer player,” McCarty told NBC News.

In different parts of this six-bill legislative package, other lawmakers proposed “asking the State Auditor to review the University of California’s admissions process for risks of fraud, denying Cal Grants — the state’s financial aid system — to schools that offer preferential decisions for donors and alumni and phasing out the use of standardized tests (because the busted scam involved arrangements to help the students cheat on their SATs).”

Opposition to Legislation

There is stated opposition to certain parts of this legislative package; in particular, the proposal to cut Cal Grants. Some higher education groups object because it could affect private schools in the state. There would be, according to Kristen Soares of The Association of Independent California Colleges, “... significant unintended consequences, and ultimately hurt low-income students and their access to higher education.”

Democratic Assemblyman Phil Ting responded to that criticism by explaining that the Cal Grants are one of the few ways that state officials can affect the policies and practices of private universities. “We don’t have legal authority over them.”

“Others say the package, while a good step, doesn’t go far enough.” This critique includes advocacy groups promoting greater access to higher education for all Californians.

Conclusion

Three of the bills – including the one seeking to punish schools for giving admission preference to donors and alumni – were approved out of the Higher Education Committee on April 23, 2019. AB 1383 – on the “admission by exception” procedure was approved by the Assembly on May 29, 2019, by a 78-0 vote. It is now in committee in the California Senate.