HIGHER EDUCATION

Tighter Rules in Wake of College Admissions Scandal

The extremely low percentage of applicants who get into elite schools was exposed when federal prosecutors indicted more than 30 wealthy parents for bribery last year. In the scandal that became known as Operation Varsity Blues, the parents paid an admission consultant to rig standardized tests or bribe coaches to help their children gain admission to several top American universities.

Across the country, high school students submitted more than 10 million applications to colleges and universities in 2017, an increase of more than 10% since 2014.

As that number continues to grow, and the likelihood of being admitted to an elite school declines, institutions and states alike are focusing on admission policies.

After news of the scandal broke, California lawmakers scrambled to introduce legislation to address admissions practices. By session’s end, legislators had enacted measures that:

- Require institutions that receive state financial aid to report any preferential treatment in admissions to the legislature every year. This includes admissions based on relationships to donors or alumni.
- Prohibit those found guilty in the federal investigation from claiming tax deductions based on contributions they made to charities involved in the scandal.
- Prohibit admission by exception—a special talent in athletics or the arts—without the approval of at least three senior campus administrators.

Legislators in 13 states introduced bills related to admissions and enrollment in 2019; 17 became law. Not all them were related to the admissions scandal, however. Colorado lawmakers decided to prohibit state colleges and universities from asking for an applicant’s criminal or disciplinary history, with exceptions for certain crimes, including stalking, sexual assault and domestic violence.

Illinois legislators passed a law requiring institutions to admit first-time applicants who graduate from state high schools with a GPA in the top 10% of the student’s graduating class. Texas lawmakers amended the state’s Ten Percent Plan to ensure admission for high school valedictorians, regardless of graduating class size.

As more colleges and universities move away from admissions based on test scores—and if the fallout from the Varsity Blues scandal persists—states will continue to address admissions policies and rules to ensure all students have fair access to higher education.

—Andrew Smalley
New Jersey soon will join North Dakota as the only states in the banking business. New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy (D) signed an executive order in November creating a Public Bank Implementation Board that will lay plans for a public bank for the state. He called it “a force for good in helping small businesses succeed, in providing student loans at affordable rates, and in opening lines of credit to municipalities needing long-term infrastructure and affordable housing,” according to nj.com.

Once the 14-member board publicly releases its plan, the bank could begin receiving millions of dollars in state deposits previously held by commercial banks. Supporters see it as a way to invest more money back into local communities. The bank will make some of its money available to community banks for small-business loans, small-scale infrastructure projects and student loans. Bank profits will be pumped back into the state budget.

Opponents argue the bank will compete with established local institutions that are already providing these services and would be vulnerable to political influence. “The creation of a state-run bank is a looming catastrophe for Garden State taxpayers,” New Jersey Senator Anthony Bucco (R) wrote in a statement. “The truth of the matter is that new agencies run by the state have a history of falling short. This poses too great of a potential liability for New Jersey families who already struggle with taxes.”

North Dakota’s state bank, which dates back to 1919, was created to help ensure that local farmers wouldn’t be charged inflated interest rates on loans from out-of-state banks. Several states have entertained the idea of establishing a state-run bank in the last 10 years.

California lawmakers recently voted to allow cities to open and operate public banks. “We finally have the option of reinvesting our public tax dollars in our communities instead of rewarding Wall Street’s bad behavior,” Assemblyman David Chiu (D), co-author of the bill, told the Los Angeles Times.

Public banks also could be a boon to state-licensed cannabis businesses, which currently lack access to banking services.

—Julie Lays
TRAFFIC SAFETY

Getting Ahead of Cyclist Injuries With Helmet Laws

Prompted by the growing number of bicycle riders and the resulting increase in crashes and injuries, the National Transportation Safety Board recently conducted its first analysis of bicycle safety in 47 years. As a result of the study, the board called for making cyclists more visible to motorists, developing crash avoidance systems for cars capable of detecting bicyclists and building separated bike lanes and other infrastructure improvements to make roads safer. It also recommended that state legislatures pass mandatory helmet laws.

Only Puerto Rico requires all bicyclists to wear helmets. Twenty-nine states have no helmet law for cyclists of any age, while the other 21 states and the District of Columbia have laws that apply only to cyclists of a certain age, which varies from 17 years and younger in California, Delaware and New Mexico to 11 years and younger in Louisiana and Pennsylvania, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. But that might be changing.

Supporters of helmet laws cite statistics. Crashes with cars killed 854 cyclists in 2018. That’s the highest number in 30 years and a 6.3% increase over 2017. And, of those who died, only about 17% were wearing helmets. Studies show that wearing a helmet decreases the likelihood of a head injury by about 48%. Although only about half of cyclists wear a helmet, they are four times more likely to do so if a law requires it, according to studies cited by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

Opponents don’t believe helmet laws are the answer. They would rather see upgrades to vehicle safety systems and road design. Helmet laws are hard to enforce, they say, and may discourage people from biking altogether. And, studies show that the more cyclists on the road, the safer all are due to the “safety in numbers” effect.

“While requiring helmets may seem like an intuitive way to protect riders, the evidence doesn’t bear this out. Experience has shown that while bike helmets can be protective, bike helmet laws are not,” says Corinne Kisner, executive director of the National Association of City Transportation Officials, in a press release.

Several cities and counties have helmet requirements as well.

CRASHES WITH CARS KILLED 854 BICYCLISTS IN 2018—THE HIGHEST NUMBER IN 30 YEARS.

—Julie Lays
CENSUS

Help Wanted: Census Bureau Is Short on Temp Workers

As the saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child. The same could be said for getting a complete and accurate census count—but the village would have to be a city the size of Atlanta. Unfortunately, the number of applicants for census jobs has been disappointing.

The U.S. Census Bureau needs around 500,000 temporary employees for the 2020 census and hopes to hire local residents to work door to door in their own neighborhoods. But it’s behind on receiving applications—by about 1.7 million.

The bureau recently launched a nationwide campaign to boost lagging recruitment numbers. Why the difficulty finding workers? Several factors are believed to be at play:

- Very low unemployment rates nationwide.
- An online-only application and training program.
- A lag in receiving completed background checks.
- Uncertainty among benefit recipients as to whether their census pay will disqualify them from receiving federal assistance.

Census jobs, such as census takers, field supervisors, clerks and office supervisors, can last a few weeks to a couple of months. States can decide whether to waive, or exclude, income from these jobs when calculating Medicaid, TANF, CHIP and SNAP benefits. So far, Idaho, Massachusetts and South Dakota have done so.

A pay increase might also help in recruitment efforts. It was advised after the bureau encountered high dropout and no-show rates when it hired 32,000 temporary workers earlier this year to verify addresses. In Montana, for instance, hourly pay rates have been increased to $17 for enumerators and to $19.50 in a few hard-to-staff rural counties. Nationally, pay will range from $12 to $30 per hour depending upon the job and location.

Every 10 years, the census provides the data used to redraw state and federal political districts, to determine the number of U.S. representatives and Electoral College votes each state gets and to portion out the federal funds states will receive for the next decade. It’s hard to overstate how important accurate counts are to the states.

—Christi Zamarripa

DID YOU KNOW?

Women Sustain Chamber Leadership Numbers

Seventy-three women will serve in leadership roles—house speaker, speaker pro tem, senate president, senate president pro tem, majority leader or minority leader—for 2020. The number is virtually unchanged from last year, though Virginia has its first female speaker. All told, of the nation’s 7,383 legislators, 2,145 are women this year.
Analyst David Teal Honored for Service to Alaska, Nation

David Teal, director of the Legislative Finance Division in Alaska, is the 2019 winner of the Steven D. Gold Award for his significant contributions to public financial management and state and local finance. Teal was honored at the Capitol Forum in December for his commitment to strengthening the legislative institution in Alaska and around the country.

Teal has been in state government in various capacities for nearly 37 years, the last 22 of them as director of the nonpartisan Legislative Finance Division. During his tenure with the legislature, he has strived to provide the body with precise, unbiased data and research to inform the decision-making of Alaska’s lawmakers. Teal says his goal is “to make the budget process work as smooth as it can, making sure that everyone is working from the same basic assumptions on revenues and expenditures, so legislators are not arguing about the facts, but are just debating policy. That doesn’t make it easy, but it certainly helps.”

Speaker of the House Bryce Edgmon (I), who has known Teal since he joined the finance division, describes Teal as even keeled. “I’ve never once seen him off his game under the most trying of circumstances,” Edgmon says. “David has kept his cool every moment in his work with the legislature.”

As a former president of the National Association of Legislative Fiscal Offices and the Western States Legislative Fiscal Officers Association, Teal has provided expert guidance to legislators and legislative fiscal staff across the country and has mentored many legislative fiscal analysts.

Teal, who retired at the end of last year, is recognized by both parties for his commitment to the legislative institution, and his nonpartisan work is deeply respected. “Alaska is a young state,” says Senate President Cathy Giessel (R). “We celebrated our 60th anniversary as the 49th member of the union this year. Because of our relatively youthful institutions, the people who handle the tillers of government, especially our analysts, provide critical knowledge and experience that inform lawmakers’ decisions. Mr. Teal, in his capacity, has been involved in over a third of all the budgets in Alaska’s history. David leaves public service with deep tracks grooved into the future for successors to follow.”

—Erica MacKeller