

# 'Operation Varsity Blues: The College Admission Scandal' may fill viewers with rage

BY MAKENZIE WHITTLE • The Bulletin

It's hard not to be infuriated by the new Netflix original documentary "Operation Varsity Blues: The College Admission Scandal" if you, like many Americans, are plagued with student loan debts or have had overall stresses about high school transcripts and getting into a "good" school. The documentary follows the recent scandal that was shocking but at the same time not entirely surprising.

The idea of parents making large donations to get their kid into a prestigious university through a kind of back-door admissions wasn't new, but the so-called "side door" tactics employed by college admissions coach Rick Singer was something different.

Parents would pay him to circumvent traditional admissions processes by paying athletic directors and coaches to put students on smaller sports teams like sailing, crew and soccer, the sports that rely on donations, not ticket sales (like football and basketball) to continue to survive.

He also would pay off counselors to get the students extended time on tests, which were usually reserved for students with learning difficulties, and then he would pay to have the test proctor take the comprehensive exam for them.

He touted his side-door methods as a sure way to get these students into whatever college they wanted, stating that the back door was never a guarantee.

The film uses Singer's own words as they were recorded through wiretaps done by the FBI as the underlying script, then uses actors to reenact the scenes for dramatic purposes. What we get is basically a string of phone calls Singer had with wealthy businessmen and women, actors and other folks in the upper



Actors Angela Nicholas and Matthew Modine reenact a scene between USC coach Donna Heinel and Rick Singer in "Operation Varsity Blues: The College Admissions Scandal" (2021).

Netflix

## More Information

"Operation Varsity Blues: The College Admissions Scandal"

99 minutes

Rated R for some language



echelons of society using his methods to cheat the system and get a guarantee into the school of the parents' dreams. Yes, I said parents.

The documentary paints a clear picture of the lives of the families utilizing Singer's services and, more often than not, it is the parent who is pushing for their child to attend a Stanford, Harvard or a University of Southern California-type school. One interviewee saw it as the parent who was unable to attend that particular school, and always had the dream of it, using their child to vicariously attend or be a part of it in some way.

Interwoven with these reenactments are in-

terviews with journalists, lawyers and admissions experts giving further background not only on the scandal but the facade of those elite universities students and parents consider their stretch goal.

Even more gut-wrenching are the short moments that we see videos of prospective students (the everyday ones who have worked hard throughout high school, taken advance placement courses just because they look good on a transcript) open their emails to see rejection and deferral letters.

While it relies heavily on reenactments, many of which grow tiresome as they are only

phone calls, and the interluding footage shot for dramatic purposes seems unnecessary and awkward, the overall story the documentary paints may end up filling you with rage, nonetheless.

"Operation Varsity Blues" places a large amount of the blame on Singer, but doesn't shy away from the blame on some of the parents and those at the colleges involved with it (though there are some nuances such as with Stanford sailing coach John Vandemore). It will leave you wanting to yell into the void of the internet or take a walk around your house with its way of showing the startling amount of privilege the key actors have within the scandal — the ones who have it all and still thought it wasn't enough.

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drug and arms dealer named Alien (James Franco) and his territory disputes with a rival dealer. It's brash, explicit and interestingly can be argued for being either misogynistic or feminist. Either way, it's not for the faint of heart. Stream it on Showtime or rent it on Amazon Prime, Google Play, iTunes, Vudu or YouTube.

"Where the Boys Are" (1960) — This early example of a teen sex comedy put Fort Lauderdale on the map of spring break locations for decades to come. It follows four coeds as they make their way to the beach looking for love led by the forward-thinking and assertive Merritt (Dolores Hart). The four do end up meeting beaux, but where the film surprises is with the melancholy turn in its final acts, but does it in a quiet and profound way for the '60s. The film also stars George Hamilton, Jim Hutton, Connie Francis, Paula Prentiss and Yvette Mimieux. Rent it on Amazon Prime, Google Play, iTunes, Vudu or YouTube.

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From left: Dolores Hart, Connie Francis, Yvette Mimieux and Paula Prentiss in a scene from "Where the Boys Are" (1960).

MGM