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Lori Loughlin and other parents face new bribery charge in college admissions scandal



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Most of the parents and coaches who have maintained their innocence in a federal investigation of corruption in college admissions were indicted Tuesday on new charges, a hard-charging move by prosecutors that significantly raises the stakes for those who have resisted the government's pressure to plead guilty.

Seven parents — a group that includes actress Lori Loughlin and her husband, Massimo Ostini, a former USC coach — were charged in an indictment returned by a grand jury in Boston, which alleges they conspired with William “Rick” Singer, a Newport Beach consultant, to commit not just fraud and money laundering, but federal program bribery as well to secure their children’s fraudulent admissions to USC.

Tuesday’s charges represent prosecutors making good on their warning, communicated to many of the defendants in the case last week, that they would be saddled with more charges if they didn’t plead guilty by Monday. [Four parents reversed their not-guilty pleas](#) Monday and avoided indictment on the bribery count.

A grand jury also returned an indictment on Tuesday charging five university employees, a public school teacher and a former employee of Singer’s with fraud conspiracy, in addition to the racketeering conspiracy charge they already faced.

“Our goal from the beginning has been to hold the defendants fully accountable for corrupting the college admissions process through cheating, bribery and fraud,” said Andrew Lelling, the U.S. attorney in Boston, whose office is prosecuting the cases. “The superseding indictments will further that effort.”

Attorneys for a parent and two coaches indicted on Tuesday criticized Lelling’s prosecutors as overzealous and said they were twisting federal law in an attempt to make legal behavior appear criminal.

“The zeal with which this U.S. attorney’s office strives to have long prison sentences hanging over these individuals’ heads is staggering,” said Nina Marino, who represents Donna Heinel, a former USC administrator accused of pocketing bribes and, in exchange, steering unqualified applicants into the school. Heinel was indicted Tuesday on new charges of conspiring to commit fraud and bribery.

Martin G. Weinberg, who represents Robert Zangrillo, a Miami businessman charged with conspiring to bribe his daughter’s way into USC, called the new bribery charge “an unprecedented attempt to criminalize a donation made to a university by a parent.”

“Never before have donations to a university — whether to an athletic department or to any other part of a school — been characterized as a bribe or alleged as a federal crime,” Weinberg said. “Mr Zangrillo’s daughter was not even presented to or admitted by USC admissions as an athlete. He vigorously denies each and every allegation in today’s charges.”

An attorney for Jovan Vavic, USC’s former water polo coach, said his client was no more guilty of the new fraud charge than the earlier racketeering one, to which he pleaded not guilty. The government’s filing of a new indictment was “implicit acknowledgment” that their earlier charges were flawed, said Vavic’s attorney, Stephen Larson.

“Mr. Vavic did not violate any federal laws,” Larson said, “and at all times did exactly what was expected of and demanded of him as

Attorneys for other parents and coaches charged on Tuesday had no comment or didn't immediately respond to messages seeking comment.

Tuesday's indictments introduced few alleged criminal acts that weren't laid out in earlier charging documents. Instead, prosecutors argued that the same allegations — parents conspiring with Singer to fix their children's standardized tests and pass them off as athletic recruits for sports they didn't play competitively or at all — amounted to a bribery conspiracy as well.

The federal program bribery charge can be lodged against anyone accused of bribing an employee or agent of an organization that receives \$10,000 or more in funding from the federal government, and who obtains something valued at \$5,000 or more in exchange. Prosecutors argue that the parents charged conspired with Singer to bribe coaches into giving up admissions slots, which are property of the universities that employ them.

Virtually every university, public or private, receives more than the \$10,000 in federal funding needed to trigger the bribery statute in research grants or financial aid. Prosecutors will likely say that admission to the elite schools to which Singer peddled access — Stanford, Georgetown, USC and UCLA, among others — exceeded \$5,000 in value.

While the indictments don't allege new criminal acts, they do contain details of Singer's interactions with parents that weren't previously known. In the case of Loughlin and Giannulli, the indictment says, the fashion designer emailed his accountant in April 2017 to explain a \$200,000 invoice he'd received from Singer.

The couple paid \$250,000 in all to misrepresent their older daughter as a recruited coxswain and bribe Heinel, the athletics official, to slip her into the school, prosecutors allege.

"Good news my daughter ... is in [U]SC," Giannulli wrote to his accountant, according to the indictment. "Bad is I had to work the system."

In addition to Heinel, two university employees indicted on Tuesday — Jorge Salcedo, the former UCLA men's soccer coach, and Gordon Ernst, the former tennis coach at Georgetown — were also charged with committing federal program bribery.

All 11 of the parents indicted on bribery charges are accused of conspiring to bribe employees of USC, underscoring Singer's reach at the private university that in recent years has seen its national profile surge and its acceptance rate plummet. The Times previously reported that the university [flagged 33 students as having ties to Singer](#). Nineteen parents, three coaches and an administrator have been implicated in Singer's scheme and charged by the U.S. attorney's office in Boston. USC said on Monday that Loughlin and Giannulli's two daughters were no longer enrolled at the school.

Four parents who were indicted on Tuesday — John Wilson, William McGlashan Jr., Joey Chen and Robert Zangrillo — were also charged with aiding and abetting wire fraud. Wilson was charged with an additional two counts of aiding and abetting federal program bribery, which prosecutors said he committed while scheming with Singer to have his children admitted under fraudulent pretenses to USC, Stanford and Harvard. His attorney didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

If convicted of the federal bribery charge, along with the fraud and money laundering counts lodged against them earlier, parents

...they go into their sentencing hearings with a higher guideline range than those who pleaded their pleas and avoided indictment on charges of bribery. Federal judges consult the guidelines when determining a sentence.

But the guidelines are only advisory; even if a parent were convicted of three charges instead of two, experts say, a judge could decide the facts of the case remained the same and not take the third charge into account when deciding a sentence.

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