

From Full House to the Big House: The Lori Loughlin College Scandal

Hannah Grisham, Sydney Ashlock, Hannah Kussin, & Kaitlyn Harder

PRCM-2500-001: Public Relations Case Studies & Ethics

Dr. Eun Ji Chung

May 2, 2025

From Full House to the Big House: The Lori Loughlin College Scandal

We chose this case because it relates to college students getting into college unfairly, and we are all college students who got into our university fairly, so we are fascinated by this topic. We once were or are all fans of the show “Full House” and Lori Loughlin’s daughter, Olivia Jade, as an influencer, so this case checked all of our boxes. The area of public relations that relates to this case is crisis management. Crisis management is an organization's process, strategy, and response to a critical event or accident (“What Is Crisis,” 2022). A public relations practitioner cannot change the circumstances, but they can manage and control the response released to the public. In 2011, the biggest college scandal hit the news. It took down the reputations of over 50 celebrities, CEOs, and business executives. A man named Rick Singer ran a college consulting company where he used his “side door” method to make donations to colleges and secure spots for his clients.

Lori Loughlin is an American sitcom star from “Full House” who was portrayed as a loving mother to twin boys and the charming wife to John Stamos, known as Jesse in the show (House, n.d.). Lori Loughlin married her husband, Mossimo Giannulli, in 1997 and later welcomed two daughters named Isabella Rose in 1998 and Olivia Jade in 1999 (Us Weekly, n.d.). Although Lori has had a successful Hollywood career in the spotlight, she is most recently known for her involvement in the college admissions scandal that rocked the nation. However, back in 2019, this scandal left an almost permanent stain on her career, and she has yet to recover.

Lori is just one of many privileged elites to participate in this bribery college admissions scandal as there are over 50 people charged in this case. Who is behind this scheme? A man named Rick Singer was the mastermind of getting young adults into their dream school

unethically (Richer, 2023). Singer would bribe entrance exam practitioners, like the SAT and ACT, to either take the tests for them or to inflate their scores (D Richer, 2023). But it did not stop there; he had close relationships with athletic coaches all over the country and would use these relationships to have the coaches designate his clients as athletic recruits (D Richer, 2023). Thus, this is what he did for Lori's family as Loughlin paid Singer \$500,000 to have her two daughters admitted to the University of Southern California as rowing crew team recruits (Richer, 2023). However, neither of Loughlin's daughters had rowed before, so they had to create fake athletic profiles for the girls to help this corrupt scheme be successful.

Unluckily for Lori Loughlin and her husband, Massimo Giannulli, Rick Singer had been working with the FBI since 2018 to build different cases against several high-profile individuals and their families (D Richer, 2023). He did this by recording many of his calls and communications with his clients over a long period, enough time for the FBI to gather the evidence they needed. On March 12, 2019, Loughlin and her husband were charged with conspiracy to commit wire and mail fraud (Heller & Cohen, 2021). Then, on April 9, 2019, she was indicted on charges of money laundering. Throughout this time, Lori and her family do not make any statements to the press about their situation and try to remain as low profile as possible as a storm is overhead. Almost an entire year later, on May 22, 2020, Loughlin pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit wire and mail fraud, and she was later sentenced to two months in prison, a \$150,000 fine, and 100 hours of community service (Heller & Cohen, 2021). Lori states her reasoning for her actions to the judge as she "thought she was acting out of love for her children", but it was a selfish mistake (*Read Lori Loughlin's Emotional Sentencing Statement: "I Am Truly, Profoundly and Deeply Sorry,"* 2020). Finally, she goes to prison in October of 2020 and is released shortly after Christmas in December 2020 (Heller & Cohen, 2021).

In this case study of Varsity Blues, the main publics include Lori Loughlin's family, specifically her daughters, the general public, and her fan base. When the news broke to Loughlin's daughters, Olivia Jade and Isabella Rose, both were gaining social media followings at the time. Olivia Jade was becoming one of the first celebrity child influencers, and this entire scandal positioned her perfectly as one of the first influencers to be affected by cancel culture. Jade claimed at the time of the scandal that she did not know what her parents were doing was considered bad, as she even went on to say she thought it was "normal" (Wagmeister, 2020). During the fallout of the scandal, Jade lost her Sephora Collection partnership (Griffith & Dasrath, 2019). Since the scandal, Jade has checked her privilege and now takes this entire opportunity as a learning experience. Olivia Jade and her sister, Isabella Rose, were not allowed to attend the University of Southern California again, but both have made social media influencer careers for themselves and have tried to move on from the scandal.

Next, the general public was affected by Lori Loughlin's college admissions scandal because the average person could not afford or even fathom doing what they were doing. The college admissions process is supposed to be a fair system by which students end up where they are supposed to be. It is not something where you pay your way in, so the general public has a hard time understanding why celebrities and wealthy individuals would waste their money on this. Further, Loughlin's fan base was mostly devastated by this news, but she was supported as well. However, the brand Hallmark refused to work with her entirely, as they took her off their screens and terminated all contracts (Griffith & Dasrath, 2019). Also, she was dropped from Netflix, and her "Full House" spinoff show, "Fuller House" (Vivinetto, 2019). But the cast of the beloved show claims to support her and has come out on multiple occasions showing their support (Vivinetto, 2019).

Lori's apology strategy was to focus on presenting her apology in interviews, rather than social media content, which is not ideal. Lori responded to spokespeople on Fox News. She commented, "I made an awful decision. I went along with a plan to give my daughters an unfair advantage in the college admissions process. I thought I was acting out of love for my children, but in reality, it only undermined and diminished my daughter's abilities and accomplishments (Moore, 2020)." While this information was pitched on Fox News, CBS News, People.com, and The New York Times, she did not post her apology on any social media platforms. She deleted her Instagram account after the scandal occurred. That limited the channel of communication and how many people saw her apology. For instance, younger demographics are more likely to scroll and find information on social media; however, in this case, they could not do that. The way that Lori handled her apology limits the number of people who see her apology. Middle-aged or older people are more likely to click on articles and read them from websites, while younger demographics do not access articles as frequently. They would rather scroll on TikTok or Instagram and watch a quick reel than read. For her strategy to reach more individuals, she should have utilized interviews with publishers and posted an apology on her social media platforms.

Instead of focusing on direct interviews and pitching that information to news outlets alone, she should have utilized both interviews and a social media apology video. If she had used both of these strategies, she would have reached a larger demographic. The more modes of communication she used, the more people could access and understand her apology more effectively. If I were Lori's public relations professional, I would have made her film an apology video and have her post it on Twitter, now X, Instagram, and Facebook. I would carefully instruct her on the importance of the aspects of the video, such as the location, her outfit, the

background, and her tone of voice, so she knows the importance of being genuine, so she does not face backlash from the public. I would instruct Lori to be in an office setting, wearing a nice blouse and dress pants, with a clean background with darker accents. I would instruct her to speak clearly and avoid filler words. I would explain that she needs to maintain a genuine and relatable approach to the public and that she needs to address her apology and how she plans to move forward from this scandal.

The tactics employed by Lori and her husband, Mossimo, were deceptive and unjust. They falsified athletic profiles for their daughters, which they orchestrated with Rick Singer. As part of his tactics to ensure admission for the daughters, he had Lori stage photos of the girls on rowing machines. Her profile was portrayed as a gold medal-winning crew coxswain, with a skill set described as “awareness, organization, direction, and steering” (Schman, Jorgensen, and Levenson, 2020). Due to this tactic, the daughters took the spots that could have gone to actual athletes. This method directly violated the principles of fairness that college admissions should uphold. Another tactic employed was the use of bribery. Lori paid Rick \$500,000, which was funneled through his fake charity (Heller & Cohen, 2021). First of all, this bribery was illegal, which led to the charges of conspiracy to commit mail fraud and honest services fraud. This tactic created a false perception that college admissions are bought, instead of earned. It took away the opportunity for a qualified student and reinforced social inequality. These tactics were perceived negatively by the public and led to outrage. People viewed the scandal as a clear example of how privilege can corrupt institutions. Alyssa LaTray, who was an incoming freshman at the time, stated, “I was disappointed by hardly surprised. “I don’t think it’s a secret that the wealthy have far greater opportunities to cheat their way into highly selective schools. However, it was a surprise to me how direct some of their methods were” (Schermele, 2019).

The public viewed these tactics as a symbol of deep inequality, in which those from less affluent backgrounds struggle more to gain admission. These tactics were very unsuccessful since the scandal led to criminal charges and lasting harm to reputations. I absolutely would not have used any tactics such as fraud or misrepresentation. Not only did these tactics break the law, but they also harmed the integrity of education. I would not have involved my children in such a scandal, but instead, trusted in their knowledge and capabilities. Ethical and lawful tactics should have been implemented. I would have hired an actual academic tutor to improve my child's test scores. Also, I would have explored alternative schools. Instead of focusing on a top-tier school, I would look at various options that match my child's academic profile.

After serving her time in jail, Lori Loughlin was put on two years of supervised leave. According to an article from People magazine, "she had to complete 100 hours of community service and was ordered to pay a fine of \$150,000" (Comiter, 2024). Lori never went back on social media or made official statements, but instead expressed remorse for her actions throughout various interviews. Fast forward to 2024, Loughlin appeared on the cover of First for Women magazine, where the headline is *Lori Loughlin Gets Candid About Positivity, Forgiveness, & Moving Forward* (Siegler). It was a long and slow process of returning to the public eye, but any comments that were made from her surrounded the same message of remorse, perseverance, and forgiveness. Lori made it clear that her passion for her family was strong. This is a smart way to approach your image, as fans relate to the desire to protect family, but it is difficult when these messages are not put on a social media account. It seems this was done intentionally to keep from further backlash online. As for her career, Loughlin was back on her show, *When Hope Calls*, by September 2021, which was less than a year from when she was released from prison. She also featured in multiple movies in early 2025, including an episode of

the show *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, where Lori plays a parody version of herself, essentially making fun of the situation. This can be seen as taking accountability for her mistakes and is a depiction of her emotions during the crisis. Loughlin's daughters have gone on a few podcasts and even started podcast shows of their own. They have regained their social media following, and Olivia Jade is posting on YouTube consistently. For such an extreme crisis, public relations-wise and legally, Lori has managed not to have her entire career taken down. While it took a long time for Loughlin to step back into the Hollywood scene, she has essentially recovered considering the severity of the original crisis.

The college admissions scandal involving Lori Loughlin is a powerful example of how privilege can overrule integrity in higher education systems. This case highlighted the significance of strategic crisis management in public relations. From the bribery and falsification of athletic credentials to the poorly executed apology strategy, every misstep damaged public trust. Despite the backlashes and mistakes Loughlin made, she has slowly rebuilt aspects of her public image through media appearances and recent attempts to step back into Hollywood. This applies to our lives currently and has taught us the importance of crisis management, strong channels of communication to the public, and making ethical decisions.

AI Usage Statement:

Hannah Grisham: I used Grammarly to check over the paper for spelling errors, and used it to brainstorm ideas for how to structure the conclusion paragraph.

Hannah Kussin: I used Grammarly to check over my paper for grammatical and spelling errors.

Kaitlyn Harder: I used AI to help with brainstorming and Grammarly to check for spelling errors.

Sydney Ashlock: I used AI to double-check my citations in APA style.

References:

- Comiter, J. (2024, November 8). *What is Lori Loughlin doing now? A look at the Full House alum's life after prison — and where her daughters are today*. People.
<https://people.com/where-is-lori-loughlin-now-8739477>
- D Richer, A. (2023, January 4). *Rick Singer, mastermind of college admissions bribery scandal, gets 3.5 years in prison*. PBS News.
<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/education/rick-singer-mastermind-of-college-admissions-bribery-scandal-set-to-be-sentenced#:~:text=For%20years%2C%20Singer%20paid%20of%20getting%20into%20the%20school>
- Griffith, J., & Dasrath, D. (2019b, March 14). *College cheating scandal: Lori Loughlin fired from Hallmark as daughter Olivia Jade Loses brand partnerships*. NBCNews.com.
<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/lori-loughlin-s-daughter-olivia-jade-loses-sephora-partnership-wake-n98333>
- Heller, C., & Cohen, J. (2021, April 17). Everything we know about Lori Loughlin and Felicity Huffman's college admissions scandal. *E! Online*.
<https://www.eonline.com/news/1023244/everything-we-know-about-felicity-huffman-and-lori-loughlin-s-bribery-allegations>
- House, C. T. F. (n.d.). *Rebecca Donaldson*. Full House.
https://fullhouse.fandom.com/wiki/Rebecca_Donaldson
- Moore, C. (2020, August 23). *Lori Loughlin apologizes after 2-month prison sentence in college admission case: "I ignored my intuition."* Fox News.
<https://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/lori-loughlin-apologized-college-admissions-sentencing>

Read Lori Loughlin's emotional sentencing statement: "I am truly, profoundly and deeply sorry."

(2020, August 21). CBS News.

<https://www.cbsnews.com/boston/news/lori-loughlin-sentencing-statement-court-prison-college-admissions-scam/>

Richer, A. D. (2023, January 4). *College admissions scam timeline: A look at the case* | AP

News. AP News.

<https://apnews.com/article/college-admissions-scheme-timeline-e929d3f91e3b9dde2e7a4c73c64fcc82>

Schermele, Z. (2019, April 19). Fallout from "Operation Varsity Blues" Continues. *TeenVogue*.

[Fallout-from-operation-varsity-blues-continues](#)

Schuman, M., Jorgensen, S., & Levenson, E. (2020, February 11). *Here's Olivia Jade Giannuli's fake athletic profile listing her as a champion coxswain*. CNN.

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/10/us/olivia-jade-giannulli-athletic-profile/index.html>

Siegler, B. (2025, April 21). *Lori Loughlin gets candid about positivity, forgiveness & moving forward*. *First for Women*.

<https://www.firstforwomen.com/entertainment/celebrities/lori-loughlin-first>

Us Weekly. (n.d.). *Lori Loughlin News - US Weekly*.

<https://www.usmagazine.com/celebrities/lori-loughlin/>

Vivinetto, G. (2019, November 15). *Andrea Barber: Lori Loughlin's "fuller house" firing left "a hole in our hearts."* TODAY.com.

<https://www.today.com/popculture/andrea-barber-lori-loughlin-s-fuller-house-firing-left-hole-t167388>

Wagmeister, E. (2020, December 8). Variety. *Variety*.

<https://variety.com/2020/tv/news/olivia-jade-lori-loughlin-red-table-talk-college-admissions-1234848220/>

What is Crisis Management? (2022, February 1). Everbridge.

<https://www.everbridge.com/blog/what-is-crisis-management/>