

Donations influence admissions

Preferential treatment at UCLA's elite orthodontics program exposed by months-long investigation

By [Robert Faturechi](#)

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UCLA's elite orthodontics residency program has violated University of California policy and standards governing public schools by giving special consideration in admissions to major donors and their relatives.

Hundreds of pages of e-mails and internal documents obtained during a months-long Daily Bruin investigation, along with dozens of interviews, show that the program and the officials at its helm developed a system of preferential treatment over the past five years.

In this unprecedented practice within the School of Dentistry, applicants related to donors giving six-figure gifts were automatically advanced over other students despite their lower test scores and grades.

In one case, an applicant was told by a member of the admissions board that a \$60,000 gift could greatly improve his chances.

Orthodontics is arguably the most competitive of dental specialties, and the program at UCLA is regarded as one of the nation's best, typically accepting applicants with extensive research experience and top scores.

But in four of the last five years, major donors' close relatives have landed one of six highly coveted residency spots in the program.

In 2006, real estate developer David Lee pledged \$1 million to the school of dentistry. His niece was admitted into the orthodontics program soon after.

In 2005, Dr. Norman Nagel pledged half a million dollars. His son was admitted the next year.

In 2004, Dr. Bruce Molen pledged \$400,000. His son was admitted the next year.

In 2003 and 2005, Dr. Thomas Bales helped lead major fundraising campaigns within the School of Dentistry, and in 2001, he pledged a half million dollars as well. The orthodontics clinic is named after him. In 2003, his daughter was admitted.

"I've been on this faculty for 40 years, and I've never seen anything like this," said George Bernard, a professor in the School of Dentistry. "People are scared that residencies are being sold on the open market."

E-mails obtained by The Bruin through sources within the school show the orthodontics program's high admissions standards were not always applied to the relatives of major donors.

In a July 2006 e-mail to a prospective applicant, Bales, also a member of the admissions board, admitted that he accepted the son of Norman Nagel, who in 2005 donated half a million dollars to the school, despite the student's substandard board scores: "We took Norm Nagel's son Jeff from (the University of Pacific) this year on my call. ... We just tell him to blame memory loss when/if someone asks him his national board scores!"

Bales declined to be interviewed for this story.

Mike McDonald, an active alumnus who has donated to the program in the past, said that program chair Eric Ting admitted in private conversations to a preferential admissions program for donors and their relatives as a way to increase revenue. Two faculty members, who wished to remain anonymous because they feared retribution from other faculty, said they also were specifically told by Ting about the details of such a program.

"There's a legacy program. I heard that directly from his mouth. He didn't realize there was something wrong with it. In fact, he defended it," one of the faculty members said.

Ting rejected these claims in a July interview. Through his lawyer, he denied a follow-up interview in October.

In interviews, many faculty members expressed concerns about the academic qualifications of residents admitted after relatives made donations. Many worried that UCLA's program would gain unfavorable press and lose its national reputation as a top-tier program.

Grades and national board scores were not available for all of the residents in question. But class rankings, provided to The Bruin through a source who had access to the records, ranked two of the residents in question at 46th and 54th in their

classes of roughly 135 dentistry students. Both were far from the top 10 percentile of their class, which is a typical standing for accepted applicants.

Another accepted resident with ties to a major donation was said to have applied only to UCLA's orthodontics program, an unusual choice because orthodontics programs are so competitive nationwide.

The resident was heard boasting about her admissions chances at an informational event, according to another applicant present for the event and other reliable sources within the School of Dentistry.

"It was almost like she knew she was going to get an interview," said the applicant, who wished to remain anonymous because he plans on working in Southern California and fears backlash from the dentistry community. "I thought it was kind of interesting because you know how competitive it is, so it was kind of weird to hear her say that."

With the exception of \$500,000-donor Nagel, who said his donation did not affect his son's admission status, none of the residents and donors implicated could be reached despite numerous attempts to contact them.

The last straw

Last November, Kent Ochiai, a standout graduate of the University of Southern California School of Dentistry, was on his way to interview for a position at his alma mater's orthodontics program when he got a call from UCLA.

He'd been accepted.

Ochiai was so pleased that he broke the good news to the USC admissions board before the interview even came to a close.

He was going to be a Bruin.

The next day, he got another call – this time from Bales, a member of the admissions board for UCLA's orthodontics program and the man for whom the orthodontics clinic is named.

In an incident confirmed by an internal university investigation and Ochiai himself, Bales told Ochiai that some members of the UCLA admissions board were wary about accepting him and that a donation of \$60,000 might secure their support.

That phone call to Ochiai, who is now finishing the first year of his residency at UCLA, led to an investigation into admissions impropriety within the orthodontics program.

That investigation, led by the chancellor's office, found the allegations that the program was reserving residency slots for the relatives of major donors could not be substantiated. There was "no credible and convincing evidence that deals were made or understandings reached to admit an applicant in return for donating money to the School," according to a summary of that investigation's final report.

Some faculty members cried cover-up.

Faculty member John Beumer resigned from his position as chair of the school's Faculty Executive Committee, in protest of what he called a "mockery of the merit based traditions and social values that have made the University of California the best and most admired public university system in the world today."

Beumer announced his resignation in a mass e-mail to all dentistry faculty.

"I find it impossible to remain as FEC chair, for in my mind, doing so would condone and make me complicit to these sordid affairs," read the e-mail.

Many other faculty have chosen not to go public with their concerns because they say they fear retribution from the university and superiors within the school.

"People don't want to stick their necks out because they're afraid they're going to get chopped off," Bernard, a professor at the school, said.

The chancellor's office has remained steadfast in denying allegations of admissions impropriety within the orthodontics program.

"The report did not substantiate any cases of individual wrongdoing. There were no regulations broken," Executive Vice Chancellor Scott Waugh said. "The investigation did not find any evidence of explicit wrongdoing."

Still, the investigation report included a series of recommendations for changes in admissions policy at the UCLA School of Dentistry. The report said the school should adopt a statement of basic values for the admissions process.

The report also suggested banning alumni fundraisers from participating on admissions boards. Darrell Spilsbury, former president of the Orthodontic Alumni Association, and Bales are fundraisers who have sat on the admissions board.

A subcommittee within the Faculty Executive Committee, a faculty senate body within the school, has implemented the investigation report's recommendations.

No one has been reprimanded by the university.

A trend

As state support for UC has dwindled, officials at the elite public institution have increasingly been forced to make a tough decision: risk mediocrity or privatize.

Shifts toward the latter – including student fee increases, major corporate sponsorships and fundraising campaigns on an unprecedented scale – have been blasted by critics as a break from UC's core identity as a public institution. Others say private support is the only way to stay competitive in the face of unreliable taxpayer support.

This dilemma is at the heart of the UCLA orthodontics program's preferential admissions treatment for donors and their relatives.

State funding, which covered 32 percent of the School of Dentistry's total expenditures in 2004, dropped to just 26 percent last year.

The cuts have pushed school officials to look toward private funding, a move that has convinced some that traditional UC standards simply are not practical anymore.

In a February e-mail to a faculty member, Spilsbury, an admissions board member last year, criticized UC's devotion to focusing primarily on the state for funding.

"If you want to carry the flag for the UC way, more power to you. ... If you want a small, poorly equipped clinic, where it survives solely on merits of students, go ahead. This is 'the UC way.' ... This isn't how businesses keep the competitive edge," he said in the e-mail. "I will not take the position to serve as a moral police for the UC way."

In the e-mail, Spilsbury added that he never allowed donation histories to affect his admissions evaluations. He could not be reached for comment despite numerous attempts.

Though he refused to comment on individuals, Norman Abrams, acting chancellor during the investigation into orthodontics admissions, said including alumni fundraisers in the admissions process is inappropriate.

"One would want to think long and hard about having an alumnus ... who engages in significant fundraising on the admissions committee," Abrams said.

The culture of preferential treatment for donors and their relatives in the orthodontics residency program is not the first such scandal in recent years that has blurred the line between public and private at UC.

In 1996, a Los Angeles Times investigation exposed a program of preferential treatment in both undergraduate and graduate admissions at UCLA for the friends and relatives of state officials and major donors.

In 2006, the UC came under fire after a series of media reports revealed an executive compensation scandal that included large bonuses and other perks for top university officials.

UC President Robert Dynes said then that the payment packages – many of which were approved without the knowledge of the UC Board of Regents – were needed in the face of state budget cuts to compete with private universities in recruiting qualified candidates for top positions.

Most recently, the UC has drawn sharp criticism for its increased reliance on corporate funding, most notably in the form of a \$500 million grant from oil company BP to UC Berkeley. Many worry such grants surrender undue influence to private interests, compromising the integrity of university research.

"The university is digging everywhere it can to find new sources of revenue," said John Simpson, a consumer advocate at the Foundation for Taxpayer and Consumer Rights. "In that process, they're selling the soul of higher education to the highest bidder."

Public universities across the nation are undergoing similar changes. At the University of Michigan, where taxpayer support covers just 18 percent of the academic budget, more than 40 percent of the most recent incoming class were not state residents.

At the University of Virginia, officials recently launched a campaign to raise \$3 billion in private donations, with one leader calling the elite school "a privately funded public university."

Many believe that the shift toward privatization is making UC less accessible to students from low-income and middle-class families, as it had in recent years within the orthodontics program at UCLA.

“I’m worried about students who don’t come from money, who work their ass off and think, ‘If I work hard, if I do everything right, I should get in,’” McDonald said. “But all of a sudden, guess what? There’s no spot for you because someone else took it because mom and dad have money.”

An earlier version of the story incorrectly identified Darrell Spilsbury's position in the Orthodontic Alumni Association.

Students stump on both sides of Iraq War

Months before launch of US military campaign, current Bruins were making war stances known

By [Robert Faturechi](#)

Wednesday, March 5, 2008

Mark Stefanos started many of his Friday nights in high school in typical fashion: piling into a car with some friends and heading into town.

It's what he'd do once he got there that wasn't so typical.

During the run-up to the war in Iraq, Stefanos – now a fourth-year political science student – and his friends spent their Friday nights leading pro-war demonstrations along one of the busiest thoroughfares in their native Long Beach.

“My friend's truck seated six, so it was like the six of us and we put the signs in the back,” he said.

His small group eventually grew to about 30-strong.

“You'd have your typical kind of Long Beach, Sublime-type surfer drive by in his truck and maybe honk his horn and give you a fist in support. Then you'd have the same type of guy come by and say, ‘You're crazy, you're just a warmonger.’”

Taking on the war in a city as politically diverse as Long Beach, home to many military families, as well as a strong liberal presence, became Stefanos' first real taste of political activism.

Just an hour's drive north, in La Crescenta, another political science student-to-be saw the run-up to war from a very different perspective.

Babken DerGrigorian, now a fifth-year, considered the imminent invasion of Iraq so unjust he could not sit idly by.

So he organized a walk-out at his high school so big school administrators were forced to cancel classes for the day.

“Everyone was going crazy, and to see that a war was about to happen over something that had absolutely nothing to do with 9/11, I just couldn't sit around,” he said.

The students' two stories offer a stark picture of how political ideologies are incubated, and how college-aged Americans, who have so much else in common, can stake claim to such varied stances on the war.

“I can see their perspective. It would only take a fraction of a percent of my ideology to change before I can say, ‘Well, I can see the other side, I see why this isn't worth it,’” Stefanos said.

“There's very little difference between what I know and what that other person knows as far as why we define ourselves a certain way.”

DerGrigorian, now a leader of Students for a Democratic Society, a radical progressive group on campus, said his perspective on the war is influenced most by his upbringing in an Armenian household.

“I was raised in a household where Armenian activism is very big, I mean I knew about the (Armenian Genocide) before I even knew what a genocide was,” he said. “And to feel that kind of injustice done to your people has given me the ability to seek commonality with other injustices that are happening in the world.”

Stefanos, the son of Christian Egyptian immigrants, another historically persecuted group, says his family's background was also a great influence, but for him to support the war.

“For me, having foreign parents, I knew the value of what being American is. And there's a lot of responsibility involved,” he said.

“(My father) really instilled the values of standing up for your country and your values in me.”

Stefanos is now a part of Bruin Republicans and editor of the conservative campus publication The Bruin Standard.

Dwindling support for the war – especially on college campuses – has not hampered Stefanos' commitment to the pro-war cause.

“Being on the side of the minority who still supports the war, I don't feel like I'm not encouraged,” he said. “I feel like being on a college campus where most people don't support something and I do is just a way of me defining myself.”

DerGrigorian – who’s organized die-ins and other anti-war demonstrations on campus – agrees that his political activism has too defined his time in college.

“I think when I look back at my college years, my involvement in activism is going to be where I got my best education. It’s not going to be in the classroom,” he said. “It’s going to be all the skill development, all the leadership development, the ability to have the space to think critically and radically about things.”

Looking forward

Like many college-aged Americans, both Stefanos and DerGrigorian got their first look at a war that has lasted for most of their young adulthood from a television screen in a high school classroom.

The U.S. military’s overwhelming bombing from air and sea evoked night-and-day reactions from the two.

“Shock and Awe was like a nightmare,” DerGrigorian said. “I literally remember watching it in class as if it was a movie or something.”

For Stefanos, the strike on Baghdad and elsewhere was more of a victory, the successful end to a cause he had protested in favor of for months. He remembers a buddy in a band turning to him and commenting that “Shock and Awe” would be a great title for a hard rock song.

“It was what I wanted to see which is a military showing its might and the United States showing the world that we were able to stand up in the face of adversity,” he said. “It was a good thing to see that we were still capable of making such a grand media spectacle. I felt a lot of that South Park-style patriotism at the time.”

Five years later, both have had their understandings of the war bolstered by their political science coursework and years of activism. Still, they stick staunchly to their original stances.

“Things aren’t going to be perfect. They’re not going to be as nice as we were told they’re going to be. But are generations to come going to look at this and say this was the biggest failure of the 21st century? I doubt that,” Stefanos said. “As long as there’s a hope then I’m still in support.”

Fro-yo face-off

A plethora of frozen dessert vendors is vying for the business of Village shoppers hungry for a trendy dish

By [Robert Faturechi](#)

Sunday, September 23, 2007

It's been eight long months in the making, but everything is finally ready, and hours ahead of schedule.

The signs announcing a grand opening have been printed and hung, the fruit has been diced into bite-sized pieces and the frozen yogurt machines are patiently humming.

So why is Chong Lee – co-founder of Polar Monkey – so tense?

“Too much frozen yogurt shops around here. Berry this, berry that, too many berries!” Lee shouts.

In the time it took Lee and his partners to secure a lease and open a store, three new dessert vendors – all offering the same brand of tart frozen yogurt smothered in fresh fruit – popped up in Westwood Village, bringing the total to a whopping five stores.

Pinkberry, Snowberry, Berry Best, Red Mango, and now, Polar Monkey.

The stores present a Korean-American spin on an old dessert favorite – frozen yogurt tarter, icier and lighter than ever before.

The phenomenon's rapid spread in Westwood is part of a viral expansion throughout Los Angeles and other major cities across the nation. Pinkberry – the industry leader – has grown to include more than 30 locations just two years after opening its first store in West Hollywood.

As the competition to win over fro-yo enthusiasts intensifies across the Southland, the Village and its stable of hungry college students has become a primary battleground.

“Compared to Pinkberry, we're a small company,” said Jimmy Han, manager at the Snowberry in Westwood. “But we're trying to go step by step – bigger, bigger, bigger.”

Dessert deja vu

For many market specialists – and amateur dessert enthusiasts old enough to remember – the recent craze is reminiscent of the frozen yogurt boom of the late '80s.

Ice cream distributors then, facing an increasingly health conscious public, launched a low-fat dessert substitute – creamy frozen yogurt that came in ice cream flavors.

“It just seems like many foods are cyclical,” said Lynda Utterback, executive director of the National Ice Cream and Yogurt Retailers Association, an umbrella organization based out of Illinois.

That brand of yogurt – led by Penguins and other vendors that have since declined – used heavy flavoring to mask the product's tart yogurt base.

The taste fusions were problematic, experts say, because ice cream flavors like chocolate and vanilla clashed with the natural tartness of yogurt.

The demand for frozen yogurt crashed as dessert distributors began to develop quality low-fat ice creams, an option virtually nonexistent before the early '90s.

“People are very serious about their ice cream, and when they decide they want ice cream, they get ice cream,” Utterback said.

Many dairy dessert specialists are forecasting a brighter fate for the recent frozen yogurt boom – mainly because this time around, frozen yogurt vendors are opting to embrace the product's natural flavors instead of masking them.

Frozen yogurt makers today “have become smarter,” said Dr. Phillip Tong, a professor who specializes in frozen dessert technology and dairy chemistry at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. “They're using fruit flavors that balance the acid better. That's been one of the keys to their success.”

A bitter rivalry

The frozen yogurt battlefield looks something like this: Dozens of lesser vendors caught between two goliaths – Pinkberry and Red Mango waging a wide-scale public relations tussle to be crowned “the original.”

Red Mango reps claim they started the tart yogurt trend in South Korea, where they dominate the market with hundreds of stores in and around Seoul.

“What we pride ourselves on is authenticity,” said Daniel Kim, president of Red Mango’s U.S. operations.

Pinkberry president Young Lee admits to co-opting the idea – just not from Red Mango – claiming he was inspired by an Italian brand of sour fro-yo he sampled during a trip to Vienna years ago.

His girlfriend, and Pinkberry co-founder, Shelly Hwang tinkered with that formula, perfecting a recipe that never took off in its home country.

“Don’t try to piggyback someone’s fame,” Young Lee said. “That’s an unfair practice and people should really look at themselves in the mirror and rethink their characteristics.”

But talk to seasoned American dessert distributors and they’ll tell you a different story.

Utterback says American distributors developed tart fro-yo in the ’70s.

But the American public, she says, never warmed up to the idea of sour dessert, so the line was discarded – only to resurge three decades later.

Designing success

“Wait, let me show you something,” says Young Lee, as he stands at the sink filling a pitcher to the brim.

No one’s quite sure what he’s up to as he strolls back around the counter in between a pack of customers waiting in line at his Westwood location.

But as he slowly turns the pitcher over, his intentions become clear – he’s doused the floor.

Then, something unexpected happens. The water soaks through the white and black gravel flooring, completely disappearing in seconds.

“The way it absorbs reminds you of the playground, like the sandbox or the beach,” he says.

The floors, along with virtually every other aspect of Pinkberry stores, are modeled in a style Lee calls “subconscious design.”

Using subtle sensory cues, customers’ psyches are manipulated to evoke positive childhood experiences, like building sand castles at the beach or playing on a jungle gym.

The powder blue ceilings simulate the sky, the French vanilla walls and pastel hues recall old-fashioned ice cream parlors and the blaring in-store music cues the excitement of hearing an ice cream truck approaching.

A focus on elaborate store design by Pinkberry and its competitors reflects the frozen yogurt vendors’ intentions of making their stores a space where customers feel comfortable lingering.

Red Mango has hired executives from Starbucks to replicate the social atmosphere that has become a signature at their coffee houses.

“These people understand service, they’ve worked under national brands that are recognized for their service,” said Kim. “Our goal is to become the premier luxury brand for yogurt.”

The setup seems to be working at the Westwood branch, where students can be seen with books laid out, curled up for hours in the store’s orange, brown and purple booths.

The science behind delicious

Just a decade ago, the notion of virtually fat-free frozen desserts would have elicited scoffs from serious sweets enthusiasts.

So the advent of a healthy frozen dessert so good it’s been dubbed “crackberry,” marks real progress in frozen foods technology, market experts say.

While the tart yogurts come in just a few elementary flavors – such as plain and green tea – developing the perfect mix is a nuanced science.

Academics studying frozen dessert technology and dairy chemistry at agricultural universities across the nation have been tapped by fro-yo vendors to tweak their formulas to perfection.

Temperature, says Pinkberry's Lee, is key.

The colder the dessert, the more fat and sugar needed to ignite our taste buds.

That's why tart nonfat frozen yogurt is served warmer than hard-packed ice cream and even gelato, a concoction so soft it's customarily served with a spatula.

The next step is getting the air-to-solids ratio right. Tart frozen yogurts have an uncommonly high ratio.

"You have more solids in your mouth," Tong said. "Instead of having air in your mouth you've got food solids, and they tend to give you better texture."

Large ice crystals lodged in the dairy can slow flavor absorption, said Tong, who has worked with Pinkberry to improve their formula.

Keeping ice particles small, through proper freezing, speeds flavor release and adds a pleasing texture common among the new breed of frozen yogurts.

To keep the frozen treats healthy, dairy chemists try to guarantee a minimum level of probiotics – the active cultures in yogurts that aid digestion and boost the immune system.

Tong says the public is more health-conscious today than ever before.

"It's a lifestyle thing," he said. "The way people eat is quite different than how they ate 20 years ago."