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The Foundation at the Center of the Admissions-Bribery Scandal Has a Surprising Item in Its Portfolio: The Versatile Ph.D.

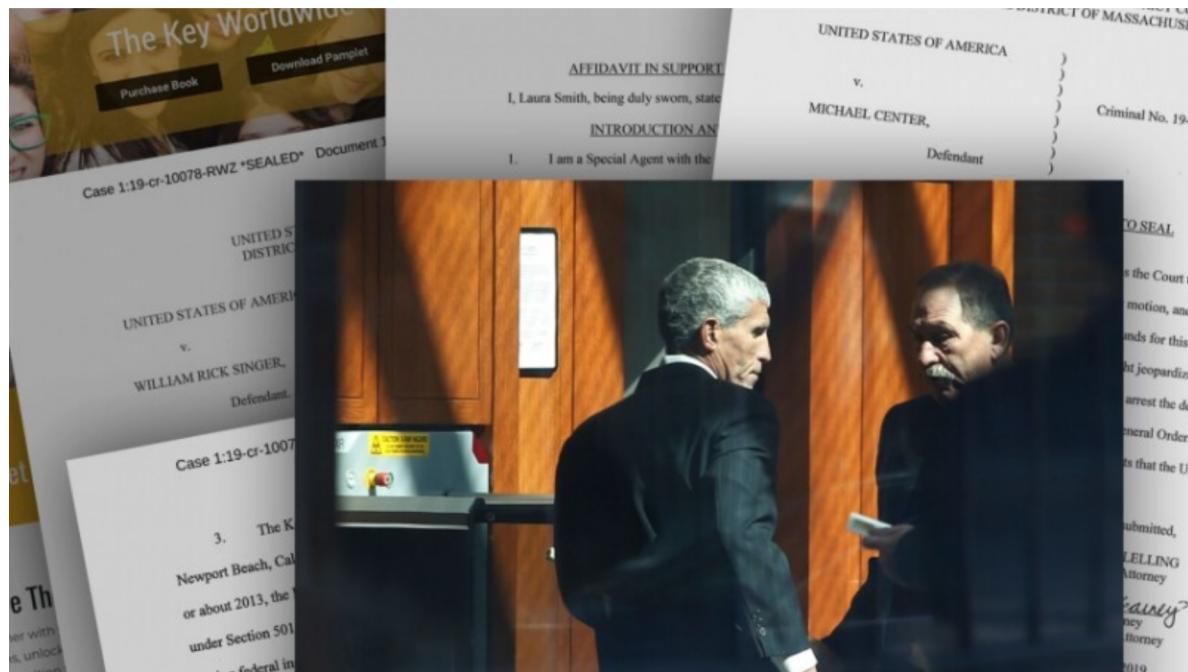
Dan Bauman

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The Key Worldwide Foundation has become infamous for the task Justice Department officials say it performed: allowing William (Rick) Singer, its executive director, to allegedly funnel bribes from parents to college coaches and athletic departments as part of a fraudulent admission scheme that [exploded into scandal](#) this week.

But the alleged payouts weren't the foundation's only forays into higher education. Nearly a year ago, the foundation purchased [The Versatile Ph.D.](#), a longstanding online community and portal for graduate students and doctorate holders seeking careers outside academe.



Dozens of people, including famous actors, college coaches, and a university administrator, have been charged by federal prosecutors for their alleged roles in an admissions-bribery scheme involving Yale, Stanford, and other elite institutions.

The service evolved out of a free email list founded in 1999 by Paula Chambers, who went on to complete a Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition at Ohio State University a year later. As demand for guidance on nonacademic careers swelled among graduate students, The Versatile Ph.D. became an increasingly popular resource.

The website boasts 85,000 individual members, according to a [news release](#) announcing its acquisition by the Key Worldwide Foundation, in May 2018. In addition, the site lists 65 institutions, including Harvard, Michigan, Rice, and other research universities, that subscribe to the service as a career-counseling tool for graduate students.

The Justice Department's indictment of Singer and his subsequent [guilty pleas](#) cast some uncertainty on the service's future. The Key Worldwide Foundation [may be forced to forfeit](#) its investment in a variety of assets, including The Versatile Ph.D., LLC, and VersatilePhd.com.

According to the news release, which was pulled offline this week,

the foundation's purchase of The Versatile Ph.D. was made through its "education and career initiative under PepIWorks." The [PepIWorks website](#), which lists The Versatile Ph.D. as a "partner," describes itself as a "mission-focused service company dedicated to providing individuals and enterprises with their most predictable and productive work outcomes."

Todd D. Maurer, named in the release as chief executive of PepIWorks, is now president of The Versatile Ph.D. He said in an email interview on Thursday that the company "anticipates continuing under new ownership, in some form, into the future." In addition, he said, the company has reassured clients since the indictments were announced that services will continue as usual.

"Versatile Ph.D. was acquired by the Key Worldwide Foundation in May 2018 and operates independently," Maurer said. "We do not have any relationship to admissions activities. In fact, our continuing mission is to help Ph.D. and postdoctoral students envision, prepare for, and excel in professional careers."

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Chambers, the platform's founder, said in a written statement that she has not been associated with the company since its sale.

Although Maurer said The Versatile Ph.D. is independent of the Key Worldwide Foundation, Singer remains Versatile Ph.D.'s chief executive officer, according to the most recent [publicly available filings](#) with the secretary of state of California, where it is incorporated. The transition in leadership from Chambers to Singer occurred a month after the sale.

California's attorney general, Xavier Becerra, has [ordered](#) the foundation to provide an accounting of all the assets it has held or

disbursed since its inception, including Versatile Ph.D.

Since the indictments were announced, on Tuesday, the Versatile Ph.D. website has played down its connection to the foundation. A cached February 25 [page on its website](#) described its acquisition by the foundation in 2018. By Thursday, [that acknowledgment](#) had been deleted.