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U.S. Colleges Stumped by Fraudulent Applications

An ocean of paperwork and little incentive to prosecute make admissions officers quietly reject fakes when they detect them

by Jane Porter

A letter hummed through on the fax machine at New York University's English department last May. It was a recommendation by Ernest Gilman praising a freshman who was attempting to transfer to Georgetown University and who had earned an A in Gilman's NYU literature course on antiquity and the renaissance. But Gilman was shocked to see a letter he had never written for a student he had never known. In 35 years of teaching, he had never encountered such fraud. "It looks like a three-dollar bill," he says. "I was really astonished that someone would go this far."

Georgetown's admissions transfer committee had initially been impressed by the candidate. On paper was a high school valedictorian with impressive SAT scores and solid grades from a year at NYU. But the academic dean on the admissions committee spotted an incongruous detail: The signature at the bottom of Gilman's letter resembled one at the bottom of the other recommendation letter, almost as though they had been penned by the same hand. An admissions officer called Gilman and faxed the letter to him. Gilman confirmed it was fake.

Georgetown soon discovered that the letter in Gilman's name was just one piece of a carefully fabricated application—including SAT scores, high school and college transcripts, and two reference letters—all of them phony. The student, who told Georgetown he was the victim of a prank, was rejected. An attempt to reach the student by e-mail was unsuccessful.

No Statistics on Fraud

As summer winds down and college campuses come back to life, schools are quietly revving up for the next admission cycle. With applications becoming increasingly global and students hopping from one school to the next, one of the most challenging tasks facing admissions offices this year will be to filter out rogue applicants.

Fake applications remain a small percentage of the documentation that courses through admissions offices. The National Student Clearinghouse, the main educational-credentials verification organization that works with more than 3,200 U.S. colleges and universities, doesn't even track statistics on fraud cases. But with more and more students clamoring for admittance to top colleges whose degrees can boost their careers, the stakes are getting higher.

Still, when schools open student application packets, they expect facts, not fraud. "Legitimacy...is not the first thing you are thinking of when you look at an application. You are looking to fill the class," says the

Georgetown admissions officer who first contacted Gilman, and who spoke to *BusinessWeek* on the condition of anonymity because she no longer works at the school. "It's like trying to tell fake money from real money. You may have to take a couple of looks before you realize it's not legit."

Paper, Paper, From Everywhere

Extra attention can take up considerable time. With competition rising among colleges and universities, any delay entailed in verifying an applicant's credentials can leave the door open for rival institutions to nab a promising student candidate. Dale Gough, director of international services for the National Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers and an advocate of stricter vigilance in checking credentials, says most schools speed up the admissions process to offer spots to attractive students, rather than take the time to double check their application materials.

Indeed, the phone call Georgetown made to verify Gilman's letter is a rare event, Gough says. "By and large, you get these letters in and the people reading them don't know the person who wrote them. Very seldom do they bother to pick up the phone or e-mail them."

To make matters worse, the college applicant profile has grown increasingly complex in recent years. Today nearly 20% of four-year college students are transfers from another school. International student applications are increasing, with 3.2% growth in international enrollment in the last academic year. Schools must track down a growing number of transcripts from all over the world. Add in the wealth of technology that makes it easier for applicants to create convincing documents.

"It's really gotten quite complicated for admissions officers," says Philip G. Altbach, higher education professor at Boston College. "It's much easier to pull the wool over somebody's eyes in the transfer process."

A Presumption of Honor

Indeed, many admissions officers argue that checking every document is a waste of money. "You're basically putting a whole lot of resources to find a needle in a haystack," says Roger J. Thompson, vice-provost for enrollment management at Indiana University. This year the school received nearly 5,000 transfer applications on top of 31,000 submissions for freshman slots. Instead of verifying all admitted students, the school checks a random sampling of less than 10% of applications. "If they submit a document that says Harvard University on it, we are going to assume that's a verifiable document," says Thompson. "Sometimes finding the documents to not be accurate is a very difficult process."

At the University of Southern California, 64,000 applications came in last year, nearly 11,000 of them from overseas. Given the large international contingent at USC, the school has expanded its international admissions staff by 40% over the past five years. It now totals 11 admissions officers who use an extensive library of resources to verify international student credentials. But with two million pages of documents submitted last year, the school could only do so much. For example, reference letters are accepted on an honor basis with no verification, according to L. Katharine Harrington, dean of admissions and financial aid.

Fake letters of recommendation are merely one trick. Phony transcripts and fake identities are others. And while some might think that fraud is a lesser concern at top colleges because students are more selectively admitted, recent cases have shown that fraudulent applications can slip past the most elite colleges.

Failure is the only penalty

In 2007, for instance, a high school dropout named Esther Elizabeth Reed was caught using the stolen identity of a missing woman to get into programs at Columbia University and Harvard. Last year, Yale University kicked out Akash Maharaj, 26, who had been admitted a year earlier as a 21-year-old transfer student with a

fabricated reference letter and fake grades from Columbia. "We have in place and had in place at the time a number of steps...that help us have confidence in those applications," says Jeffrey Brenzel, dean of undergraduate admission at Yale. "Can you guarantee you will never have a fraudulent document that goes undetected? The answer is no." Brenzel declined to elaborate on specific measures taken by the school to verify credentials, but said that no changes have been made to the verification process since Maharaj's case was uncovered.

While an application is reviewed by a number of people before a student is admitted, the way documents are processed can make it harder to detect fraud. At some schools, mail rooms remove application materials from their original envelopes to help speed up the review process. Admissions officers never see a transcript's original packaging and postmark to verify that it came directly from a school and not from an applicant. Moreover, admissions staffers tend to be young, with high turnover, and may lack the experience to detect fakes.

Critics of the admissions process say colleges and universities don't do enough to prevent bogus applications from circulating. Gough says he's long carried a thousand-dollar check in his wallet for delivery to the first admissions or registrars officer that decides to press fraud charges against an applicant who submitted fake paperwork. School officials say that potential legal costs mean there's little benefit in pursuing measures beyond rejecting the tainted applicant.

Nonetheless, these cases present a clear violation of the law, says Allen Ezell, a former FBI agent who spent 11 years cracking cases in higher education fraud involving diploma mills and fake credentials.

Gough tells schools that taking legal action against a fraudulent applicant would reinforce the seriousness of the offense. "So long as that is the modus operandi by colleges and universities as far as not taking more legal action against this, it will continue," he warns.

*[Porter](#) is a reporter with *BusinessWeek* in New York.*

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