Cheating their way into graduate school

By Eric Wentworth
The Washington Post

Three years ago trustees of George Washington University quietly revoked a doctor of medicine degree conferred the preceding May on a promising graduate of the university's medical school.

The trustees acted after belated discoveries that the would-be doctor had been admitted by the school as a transfer student based on falsified transcripts from three other institutions, including Baltimore's Johns Hopkins University.

Last winter brought the spectacular disclosure from Harvard University that a husband and wife using fake names had successfully finagled their respective ways into its super-selective law and business schools—he for the second time.

These cases and numerous others—one recently in Virginia, another in New York City—are posing a growing problem for academic gatekeepers: spotting applicants who hire imposters to take exams, submit bogus transcripts or letters of recommendation or try other tricks in the high-pressure, high-stakes scramble for limited places in the nation's professional and graduate schools.

Admissions officers and university registrars are increasingly concerned, and the agencies that administer tests and process applications for many schools have been adopting tighter security measures.

(Helen Warren, administrative officer at Polytechnic Institute of New York's graduate center in Farmingdale, said that "in 11 years, we've never had a case that reached the ears of the administration." A spokeswoman at the State University of New York at Stony Brook said that [illegible] attempts to present falsified credentials [illegible] for entrance to undergraduate [illegible] or graduate programs have been stopped at the registrar's office. And at Adelphi University in Garden City, a spokesman said that nobody can remember any such cases. But several Long Island college officials admitted that if a student is carrying off a deception successfully, they wouldn't know about it.)

The Association of American Medical Colleges, which runs an applications clearinghouse for its members, has found 27 cases so far this year of doctored transcripts, forged recommendation letters or other proved or suspected "irregularities."

That's a small fraction of the estimated 43,000 medical school applicants, but it is double the number of cases two years ago—and, as with other available statistics, only counts those who get caught.

In the Virginia case, one of the few to land in court, Harold S. Blumenthal of Norfolk was convicted in Circuit Court last month on charges of forging and passing a falsified transcript from Old Dominion University there. The faked document, evidently made from one issued to him by the Old Dominion registrar's office, greatly overstated his grades, listed him as a summa cum laude graduate and bore a forged registrar's signature. The medical schools' group first triggered the investigation after noting, as it processed Blumenthal's application, that his transcript lacked the official Old Dominion seal.

Educational Testing Service of Princeton, N.J., which runs several admissions test programs, conducts hundreds of inquiries a year into possible problem cases. Paul Williams, the service's director of test security, said that 24 Law School Admissions Test scores, 68 Graduate Management Admissions Test scores and 124 Graduate Record Examination scores were canceled last year because of hired impersonators, copied answers or other test-related problems.

The competition for law school admission was becoming so frantic in the early 1970s that "ringers" even began advertising their services on college bulletin boards—sometimes with money-back guarantees.

After 117 Law School Admissions Test scores had to be canceled in a single year, the testing service decided in 1973 to thumbprint all applicants showing up to take the test instead of just asking them, as before, to produce a driver's license or other photo-bearing identification.

Newsday Illustration by Bob Newman

Williams related one case in which an imposter, using a fake name, took the law test alongside a client. Once the test started, they exchanged the answer sheets with their names and thumbprints. Imposter, putting his answers on his client's sheet, scored a very respectable 650 for him. Later, Educational Testing Service uncovered the imposter's role by comparing his thumbprints on the answer sheets bearing fictitious names that he had exchanged with his clients.

Nationally, law school applications outnumber places by more than 2 to 1. For medical schools, it's 3 to 1. For the top schools, ratios are far higher: about 6 to 1 at the Harvard Business School, and even steeper at some others. Thus, cheaters who succeed are elbowing out honest applicants.

Suspicions about test cheating are usually triggered when a student gets a test score far higher than a prior score or out of line with his general academic record. Educational Testing Service pulls "large score gain rosters" from its computer listing applicants whose new scores exceed old ones by more than a set margin—150 points (say, from 450 to 600) for the law test.

About 10 per cent of all 136,000 law test scores last year showed gains of that magnitude. The testing service investigated some 300 of those scores, plus about 200 other scores, ultimately canceling 24.

Policing test scores can be a touchy business. Twice in recent years the Association of American Medical Colleges has been sued for libel. In the one case decided so far, an applicant sued the association for having notified member schools that his May, 1970, Medical College Admissions Test scores, notably higher than two earlier sets of scores, were achieved by someone else in his name. The association based its conclusion on the findings of two handwriting experts. U.S. District Court Judge Joseph C. McGarraghy tried the case in Washington, D.C., and in February, 1974, upheld the association.

Meanwhile, the medical schools group tightened up on test security. For years it had asked medical test candidates to send photographs when they registered. But now these photos are forwarded on identification cards to the test centers, where proctors use them to screen test-takers as they arrive. The photo-ID cards are later sent to the medical schools where successful applicants enroll.

The most bizarre case of late surfaced this winter at Harvard, where Spiro M. Pavlovich III and his wife Monette Mary, had allegedly duped the law and business school admissions offices with fake names and transcripts.

Both have since been indicted for extending their deceit to applications for government-insured loans—a federal crime. The first suspicions reportedly came not from some alert school official but rather from lawyers to whom Pavlovich bragged too boldly during a summer-job interview.

Just how Pavlovich and his wife went about their alleged hoax has remained a mystery. A well faked transcript, however, can stir suspicions of "inside help" from a regular employee or part-time student worker inside a registrar's office.

Last month President John W. Kneller of Brooklyn College disclosed that 12 employees of the college registrar's office and computer center had been implicated in transcript-doctoring to "improve their own academic records or those of friends and relatives." The faculty called for rescinding one 1975 graduate's degree because his transcript showed 13 unauthorized grade changes.

While registrar's offices generally keep their institutional seals under lock and key, occasionally one is stolen—or at least mysteriously vanishes. Forgers who cannot get their hands on a university seal have tried other ruses, and transcripts for law and medical school applicants have turned up with a Boy Scouts seal or a notary public's seal.

"We've even found a transcript imprinted with a silver dollar," said Gerald Kurtz, staff member of the medical schools association who oversees its centralized applications service.

Forged or doctored transcripts have become a serious enough problem to prompt a discussion at last year's annual meeting of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. Among the tips there: "The forger thinks he has to be perfect. Watch, then for the transcript which is too neat . . ." /II