Harvard missed signs it was being hoodwinked

By Tracy Jan

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It turns out that fooling the gatekeepers of the nation’s most selective university wasn’t as hard as it looks.

Adam Butler Wheeler, portrayed upon his arrest for fraud as a con artist whose brilliant forgeries landed him a coveted spot at Harvard, won over the admissions committee with an application rife with inconsistencies and an inscrutable personal essay, despite fake faculty recommendations that repeatedly praised his lucid writing.

A close examination of Wheeler’s application materials, obtained by the Globe, reveals neither a meticulous feat of deceit nor a particularly elaborate charade. At times, he was just plain careless.

A gushing letter of recommendation, purportedly from the director of college counseling at Phillips Academy, said Wheeler enrolled in the prestigious Andover prep school as a junior. The accompanying transcript, though, indicated he attended for four years.

Both documents turned out to be fake. Wheeler was never a student at Phillips, as the lanky 24-year-old admitted Dec. 16 when he pleaded guilty to charges of larceny and identity fraud. (In reality, Wheeler was a fine but not standout student from a Delaware public high school.)

In hindsight, there were other red flags that raise questions as to how closely Harvard’s staff scrutinized Wheeler’s application, and whether the failure to catch simple errors and too-good-to-be-true claims played a greater role in Wheeler’s admission than his own ingenuity.

“No to take responsibility from what he did, but Harvard has to own up to what it did by letting him in,” said Steven Sussman, Wheeler’s attorney. “There were substantial irregularities with the Wheeler application that should have raised red flags that were ignored.”

Harvard spokesman Jeff Neal declined to comment on Wheeler’s application but said the university has taken steps to improve its process for screening applicants.

“It is always easier to identify specific issues in hindsight, after you already know there is a concern,” Neal said. “We are taking measures to bolster our ability to protect against fraud.”

Wheeler, through his lawyer, declined to comment.

Wheeler’s transfer application form, in which he states his intention to major in literature and become an academic, is riddled with discrepancies and implausible credentials.

A grade report from the College Board, which Wheeler has admitted faking, shows he earned the highest marks on 16 advanced-placement exams, an improbable feat. The majority of students taking AP exams take only one or two during their four years of high school, according to the College Board. Virtually none take 14 or more.

“It is extremely rare to take 16 AP exams over one’s high school tenure,” said Jennifer Topiel, a College Board spokeswoman. “And to score a five on all of them is just exceptional.”

Another oddity: His forged high school transcript says Wheeler took AP art history in one trimester. The Phillips Academy course catalog lists the class as a yearlong course.

Nor did the years in which some of the tests supposedly took place match the years in which the courses were listed as having been taken. Wheeler’s College Board report claims he took the AP exams in European history and English
language and composition — scoring perfect 5s on both — in 2002, before he even began his freshman year in high school.

The application includes a fake recommendation letter from the Phillips Academy counselor that described Wheeler as “by far the most intellectually gifted and at the same time so incredibly unaffected, insightful, truly genuine student” he had ever worked with. (The letter included an incorrect middle initial for the counselor.)

In slanted, narrow handwriting, Wheeler’s signature on the application form authorized Harvard to request all secondary school records. It never did.

His transcript is crowded with upper-level courses even when he was just a freshman. It shows him taking six or seven classes at a time — at a school where the normal course load is five.

Wheeler claimed to have aced 10 philosophy and literature courses at MIT while he was still purportedly a student at Phillips. But Phillips Academy does not allow its students to enroll in courses at college campuses, said a school spokeswoman; nor does MIT allow high school students to take regular courses.

Wheeler, who actually spent his first two years of college at Bowdoin, sent Harvard a straight-A transcript from MIT, where he claimed to have enrolled as a freshman. The transcript included grades from the first semester at MIT, even though MIT does not give letter grades to first-year students during the fall term. He transferred to Harvard in 2007.

Wheeler also offered four recommendation letters from MIT professors, describing Wheeler as a brilliant philosopher and literary critic. But the professors named were actually on the faculty at Bowdoin, where Wheeler had been suspended for plagiarism.

His application form and his forged transcript cite different dates when Wheeler claimed to have been a student at MIT, and also include a fake e-mail and phone number for his supposed advisor at MIT, who Harvard never called.

The application includes a rambling personal essay with language criticizing undergraduate studies at MIT. “My belief is that the conceptual basis of the multidisciplinary and cross-cultural study of texts, traditions, and discourses must consist of a commitment to connectivity — in part for all the reasons that bombard us every day as virtual cliches,” he wrote.

He also submitted eight pages of poetry along with a short piece of prose about his parents’ divorce (his parents are still married): “A couple of weeks ago my mother called me into her room and handed me my father’s brief but no doubt handsomely phrased letter saying that he was leaving her. Having read it, I was inspired (at eleven) to let it flutter from my fingers to the carpet.”

Wheeler’s application file also shows that he managed to dazzle a Harvard alumnus who interviewed him when he applied as a transfer student. The interview was conducted at Bowdoin — even though Wheeler claimed to be an MIT student — an incongruity that Wheeler explained by saying that he had finished his MIT courses early, had no final exams, and moved to Bowdoin midsemester to help an English professor there write a chapter of a Shakespeare book.

Wheeler so impressed the interviewer with his ability to fit seamlessly into college life at Bowdoin in such a short time, and with his seemingly genuine academic interest in Elizabethan literature, that the alumnus endorsed him for admission.

“Adam is an engaging conversationalist, mild and reflective in his delivery, seemingly enthusiastic but not anxious about Harvard’s decision, confident that he’ll make it work somehow (as he indeed has remarkably this spring),” wrote Peter Quesada, the interviewer. “If you have room for him, he would do well, and be indistinguishable from freshman entrants by the end of his sophomore year.”

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