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'But you don't like to read. Why do you want to go to Harvard?'

By Erika Fry, reporter @FortuneMagazine February 6, 2014: 5:29 PM ET

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(Fortune)

Daniel Grayson thought there was probably something fishy about the kid who said his childhood friend died from a procedure in a back-alley abortion clinic in Bangkok. Grayson, an associate director of admissions at Tufts University who recruits students and reviews applications from Southeast Asia, had been warned about too-good-to-be-true applications from Thailand. This one, from a student who claimed to have been so inspired by his friend's plight that he made a documentary on illegal abortion and promoted it with great success on the Internet, got him wondering. Grayson emailed the applicant, a senior at a Thai international school, asking to see the film. He heard back several weeks later from the student, who sent a link to a video posted to YouTube the day before by another person. The "documentary" -- a three-minute reel of stock photo images accompanied by a student reading a bland script on abortion -- looked hastily thrown together.

Tufts denied the applicant. In fact, during the 2013 admissions season, Grayson threw out a quarter of the applications from Thailand for suspected cheating. The applicants, he says, had offered impressive stories of enterprising (but fictitious) extracurricular projects, like the student who said he had invented an elephant motion detector to help protect agricultural fields in rural Thailand.

Padding college applications is virtually as old as higher education itself; for all we know Nostradamus may have overstated his powers of prophecy to secure a spot at the University of Avignon. But many undergraduate and graduate officials say that in recent years there's been a spike in problematic submissions, especially from emerging markets, where the families of the elite and the growing middle class are eager to ensure their children's success with degrees from top U.S. schools. And they are enlisting the aid of a growing professional class of consultants and fixers who will not only help a student navigate the complexities of the American college system but in many cases buff and polish a candidate's application beyond recognition.

In the most extreme cases, students and parents turn to savvy and unethical admissions consultants who excel at packaging students for U.S. audiences; for a pretty price, consultants will happily write essays and recommendations, fabricate student backstories, and coach applicants through enough interviews that the lies stick. "There do seem to be countries where getting unwarranted 'help' isn't considered cheating as much as it is seen as a necessary way of doing business," says Therese Overton,

an associate dean of admission at Wesleyan University. "As the stakes rise and more people are apprised of the possibilities, it does appear the problem is getting worse."

Then there are students, particularly in China and increasingly in India, outsourcing their applications to commissioned agents who are paid a bounty for every international student they get into an American school, a system that encourages recruiters to gussy up and enroll as many students as possible. (In a bizarre double standard, colleges are barred from paying agents to enlist U.S. students partly to prevent unscrupulous colleges from scamming the financial aid system.)

That's not to say that every candidate from an emerging market is dishonest or that schools should turn their backs on the benefits of diversifying their campuses with kids from developing economies; bad actors represent just a fraction of the millions of applications that U.S. schools review each year. But admissions fraud isn't a victimless crime: Ill-prepared students find themselves overwhelmed at school, and universities are stuck with underperformers they need to bring up to speed. And in an increasingly competitive process, cheaters take seats away from deserving students -- American and international applicants alike -- while gaining access to the ranks of the global elite.

You'd think university administrators would be outraged by such attacks on the integrity of the admissions process, but few schools are willing to talk about dirty applications. *Fortune* contacted the undergraduate admissions offices of all eight Ivy League universities; Harvard provided a prepared statement, and only Dartmouth College's dean of admissions discussed the matter on the record. (She says detecting fraud makes reviewing international applications "more challenging.") The few rank-and-file admissions officers who are vocal on the matter suggest that schools may not want to expose flaws in a closely guarded system they take pains to portray as fair, while others, in all seriousness, fret that being too suspicious of applicants violates the "spirit" and "essential connection" of the admissions process. Privately, though, many suggest that university leaders simply don't want to shut down a pipeline that helps schools stay in business and boosts their college rankings: Under financial pressure from federal and state budget cuts, falling tuition revenue, and mounting operational costs, many colleges have come to rely on income from international students, who typically pay full freight. The 820,000 foreigners currently pursuing degrees at U.S. schools represent just 4% of total students (at elite institutions the number trends toward 10%), but their ranks have swelled from 586,000 a decade ago. "It's a money business for most schools," says Bruce Poch, a longtime admissions dean at Pomona College who became the dean of admission and executive director of college counseling at the Chadwick School in Palos Verdes Peninsula, Calif., last year. "It's not about finding needy kids. It's about finding kids who can pay."

As college acceptance letters start to land in mailboxes around the world, inevitably a few of those fat envelopes are bestowed on students who are unqualified, unethical -- or both. "We want to believe -- we want to think that students applying to our school are cool enough, smart enough, dynamic enough to do this -- and we're lucky enough to admit them," Tufts' Grayson told a crowd of college counselors and admissions officers at an industry conference last year. "It plays to our hubris." Indeed. The applicant Grayson denied, the one with the amateurish documentary? *Fortune* has learned that he's now a freshman at a prestigious East Coast university.

Susitt "Sai" Thanarat is the founder of Bangkok's oldest and most expensive admissions consulting firm, Admissions-Office (AO). Modeled after "the ancient Socratic school of Athens" and operated out of the 18th floor of an office tower in central Bangkok, AO sells itself as "Asia's premier educational consultancy." And AO touts winning results, citing 1,100 Ivy League acceptances to date -- among them 88 at Cornell, 39 at Harvard, 65 at Columbia, and 125 at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School. (Acceptances at elite non-Ivies are impressive too: 214 at Duke, 107 at Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management, and 103 at MIT's Sloan School of Management.) A 2010 advertisement claims that 90% of AO clients are admitted to their top-choice school, and a recent AO offer from daily-deal site Groupon advertises that its clients received 75 million baht (\$2.3 million) in scholarships in 2012 alone. But like many of Thanarat's claims, AO's acceptance rates are probably exaggerated, along with Thanarat's own credentials and those of a number of the students his firm ushers into top-tier U.S. schools. According to several former employees and clients, all of whom requested anonymity, Thanarat is running the equivalent of a high-priced applications mill, churning out remarkable résumés, pristine essays, and perfect packaging for students, some of whom needn't lift a finger. Thanarat, who spoke to *Fortune* via phone several times, denies any wrongdoing.

A cherub-faced, bespectacled 38-year-old, Thanarat's pedigree gives him credibility with Thai families seeking his help. The grandson of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, who staged two coups before becoming the country's Prime Minister, a position he held until his death in 1963, Thanarat attended top private schools -- the International School of Bangkok (former Treasury secretary Tim Geithner's alma mater) and the Pomfret School in Connecticut -- and received a merit-based Bank of Thailand scholarship to attend Stanford. There he studied economics and international relations and was a member of the polo club. He graduated in 1998 at the height of the tech bubble -- alongside future tech stars like YouTube's Salar Kamangar -- and returned to Bangkok to begin his career as an analyst at the Bank of Thailand, the country's Federal Reserve equivalent.

He soon realized he had other assets: Being a Stanford graduate made his advice highly prized among Thais aspiring to an elite U.S. education. He founded AO, inspired in part, he says, by the dedication of his own prep school guidance counselor. Though Thanarat would not share his rates -- he says that it depends on the client and that he charges a lump sum (the more work, the

higher the price tag) -- sources say that fees can be as high as 500,000 to 1 million baht (\$15,000 to \$30,000). Thanarat says he does not agree to help everyone; he is selective about clients in order to protect his consultancy's exclusivity. He also does business with top public schools and large Thai companies, like energy giant PTT and Siam Cement Group, where he advises on human resource matters, including business school programs for current employees. Neither company responded to requests for comment.

In the first of several phone conversations with *Fortune*, Thanarat described private admissions counseling in Thailand as the "Wild West," but vowed that AO maintains the highest ethical standards, including the "two obvious givens" of the profession: that essays be true and written by the applicants themselves. The company's website also emphasizes that point in bold and underlined type.

But according to six former staffers, two of whom let *Fortune* review what they say are fabricated and ghostwritten documents from their time at the company, AO consultants ignored the company's policy and fabricated compelling profiles, often from a small kernel of truth, like the fact that a family hailed from a rural province or that the applicant liked to swim. In essay-writing sessions, the students would sometimes be in the room, but rarely engaged. A few ex-staffers recall students sleeping and fiddling with their cellphones.

Thanarat himself, with a colleague, would lead "brand strategy sessions" for each student. One ex-employee described Thanarat as energized by this creative process, at times joking as he mused about new stories they could try. Typically such strategizing would result in sensational -- and given the well-heeled clientele, quite ludicrous -- stories of Thai hardship or novelty that would be sexy to a Western admissions officer who didn't know better. Thanarat insists that the student-clients participate in AO's strategy meetings and that his jocularity was taken out of context by newbies to the firm. "We make fun of all sorts of people internally," Thanarat tells *Fortune*. "It may have been an oversight to do it with junior-level staff around."

Even qualified candidates, such as those seeking graduate school admissions, often had their applications and essays written or rewritten for them. And once the firm got a student into a college, AO would sometimes continue to provide ex-clients with ghostwritten homework and papers to help them get through their classes. In a later interview with *Fortune*, Thanarat acknowledged that some unethical behavior -- ghostwriting essays for applications, for example -- may have occurred at AO at the hands of rogue counseling staff, whom he has since fired. He acknowledges that they got clients into U.S. schools but denies that he personally took part in or encouraged dishonesty on applications.

Lately, though, some U.S. schools are starting to suspect AO of unsavory tactics. Stanford's Graduate School of Business and MIT's Sloan School of Management each rescinded an invitation to a Thai student last year after discovering the student had misrepresented himself on his application and then tried to cover it up. Both schools linked the student's application (but not necessarily his misrepresentation) to Thanarat's services. Thanarat denies he worked with the student.

Stanford's business school also discovered that AO took credit for the admission of two Stanford students who had never been AO clients. And the school hears from Thai applicants who are under the impression that Thanarat is a channel of influence at the business school. As a result, the institution now monitors its informational events in Thailand to make sure Thanarat is not in attendance, and it has informed large companies like PTT that they do not need to work through him for access.

Thanarat has further disenchanted his alma mater by claiming for years on his website, in news stories, and in at least one advertisement that he or colleagues worked in admissions at Stanford University and other prestigious schools. Stanford spokeswoman Lisa Lapin says that is not true. "We have had repeated issues with Susitt Thanarat misrepresenting his connections to Stanford and his credentials and using Stanford's name in connection with his business without permission," she says.

Thanarat chalks up the various Stanford concerns to misunderstandings. He says AO has tried to clear up confusion about his ties to Stanford. As for the students AO inaccurately claimed to have gotten into the business school, Thanarat explains that those young people used an affiliate test-prep company whose website is linked to AO's, and that somehow led to "confusion" about their provenance. He also tells *Fortune* that the college consulting business has become increasingly competitive, and sharp-elbowed rivals are "mudslinging" in an effort to discredit his firm. "We are going through an extremely difficult time," he says. "But at the end of the day, the students who we work with and who got into these top schools -- they are deserving of that."

Some of Thailand's elite are starting to recognize that there are consequences to the kind of over-packaging that consultants provide. In late 2012 a group of 14 Ivy League alums in Thailand petitioned trustees of their alma maters to be more vigilant in monitoring applications from their home country. "Word on the streets of Bangkok is that unqualified applicants can purchase admission to any of the eight Ivy League colleges," read the letter, signed by Thais and expatriates, including an official with Thailand's ministry of finance. "The effects of this ongoing fraud are to diminish the global reputations of the universities, damage the reputations of honest and qualified Thai students who have not cheated, and lessen aid available to all students who are truly needy and deserving." Maria Laskaris, dean of admissions at Dartmouth, called the situation in Thailand "complex" and

said it was the most concerted effort she's seen by alumni to rein in cheating.

In the spring of 2013, Bangkok's top private high schools informed parents that selective U.S. colleges had become "increasingly concerned about the authenticity of applications from Thailand" and the use of unethical, private college-counseling agencies. Many of the city's private high schools this year have implemented strict policies to ensure that their students' applications are authentic, and they've lectured kids on ethical practices. Despite those efforts, one high school counselor suspects that students continue to use the city's more unscrupulous private consultants. The pressure is simply too great. Though parents and students in America put a premium on getting into a top college, that's especially the case in Asia, where American tuition is considered a huge investment, and one only worth making for a brand-name school. A degree from Stanford or Princeton is less an intellectual pursuit to some than a coveted symbol of economic and social status. One individual, who ghostwrites applications in Bangkok and claims to have gotten all but one student into top institutions, remembers having a conversation with a client: "But you don't like to read. Why do you want to go to Harvard?"

Cheating on applications goes on in places other than Bangkok, of course. Last May the SAT was canceled for all of South Korea after one of the tests was leaked. The unabashed ghostwriter, who has worked in several Asian countries, says the demand for his services is highest in East Asia. According to a 2010 study from Zinch China, a service that promotes access to education, a large majority of application materials submitted by Chinese candidates are fake, including 90% of teacher recommendations, 70% of essays, and half the high school transcripts.

It would be convenient to blame overzealous parents for the number of unqualified students arriving at American universities' doors, but admissions is a two-way street, and a growing number of schools are paying agents to turn up foreign students to bolster their enrollment numbers. Proponents say agents provide a real service, helping foreign students navigate the U.S. college application system. But reliance on paid recruiters can backfire and seriously damage a school's reputation.

Far from the Ivies sits Dickinson State University, a school of 1,450 students in western North Dakota that sought to make up for declining enrollment tied to the region's diminishing high school population and, more recently, as local students began bypassing school in favor of lucrative jobs in the region's oilfields. From 2003 to 2011 it enrolled about 800 international students, primarily from China, in special-degree and certificate programs purely on the word of agents in China -- recruiters that Dickinson State paid for each student. When auditors finally checked in 2012 -- at the request of the school's new president -- they discovered that most of the students didn't have complete admissions files, often lacking transcripts or proof of English proficiency. Moreover, the hundreds who had graduated from the special program had received diplomas without completing all degree requirements.

Dickinson State's president, D.C. Coston, disclosed the scandal and vowed to restore the integrity of the university by rescinding unearned diplomas and recommitting to college standards. Dale Gough, director of the American Association of College Registrars and Admissions Officers, commends Coston for making the hard choice to be transparent about the school's mistakes. "Not many do," he says.

Of course, schools don't need extensive audits and investigations to suss out bad applications. Admissions officers can compare a student's SAT writing sample to the application essays to make sure the two match in terms of writing ability and voice. Many schools also conduct interviews via Skype, or through a graduate or third-party service in the country. "The obligation is on us to be more vigilant, proactive, and thoughtful about what we see and are willing to believe," says Tufts' Grayson. It is a daunting task for an already pressure-filled profession. (See Tina Fey's high-strung workaholic character in the film *Admission*.) According to *Inside Higher Ed*'s 2013 survey, 59% of colleges failed to meet their enrollment goals in 2013. Since 2011, the number of high school graduates in the U.S. has been declining, yet partly because of the surge in international interest (the very interest universities are stoking) and the emphasis colleges put on selectivity, there are more applications to process. (Colleges, too, try to game the system: The more applications a school can field, the more selective and highly rated it will appear in influential college rankings.)

"It's going to take time and energy," Grayson admits. "But it's important, or else we're contributing and making it easier for [unethical consultants] to operate."

In the meantime, the global get-into-college consulting business continues to boom. A trade association, the Overseas Association for College Admission Counseling, has seen membership swell from a handful of mostly European advisers when it was founded in 1991 to 1,300 today. Most consultants, of course, are ethical and get into the profession to help students. Indeed, that's how Sai Thanarat says he started, aiming to carry on his own high school counselor's tradition of walking promising young people through the college admissions process. By at least one measure, he has succeeded. According to AO's website, the firm just had its best admission season in company history.

Editor's note: From 2006 to 2010 Erika Fry worked as a reporter for the *Bangkok Post* in Thailand. In 2009 she wrote a thoroughly reported and documented story about a Thai government official who was accused of plagiarism by a British

agricultural consultant. After the story was published, she, an editor, and the consultant were charged with criminal defamation. The *Bangkok Post* defended the editor and Fry against the charges. On the advice of her own legal counsel, she left Thailand illegally in 2010 to avoid being in that country for the period of years it would take for the case to make its way through the system. Charges were dropped against the editor and dismissed against the consultant who raised the allegation; Fry's case is still pending because she had left the country. Fry, a graduate of the *Columbia Journalism School* and a former writer for the *Columbia Journalism Review*, has been a reporter at *Fortune* since 2012.

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