

Illinois Report

Fear of a Website at UIUC

By **John K. Wilson**

George Gollin didn't intend to launch a crusade against diploma mills that would eventually lead the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to censor this physics professor's website. Gollin was just annoyed at pop-up ads that continually came up on his computer. After clicking them shut, over and over again, he says, "after a couple months, I called the number" on the ad. Intrigued by the sales pitch, he went on the web.

What they were selling was the same thing his university sells: a university diploma. But these institutions of "higher learning" were actually diploma mills, ready to sell fake degrees to anyone willing to pay. Robertstown University gave a multiple-choice quiz to give credit for "life experience." Gollin took the quiz. Because the 100-question quiz was so simple ("Where does the President live?"), Gollin knew all the answers, so he intentionally made mistakes to get only 26% correct, or roughly what random guessing would get. Gollin received an email saying that he passed the test, and could receive an Associate of Arts degree with a 2.7 GPA for a mere \$1000. He took an identical test offered by St. Regis University, got only 21% right (worse than random guessing), and received the same offer, with an even higher GPA.

Gollin posted this information on his website at the U of I, and complained to the Federal Trade Commission and state fraud agencies (one of them, in Oregon, is now posting the information the University of Illinois told him to take off the website). Gollin's criticism of diploma mills was featured on the CBS Evening News on July 25, 2003, and he appeared on CNN Aug. 30, 2003. Soon after, the diploma mills began complaining to Gollin and the University of Illinois, threatening to file a defamation lawsuit.

These letters scared the University of Illinois, which pressured Gollin to remove the offensive content. On Oct. 9, Gollin agreed to obey orders from top administrators to remove the controversial webpages.

Robin Kaler, a spokeswoman for the University of Illinois, claimed: "We were trying to help him find a more appropriate place for his website" because a website on diploma mills should be "housed in a place that deals with accreditation." But Gollin perceived the meeting with University officials as an order to drop the controversial information from his website, and he got Oregon accreditation officials to agree to post the information on their website.

Kaler argued about Gollin, "He has a lot to offer the community and the world outside of his discipline. But for the university support he receives, it's for his work in his discipline." This seems to indicate that the University of Illinois believes faculty websites can only include information directly related to their field of research. Yet Gollin's site, like those of many faculty, includes personal and even humorous material in addition to his scientific reason. If big issues about the integrity of academic standards are banned from faculty websites for fear of criticism or lawsuits, then academic freedom is endangered.

By intervening to urge a professor to remove allegedly libelous material, the University of Illinois sets a dangerous precedent for monitoring student and faculty websites and may actually make itself more vulnerable to litigation (because now it's taking responsibility for the content of websites).

Gollin believes that as "an infringement of academic freedom, it needs to be discussed," but he is happy that the State of Oregon is putting his information on their website: "It makes me a hell of a lot safer, it makes the university a hell of a lot safer."

So why is a physics professors pursuing diploma mills? "Physics is interesting because we deal with 11 different dimensions," Gollin says. "This is also interesting because it's so unfamiliar to me." Gollin is fond of John LaCarre novels, and his crusade against diploma mills may be the closest thing to international intrigue that a physics professor in central Illinois is likely to find.

Gollin plans to continue his fight against these diploma mills and the "really, really evil" people who own them. He says, "I have this very nice life" compared to Liberia, where civil war has brutalized the people. "These sons of bitches who smell money are just using the situation there for their own ends," says Gollin. "They're monsters. They're just disgusting monsters."