

Criminals offering fake degrees from non-existing institutions are a threat at many levels. Their actions also destroy the credibility of the higher education system of entire nations.

Fake diplomas: A threat to higher education

I had never expected to tell a story about collaborating with the United States Secret Service, or asking a colleague how to avoid getting shot.

My story begins in Bucharest, from where Romanian spammers regularly bombard us with offers for degrees from the “prestigious unaccredited universities” of the “University Degree Program” (UDP). I called UDP in 2002, to complain about the volume of spam. Instead, I received a sales pitch: I could get a degree in any field I wanted, with a handsome diploma and transcripts—from the non-existent “Parkwood University”—within ten days. I visited the Parkwood web site and a dozen more “schools” run by the same organization and learned that its customers had bought degrees in plastic surgery, oncology, orthopedic surgery, engineering, psychology, and education. Alarmed, I began putting information about diploma mills on a web page so that a search for “Parkwood University” might alert the unsuspecting.

According to a report, one third of the people who call one of the UDP salesmen actually buy a degree; \$1000 is a fairly typical price for a PhD certificate. In 2003, the Federal Trade Commission successfully pressed civil charges against UDP, but its offshore base has allowed UDP to continue its operations. At the time of the FTC action, UDP’s annual income was thought to be roughly \$50 million.

Then I learned about “St. Regis University” (SRU). In 2003, it claimed to be based in Liberia, offering courses over the Internet and awarding academic credit “for life experience.” The SRU site showed accreditation documents apparently signed by Liberian officials. Strangely, the school had come into existence while a disastrous civil war destroyed much of Liberia, including its national university. How could SRU offer a distance learning program in a country without electrical power?

The answer: it was all fake. SRU was run by a group of Americans in the United States. The organization was one of the most sophisticated diploma mill cartels to date. It hijacked a piece of Africa by, affidavits allege, obtaining university credentials through documented payments to Liberian officials, including the deputy chief of mission of the Liberian embassy in Washington.

A photo supposedly highlighting one SRU campus actually showed Blenheim Palace in Great Britain, the birthplace of Winston Churchill. A closer look at the gallery of SRU faculty portraits revealed that heads of Africans had been grafted onto the body of a white man.

Soon after I posted SRU information on a web page hosted by the University of Illinois, the university and I began receiving threats of lawsuits on behalf of SRU from “The Liberian Embassy, Washington D.C.” The email messages were being sent through the same Spokane, Wash., Internet service provider used by other entities in the St. Regis group. The Liberian embassy was not the source of the messages.

But other threats of legal action began to arrive, and I did not know how willing the University of Illinois would be to respond to a legal assault. I thought the safest course of action would be to collect more information, and try to interest the Washington State Attorney General in conducting an investigation. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* wrote a pair of stories about the threats from “St. Regis,” leading to a number of news stories by investigative journalists. One reporter ambushed two SRU salesmen at an Indiana automobile factory scheduled for closure; they had just sold dozens of bogus degrees to workers in peril of losing their jobs.

The real Regis University, an accredited school in Denver, CO, with a strong Jesuit tradition, has suffered from confusion with the fake St. Regis University. The Regis University administration contacted me, and I shared the electronic trail left by SRU. In December 2004, Regis filed a trademark infringement suit. The settlement obliterated “St. Regis University” but its operations resumed as “James Monroe University.”

As the SRU story gained more publicity, the Washington State Attorney General launched an investigation. I became a pro-bono consultant. The effort expanded into a multi-agency federal criminal investigation led by the Secret Service. I was greatly relieved: someone had tried to persuade me to travel with him to Liberia (to see “St. Regis”), and I was alarmed that an ambush had been planned. Now agents with subpoena power (and guns) had an interest in the case, and my family’s safety. In August 2005, federal agents in three states seized computers, documents, and other material associated with

"St. Regis." Eight people were indicted in October 2005 for mail fraud, wire fraud, and money laundering, with operations spanning at least 18 states and 22 countries.

The list of SRU customers includes teachers, psychologists, engineers, and at least one college president. Only half are American; many degrees were shipped abroad to Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and other countries in the Middle East. The annual degree output from SRU had been about the same as the University of California, Santa Barbara. Overall, the American-dominated diploma mill industry probably sells at least 200,000 degrees per year—dwarfing the number of higher education degrees conferred by the public education system of any single state in the United States except California (199,856 degrees in 2003).

Some of the hazards posed by diploma mills are obvious: cars designed by untrained engineers, children treated by fake physicians, criminals with bogus immigration documents. But

the damage is even larger. Liberia needs doctors and engineers and teachers, who can attend foreign graduate programs and return home to help their country. Instead, American diploma mill operators have so thoroughly corrupted the Liberian system of university accreditation that experts in foreign higher education now are sometimes unwilling to recognize a legitimate degree from any Liberian university, including the University of Liberia, which is fighting to rescue its reputation.

Meanwhile, officials from another African country now appear to be cooperating with another diploma mill consortium in the hijacking of their country's higher education system. The education system of an entire continent could be threatened. It is a problem that demands our attention.

George Gollin

George Gollin is professor of physics at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

University of Counterfeitica

School of Personatus
To all who may read these letters, Greeting:
hereby it is certified that upon the recommendation of the Faculty,
the Trustees of University of Counterfeitica have conferred upon
Thomas Ripley
the degree of
Master of Praestigiarium
in recognition of the fulfillment of the requirements for this degree.

In Witness Whereof, this diploma is awarded
April 1, 2006.

