George Gollin filled out the paperwork to get a public policy degree from Belford University.

He said his life experience reading newspapers and watching the nightly news qualified him for a diploma. Belford agreed.

Then he changed his mind and told Belford he believed that his life experience actually made him better qualified to receive a doctorate in thoracic surgery.

"And they said, 'Sure,'" said Gollin, a physics professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign whose avocation is exposing diploma mills and pushing for tougher laws against them.

Belford is one of many online entities where people can purchase high school diplomas or college degrees. Gollin believes such diploma mills cost American taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars a year, threaten national security, jeopardize people's health and possibly harm countries already on the brink of collapse.

Gollin's interest in the subject came after he received a number of spam e-mails from a similar diploma mill. Annoyed, he tried to contact the school. In return, he got a sales pitch. And that started him on a mission to out the mills.

Last week, an East St. Louis woman was arrested on federal charges that she had stolen $50,000 from a Montgomery County residential treatment facility where she had worked as executive director - a job she got by presenting a fake diploma and transcripts from St. Regis University.

Federal authorities in central Illinois talked to law enforcement in Washington state, where eight people have been charged, and four convicted, of federal charges connected with St. Regis.

"What we charged were the principals who operated the diploma mill," said Tom Rice, first assistant U.S. attorney in the eastern district of Washington.

The owners of St. Regis allegedly claimed the university was a legitimate school in Liberia and bribed Liberian officials and used the Liberian Embassy in their scheme. The 40-page indictment accuses the group of trying to launder more than $1 million as a result of the scheme.

As part of the investigation, a U.S. Secret Service agent posed as a retired Syrian military officer who wanted to get a U.S. visa. Using the fake name Mohammed Syed, the agent reportedly was able to buy degrees in chemistry and environmental engineering from a diploma mill owned by the same couple that owns St. Regis.
Some states have passed laws making it illegal to use fake degrees. Illinois is one of them.

Gollin is working toward getting federal measures passed, including the Diploma Integrity Protection Act. The federal bills would allow federal and state educational and law enforcement entities to work together to review new educational institutions, identify diploma mills, prosecute and to stop the use of fake degrees for immigration and federal employment.

In the Montgomery County case, the damage was merely lost money, but Gollin can talk about other cases where the damage is far more substantial:

* John Curran was convicted of wire fraud and money laundering in Rhode Island after he obtained a "medical degree" from St. Luke University. The degree, obtained without having to take a class, allowed him to get a job as a doctor. His medical advice led to the death of at least one person.

"The problem with medical degrees scares everyone, and it should. Nuclear engineers should scare people," Gollin said.

* Federal court documents indicate about 5 percent of diploma mill customers are federal employees and another 5 percent are state government employees. The fake degrees are used to garner raises.

Gollin said he calculates that by the 200,000-diplomas-per-year figure, some 10,000 federal government employees might receive a $4,000- to 5,000-a-year raise. In one year, that adds up to a $50 million cost to U.S. taxpayers.

"If you consider that over a half dozen years, you probably have several hundred million a year in tax money just going to pay for raises those people have obtained. They'll have those raises until they retire, and then it will be part of their pension until they die. That's hundreds and hundreds of millions a year going into the pockets of these people," Gollin said.

* Academic documents that indicate a person has certain kinds of training, such as in engineering, can help a person obtain an H-1B work visa for entry into the United States.

Gollin points to the case where the Secret Service agent posed as a man named Mohammed Syed.

"He created an undercover identity and requested a degree for a bomb maker who wanted to stay in the U.S., and the St. Regis told the bomb maker that it was proud of its graduates and it takes Visa and Mastercard," Gollin said.

* Fake diplomas are especially dangerous to developing countries, where people with fake degrees might pretend to be bridge builders or doctors.

"That's one of the most awful things. They need trained doctors and engineers," Gollin said. "The countries with tremendous death and heartbreak will send tremendously angry young people out into the world who are bent on (creating problems)."

How many?

Experts estimate that about 200,000 fake diplomas are purchased each year from at least 22 fraudulent universities. People fill out short questionnaires, tell their life experiences and hand over some money - $300 to $3,000, or more - and they get diplomas, complete with documentation.

LOAD-DATE: March 10, 2008
Bogus degrees offer way to U.S.

By Bill Morlin
Staff writer

Diploma mill probe reveals half of online credentials were sold to foreigners

Foreign nationals, including potential terrorists, could legally gain entry into the United States with fraudulent degrees purchased from Spokane-based diploma mills, documents made public Monday reveal.

Half the “degrees” sold by Saint Regis University and other diploma mills were sold to overseas purchasers, a majority of which were for “students” from Saudi Arabia, the documents say.

The documents don’t give a specific number of degrees sold overseas, but they disclose the operation based in Spokane and North Idaho has “made millions” in the last few years.

Offshore bank accounts are being used as part of the alleged money-laundering operation directed by Dixie and Steve Randocks, the documents allege.

An eight-month task force investigation, outlined in the documents, revealed that a top-ranking Liberian diplomat based in Washington, D.C., was soliciting cash bribes from the Randocks and their associates based in Spokane, Post Falls and Arizona.

The Liberian Embassy official demanded the bribes in exchange for lining up “accreditation” for Saint Regis University and other diploma mills and for arranging payments of $50 to $100 a month to Liberian educators who would pose as “faculty members” for the online universities.

As part of the investigation, the demands for the “cash pay-

Continued: Diploma mills/A5
Diploma mills:
On the verge of filing charges

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ments" were secretly videotaped during a July 5 meeting at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C., where an undercover U.S. Secret Service agent from Spokane attempted to buy an online diploma mill for $100,000.

Abdullah Dunbar, the deputy chief of the Liberian Embassy in Washington, D.C., demanded $5,000 and an expense-paid trip to his homeland to finalize accreditation for the online university, the court documents allege.

Asked if any laws were being violated by making such a demand, Dunbar responded, "Nah, I'm a diplomat," according to the court documents. If he isn't charged, U.S. authorities are expected to seek Dunbar's deportation, according to a source familiar with the case.

There have been no arrests, and no criminal charges have been filed.

But a 441-page affidavit, filed Monday in U.S. District Court, makes it clear that the task force is on the verge of securing federal charges for conspiracy, wire and mail fraud, money laundering, bankruptcy fraud, income tax evasion and engaging in "prohibited foreign trade practices."

Federal sources say the most troubling aspect of the investigation revealed that foreigners who purchased such bogus online degrees could then be eligible for "H-1B visas, using their educational backgrounds as reasons for legitimate entry into the United States.

During the investigation, an undercover Secret Service agent using the name "Mohammed Syed" applied for a college degree from James Monroe University.

The applicant, court documents say, filled out an online application, claiming he had obtained "multiple hours of training in chemistry and engineering" as a member of the Syrian Army.

Syed said he was in the United States on a visitor's visa, "but wanted to quickly obtain college degrees so he could find employment and obtain a H-1-B visa to remain in the United States," the documents say.

Within a month, the operators of the bogus online university, believed to be based in Spokane, responded by e-mail, telling Syed he could purchase college degrees in chemistry and environmental engineering for $1,277.

"The payment form also provided the opportunity for 'Mohammed Syed' to backdate any of his degrees and choose whatever date of completion he would like," the documents said.

Branford Acadamy, an online school offering high school and community college degrees, has been listing its address at this building at 14528 Newport Highway in Mud. The school was registered to ex-Realtor Dixie Randock.

The meeting with Dunbar at the Washington, D.C., hotel was set up by Richard Novak, of Peoria, Ariz., identified in court documents as an associate of Dixie and Stephen Randock.

The Randocks' home in Colbert, just north of Spokane, and their business office at 14520 N. Newport Highway were among five locations in the Spokane area searched last week by a multiagency federal and state task force, led by the U.S. Secret Service.

Novak told an undercover agent that the Randocks' three main online universities, Saint Regis, Robertstown and James Monroe, "have made millions of dollars over recent years."

Despite some recent "negative press (attention), James Monroe and the other schools are still fully recognized and accredited by the Liberian government," Novak told the agent, according to the documents.

Agents also searched Novak's home in Arizona and a business office in Post Falls, used for shipping diplomas, and a stamp works at 5210 N. Market, operated by Blake Carlson.

Documents seized in the search show the Hillyard businessman has conspired with the Randocks, listing himself as the "Dean of Studies" of Robertstown University, and "provost and chief academic officer" for Saint Regis University - two of the bogus diploma mills.

Carlson also describes himself as "co-founder of the World Chapel Ministries," which says it is "dedicated to the mission of helping Christians through the life experiences, missions and ministry attain valid, government-recognized degrees, ordinations and certifications."

In the course of the investigation, the undercover Secret Service agent also purchased a high school degree, a two-year associate of arts degree, and a fouryear "bachelor's degree in pre-law."

He also purchased "official transcripts for four full years' worth of college classes which never occurred," the court documents say.

Bill Mortin can be reached at (509) 489-5444 or by e-mail at bmortin@spokesman.com