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Colleges Challenge Web-Advertising Practices of For-Profit Institutions

By [DAN CARNEVALE](#)

Type "Grantham University" into Yahoo's search engine, and what appears at the top of the page, above the actual search results, is not a link to Grantham's home page but an ad for the University of Phoenix -- a "sponsored result," in search-company parlance. Sponsored links to other companies offering online-degree programs appear to the right.

Not surprisingly, administrators at Grantham -- a small, for-profit institution in Slidell, La. -- are unhappy that a search on Grantham's name pulls up competitors' ads. So are officials at other institutions whose names produce similar sponsored results in popular search engines. Any advertiser can buy such space for just about any word or phrase, with the sponsored links appearing in shaded areas above and to the right of the regular search results.

Officials of small colleges have grumbled privately about the practice for years. Their anger became public this month when Richard Oliver, director of online education at Tiffin University, confronted Laura Palmer Noone, president of the University of Phoenix, after a speech she gave at a higher-education conference in Boston.

Phoenix officials say they have a policy against buying Web ads linked to the names of other colleges. But sometimes the advertising vendors they hire do so without their permission, university officials said. An official of one of Phoenix's vendors said it buys ads based on city names and will remove the ads if anyone complains. Other vendors that appear to buy such sponsored links on search engines would not comment.

But Mr. Oliver told Ms. Palmer Noone at the conference that typing "Tiffin University" into the Google and Yahoo search engines pulled up Web advertisements related to the University of Phoenix. She responded that vendors sometimes do not abide by the university's advertising policies.

"If it does happen, then that vendor will be chastised and possibly terminated for doing that," she said. She also told Mr. Oliver, "I don't approve of that practice, and it will stop. If you can give me the information, if you'll give me your business card, I'll make sure and track it down, because that is not

appropriate."

The ads have since been removed.

Mr. Oliver said he wondered why the University of Phoenix, the largest for-profit college in the nation, would be interested in buying ads linked to the name of a small college like Tiffin in the first place.

"We're a small institution out in the middle of the cornfields in Ohio," he said in an interview. "We are a pimple on the back of a flea's butt that sits on the big University of Phoenix dog. We are small."

The sponsored links are bought through a bidding process. The company that pays the most gets the top ad. For the "Tiffin University" search, the top spot in the results sold for more than \$8 for each person who clicked on the advertising link. That could mean thousands of dollars, depending on how many people clicked.

Tiffin cannot afford to pay that much for Web ads, Mr. Oliver said. But large companies can -- and do.

"It's Goliath coming after David," Mr. Oliver said. "If nothing else, there should be some, what am I trying to say, professional-courtesy issues."

Terri Bishop, senior vice president for public affairs at Phoenix, said officials there check regularly to make sure that vendors who buy advertising for the university abide by its policy of not purchasing ads related to other colleges' names. It's tough to catch all of the instances, she said, because some of the vendors subcontract the business to other companies, which do not know Phoenix's policy on advertising.

"It's not that we're doing anything different than anybody else," Ms. Bishop said. "We spend a lot of money on marketing, so we're probably a lot more visible than others."

For a college to use another institution's name in an ad purchase could be against the law in some states. Caldwell College, in Caldwell, N.J., informed the University of Phoenix last fall that Web ads for Phoenix appearing on pages of results for the search term "Caldwell College" were a trademark violation under the New Jersey Consumer Fraud Act, said Kevin Berrigan, director of media relations and advertising at Caldwell.

"We were told that the University of Phoenix had contacted all of their marketing vendors to remove the name 'Caldwell' from all of their respective Internet-software programs," he said. "This issue still maybe needs some attention."

The ads were removed from the Google search engine, but some of them remained on Yahoo until a reporter contacted Vantage Media, the vendor, this month.

Mark DiPaola, president of Vantage Media, said the company buys links to the names of cities on the University of Phoenix's behalf, not to the names of colleges. "When a city name interlaps with a college name, that's where the confusion arises," he said. In those cases, he said, the company will remove the ad: "Our intent is to never violate a trademark or even cause any confusion."

The Vantage ads above the search results for "Caldwell College" have since been removed, but ads for other companies -- including "www.onlinecollegereview.com" -- remain. Representatives of that company did not return phone calls seeking comment.

Tom Macon, chief executive officer of Grantham, said the Web ads can be confusing for students trying to look up information about small institutions like his.

"For a consumer looking around, it's really unfortunate," Mr. Macon said. "It's tough for a school of our size. Trying to cut through the clutter is very difficult."

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