James Soloway, a call-center employee, made calls last year on behalf of Vantage Media, a lead-generation company that uses search engine advertisements to gather information about prospective students that it can sell to for-profit colleges. He described his misgivings with the work in this email to Chronicle reporter Josh Keller. It has been edited for clarity.

For some background on myself, I’m forty five years old. I work in the call center industry in Winnipeg and have so for six years, in customer service and sales. I was offered the opportunity to be on Vantage Media in March of 2010, as an alternative to being laid off as the call center that I was employed at, Inspyre Solutions, had been losing a number of clients since the recession of 2008.

... The training consisted of just one day in the class room going over call flow, policies and procedures, then a few days on the calling floor, listening to other agents. Two issues came up for me as I began listening in on phone calls.

One, the students were not at all receptive to the calls as they couldn’t understand why they were being called by College.us.com - a Vantage Media website and not the community college they thought they sent their inquiry to. Two, we had no training on the different types of programs being offered and what the different designations meant. I was on my own when it came to understanding what the difference was between an L.P.N, R.N., and B.S.N for instance.

... I still pretty much remember the opening script:

My name is James Soloway, I’m calling on behalf of College.us.com, we’re following up on a request for information that you made to Sacramento Community College on Business Administration programs. If you have not yet been contacted by Sacramento Community College, they will still be contacting you as well. May I search for other schools in your area offering programs in your field of interest?

The objective was to keep the student on the phone long enough to generate three leads for Vantage Media’s private schools such as one lead for South University, one lead for The Art Institute and one lead for Kaplan University. The process was very much a well oiled machine. All of the student’s contact info originally entered at EducationStart.org would be automatically populated into the landing page for the private school. If the student agreed to be contacted by the private school, the agent just had to click submit and the student’s info was immediately loaded into that private school’s dialer system, often having the student being contacted within minutes from when we submitted the page.

...

After making calls for several months, it became apparent to me that we were more likely doing a disservice for the majority of students. We did not have the training to properly advise the students and our course options were usually limited and were often
in a different field of study all together, which is where the whole Vantage Media lead generation model puts the student’s education path at risk.

Often, the only options for a school with a course to offer the student in their primary field of study choice was an online school option, which a lot of students don’t want. However, the expectation was that we were not to allow a call to end with a student until we had created three private school leads- have the student agree to be contacted by three of Vantage Media’s private school clients.

The student, having been given the impression that the agents are an educational counsellor, becomes persuaded to give less weight to their first choice of career path and consider an alternate, simply so Vantage Media can collect lead generation fees from as many schools as possible.

Finally, it seems now the student never does hear from the community college they had wanted information from in the first place. That was the only reason I stayed on the account as long as I did as I had no reason to doubt that the community colleges were receiving the requests.

By into the fall of last year, it had been brought to my attention that [Vantage’s program manager] was concerned that my lead production had fallen below the team average, which did not surprise me. This conversation, combined with my being a Shop Steward for the union led me to feel that I likely had a target on my back and my time may be up soon. Having never been terminated in my working career, I made the decision to protect my record and leave the company in December of last year. I’m now currently employed at one of the best jobs I’ve ever had and have no regrets...and no reason to bare a grudge.

I just feel bad, I feel bad that I was part of something that took advantage of people, a lot of them kids still in high school. I feel bad being witness to fellow workers losing their jobs for not being in compliance with the policies of a client whose business model can not function without first excelling in deceit.

I just don’t understand why collectively, public schools don’t come together to have all their names taken off Vantage Media’s websites. Vantage Media is deceiving possibly two to three thousand students a week. Students are being misinformed. Public school reputations are being damaged. This is simply wrong and needs to be stopped. If Vantage Media was forced to abandon educational marketing, I don’t believe any student out there would be the lesser for it. Would any student ever miss Vantage Media? I don’t believe so.