Music piracy crackdown nets college kids

By ANNA JO BRATTON, Associated Press Writer

Sun May 13, 4:50 PM ET

LINCOLN, Neb. - At first, Sarah Barg thought the e-mail was a scam. Some group called the Recording Industry Association of America was accusing the University of Nebraska-Lincoln sophomore of illegally downloading 381 songs using the school's computer network and a program called Ares.

The letter said she might be sued but offered her the chance to settle out of court.

Barg couldn't imagine anyone expected her to pay $3,000 — $7.87 per song — for some 1980s ballads and Spice Girls tunes she downloaded for laughs in her dorm room. Besides, the 20-year-old had friends who had downloaded thousands of songs without repercussion.

"Obviously I knew it was illegal, but no one got in trouble for it," Barg said.

But Barg's perspective changed quickly that Thursday in March, when she called student legal services and found out the e-mail was no joke and that she had a pricey decision to make.

Barg is one of 61 students at UNL and hundreds at more than 60 college campuses across the country who have received letters from the recording industry group, threatening a lawsuit if they don't settle out of court.

"Any student on any campus in the country who is illegally downloading music may receive one of these letters in the coming months," said Jenni Engebretsen, an RIAA spokeswoman.

Barg's parents paid the $3,000 settlement. Without their help, "I don't know what I would have done. I'm only 20 years old," she said.

At least 500 university students nationwide have paid settlements to avoid being sued, Engebretsen said. Students who don't take the offer face lawsuits — and minimum
damages of $750 for each copyrighted recording shared if they lose.

UNL officials have been told 32 more letters are on the way. At least 17 UNL students
who did not take the settlement offer have been sued, according to the RIAA, although
the university has been asked to forward only five subpoenas.

But the students coughing up the cash question why they're the ones getting in trouble.

"They're targeting the worst people," UNL freshman Andrew Johnson, who also settled
for $3,000. "Legally, it probably makes sense, because we don't have the money to
fight."

Johnson got his e-mail in February, with the recording industry group's first wave of
letters targeting college students. He had downloaded 100 songs on a program called
LimeWire using the university network.

The money to settle came from the 18-year-old's college fund. He'll work three jobs this
summer to pay back the money.

Johnson compares what he did to people driving 5 miles per hour over the speed limit.

"It's not like I downloaded millions of songs and sold them to people," Johnson said.

But just one song can bring a lawsuit, Engebretsen said.

"It is important to send the message that this is illegal, you can be caught, and there are
consequences," she said.

The industry realizes attitudes need changing, and money from the settlements is
reinvested in educational programs schools and other groups can use to spread the
word that song sharing can have severe consequences.

Some of the programs are tailored to start with third-graders.

"We do recognize that by the time students reach college, many of their music habits
are already formed," Engebretsen said.

Earlier this month, members of Congress sent a letter to officials from 19 universities,
including UNL, asking for information about schools' anti-piracy policies.

According to the letter, more than half of college students download copyrighted music
and movies. The information requested is intended to help assess whether Congress
needs to advance legislation to ensure illegal downloading "is no longer commonly
associated with student life on some U.S. campuses," the letter says.

Barg is still angry about her letter from the recording industry group, which she calls
bullying. But she agrees sharing music is common, and that other students don't
understand the consequences.

"Technically, I'm guilty. I just think it's ridiculous, the way they're going about it," Barg
said. "We have to find a way to adjust our legal policy to take into account this new
technology, and so far, they're not doing a very good job."

Barg thinks the university should send an e-mail to all students, warning them that the
recording industry won't look the other way.

As campus clears out for the summer, UNL officials are considering launching a new
educational campaign in the fall.

"If we can do anything to help educate students about what illegal file-sharing is, we're willing and interested in doing that," said Kelly Bartling, a university spokeswoman.

Bartling said no one wants students to have to worry about how to pay tuition because of an expensive settlement. "It is a hugely expensive lesson," Bartling said.

Johnson, the UNL freshman, doesn't think the threats from the recording industry group are going to solve the problem. Friends who know he got in trouble still share music online.

"People are still going to do it until they get caught, and they can't catch everyone," Johnson said.

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On the Net:

Recording Industry Association of America: http://www.riaa.com

University of Nebraska-Lincoln: http://www.unl.edu

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