

The Professor Who Battled Toyota And Survived

Jim Suhr, Associated Press Writer

CARBONDALE, Ill. (AP) — It's the kind of publicity any university might dream about: An instructor uncovers a possible flaw that's causing some of the world's most popular cars to accelerate suddenly. His ground-breaking work attracts interest from Congress and reporters worldwide.

But as Southern Illinois University's David Gilbert sought to show that electronics might be to blame for the problem in Toyotas, the world's largest automaker tried to cast doubt on his findings. One Toyota employee even questioned whether he should be employed by the school, which has long been a recipient of company donations.

Electronic messages obtained by The Associated Press show the automaker grew increasingly frustrated with Gilbert's work and made its displeasure clear to his bosses at the 20,000-student school.

"It did kind of catch us off-guard," university spokesman Rod Sievers said.

So did the fallout. Two Toyota employees quickly resigned from an advisory board of the school's auto-technology program, and the company withdrew offers to fund two spring-break internships.

"I didn't really set out to take on Toyota. I set out to tell the truth, and I felt very strongly about that," said Gilbert, who was among the first to suggest that electronics, not sticky gas pedals or badly designed floor mats, caused the acceleration that required the Japanese automaker to recall millions of vehicles.

Toyota insists its relationship with the school remains "strong," and company officials say they have no plans to stop contributing to SIU. They also say the two Toyota representatives who stepped down from the advisory board did so merely to avoid any appearance that the company was exerting influence over Gilbert's testimony.

"We have absolutely no issues with SIU and retain an excellent relationship. That won't change," Toyota spokeswoman Celeste Migliore said.

Driven by his own curiosity, Gilbert in January found he could manipulate the electronics in a Toyota Avalon to recreate the acceleration without triggering any trouble codes in the vehicle's computer. Such codes send the vehicle's computer into a fail-safe mode that allows the brake to override the gas.

Gilbert said he reported his "startling discovery" to Toyota, and the automaker "listened attentively." But Gilbert said he never heard back from the company, which has steadfastly maintained the problems were mechanical, not electronic.

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Next, Gilbert told the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, then made plans to tell Congress.

"I didn't feel I could just be passive in this," he said.

Along the way, Gilbert told the university in writing that he had been tapped as a consultant for a company called Safety Research & Strategies Inc., which asked him to study the safety of electronic throttle controls.

Gilbert's boss, Terry Owens, wished him well: "Good luck in your investigation," Owens wrote in a Feb. 10 e-mail. "I hope it leads to public safety and publications."

One of Gilbert's research partners, an assistant professor named Omar Trinidad, nervously asked Owens whether the findings would "negatively affect my tenure track or even jeopardize my tenure with SIUC? If you have any reservations on what we are doing, please do not hesitate to inform me."

Owens tried to reassure Trinidad: "If your investigations are upheld and have major impact resulting in papers, presentations, and national recognition of expertise, these are all factors that will benefit your research productivity."

Hours later, on the eve of his congressional testimony, Gilbert appeared in an ABC News "World News" report showing correspondent Brian Ross driving a Toyota rigged to quickly accelerate. When it did, a shaken Ross said he had a hard time getting the car to come to a stop.

ABC News later acknowledged that a picture in the segment showing a tachometer with its needle zooming forward was taken from a separate instance in which a short-circuit was induced in a parked car.

But almost immediately after the ABC report, media outlets began calling the school looking for Gilbert. By then, he was headed to Washington — without a cell phone.

Hardly anyone at the university knew Gilbert was going to Washington to testify, Sievers said.

The next day, Gilbert made his case to the House Energy and Commerce Committee, and lawmakers seized on the testimony as proof Toyota engineers missed a potential problem with the electronics.

Gilbert's appearance unleashed a publicity firestorm that Southern Illinois scrambled to control. E-mail chatter among administrators talked of the need to tout Toyota's "very productive relationship" with the university.

Within days, a product-liability attorney representing Toyota said company attorneys wanted to meet with Gilbert and university officials to discuss Gilbert's use of donated Toyota vehicles and "related matters."

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"We would like to explain our analysis of the situation and what we believe is a reasonable solution," Vincent Galvin wrote.

At the meeting four days later, Gilbert said, the visitors pressed him to justify his testimony — something he refused to do, saying he stood by his sworn statements to Congress.

Gilbert, who owns a Toyota Tundra pickup, believes the meeting "was meant to maybe intimidate me."

The university asked Gilbert and Jack Greer — director of the auto-technology program — to fly to California to see a demonstration at Exponent Inc., a consulting firm hired by Toyota.

"I wasn't really sure what the point of the trip was, but to keep the peace, I agreed to go," Gilbert said.

Toyota did not wait for that visit to fire back. Six days later, a group of experts assembled by Toyota to refute Gilbert's findings told reporters his experiments were done under conditions that would never happen on the road.

Gilbert's work "could result in misguided policy and unwarranted fear," Chris Gerdes, director of Stanford University's Center for Automotive Research, told reporters. His organization is funded by a group of auto companies that include Toyota.

To Gilbert, "it seemed like an awful large amount of effort to be extended by a company to dispel something." He was unswayed by what he saw in California.

The pressure on him continued to build. On March 8, Mark Thompson — identifying himself as an SIU alum and, without elaboration, a Toyota Motor Sales employee — voiced in an e-mail to the university's then-chancellor, Sam Goldman, his "great concern and disappointment" about Gilbert. Thompson said he was "deeply disturbed" by what he called Gilbert's false accusations about the automaker.

Thompson reminded Goldman that he and Toyota regularly contributed to the university — including a \$100,000 check to the auto-tech program in late 2008 — and "due to the outstanding reputation your automotive technology program has, we donate much more than money," including cars.

"I ask you why your organization allows such activities to be performed by one of your professors and most importantly allowed to be reported to the media in a false manner," Thompson wrote. "I believe he should not be an employee of our fine university."

Goldman later assured Thompson that "we are taking this matter very seriously for the reasons you cite in your e-mail and for our very strong desire to maintain our relationship with Toyota."

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As a research university, Goldman added, faculty are allowed to research independently and publish their findings, while observing ethical and conflict-of-interest guidelines.

Gilbert insists he never felt his job was threatened, though "there were some moments where I kind of felt I was standing alone."

Still, he said, if his work "can somehow make a car safer in the very narrow scope of electronic throttle controls ... then to me it's worth it. Because that could be someone's life that I could be saving."

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