College and university campuses are characterized by specific characteristics that pose major challenges for security to prevent crime. The high student population, prevailing freedom, lack of guardians, and homogenous nature of the campus setting create an environment with many opportunities for crime to occur. A modified security model is therefore needed.

Although higher educational institutions (HEIs) and other organizations often invest in sophisticated technological measures, human security aspects are sometimes forgotten or ignored. To create a strong security culture on campus, people can play an important role, both in monitoring for and reporting crime and modelling safe behavior on campus.

To create a strong security culture on campus, focus on technological (video surveillance, access control, locks), organizational (procedures, responsibilities), and human measures (behavior, attitudes) is needed. For these human security measures, there are initiatives that increase individuals’ security awareness, or the degree to which students, staff, and faculty understand the level of security and take responsibility regarding security on campus.
Strengthening security awareness requires an integrated approach that focuses on individuals’ knowledge, attitude, and behavior. Awareness initiatives on campus ideally include three objectives: increasing knowledge of security risks and procedures, developing a positive attitude towards security, and stimulating security conscious behavior.

Improving security awareness among students, staff, and faculty has many advantages. First, the consequences of an incident on campus can be limited if everyone is aware of the security procedures and acts accordingly. Furthermore, people who have a sufficient level of security awareness are more motivated to detect and report suspicious situations or persons, which reduces the number of security threats on campus. Moreover, security procedures will be followed more quickly if people are informed about why certain measures were introduced. This strengthens the institution’s security culture and increases the efficiency of other technological and organizational measures.

Finally, awareness initiatives do not always have to be expensive to achieve a major impact—making them very attractive security measures for HEIs. Considering the overall tight security budgets of HEIs, these awareness initiatives can make an important contribution to campus security without requiring much investment. This way, there is also more budget available for technological and organizational measures, such as video surveillance or security staff.

Several methods are applicable to increase people’s security awareness on campus. The most frequently used methods are educational initiatives such as training courses, demonstrations, videos, or workshops. While educational awareness programs are most effective in the long term, alternative methods are more appropriate to draw attention to certain security issues in the short term. HEIs can promote specific security topics by developing posters, flyers, stickers, or banners to share on the intranet or social media or by distributing newsletters or articles in the university magazine or campus newspaper.

Security leaders can also opt for more direct options, for instance by conducting awareness tests, introducing a reward system, or including security awareness in the annual evaluation of students, staff, and faculty via evaluation interviews or surveys. While educational methods mainly focus on improving security knowledge, a combination of alternative methods is required to strengthen individuals’ attitudes and encourage secure behavior.

**Improving Security Knowledge**

People who are aware of the security risks and procedures are expected to behave in a more secure way. Students, staff, and faculty therefore need to learn about the potential security risks and the behavior they can adopt to prevent or mitigate criminal incidents.

To increase people’s security knowledge, HEIs should focus on security-related topics that can be improved. This requires clear insight into the current level of security knowledge among students, staff, and faculty before security professionals implement an awareness program. Short tests, mystery visits, or informal group discussions can provide more information about what security knowledge could be improved.

Moreover, when informing people about security it is important that HEIs provide sufficient information without causing fear about crime. HEIs must balance information that
is “need to know” and information that is “nice to know.” Additionally, the information communicated should always be adjusted to the target audience, which implies that different communication strategies and formats may be used for different stakeholders, such as students compared to faculty.

**Strengthening Attitudes Towards Security**

People’s attitudes form the crucial link between their knowledge and behavior. While it was widely known that wearing a mask during the COVID-19 pandemic would reduce the risk of infection, for example, many people refused to wear them. People’s attitudes towards wearing a mask played a crucial role in whether COVID-19 continued to spread.

Increased attention of attitudes towards campus security is therefore needed when implementing an awareness program. Because attitudes are often shaped through interaction with other people, training that includes some interactive discussion is effective. By learning about others’ attitudes about certain security topics or responsibilities, people may change their own perspectives. For instance, discussing topics such as the risks related to information security and privacy could encourage people to act more carefully and to not leave sensitive information lying around or to shut down their computer when leaving the workplace.

Moreover, HEIs can have a significant impact on individuals’ attitudes towards security when campus security is presented as an integral part of the organizational culture from students’ or faculty members’ first day on campus. During orientation, security procedures can be communicated and more information about the expected level and importance of security on campus can be provided. Security professionals should regularly repeat awareness initiatives to gradually shape attitudes towards security.

**Encouraging Security Consciousness**

When organizing security awareness initiatives, the main goal is to help students, staff, and faculty to stay secure on campus. For instance, it may stimulate people to take preventive action by reporting problematic situations, such as the presence of suspicious persons on campus.

To encourage security consciousness, it is crucial that HEIs provide the right level of contextual support, tools, and structures; insufficient support or a weak organizational culture could lead to the opposite results. For instance, when HEIs encourage people to report criminal incidents, it is indispensable that the college or university has an easy to use and quickly available reporting system to reduce confusion or frustrations when notifying the university.

Moreover, direct, positive behavioral experiences with security, such as seeing security successfully resolve a crisis situation, will strengthen people’s motivation to behave in a security conscious way.

More interactive awareness initiatives will ensure that students, staff, and faculty have the opportunity to gain experience with specific topics which strengthens their motivation to follow security guidance. Alternative and more interactive approaches, such as penetration tests, red teaming, simulation attacks, or interactive demos, will increase participants’ direct interaction with security related issues.
General Do’s and Don’ts

It is crucial that HEIs involve everyone within the organization in their awareness program. Students, staff, faculty, and contractors such as technicians or cleaning staff must be informed about campus security procedures. To reach as many people as possible, awareness initiatives should not take up too much time. Organize a training during a lunch break, developing an online demo that can be followed whenever people have some spare time, or create touchpoints, such as posters, giveaways, or online messaging.

In addition, if the HEI’s management demonstrates commitment and involvement regarding security issues, it will likely lead to more support and more positive attitudes among other organizational members. Moreover, expected security behaviors will be more accepted when the example is set by the management. When managers set an example by preventing piggybacking when entering secured rooms, this behavior may be more easily accepted and adopted by other organizational members.

A one-sided focus on the responsibility of potential victims of crime should be avoided. Although it is crucial to inform students, staff, and faculty about personal risk mitigation measures, security professionals can combine these initiatives with security measures that discourage offenders from committing crimes. For instance, a project aimed at preventing bicycle theft on campus should include both an information campaign about preventive actions cyclists can take to avoid bike theft and the implementation of secured bicycle parking facilities.

Finally, to ensure that security awareness initiatives are working, measurement is a crucial step in this whole process. A multimethod approach that combines qualitative and quantitative research methods can work well. For instance, while people’s behavior regarding security may be evaluated through observation, the impact of training on their security knowledge can be measured through an awareness test. Applying a multimethod approach makes the measurement process more time-intensive, but it ensures a more detailed and realistic outcome that can be translated into substantiated recommendations for existing and future awareness initiatives on campus.

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