Upgrading security on a higher education campus

From kindergarten to college, the goal of providing students with a safe environment in which to learn is one that administrators at all educational facilities across the country work tirelessly to achieve. However, while the core goal is the same—keeping people from accessing places where they shouldn't be—the are a number of challenges that are unique to securing a college campus. With summer just around the corner, now is the time for campuses to begin focusing on how to address any existing or potential security vulnerabilities to ensure they’re ready when students return in the fall.

Identifying risks

“One of the biggest reasons college campuses are so difficult to secure is because they are so open,” says Jeff Koziol, account executive for education partners at Allegion. “Unlike K-12 facilities, where you traditionally have a single building to secure and student movements are heavily restricted within set hours of operation, a college campus is comprised of several disparate buildings and students are free to come and go at any time.”

While some colleges have tried to monitor who comes on and off campus by installing guard shacks and having a “closed campus,” this would be difficult, if not impossible for most campuses to achieve. And as Mark Williams, senior architectural consultant at Allegion and steering committee director for Partner Alliance for Safer Schools (PASS) points out, even having a closed campus does not ensure student safety.

“Just as we see in secondary schools, most of the perpetrators are students themselves as opposed to intruders,” he says.

“Campus crimes are typically committed by individuals who are authorized to be there, so the goal is to adopt security measures that will be effective and also compatible with that level of open access.”

– Jeff Koziol, account executive for education partners at Allegion

Another challenge that is unique to securing a college is the fact that many of these campuses are utilized by non-students groups, particularly in the summer months. “In order to raise additional revenues, many will leverage their facilities by hosting conferences and camps in the off season,” explains Koziol. “This means hundreds of people who aren’t students have to be given appropriate access to the campus. That usage is unique and needs to be planned for. You may not want to hand out expensive ID cards to young campers who may not be responsible enough yet to properly hold onto them. What happens if they are lost? How do you handle access control during those times? These are vital questions that have to be considered during the security review process.”

Consult the experts

Although active shooter events are the first thing that many people think of preventing when it comes to security, these events are unlikely to be the types of emergencies schools must deal with. It’s important for college administrators to take what’s known as an “all hazards” approach, ensuring their staff and facility are prepared for any type of emergency event.

Williams recommends that colleges begin by conducting a security assessment of their facilities. Not only will this help to identify and prioritize areas that need to be addressed, it will also help to prevent the purchase of
products that are ineffective, unsafe or non-compliant with life safety codes, ADA law and existing or future security systems.

Although school administrators should absolutely be involved in the assessment process, recruiting the assistance of outside experts will yield more comprehensive long-term solutions. Williams suggests following the PASS recommendations of taking a team approach with a cross functional group of individuals including:

- Security director
- School administration
- Facilities
- IT
- Local law enforcement
- Integrator
- Door and hardware consultant
- Campus police

Another source of expertise that is readily available to school officials but frequently overlooked is the students themselves. Particularly in the aftermath of the Parkland tragedy, students want to be more involved. Their assistance can be incredibly helpful to the assessment process as no expert is going to be more aware of potential threats and security vulnerabilities that are unique to a school than the students themselves.

Consulting experts will also help campus officials avoid what Williams says is the biggest mistake made by many educational facilities in their efforts to increase security—making emotional decisions without understanding the impact of those decisions. This often results in the purchase of security devices that solve non-existent problems or, worse still, violate life safety codes or ADA standards. A particularly egregious example can be seen in the rush by many schools to install aftermarket products known as barricade devices. In addition to being equally effective at preventing both intruders and emergency responders from entering a room, they can also prevent occupants from exiting, which violates life safety codes and ADA federal law. And as Williams points out, they are a clear example of a product solving a non-existent problem. There is also the risk of introducing one of the unintended consequences of deploying them, namely allowing anyone to barricade themselves in a building or room for any reason.

“The Sandy Hook Advisory Commission noted in their report that there is not a single documented instance of an active shooter breaching a locked door,” he explains. “We already have safe, code-compliant solutions that work.”

That was effectively what the state fire marshal told the City College of San Francisco in February of 2018. After the college spent $200,000 installing 1,000 barricade devices on their campus doors, they were ordered to remove the illegal devices immediately. Had the administrators consulted with a security expert beforehand, they could have installed one of the many code compliant alternatives available and saved the college a considerable amount of money and frustration.

Prioritizing solutions

With so many different buildings, it can be hard to know where to start upgrading security. “Perimeter security is of utmost importance, and it’s rare to find a campus that hasn’t secured the perimeter doors on its buildings,” said Koziol. “But just because the perimeter is locked doesn’t mean the building is actually secure. This is particularly true in residence halls where piggybacking can be an issue at entryways.”

Many colleges are taking access control to the actual student room to provide better security, improved accountability and reduced liability. In lieu of traditional keys or expensive ID cards, an increasingly popular option on campuses is the use of mobile applications to access doors, eliminating the need to carry a traditional brass key and diminishing the need for their ID cards.
“Physical keys are a huge security liability,” says Koziol. “If the campus master key is lost, stolen or copied, you have to rekey the floor, building or entire campus. New solutions offer better security and reduce the risks and expense involved with traditional keys. They’re also a draw to prospective parents who want assurances that their kids will be safe and accounted for in their dorm rooms.”

Conclusion
No matter what security issues are being addressed, Williams says that what’s vital is that the solutions are compatible with the users. “If it isn’t convenient, the users will eventually find workarounds that render it ineffective.”

By collaborating with qualified security experts, college administrators can conduct a thorough security assessment of their campus and find effective, code-compliant solutions to successfully address any vulnerabilities and achieve their goal of providing a safe learning and work environment for their students and faculty.

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