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University to Launch Terror Institute

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By Rachel Velcoff, The Daily Pennsylvanian

Created in response to the Sept. 11 attacks, the institute will hold its first program today.

The University's recently-formed Institute for Strategic Threat Analysis and Response -- a collaboration of terrorism-related research projects and educational initiatives -- is set to hold its first official event this afternoon. The symposium, "Strategic Thinking: How Climate, Disease and Socio-Political Structures Become Strategic Threats," will feature lectures from several faculty members and provide an introduction to the Institute's research.

ISTAR was launched last spring in response to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks as a way to generate multi-disciplinary research and education projects within the University involving bioterrorism, cyberterrorism and a number of other issues, administrators said.

The idea "really came out of a discussion that the provost and I had with the deans the week after Sept. 11, which was, 'You know here we are with this amazing institution with extraordinary resources and talent in the faculty, isn't there something we can do?'" University President Judith Rodin said. "Our world has changed and we

ought to be really figuring out how Penn responds to this."

The Institute, which now includes more than 70 faculty members across Penn's 12 schools, focuses on analyzing asymmetric threats -- those that occur "when the actually threatening object has a potential to cause damage way out of proportion to the initial threat," Director and Medical School Professor Harvey Rubin said.

Specific areas of study include biological agents and infectious diseases, public health, bio-defense infrastructure, disaster tolerance and recovery, strategic defense analyses and risk assessment issues.

According to Provost Robert Barchi, the Institute's research represents "a combination of projects that were already ongoing at the University" and "a series of new projects that are growing out of the collaborations that faculty members are building within the context of ISTAR."

"Faculty from everywhere across the University have jumped in, and what they're doing, what they're thinking is so phenomenal and exciting and it will be the basis for so many things," Rodin said.

Over the summer, Rubin began meeting with government officials to

discuss funding for ISTAR's projects, and several are scheduled to receive federal, state and city grants.

The projects are broad in scope and include both research and educational initiatives. One, which is currently awaiting state funding, would create teaching and training modules to help medical responders in hospitals in recognizing bioterrorism threats and communicating risks to the public, Rubin said. Another, now underway, deals with evaluating the effectiveness of various responses to table top scenarios of different strategic threats.

Computer and Information Science Professor Carl Gunter, one of the faculty members involved with ISTAR, stressed the interdisciplinary nature of the Institute's research.

"It's quite extraordinary, the diversity of different kinds of groups," Gunter said. "I have not seen anything at Penn that is as interdisciplinary as this."

"Most of what I've experienced with [ISTAR] is trying to determine whether there is a common subject here," Gunter said, noting that his research focuses on Internet security and anonymous cyber attacks. My work "has some characteristics in common with some of these other threats, and so the aim was to find themes and mechanisms that would... underpin the diversity of different kinds of threats."

"It's certainly an area that needs attention, and Penn is very well suited to

it, too, because of the enormous diversity [of] the different disciplines on campus," Gunter added.

Barchi and Rubin both stressed student involvement as a key component of ISTAR's projects.

"This is a really unique opportunity to do very high-level multi-disciplinary research and involve the students," Rubin said. "That's one of our really important goals."

Although ISTAR is based on Penn's campus, its members will eventually collaborate with researchers throughout the area. In November, the Institute will participate in a regional home front security conference sponsored by Greater Philadelphia First, a local organization that Rodin co-chairs.

Administrators said they hope today's kick-off symposium will help establish interest in ISTAR among the University community.

"We think that there is a real role that academics can play in sort of informing the policy," Rubin said. "We're hoping that it will be an open and vibrant and lively discussion."

Barchi echoed Rubin, noting that "the dissemination of information" is "really part of the mission of ISTAR."

The event will begin at 2 p.m. in Zellerbach Auditorium. Speakers will include Barchi, Rubin, Environmental Science Professor Bob Giegengack, Veterinary School Professor Gary Smith and History Professor Arthur Waldron.