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Penn leads anti-cyberterrorism initiative

By Andrew Whitney
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University and government officials announced last week that Penn will play an important role in a new organization aimed at protecting the nation from attacks on computer infrastructure.

Buck Fleming, executive director of the newly created Cyber Incident Detection Data Analysis Center, said that Penn will handle the research.

The initiative, which is funded by the Department of Homeland Security, will rely on Penn's Institute of Strategic Threat Analysis and Response laboratory to help CIDDAC determine how would-be cyber-terrorists are trying to attack public and private computer systems.

Penn won out over other interested schools -- including others in the Ivy League -- although Fleming declined to name specific institutions. CIDDAC decided to involve academia after "we recognized the complexities of this program," he said.

One of Penn's major attractions over other universities, Fleming said, was Harvey Rubin, the director of ISTAR and a professor of Computer Science, Medicine and Microbiology.

"Penn had a very special person in this field," Fleming said.

Rubin is excited to be involved.

"The kind of [information] that we'll be able to collect is almost behavioral data about the intruder," he said.

CIDDAC will install monitors -- disguised as company computers -- on corporate computer systems that will record and relay information on hacking attempts to ISTAR. The result of the combined efforts of CIDDAC and Penn should be decreased vulnerability in a changing climate.

"The bad guys don't sit still -- they get smarter and better," Fleming said.

Despite the emphasis on security, Fleming noted that protecting the privacy rights of citizens will also be a top priority for the center.

"CIDDAC started," he said, "with an understanding that any collection of information has to recognize the constitutional rights of citizens."

These privacy concerns extend to companies as well, he said, noting that "nobody wants the government looking into their systems."

The cooperation of the private sector is crucial to the success of the program. To this end, CIDDAC has embarked on a marketing campaign to increase participation.

"We need to demonstrate the value" to the private sector, Fleming said.

Rubin said that the system should be "up and running over the summer."