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Advice from the Webmaster: Be Paranoid

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Advice from the webmaster:

Be paranoid.

In the 17+ years I've been webmaster at Linfield College, I have learned the internet can hurt you anonymously, quickly and painfully. There isn't enough space in this magazine to cover the topic in detail. But if I had to give an elevator pitch about what you should worry about and what you should do based on my experiences and what Linfield's Information Technology support desk deals with, it would be this.

Hackers and viruses have been around as long as there's been an internet to hack and infect. The current wave of ransomware is especially bad. Once infected, your computer's hard drive is encrypted and you have to pay someone for decryption keys that probably won't work (customer satisfaction isn't a high priority here). The most common way to get infected is clicking on a link in an email.

The single best thing you can do to protect yourself is be paranoid. Imagine that everything you see, read, click or download is potentially dangerous because it is. My assistant, Sean Ezell '05, has always believed: "If I didn't ask for it, I don't want it." Be like Sean. If you get email, texts or message requests from a source you don't know, toss them. Don't click on embedded links, don't download attachments. You didn't win the lottery. Nobody wants to transfer a million dollars to you. You're not that lucky. You're like me; you're lucky enough to click on one of those links, download some North Korean ransomware and encrypt your entire hard drive.

Social media presents a different set of issues that are more personal, and even more dangerous. People have died from what someone else posted on Facebook. The best thing you can do right now is locate your privacy settings in your social media tools and learn how to use them. Make sure you know who can see what you're posting. Learn how to block garbage and report bad behavior. Find privacy and security documentation at **linfield.edu/social-privacy**.

Jonathan Pierce, a Colorado College graduate, has been tending Linfield's Internet presence since 1999.

Back up your data. What if you didn't listen to me and clicked on a link in an email from that person you had a crush on in high school and now your hard drive is mush? Small, 1TB USB-powered drives are cheap. Get one and copy your important stuff to it. I like the USB drives because you can keep them unplugged until you need them, which means they're less likely to get infected if you're compromised. Local storage is so last century, but it's the most reliable way to get back your data if your computer is dead. Heck, when they start selling 2TB drives for less than you paid for your 1TB drive, go get one and toss the old drive in your fireproof home safe. Now all the digital video of your family is safe from hackers AND fire. I know. You're welcome.

You do have a fireproof safe, right?

– Jonathan Pierce