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Security at Western Kentucky University Libraries: A Case Study and Overview

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SECURITY AT WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES:

A CASE STUDY AND OVERVIEW

On the night of Monday April 24, 2006, a librarian at Western Kentucky University (WKU) noticed that a painting that was part of the library's art collection was missing and had been replaced with another painting (a la *The Thomas Crown Affair*). The librarian contacted the Library Security Officer (LSO) who began an investigation. The LSO notified the campus police and filed a theft report. The next day he prepared fliers describing the missing painting and its replacement. These were distributed in the library and the Art Department. On Wednesday a student worker at the Helm Library Information Desk (which is located at one of the entrances to the library) reported that he had seen a subject carrying the missing painting outside the library on Monday afternoon. A review of the security video footage showed two persons entering the library entering with one painting (the replacement) and leaving with the other. The painting, which was tagged with a security strip, did set off the alarm. The subject's book bag was searched, but the painting did not set off the alarm the second time the subject exited as he held it low enough to pass the sensors.

With the help of student assistants in the library, the subjects were positively identified. The LSO provided this information to campus police. One of the student workers at the Circulation Desk happened to be enrolled in the same art class as the student who had taken the painting. She was able to tell the LSO that the student had passed the work off as his own work for a class assignment. The student worker notified her professor who passed this information on to campus police. Campus police searched the suspect's apartment without finding the painting, but the suspect was subsequently observed returning to the library with the painting and setting it inside one of the entrances to the

building. Police followed this up and questioned the suspect again. He was arrested and admitted his involvement later at the county jail.

When the painting was recovered, it was discovered that the artist's name had been painted over and replaced with that of the student involved in the theft. The painting has been repaired and returned to display in the library with additional security around it. This incident, while regrettable, did have a happy ending, and it does provide an excellent example of WKU's library security measures and their strengths and weaknesses. Of particular importance was the involvement of student workers in the resolution of this matter. Western Kentucky University has made student engagement a cornerstone of its mission, and this incident provides unambiguous evidence of the difference engaged students can make to an institution.[1]

The Library Security Officer

Western Kentucky University Libraries' Security Officer is a full-time staff position. Security in the library was originally part of the responsibilities of the staff member in charge of the stacks. As the library's hours increased, it was realized that additional manpower was required to provide adequate coverage.   The LSO works Sunday through Thursday nights at the main library from his office at the Circulation area. He oversees the hiring and training of the library's student patrollers. These student patrollers also work in the evenings. They man the desks at the entrances of the library and patrol the stacks equipped with walkie-talkies, reporting suspicious activity to the LSO. The LSO is the library's liaison to the campus and city police forces, providing information such as witness statements and video footage to them in furtherance of their investigations. The

LSO also works with the campus health and safety officials, scheduling fire alarms, safety training, and evacuation drills. Western is especially lucky to have our particular LSO, Doug Wiles. He has the technical ability to do much of the installation of security equipment himself, resulting in considerable savings to the institution. He is also possessed of initiative to match his abilities, finding weaknesses in the library's security and more importantly find solutions to them. He is also the first to step in and assist with moving furniture, providing rides to other staff members during inclement weather, and innumerable other services. This dedication was rewarded in 2000 when Mr. Wiles received the Margie Helm Award for Outstanding Performance for his zeal and hard work keeping the library safe and secure.

Student Patrollers

Western Kentucky University Libraries have at any time between seven and ten student patrollers. The program was begun in 1979 as a response by the library administration to a robbery in the stacks. These patrollers work nights and weekends walking the floors and staffing the information desks at the entrances to the facility. They are also trained in circulation procedures and basic reference service so they can provide assistance to library patrons as their primary duties allow.[2] The patrollers also direct evacuations of the building when the alarm sounds while they are on duty. They are equipped with two-way radios so they can communicate immediately with their fellow patrollers and their supervisor. Upon encountering a suspicious situation or an alarm at one of the security gates, they contact the LSO will make the initial assessment of the situation. Often a brief discussion with the parties involved will resolve the problem, but the LSO will

contact the university police if further investigation or an arrest is required. The patrollers also provide an escort service for library patrons concerned about leaving the facility unaccompanied after dark.

Other institutions have reported similar benefits from the addition of student patrollers to the library's security force. Person and Ferry found that "During the 18 months prior to the patrol's assignment to the library, there was one criminal arrest, but there were ten arrests during the patrol's 18-month presence in the library" at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. [3]

Campus Police

Student patrollers and other library personnel are not authorized to make arrests. That is the function of the campus police department. According to Captain Mike Dowell of the WKU Police Department, the situation is similar to that of merchants and shoplifters. Library personnel can detain a suspect and contact university police who make the actual arrest. [4] The type and amount of evidence determine whether an arrest will be made. Footage from the security cameras can make a big difference here.   The police do not differentiate between students and other suspects, except that students may also be reported to the Office of Student Life. Depending on the nature of the incident, ersons may be banned from the library or required to check in upon entering or leaving. There are other cameras on campus covering the entrances to the dormitories, and new cameras are being installed to cover the public areas around campus.   The bookstore and a convenience store located on Western's campus also have security systems. Captain Dowell sees a similarity between crimes in the library and on campus in general. They

are primarily crimes of opportunity: unlocked vehicles or dorm rooms, unattended book bags, etc. Crimes are all taken seriously at Western, whatever the location.

Security Gates

The library has 3M security gates at both public entrances to the building. One is by the Circulation Desk, and the other has an Information Desk located adjacent to it. Prior to the installation of security gates (in the late 1980's) the entrances were staffed by library volunteers who checked the bookbags and purses of all who left the library for materials that had not been checked out. All circulating materials in the library have been fitted with security strips. This includes books, audiovisual materials, laptop computers, and reserve items. Other tempting objects in the library such as A/V equipment and art works (as we have seen) are also tagged. These provide the first line of defense for the library's collections. Occasionally textbooks from the campus bookstore or videos rented from stores in town will set off the security alarm, but our staff is trained to detect these materials in a professional and courteous manner. Most library patrons do not mind this infrequent aggravation.

In a typical semester, about 500 patrons are stopped for setting off the alarm, but only about 1% is deemed to be attempted theft. Of these, about three are arrested.[4]

The security gate/tag system is not infallible, as an article in *Library Technology Reports* stresses, "While theft detection systems do not eliminate losses, they appear to substantially reduce them. Anecdotal evidence suggests a reduction of 70 to 80 percent."[5] The incident described at the beginning of this article makes this clear. In this case the student set off the alarm when he first tried to exit. He returned and consented to a search of his book bag. Unfortunately on his second attempt to depart, he held the

painting low enough at his side to slip past the detectors. This is, luckily for us and libraries everywhere, a relatively rare occurrence. In the vast majority of cases, library materials do set off the alarm before they can make it out of the building.

Security Cameras

Security gates are a good primary security source, but as Clark notes "Anti-theft devices are effective when they are used in conjunction with other strategies – video cameras, people monitoring the doors, etc. They do a good job of keeping honest people honest and, with other security devices, they can be even more effective."[6] Cameras are the newest addition to the library's suite of security measures. WKU has 25 Panasonic color cameras connected to a digital recording system from Advanced Security Link.   The LSO recommended the cameras to the library administration in response to various incidents, including thefts, an altercation, drug use, and a homeless person attempting to spend the night in the building. The first four cameras were installed in 2000, and additional cameras have been installed at an average rate of four per year. The first cameras installed were positioned to cover the public exits to the building. In this manner they could capture images of patrons who set off the alarm but did not stop upon leaving. Subsequent cameras have been placed to cover the other exits to the building and locations with high traffic (the reference room and student computer lab) and valuable items (DVDs and copiers). At this time there is at least one camera on each of the floors of the library open to the public. This allows the LSO and police to track a subject as he makes his way through the building. In this way additional crimes have been occasionally discovered. The main monitoring station for these cameras is in the LSO's

office. Depending on the frame rate of the particular camera, images can be stored on a computer hard drive for up to two weeks. A high quality color printer is also available for hard copies of images from the cameras. This is how the picture of the suspect in the painting theft was obtained and his identity was eventually established.

Signs are posted at all entrances notifying patrons entering the library that video surveillance equipment is in use in this facility. Most patrons and staff appreciate this visible proof of the institution's concern for their safety. Sometimes the mere mention of the existence of video footage to a suspect is enough to procure their admission of guilt and the return of missing library materials. These security cameras are also quite useful in the recovery of personal items (such as cell phones or textbooks) taken in the library that do not have the security tags that the library's books have.

A Security Ethos

The last, and possibly most important, facet of the library's security system is perhaps the hardest to quantify. This is the mindset among the library staff, and to a lesser degree among its patrons, that the security and safety of both the people and property in the library is everyone's responsibility. Chadley reminds us that "library employees, public safety officers, and the overall academic community must work as a team to reduce campus crime and increase personal safety."[7] New hires, from faculty members to student workers, receive instruction in security and safety measures as part of their training. This initial training is reinforced by printed instructions available in training manuals and posted at service desks throughout the building. This information is also available online. A cooperative attitude is fostered among all levels of staff, and no one

is afraid to report any suspicious circumstances or ask for clarification and amplification of the library's policies and procedures. As part of Western Kentucky University's mission of student engagement, the library's student workers are made aware of the importance of their responsibility in helping to keep the library a safe and secure place to work and study. Even more important is the assurance these young people receive that they have the respect and support of their supervisors and that they will not have to deal with any potentially dangerous situation on their own.

Conclusion

An active Library Security Officer with the trust of his colleagues and backing of the library administration is the keystone to maintaining this library's security and safety. A responsiveness to technological developments as well as to specific incidents has driven the evolution of the institution's suite of security equipment and personnel: from hand-checked bags at the door to security gates and cameras backed by a trained security force, WKU's drive to ensure a safe and secure library has continued. As the case cited at the beginning of this article makes clear, the human factor has not been ignored either. Training for new hires and continued drills and workshops foster an informed workforce. A spirit of trust and cooperation was essential to the recovery of the missing painting, as it is during a disaster drill or when dealing with an altercation among patrons. Perhaps not surprisingly in a library, it is information about responsibilities and procedures that is the *sine qua non* of a safe and productive place to work and learn.

Endnotes

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5. Wiles, Doug. (personal communication, November 26, 2006).

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