

UM-Flint helping students be computer savvy -- about security

Posted by [mawhites](#) February 11, 2008 16:18PM

FLINT -- The enticing e-mail looks like an online Valentine's Day card, a tempting financial offer or a bank verifying account information.

To open or not to open?

Wisdom on such questions can earn UM-Flint students a chance to win big this week -- with an Apple MacBook, iPod Touch and Nintendo Wii as top prizes.

And UM-Flint's launch of the "Computer Security 101 Exam" Monday that's linked to rewards is the type of campaign that is becoming more popular among college campuses facing an era of big online risks.

"Mostly, we're just trying to make them aware of what types of scams are out there and what steps they should take to protect themselves," said Scott Arnst, UM-Flint's director of Information Technology Services.

"We certainly don't expect everyone to know everything about computers. It's kind of our job to be a good steward to help them understand what some of the risks are."

The computer security awareness campaign comes just two months after a Dec.6 security breach at UM-Flint by hackers looking to pirate copyrighted music and movies.

Several servers on campus were hacked, prompting an investigation that involved the FBI and students being advised to change their passwords to protect against data theft.

So far, no one has been charged, but investigators suspected the online intruder was from a foreign country. This is the second time in six years something like this has happened, Arnst said.

He said a university's high-speed Internet connection and open system designed for sharing information might make it a target of cyber thieves and other scammers.

"We're a learning community. It's supposed to be a place where people can explore and learn new things, which has some inherent risks to it," Arnst said. "That's the line we have to walk, providing that sense of openness but taking steps to protect people."

UM-Flint's exam quizzes students on subjects such as how to protect passwords and guard against the nefarious phishing scam, which sends fraudulent e-mails to bait users into handing out personal information.

It's the type of knowledge other colleges, including Kettering University, also hope to roll out as part of orientation.

In recent years, national groups EDUCAUSE and the National Cyber Security Alliance even took on the cause, offering cash prizes for student videos that raised campus computer security awareness at universities and colleges.

This is the second year UM-Flint has offered the Ann Arbor-initiated exam, doubling prize values from \$1,500 to \$3,000 this year. Fliers around campus promoting the campaign brandish such slogans as "Roses are red, violets are blue, but did your sweetheart really send that E-card to you?"

Students can retake the test until they score 100 percent, which qualifies them for a chance to win prizes.

"I think that a lot of people, when they come to college, don't have a lot of experience with this sort of thing," said Gabriel Ebbert, 30, a computer science major at the UM-Flint.

"As they get into school, they're on the Internet all the time and required to log on for classes and it could get easier to get involved with things that put you at risk."

Some students might not know for example that even a legitimate Web site that offers something free, such as a screen saver, may download software that tracks users for advertising purposes.

Students should also be careful about where they store personal data to avoid identity theft and fraud.

Ebbert, who works in UM-Flint's ITS department, said he helps one or two students a day who need help ridding a computer of Spyware and Adware, which are advertising-supported software, or a virus.

"I've used my experience with this to know what to stay away from," Ebbert said. "It's kept me from having a lot of issues ... so far."

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