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# College Seeks Security in Thumbs

Katie Dean 08.06.02

It's down with passwords and up with thumbs for a school in Iowa trying to keep its data safe.

While the plan to use thumbprint scanners by the West Des Moines campus of the Des Moines Area Community College might sound like Big Brother to some, students seem unfazed by the idea. Even students at the University of California at Berkeley, with its reputation for protest, shrugged at the thought of logging into a school computer with their thumb.

Of course, it's not happening on their campus.

Problems with students and staff forgetting their passwords and general security concerns prompted officials at the [Iowa college](#) to implement computer mice with thumbprint scanners.

"We've already had high school kids point out to us that there were holes in our system, so we took the next two or three steps to make it more secure," said Tony Paustian, dean of the campus. "We're being proactive instead of reactive."

The scanners, which identify different points on a thumb and not the whole print itself, will be built into all public access computers this fall, including the open computer lab, resource center and café. Over the course of the upcoming school year, scanners will be integrated into all computers.

"It's going to be mandatory that all students and faculty submit their thumbprint," Paustian said. "This offers more protection for the individual than just having numbers and passwords. Basically, our system will be no less secure than what a government or military system would have."

Privacy experts, on the other hand, are not impressed with the plan.

"To use (a thumbprint) by itself in an authentication environment is just asking for trouble," said Lauren Weinstein, creator and moderator of the [Privacy Forum](#).

"What do you do when somebody's biometric information is compromised?" he said. "Do you have them go out and get a new thumb? Getting a replacement thumb is expensive and painful."

Lee Tien, senior staff attorney with the [Electronic Frontier Foundation](#), dismissed the plan as a publicity stunt.

"I'm not sure that there's a need for this kind of security (on this campus)," he said. "It does seem like a lot of hooah."

Weinstein said that lifting thumbprints could be easier than cracking a password, anyway. Several privacy experts cited a recent case where a Japanese researcher cracked 80 percent of fingerprint readers by lifting a print, then manufacturing a fake finger from gelatin.

"Passwords can be changed," Weinstein said. "People don't really realize what the ramifications would be for the misuse of that data because we haven't had a lot of experience with that (situation)."

Computer security consultant [Richard Smith](#) said that asking students to log in with a print is not a danger by itself.

But, he added, "One identifier (like a thumbprint) would make it easier to link databases, like credit card information, etc., together. There's always this concern that when you start matching up these databases, you can find out a lot about the individual."

Paustian insists the encrypted data will not be shared with anyone.

One university official applauded the idea.

"I think these people deserve kudos for trying to raise the bar on security practices," said Michael Corn, associate director for the [University of Illinois](#) Office for Planning and Budgeting.

He said the thumbprint idea was very attractive from a security standpoint, but potential privacy concerns of students and faculty should be addressed also.

In Des Moines, no one has expressed concerns about the plan, Paustian said. But he added, "Students don't know about it yet."

But a brief survey of students revealed that some do not have concerns about sharing their prints, anyway.

"As long as the institution takes really good care to protect that information, then I think it would be beneficial," said Karl Lantz, a telecommunications student at West Des Moines. "I've had jobs before where I had to give my thumbprint. This place wouldn't be the first."

Lantz previously worked at a casino in Council Bluffs and was required to give up all 10 prints.

"To tell you the truth, because I'm so lazy, I'd probably like the idea. It would be convenient," said Simona Foica, who will graduate from UC Berkeley in December.

"I wouldn't see it as an infringement of my privacy because I don't feel that I have any privacy within the school system," she said.

"It doesn't really bother me at all," said Miller Huang, a Berkeley student from the Los Angeles area. "It's almost the same thing as a Social Security number."

"I see no harm in it," he added.

Others saw the idea as extreme.

Praja Lakireddy, also a UC student, said, "It seems kind of excessive. It seems like an invasion of my privacy."

"Why should it be mandatory? It reduces my choices," Lakireddy said.

"It's a bad idea," said Samari Wyatt, a Berkeley computer science student. "It would bother me."

A number of businesses have experimented with using biometrics, like Dollar Rent a Car and U-Haul. In fact, in some areas of the country, customers must submit their thumbprint to rent a vehicle.

At the Penn Cambria School District and the Welsh Valley School in Pennsylvania, students can [buy lunch](#) with their thumbs.

Said Paustian: "Whether people like it or not, biometrics are coming."