

Electronic card-access system for all campus doors studied



Ananda Samaraweera, a research technician in the Dept. of Animal & Poultry Science, shows how he places his electronic card-key near a scanner in the wall to unlock the door to the protein analysis lab on the sixth floor of the Agriculture Building.

Photo by Lawrence McMahan

The U of S has hired a Saskatoon security company to look at a possible campus-wide electronic card-lock system that would offer high-tech control over access to labs and offices.

And at an April 10 meeting called by Facilities Management Division (FMD) to announce the launch of the feasibility study, 20 representatives of colleges and administrative units heard that an integrated network-based card-access system would not only provide quicker and better control over who gets into what rooms, it would also provide a lot of data tracking who is going where, and when.

Further, they were told that such a system can automatically lock and unlock doors at certain times, provide many levels of access for labs and offices, and give different access to certain areas - access that can be tailored to individual students, faculty, staff or others, such as visiting scholars who may need to be able to get into certain areas just for a week or two.

Cliff Rempel, FMD's head of Project Management, told the meeting the cost of a high-tech card-access system can be very high - anywhere from \$2,000 to \$10,000 per door. But he said a long-term strategy for implementing a system could incorporate the costs of the door locks into overall construction and renovation projects.

Rempel said the need for the feasibility study became apparent when Facilities Management looked at what kind of access systems were needed in the new buildings now under construction on campus - including the Spinks Addition, the Chemical Engineering Addition, the Thorvaldson renovation, and the VIDO Addition.

There are an estimated 13,000 locking doors on campus and hundreds more coming on-stream in the new buildings.

Rempel said that after a recent call for proposals, FMD has hired Omni-Tech Systems, a local company specializing in integrated security and surveillance systems, to carry out the feasibility study over the next few months.

Omni-Tech President Brad Hewlett told the April 10 meeting he will try to talk with all interested U of S departments or units in the next two months to gather the needs and wishes of the campus community.

Hewlett wants to know what kinds of access issues exist on campus, what kinds of access systems are already in place, and what concerns or problems people foresee for a new integrated access system.

"The University doesn't want to keep doing small systems (in new buildings or renovation projects)," Hewlett said. "How can we integrate and do one overall system?"

He said his job is "to see if we can come up with a global plan for the University, to see if it's feasible or not to integrate the current types of systems."

Right now there are a variety of lock and access systems, ranging from metal keys (in the majority of campus), to magnetic-strip cards (used for instance in residence doorways since 1996), to modern electronic proximity card-access systems (in use on the sixth floor of the Agriculture Building, for example).

U of S Security Services Director Bob Ferguson said the study of a new electronic access system "is overdue". He told the meeting his special constables doing campus patrolling at night "are going out with 10 lbs. of keys and a handful of cards - and it's getting to the ridiculous point."

Ferguson also noted the security benefits of the "volumes of audit information" that card-access systems can provide. Hewlett said it is possible, for instance, to know whose card was used to get into a room just before a computer was stolen. And systems can be set up so that security cameras start recording when a certain door is unlocked at a certain time, or when a door is unlocked by certain people, he said.

College of Agriculture Manager of Administration and Finance Colleen Romuld told the meeting there were some problems during introduction of the electronic card-access

system in the Agriculture Building, including questions of adequate training and support from local suppliers, staff using the system properly, and the cost of cards.

"One problem is that departments insisted they wanted card access, but people often don't close the doors. And, we don't pay for keys (for old-style doors), but we do pay for cards," she said.

It amounts to a fair bit of administrative work, yet "I can't see each college or department hiring a person to manage card access."

Hewlett replied that one outcome of his study may be a recommendation that the University would need to hire three or four staff centrally to manage the card access system across campus.

Information Technology Services (ITS) staff at the meeting said some units, like theirs, have very particular needs for a high level of closely monitored security for sensitive computer equipment. Server & Database Manager Jorgen Madsen said, for instance, ITS currently has a small stand-alone computer-controlled card-access system for its offices in the Administration Building. Access needs like this, though, call up questions like the related need for emergency power supply to ensure they can always gain access to their essential equipment.

Rempel and Hewlett said the U of S should keep up with current access systems and technology, and this study will address that. They pointed out that some other institutions on campus, like the Agriculture & Agri-Food Canada Research Centre building and the Canadian Light Source (CLS) synchrotron, already have sophisticated electronic card-access systems.

And Ferguson added that in the United States some major research grants to universities are conditional on there being a high level of security for the labs where the research is being conducted.

Rempel said the scope of Omni-Tech's feasibility study could increase to take in all the concerns and questions the campus community may have about the card-access issue. For instance, Facilities Management knows there will be security concerns for artwork that will be displayed in the College Building after its upcoming renovation - so Hewlett has been asked to include that matter in his study.

Hewlett's company has consulted on security for a number of facilities including Edmonton International Airport, the Canadian Armed Forces air base in Moose Jaw, and the CLS and Agriculture Canada buildings on campus.

Rempel says, "We welcome any comments from the campus community" on the card access issue. Comments, concerns or questions should be directed by e-mail to Brad Hewlett at: bhewlett@omni-techsys.com