

Blunt Advice for Freshmen

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Recently I responded to a journalist's requests for top suggestions on what college students should know about information technology and security. Here are my responses. Pass them on to kids you know.

So you're going to college in a month? Here are some brutal observations about your use of information technology.

- 1) Securing your information as you head to college involves six fundamental aspects of information:
 - a) Confidentiality – think about who should know what about you. Do you really want to post pictures of yourself apparently breaking the law (e.g., through under-age alcohol consumption) so that anyone – including non-friends, professors, and potential employers have access to the pictures?
 - b) Control – once you reveal information, who will be able to use it without your permission? Kids who use sexting and send their “friends” nude pictures of themselves can discover those pictures sent all around a complete circle of strangers as the original recipient boasts or his or her sexual conquest. If you send a terrible e-mail full of anger at someone else (like a teacher), how do you know it won't be distributed without your permission and cause real problems for everyone?
 - c) Integrity – if you forward crap about the end of the world or how eating potato chips with ketchup will kill you to your friends without actually checking to see if the info is correct (e.g., by consulting SNOPE.COM), what do you think your reputation will be like when the truth comes out? And if you write or spread lies about named people, did you know you could be sued for libel? How's that going to look on your resume?
 - d) Authenticity – hmm, your buddies want to use your computer – and you let them sign on as you! So what happens when they send a “joke” to the White House using your name and threat to kill the President? I'll tell you what happens: you get a visit from the Secret Service within a few hours. Don't EVER let someone use your identity for ANYTHING!
 - e) Availability – my dog may not have eaten my homework, but my computer crashed and wiped out my essay. Yeah, right. We professors hear it all the time – but we always ask, “So where are your backups?” Backups – copies taken at different times – preferably with different version numbers on your homework files – can not only save your ass when your disk drive crashes, they can even prove that YOU wrote the essay your roommate just STOLE and presented as her own work, resulting in an accusation of plagiarism against YOU.
 - f) Utility – make sure you check with your profs about how they want electronic work submitted. It's not going to do you a bit of good to send in a PDF document if the prof explicitly

asked for only DOCX, DOC, RTF or ODT files.

- 2) A computer virus / worm / Trojan can ruin your whole day – or academic term. Always be sure that your computers, notebooks, tablets, and phones are running adequate antimalware software. It's just part of the cost of running those devices – get over it.
- 3) Total strangers who claim in an e-mail that they are sexually attracted to you or have millions of stolen dollars they want to give to you as a commission on money transfers are LYING. The ones telling you that they can cure cancer, change body parts to enormous sizes, instantly improve your sex appeal, and give you thousands of dollars a week for very little work that you can do from home are LYING. Don't get fooled. Use a spam filter for your e-mail and remember what you've heard for years: if it sounds too good to be true, it's probably not true.
- 4) In the USA and some other countries, making, sending or downloading child pornography is a federal crime. That also means that making, sending or storing nude pictures of underage children using your cell phone is a federal crime. DON'T BE STUPID.
- 5) Kids are dying in road accidents – and many of them are found to have been typing text messages on their phones while they were driving. Although you may think that they deserve Darwin Awards for removing themselves from the gene pool, actually they just have underdeveloped prefrontal cortex – and so do you. That means that kids often lack judgement about the risks involved in their chosen behaviour, especially if “everybody else” or “the cool kids” are going it. So keep your head – literally. Text while driving and you have an excellent chance of dying or ending up paraplegic, quadriplegic, or brain-damaged. Sorry kids, it's time to grow up.

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