

Under surveillance

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Andy Gottesman/THE LANTERN

Campus security watches over surveillance cameras in Blankenship Hall. The control room features cameras from all over the university campus..

With more than 500 security cameras covering the campus area, it is likely that every student has passed under the lens of Ohio State Public Safety.

"Our camera monitors, just this past year, have helped the police catch a criminal suspect breaking into vehicles at the vet hospital, suspects who were stealing bikes, and on several occasions people who were vandalizing property," said Ron Balser, director of University Security and Protective Services.

Since the installation of the first cameras in 1989 at the Wexner Center for the Arts, the surveillance operation has expanded as far as the Lazarus building Downtown, and includes campus from the Medical Center to the Gateway.

Until 2005, though, only the Wexner and Medical centers used security cameras.

"Sometime in 2005, technology changed to where you no longer had to run a wire to carry the signal from the camera to the location you were going to monitor," Balser said. "The camera installation costs and the monitoring costs went way down."

Today the entire operation is monitored out of one location in Blankenship Hall, which headquarters OSU Public Safety.

The system has allowed police officers to more efficiently arrest suspects, and has given prosecutors the evidence to convict them. Thanks to this success, there are plans to add more than 200 cameras in the near future.

"Before this past year we were getting four or five requests a year for camera footage, and today we are receiving that many requests in a month," Balser said.

Police officials and prosecutors are not the only ones who use the security cameras, though; the system has recently broken into the realm of academia as well.

With the help of some of his doctoral students, professor Jim Davis of the Department of Computer Science and Engineering at OSU is developing a system known as "Smart Surveillance."

While most commercial monitoring software produces flat, panoramic images, this new technology captures a 360-degree view from the camera.

This software will allow security staff to develop a better sense of typical events on and around campus. It will then be easier to recognize atypical circumstances and maintain constant footage of potential suspects.

"If you're doing something strange, we want to be able to detect that and figure out what's going on," Davis said.

Balser said that the current monitoring system is a cost-effective way to fight crime. "We, at Public Safety, would have had to drastically increase the number of security and police officers without them," he said.

Students at branch campuses, including Wooster, should expect new monitoring systems in the near future, Balsar said.

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