

**THESIS TOPIC APPLICATION AND PROSPECTUS**

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SPEAR PHISHING: Detection and Control Among Claflin University Students

**Thesis Title:**  \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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**Anticipated Graduation Date:**

THESIS STATEMENT

Phishing is the most popular attack vector for criminals and therefore poses a significant threat to all Internet users and is difficult to defend against [1]. It is, therefore, crucial to examine the awareness of this technique, to design and distribute awareness education.

**INTRODUCTION**

As many schools and colleges went remote during the pandemic, and some of those schools and colleges remain remote. They are heavily reliant on email to communicate with teachers, advisors, and department heads. Hackers understand this and are taking advantage of the situation. From June through September 2020, Barracuda researchers evaluated over 3.5 million spear-phishing attacks, including attacks against more than 1,000 educational institutions such as schools, colleges, and universities [1]. At Claflin University, I noticed an increase in spear phishing emails beginning in 2020, when the pandemic was at its peak. Students began receiving emails impersonating FAFSA, the Claflin University financial aid department, and career center.

Many people's jobs and finances were unstable because of the pandemic and global restrictions at the time. I was scammed by an email I received that offered me the chance to work as a personal shopper for four hundred dollars every two weeks. Hackers took advantage of students' financial vulnerability to trick them into disclosing personal information. I didn't realize how important and prevalent spear phishing was among other universities until I kept receiving these emails. As an individual, I decided to educate myself to avoid making the same mistake again.

Claflin University only began distributing phishing email training a year after the pandemic, after the university had received multiple phishing email hits. This should have been implemented from the start and made mandatory for all Claflin University students and employees. After educating myself and completing a spear phishing training at my internship at Palo Alto Networks last summer, I noticed that I became more cautious when responding to or clicking on links in my inbox.

I truly think that further education among students can significantly reduce the trend of phishing emails that we continue to receive at Claflin University.

The goals of this research are:

* To check scam susceptibility, if it increases as emails become increasingly tailored to the individual. That is participants are expected to be more likely to be deceived by spear phishing emails than tailored and generic emails
* To what extent can an educational-support tool aid in identifying spear phishing attack emails
* To check the difference in detection/susceptibility to spear phishing attacks for students at non-technical educational university programs compared to students enrolled in technical programs
* To check an association between gender and scam susceptibility: females are expected to exhibit higher scam susceptibility than males

REFERENCES

1. Flouton, M. (2021, October 29). *Threat spotlight: Spear-phishing attacks targeting education*. Barracuda. Retrieved May 22, 2022, from <https://blog.barracuda.com/2020/10/29/threat-spotlight-spear-phishing-education/>