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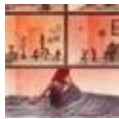
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Colleges enlist apps to combat assaults on campus

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT AUGUST 27, 2014



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GLOBE FILE PHOTO

Williams College has signed on to use the Circle of 6 app and will encourage students to download it this fall.

Amid increasing concern about campus sexual assaults, universities and digital entrepreneurs are offering an array of new mobile apps aimed at helping college students navigate their way out of troubling and dangerous situations.

The apps can allow students to, for example, quickly and discreetly broadcast their exact location if they're lost, ask for help getting home if they're intoxicated, or request a friend to call to interrupt an uncomfortable date.

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Before walking alone late at night, they could let a group of friends and family virtually monitor their journey via GPS, and a timer can be set that will alert companions, emergency officials, or authorities if the clock expires before reaching their destination.

UMass Dartmouth — along with Providence College, Brown University, and about 100 other colleges across the country— recommends its students download an app called Rave Guardian. The schools have partnered with its creators to launch customized versions for their campuses.

Williams College has signed on to use another free app, called Circle of 6, and will encourage students there to download it starting this fall.

Also recommended by administrators at the University of California Los Angeles and used by more than 150,000 individuals, Circle of 6 was a co-winner of a White House challenge two years ago that called on software developers to find ways mobile technology could help prevent dating violence and abuse among young adults.

The contest's other winner was OnWatchOnCampus, another free app that is in discussion with about a dozen colleges across the country about forming official partnerships to deploy customized versions of the software on their campuses.

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“It’s kind of a neat tool box to provide students with mobile security,” said Emil Fioravanti, campus police chief at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, which will introduce such an app to students this fall.

“Is it a silver bullet that’s going to provide 100 percent security? No,” he added. But, “it’s another arrow in the quiver that can be used as a method of personal safety. That’s what it’s really all about.”

Similar apps have emerged. While they can prove helpful in a range of situations, the apps are often designed and marketed as a way to try to prevent sexual assault, dating violence, and harassment.

Not all apps offer the same features, but many include a way to let students alert friends or family before, or instead of, police.

“There’s a growing realization that safety is a community effort,” said Todd Piett, chief product officer of the Framingham-based company behind the Rave Guardian app. “It’s no longer just about police keeping people safe; it’s about having a network of people you can trust helping to keep you safe.”

Nancy Schwartzman, founder and chief executive of New York City-based Circle of 6, said she was sexually assaulted while living abroad shortly after she graduated from college.

“What hit home for me in the design of this app is what I really could have used — if not in the moment, then certainly right after,” she said. “I’d wished I’d had people’s numbers embedded into my phone.”

The apps are seen by many as a portable and potentially more useful version of the blue light emergency call boxes that have long been popular on college campuses.

Among college students, “most cases of rape start at a party or a place where they’re socializing or drinking, so something that lives on their phone, which they’re interacting with constantly, is going to be more effective,” said Scott Berkowitz, president and founder of the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network .

However, advocates and campus safety officials said the older technology should not be discontinued.

“For example, if I were holding someone up, the first thing I’d do is have them give me their phone,” Fioravanti said. Having blue lights and apps as “redundant layers of communication really can’t hurt.”

The apps, too, might not work in every situation. Students don’t always have their cellphone with them, for instance. Their device might not be charged, might not have reception, or might not be working properly.

But just knowing the technology is out there could help improve safety.

“There’s a cognitive effect for the community,” Fioravanti said. “To say, ‘OK, we’re taking steps,’ and also the knowledge for the not-so-nice members of our community to know there’s one more layer of protection out there.”

Officials expect the apps to resonate with today’s tech-savvy students. Administrators also hope the software will spark discussions about sexual assault, inappropriate behavior, respecting others, and how students can keep themselves and their friends safe.

“We’re trying to encourage a campus culture where people look out for each other, whether that’s someone who needs help because they feel uncomfortable or vulnerable, or if someone needs to be told that they’re making someone else feel uncomfortable,” said Meg Bossong, Williams’s sexual assault prevention and response director.

At Providence College, where the Rave Guardian app will debut this fall, administrators will acquaint students with the technology during orientations and at dormitory floor meetings, emergency management director Koren V. Kanadian said. There will be workshops about how to use the app and posters will be plastered around campus explaining how to download it.

Some colleges plan to survey students about the app's helpfulness, and, with help from the app makers, will collect and analyze anonymous data about when and how students use the technology.

The growing number of colleges interested in the apps also signals that, amid increased scrutiny, more administrators are openly acknowledging and working to combat sexual assaults on campus.

"Initially, the idea of college administrators becoming engaged with us was really difficult, and now with pressure from the government and others it's 180 degrees," said Medora Heilbron, brand manager for OnWatchOnCampus. "I'm hoping the pressure continues."

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