

Best Practices for Combating Illegal File Sharing on University Networks

The ultimate goal of any anti-piracy initiative is practical – it reduces illegal activity on the network, increases network efficiency, reduces exposure to viruses, and ultimately reduces operating costs for institutions of higher education. Educational institutions are uniquely positioned to shape student attitudes toward copyright. Below is a list of “best practices” for universities, which provides a step-by-step approach to addressing illegal file sharing on campuses.

I. Adopt Strong Acceptable Use Policy and Clearly Inform Students on Guidelines

The adoption of a strong, clear and consistent university policy defining computer and network usage and ethics that covers students, staff, and faculty creates a basic platform for a successful effort and is a critical first step. The policy should note that the campus network must not be used for illegal or improper purposes such as unlicensed and illegal copying or distribution of software. It should also explicitly prohibit downloading, storing or sharing of copyrighted material – including music, movies, and software - without permission of the copyright owner. Adopting such a policy will help to protect students from identity theft and invasion of privacy due to inadvertent sharing of confidential information on peer-to-peer software. Finally, students should be made aware of this policy through all means available including orientation, email communications, student handbooks, websites, faculty, campus administrators, and student life coordinators.

II. Consistently Enforce Campus Acceptable Use Policy

Consistent enforcement of the campus policy reaffirms that stealing is fundamentally wrong. Network users must understand the rules and the consequences for breaking them. When a violation is detected, the offender must be referred to the proper judicial administrator, just as is done when theft or plagiarism is committed. The easiest way to prevent a student from continuing to break the law is to act seriously and decisively when such violations are initially detected. Once an infringement is detected, the infringing material and P2P software should be removed before logging back onto the campus network and any subsequent violations should entail an escalated response. Records of network usage, sufficient to permit identification of users, should be maintained for a reasonable amount of time.

III. Implement Technologies to Prevent Misuse of Campus Networks

A proactive technology approach has proven to be the most effective solution to deterring piracy. Some schools are blocking particular protocols to stop some or all of the P2P traffic on their networks, realizing that the overwhelming, if not sole, use of these applications on campus is to illegally download and distribute copyrighted works. There are several off-the-shelf, proactive applications (e.g., developed by vendors such as Audible Magic, Enterasys, and Red Lambda) that help campuses control network usage, define the scope of campus network bandwidth usage, and deter illegal P2P activity. These applications help maintain the integrity, security, and legal use of school computing systems without compromising student privacy.

IV. Facilitate Access to Convenient, Inexpensive, Legal Alternatives

Adoption and sign up rates for legitimate on-line music and movie services by students is highest when the institution has first reduced the availability of illegal file-sharing, thus developing the thirst for legal content. Without first addressing the illicit use of P2P systems on campus with technical measures, it is extremely difficult for legitimate services to take root. If students have unfettered access to enormous amounts of pirated content, no service—regardless of pricing or content offerings—will be successful. There are a variety of different participation plans available to schools. Ruckus, for example, is funded through advertising and is completely free to users. Adoption of these services can reinforce an institution’s commitment to fostering legal and ethical behavior among its students.

Conclusion

The ideal university anti-piracy approach is a combination of a clear campus policy, consistent enforcement, and effective use of technology, along with convenient access to legal alternatives. Universities showing success in addressing the issue of illegal downloading on campus networks are using a combination of practices including (a) educating students about the campus policy, (b) enforcing the policy on the campus network, (c) sending automatic notices informing users that their activity is not anonymous and that the infringing material must be removed before logging back onto the network, (d) prohibiting use of file-sharing systems predominately used for unauthorized sharing of copyrighted content on the university’s local area network, and, most important of all, (e) adopting a technological solution (e.g., in-house methods of blocking infringing transmissions and/or blocking and filtering technologies offered in the marketplace by companies such as Audible Magic, Enterasys, and Red Lambda).