

The Crimson White

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New Antiterrorism software warns U.S.

UA CARE Lab develops new program to connect pre-terrorist actions together

By Erin Lee, Staff Reporter

The terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in 2001 might have been prevented if a computer program the University is developing had already been implemented, one UA researcher says.

The UA Critical Analysis Reporting Environment Research and Development Lab received a nearly \$1 million grant from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to develop an online information system to alert law enforcement officers about suspicious preludes to terrorist acts.

Allen Parrish, director of CARE Lab and associate professor of computer science, said Mohammed Atta, a terrorist who flew an American Airlines airplane into the North Tower of the World Trade Center on 9/11, could have been identified earlier if the system they are now developing was used then.

Atta was pulled over for a traffic violation in Tamarac, Fla., in April 2001. He was also cited for driving without a license. In May of that year, he eventually got a Florida driver's license.

Parrish said their research looks at how to share information about potential terrorist events. If a law enforcement officer observes suspicious activity that could be part of a terrorist plot, that information would be shared with the appropriate authorities on a secure Web site, he said.

For example, if a student happens to buy several thousand dollars worth of fertilizer and a police officer think this is "suspicious," he can input that information into a computer, where law enforcement officers across the country will be able to see it.

If other "suspicious" activities occur elsewhere, law enforcement officers can locate that information on the Web site, which would only be accessible to law enforcement agencies, and determine if these acts are a part of a terrorism ring.

Parrish said the program would give everyone a greater degree of protection because law enforcement officers will be more efficient and effective, and said he wants it to become a model for other states to adopt. The University is only one of 12 institutions in the nation that received a grant to conduct research for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

"This program allows you to put a lot of facts together in the hopes that law enforcement officers can prevent something really bad from happening," Parrish said.

He said the CARE Lab shares a \$990,298 grant with the Alabama Criminal Justice Information Center, the Alabama Emergency Management Agency and the Alabama Department of Homeland Security.

He said details have not been finalized on what information will be available on the Web site. But the program will be tested in six months and will be fully implemented in a year, Parrish said.

Jack Pappas, a junior majoring in engineering and physics, is working with the CARE Lab to develop the antiterrorism software. The lab is also working on a program allowing court systems across Alabama to share domestic violence information.

"This program makes everything more streamlined," Pappas said. "Instead of paperwork taking a week to process, now it might only take a day."

Matthew Hudnall, a senior programmer analyst with the CARE Lab, said the lab was instrumental in developing the Law Enforcement Tactical System Web site.

He said this program integrates information databases throughout the state, which law enforcement officers can use to search for suspected criminals.

The LETS Web site includes a search engine for law enforcement officers to type in keywords in order to narrow a search. For example, when Hudnall typed "Erin" and "Mobile" into the program, 74 entries appeared. This means the program found 74 people in Mobile with the name Erin.

Hudnall said the current LETS Web site only accesses individuals with an Alabama driver's license or car tag.

The antiterrorism program the lab will develop for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security will be based on the existing site.

Nearly 6,000 Alabama law enforcement officers, including the Tuscaloosa Police Department, use the LETS Web site, Hudnall said.

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