

Campuses swimming in flood of infringement notices from RIAA

As the school year winds down, the RIAA is sending out a flood of copyright infringement notifications to schools. The group says its business as usual, but campus IT workers tell Ars that the increased workload due to the notices is "daunting."

Colleges and universities around the country are seeing a significant increase in the number of copyright infringement notices that they receive from the RIAA. Schools that typically get a handful of notices in a month are now seeing several times those in a single week. The RIAA says it isn't doing anything differently, but school IT administrators are not thrilled about the extra work the notices entail.

"We have seen an increase, although it pales compared to most schools," St. Cloud State IT security coordinator Darrin Printy told Ars. "Normally, we only get about a dozen per year; now we are getting about four to six notices a week."

The story is the same at larger schools, according to the "Chronicle of Higher Education", which first reported the increase. At the University of Cincinnati, the number of notices has jumped to 13 in the past two weeks, instead of the usual one or two notices per month. George Washington University has received 123 notices in the past week, compared to the usual five to ten.

"We have seen a large up-tick as well," Brian Rust, who works in the Office of the CIO at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, told Ars. "I'm told it started when we received a new batch of six pre-settlement letters two weeks ago. Since then, the instance of cease and desist letters has greatly increased as well."

One result of the increase in notices is an increased workload for university IT staff. "For my coworkers, the increase is immense," University of Wisconsin-Madison University Housing network systems administrator Marc Bourgeois told Ars. "For the people at the university that communicate with copyright holders, I'd imagine the increase in workload has been somewhat daunting."

RIAA spokesperson Cara Duckworth says that the group hasn't made any changes in procedures, but does hint that the record labels are now better able to detect infringement. "We are constantly striving to improve upon our technological ability to detect theft," Duckworth told Ars.

Although the RIAA has been eying campus P2P use for some time, the group only began sending out settlement letters in February 2007. Those letters are generally addressed to the user of an IP address at a college; if the school chooses to figure out who was using the IP address at that time and forwards it to the student, he or she is eligible for a reduced infringement settlement from the RIAA.

At the one-year anniversary of its campus enforcement program, the RIAA had sent out 5,404 settlement letters (another 569 letters went out earlier this month). The first 5,003 letters led to over 2,300 students choosing to settle. Another 2,465 were sued by the group.

Back in February, RIAA president Cary Sherman told Ars that he believed the schools were responding to the issue "in a helpful way," but the sudden and unexplained increase in copyright infringement notices may be an indication that the RIAA doesn't think colleges are being as helpful as they could. The hope may be that, frustrated by the increased labor necessary to deal with the influx of notices, university IT departments will decide to come down hard on P2P users.

Some schools, like Ohio University, have already cracked down on P2P use. Others, like the University of Oregon, have responded harshly to the RIAA's lawsuits and are battling to quash the RIAA's "unduly burdensome" subpoenas.

Unfortunately for just about everyone involved, there doesn't appear to be any end in sight. Sherman has said that the RIAA will keep up its campus P2P campaign "for as long as the marketplace demand[s]." P2P usage may be flat, but it's not decreasing. In fact, the popularity of P2P app LimeWire continues to grow and traffic on BitTorrent—which is used for sharing entire albums as well as individual songs—is up.