REIMAGINING KEY CONTROL FOR THE EVOLVING CAMPUS

BY TRICIA BUTLER

In the current college environment, facilities planning for higher education campuses can be volatile. Campus leaders are navigating fluctuating enrollment numbers, budget cuts, aging facilities, legislative changes, and more. For campuses to flourish, facilities planners must re-evaluate their budgets and optimize space utilization, reimagine a more collaborative campus community, and prioritize the safety of students and employees. As campuses change, key and access control need to evolve with them. Anyone responsible for managing access to various areas throughout the campus should ensure the key and access control method they use supports, rather than hinders, campus operations. This article covers three main areas to consider in such planning.

Space Utilization and Secure, Flexible Access

Space and asset utilization has been a challenging aspect of managing a higher education campus since the start of the pandemic. During Covid's peak activity, campuses remained largely empty, leaving hundreds of square feet unused. Now, as lockdown measures ease, some campuses have packed residence halls and classrooms, while others are dealing with declining enrollment and implementing permanent distance learning programs.

Like the students who have opted for virtual classrooms instead of physical ones, some campus staff workers are transitioning to a permanent hybrid work model, leaving office space underutilized. Now, facilities planners and campus leaders are facing the challenge of predicting how much space is actually necessary, optimizing existing square footage, and adding or updating buildings as needed.

In the 2021 Campus Facilities Inventory Report, more than half of school leaders said they see a need for more flexible staff and faculty offices. Such flexibility means that students, contractors, faculty, and staff all require secure access tailored to their individual needs. To address these access requirements, some campuses use electronic door locks. However, not all institutions have the budget to implement electronic locks on every single door throughout campus, especially if doing so requires retrofitting aging facilities.

How can people have the keys they need without compromising security? Electronic key control systems can help bridge the gap between high-tech access control measures and buildings that use traditional metal keys. Keys—and even fobs and access cards—can be secured in a central location, where authorized users can remove the keys they need, giving them flexible access to campus spaces. For example, a professor needing access to a lab or office space for which they do not have a permanently assigned key can log in to the system, check out the key they need, and return it when done.

Just as electronic door locks provide an audit trail of door access, key control systems allow those responsible for key control to assign authorized key holders. The system automatically records who has accessed, removed, and returned keys. As the campus evolves, facilities planners should prioritize how they will provide flexible access to campus spaces without compromising security.

Campus-Wide Collaboration and Standardized Policies

One of the unexpected positive outcomes of the pandemic is that it has forced departments across campus to collaborate to solve problems. Now is a perfect opportunity for those

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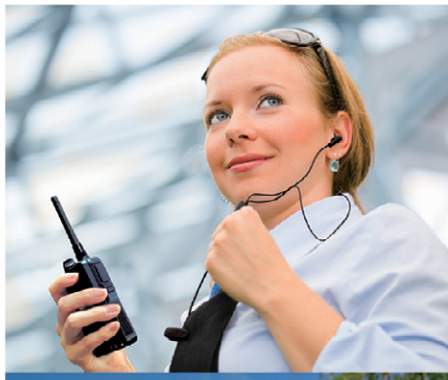

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departments to continue that momentum and work together to create overarching key and access control procedures.

Different areas of a campus often have their own separate key control protocols. However, areas such as residence life, the physical plant, and campus security are interdependent. One way these departments can team up is by developing a campus-wide key control policy and system. With fewer differences in policies, processes, and technology, people are less likely to make mistakes, especially if staff members have a reason to use keys in multiple areas of the campus.

Using the same type of systems throughout the institution also helps enforce the key and access control policy. By automatically authenticating users and specifying which user roles are authorized to check out certain keys, people are less likely to remove keys or access areas without authorization. In addition, overdue key alerts will help ensure that people return keys in a timely manner. With these measures in place, campus leaders will be better able to identify, report, and correct safety and security concerns.

When evaluating how the campus manages access in different departments, facilities planners and campus leaders should consider the following questions:

- Is there an overarching access control and key security plan that holds all areas of the university to the same standards?
- Does the policy regulate the creation of master keys and fobs?
- Are all key holders adequately trained on how to handle keys?
- Do all students and staff know how to request a key or access to flexible spaces?
- Is there a routine process for collecting former employees' keys, fobs, and access cards and revoking their access privileges on their last day?

Creating a campus-wide key management plan and process leads to less risk, miscommunication, and confusion.

Risk Management and Key Security

As institutions begin to use space differently and implement technology to accommodate the evolving campus, risk management will also change. However, with limited capital available for facility improvements, campus leaders will have to decide how much risk they're willing to assume and prioritize what solutions to invest in.

Protecting physical keys is an important part of campus risk management and physical security strategy. In a time of shrinking

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enrollment and budget, the reputation damage and expensive rekeying costs from a physical security breach would be detrimental.

Electronic key control enforces physical security by:

- Securing keys and any pre-programmed fobs or access cards
- Protecting staff and students
- Creating automatic audit trails of key access
- Helping prevent physical security breaches
- Storing and tracking spare physical keys for electronic locks in case of a cyberattack or power outage
- Providing vendors with secure, trackable access to keys
- Sending automatic alerts to system administrators if a key is not returned on time or if a user attempts to remove a key they are not unauthorized to use

While every campus will allocate spending differently, helping staff and students feel safe on campus is always worth the investment. Facilities management is more challenging and dynamic than ever, but electronic key control can help bring calm to the chaos. Campuses will be able to provide secure, flexible access to keys, help departments across campus work together, and mitigate security risks.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Tricia Butler is a Senior Field Manager with KeyTrak, Inc. For over two decades, she has helped some of the largest higher education campuses across the western U.S. minimize key management risks and operate more efficiently.

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