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secretive SURVEILLANCE

Police Services installs two cameras at
Student Activities Building,
hoping to catch criminals in the act

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At the far end of the cafeteria, just above a row of vending machines, a little plastic box is affixed to the wall. While students relax and carouse on their lunch hour, this little plastic gadget records every move they make. Another similar device keeps watch over the comings and goings of the

quad in front of the Student Activities Building.

Unbeknownst to most students, Police Services said they have installed two security cameras at Contra Costa College as part of an effort to combat drug sales.

"It's an experiment," Police Services Officer Mariano Bermudez said. "We were advised by concerned students and faculty that there is a vol-

ume of drugs coming through the campus."

The cameras were installed during the first week of October in hopes of catching some of these drug dealers in the act, Bermudez said. One of the cameras also records sound, but Bermudez declined to say which one because it might jeopardize ongoing investigations.

Police Services and administration officials made the decision to install the cameras, Bermudez said. College President Helen Carr refused to comment to The Advocate on the subject, and director of business services

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Mariles Magalong said she did not know who made the final decision.

"It was probably Police Services," Magalong said.

District Police Chief Richard Couser described the criminal activity in the Student Dining Room as "very lightweight."

"You had some drug dealing there," Couser said. "The kids had set up lookouts (to warn of police presence)."

Because it was so difficult to catch a drug dealer in the act, Police Services decided to install the cameras without telling the campus, Bermudez said. However, Lt. Dave Olson said the department was not trying to be sneaky about the cameras.

"It's no secret," Olson said. "If we wanted to sneak cameras in there, you wouldn't see them."

Police staff were nonchalant about the devices, saying they were perfectly acceptable law enforcement tools.

"We put the cameras in public places," Bermudez said. "It's no big deal."

However, Bermudez said he hopes the cameras will prevent criminal activity.

"If I am a bad guy and I see a camera, I'm not going to commit a crime there," Bermudez said. "This is a way to deter dope sales. It's pretty simple."

Olson said he thought the cameras were a good idea, but had some reservations about the devices.

"I'm not sure I like cameras anyway because it gives you that 'Big Brother' feeling," Olson said.

Reaction among students in the cafeteria ranged from shrugged shoulders to raised eyebrows.

"I never bothered to look (for cameras)," sophomore Todd Eagle said. "I never planned on robbing the place." He said he was impressed with how inconspicuous the cameras were after noticing them.

"It looks pretty good," he said. "I never even saw them."

However, Eagle said he was skeptical about the effectiveness of the devices.

"It's pretty tough to catch drug dealers," he said. "How are they going to catch them, whether they pass (the drugs) in a handshake or whatever?"

Maria Zhab, a cafeteria employee, said she was happy to have cameras on campus.

"That's great," she said. "We're safer now." Zhab said she had never felt unsafe or witnessed any illegal acts in her four months behind the dining room counter.

"Drug dealing? I don't think so," she said.

Sophomore Jarmon Kelly said the cameras would not change his behavior, but that the addition of cameras was disturbing.

"It doesn't make me feel any safer," Kelly said. "It's just a constant reminder of Big Brother. Do I have to go outside to have a personal conversation?"

ASU President Erik Suarez said he was surprised, but would like to see cameras in more build-

ings on campus, like the Applied Arts and Humanities buildings.

Bermudez said the introduction of cameras could be a sign of things to come.

"Hopefully this will lead to having more cameras, like in the parking lots and in common public places," Bermudez said.

Cameras are especially useful in an understaffed department such as Police Services, in which only one full-time officer is on duty at any one time, Bermudez said. The district may be hiring more officers in the future, but CCC will get one more officer at most, Bermudez said.

The cost of the cameras, which Bermudez said was less than \$200, came out of the Police Services budget.

More cameras would have to be paid for by the Contra Costa Community College District, as well as staff to watch the monitors, Bermudez said.

Bermudez said he hopes the district will foot the bill in the future, although "nothing's been allocated" by the district. Currently, Olson said, "we don't have enough people to have someone sit around and watch the monitor."

In the two weeks since the cameras were installed, no crimes have been observed, Olson said.

"Most of the people on campus are pretty cool," Olson said.

Couser was cautious about the financial and legal implications of widespread camera use.

"(Having) cameras all over campus is a great expense," Couser said. "And when you have cameras, there is the expectation that someone is watching." If nobody is manning the monitors, Couser said, "It could be a liability."

As an example, Couser recalled a scenario, unrelated to the college district, in a parking garage in which a woman was sexually assaulted in view of a security camera.

"She figured the police would be there any moment," Couser said, "but nobody was watching the monitor, and they never showed up."