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Just your friendly hacker

Di Fabio's job since January 2004 has been to make sure that never happens at NSU. On a hack-proof scale of 1 to 10, Oladipupo puts Norfolk State at 9. "There's no system that's perfect," he said. For his part, Di Fabio said,

"When we first put in the firewall, our logs were all red. 'Access denied.' Six months later, the logs were all green. The people trying to get in are not even trying anymore."

– Andrea Di Fabio

"I'm very confident. Every day a new virus comes out, but I think we're doing the best that we can."

When Di Fabio arrived at the university, "I wouldn't say it was a complete mess," he said. "I would say there were viruses crawling around and people accessing our system from China and all sorts of places."

Colleges, he said, have had mixed opinions on firewalls: Do you increase security at the expense of limiting access? Di Fabio and other NSU administrators chose to install a firewall in March 2004, followed by an intrusion prevention system in February of this year.

The university's network was split in two, between students and professors, "so students cannot get into servers that aren't meant to be for students."

E-mails that come into the university now must clear six gateways.

Illegal file downloading is immediately blocked and signaled by a red bar on one of several charts that appear on the screen of Di Fabio's computer. On a recent afternoon, the charts looked quiet, except for one measuring Spyware attacks, which registered more than a dozen bars.

Di Fabio measures his success in another color-coded way.

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Growing up in Rome, Di Fabio loved to tinker with remote controls, ham radios and TVs. When he became a teenager, he got into computers.

"I always wanted to figure out how it worked and how to make it do what I wanted it to do," Di Fabio said. "I never was interested in playing games."

He moved to New York in 1991 to study English and ended up attending Old Dominion University, where he received a bachelor's degree in computer engineering and a master's in computer science.

Before coming to NSU, he worked at Old Dominion and, most recently, at the Virginia Beach office of Business Engine, a software company based in California.

Di Fabio's title at Norfolk State is "lead information security officer/engineer," which involves a lot more than blocking hackers.

He's working on the university's SpartanShield program, which allowed students for the first time this year to register for classes online. Next year, he hopes to expand it so that students can pay online.

Di Fabio also will tend to the supercomputer that will adorn the university's Research and Innovation to Support Empowerment, or RISE, technology center, which is to open next year. He is involved in the

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– Andrea Di Fabio, on his early childhood experiences with computers

search for a campus police chief and is helping plan Educause’s next “security professionals conference” in 2006 . As for his ethical-hacking triumph at this year’s conference, Di Fabio shrugged it off. He had an advantage, he said, since they used UNIX computers, the type he had played with as a youth. “I guess it was a good combination of knowledge and luck,” he said.

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