AT&T Business

Defending higher education: L.A. Pacific University relies on AT&T Cybersecurity

- **Business needs** - The university needed a better way to understand, anticipate, and neutralize network security threats.

- **Networking solution** - An AT&T cyber risk assessment and penetration test helped the school determine where to enhance security.

- **Business value** - Better understanding of potential vulnerability, increased endpoint security

- **Industry focus** - Higher education

- **Size** - 3,200 students

About Los Angeles Pacific University

Los Angeles Pacific University (LAPU) is an accredited, faith-based university. It offers convenient and affordable associate, bachelor's, and master's degrees to students of all backgrounds. As part of the Azusa Pacific University System, LAPU provides a high-quality, faith-integrated education that is intentionally accessible, career relevant, and committed to student success.

The situation

To protect its networks and staff endpoints, L.A. Pacific University wanted to understand and address the threats to its network environment.

Solution

AT&T Business performed a cybersecurity risk assessment and a network penetration test to help recognize cyberthreats to LAPU's systems, networks, data, and information. This helped the school identify areas for improvement and add the necessary protection. Based on the findings, the university opted to deploy SentinelOne Endpoint Security to protect the university's network endpoints. LAPU also added a vulnerability management solution from AT&T Business.

Designed and built for working adults

L.A. Pacific University is a fully online institution designed to meet the needs of adult learners for accessibility, flexibility, and community. The university's three-semester-per-year program enables students to complete degree programs 50% faster than at traditional schools.

The university started as the online adult division of Azusa Pacific University but spun off several years ago. "We were specifically designed and built to serve working adults," said Andy Benis, LAPU Associate Vice President of Marketing and Outreach. "We are very deliberate about keeping tuition low, primarily for accessibility. We believe higher education has gotten too expensive and too restrictive for many folks."

Benis said LAPU is California's most affordable online Christian university, providing an education that is convenient, flexible, and diverse. "We have a large Hispanic and African-American population, which reflects the Southern California demographics," he added.

LAPU has been ranked among the nation's Top 10 Military Spouse Friendly® Online Schools in the U.S. for 2021-2022 and honored by the Best Christian Workplace Institute for the quality of its work environment. It has also received numerous Omni Awards for excellence in media design.

Building community among online students

The majority of LAPU students work while they're attending college. The university has taken this into account and structured its programs to meet students' unique needs. Officials understand that more people have mobile devices than laptops. And because smartphones are the preferred device of many students, the university has created an innovative app designed to make courses and student services fully accessible on smartphones.

IT Director Jared Robison said students had been asking for a way to connect more easily with the university. The *myLAPU* app lets them stay on top of events, classes, and assignments. The app also notifies students of important dates, deadlines, and announcements.

"The app creates opportunities for chats and forums, and it's actually building a lot of community among students," Robison said. "We see it as part of the university's spirit of innovation."

Student-centric education

myLAPU is just the latest innovation at a school that has upended the conventional college experience, Benis said. "In a traditional university setting, the focus of a particular course is the professor who designed that course. It's his content." In some traditional schools, according to Benis, professors don't think about adapting the curriculum to meet students' needs.

"We flipped the model from professor-centric to student-centric," Benis noted. "We're very focused on how people learn best; content is built around how they learn."

In addition, all LAPU students are assigned a personal success coach to work with them from day one through graduation. The coaches assist with academic advising, transferring credits, and helping with anything else that arises. "They're sort of the one-stop shop for everything a student might need, including encouragement and emotional support," Benis said.

Exploring ways to protect the infrastructure

Like many nonprofit organizations, LAPU uses its resources carefully, a fact that was apparent to Robison when he joined the university. The IT team was very lean, and Robison found that security policies and procedures were not well documented.

The university's three-semester structure created additional challenges for his department. "Most traditional universities have summers off," he said. "So, it's easier to implement technology or new systems or processes." LAPU offers classes all year long, so there's no down time during which to make system changes.

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Jared Robison
IT Director,
L.A. Pacific University

"You have to basically keep going and keep protecting your students and staff," Robison said. "We need to make sure our networks are secure and reliable and accessible, so we have to roll out our systems and scale accordingly."

Robison said the LAPU IT department was solid, but he saw a need to increase its focus on security. "LAPU, just like every other university, collects, maintains, and touches sensitive information on a daily basis," he said. He wanted to take every precaution to protect that information.

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As he was addressing ways to enhance network security, the COVID-19 pandemic spread, and employees began to work from home. "Suddenly we had to protect the endpoints of 150 employees who were now working from home," he said. "How do we protect that environment?" Robison called on AT&T Cybersecurity experts to determine the best ways to secure the university's infrastructure.

New policies to enhance security

Evaluating network security requires a deep understanding of an organization's architecture, Robison said. "When you're dealing with security, you need to know a baseline. You have to know what's going on in your environment. You can't improve on what you don't know."

AT&T Business performed a Cybersecurity Posture Assessment using the National Institute of Standards and Technology cybersecurity framework to identify areas of improvement. A Cybersecurity Posture Assessment is a valuable first step for any organization wanting to identify where they're at, what they're missing, and what they need to do to increase their cybersecurity maturity level.

The posture assessment integrates all facets of cybersecurity into one comprehensive assessment approach. AT&T Business was able to provide an overall view of the school's internal and external security posture. This gave LAPU a cybersecurity roadmap, detailing quick-win recommendations and long-term strategic goals.

Penetration testing, or pen testing, showed LAPU the strength of its network defenses. "Pen testing of some key systems showed that our network was actually locked down fairly well," Robison said. "We don't have a security specialist on staff, so the AT&T consultation gave me a lot of confidence in our network."

Robison continued: "They did show us areas in which we can improve by putting in security procedures. It made us focus on the need for training." Now, for instance, the university has tightened the policies for handling sensitive documents and educated staff on the best practices.

With the arrival of COVID-19, AT&T recommended rolling out security training more quickly than planned. "They told us to put the new processes in place to protect the organization, and so we did," Robison said.

Next-gen endpoint protection

LAPU had confidence in the recommendations from AT&T Business, especially after a parallel assessment resulted in similar results. "We had a financial audit at the same time AT&T performed the cybersecurity audit," Robison said. "Each organization provided recommendations and the five major ones lined up. This validated our plan and made it easier to get approvals for the budgets to address those recommendations."

LAPU upgraded its cyber defense with SentinelOne Endpoint Security. "It makes our data significantly more secure," he said. Automated threat prevention, detection, and response help to protect the university's devices. The next-gen endpoint solution automatically terminates malicious processes, disconnecting and quarantining infected devices.

"It's kind of the living, breathing artificial intelligence of your network," Robison said. "It logs and tracks the whole entire process and significantly reduces the risk of malware, ransom attacks and similar events, in real time, based on what's going on in the world. It really does improve our network significantly."

A cybersecurity roadmap

The cybersecurity experts from AT&T Business provided assistance that went well beyond what LAPU expected. "The team that did our pen test was very informative,

educating us about the process," Robison said. "They actually took the time to explain what they were doing, which wasn't the case with other pen tests where they just do their thing and come back with a report."

AT&T also provided a cybersecurity roadmap to help LAPU continue to improve its network security. "Since we're a small university, we don't have huge budgets, so we do a lot of what I call 'onion layer security,'" Robison said. "You can't do everything at once, so you want to create layer upon layer of security. Ideally, every year you add a layer or two and adapt as technology adapts."

Based on the cybersecurity risk assessment, Robison plans to add AT&T Managed Threat Detection and Response (MTDR), which improves defenses against advanced threats. "One of the cornerstones of the assessment was documenting our policies and procedures and getting log management in place so we could proactively monitor the networks with MTDR," he said.

AT&T Business also recommended a Qualys vulnerability management program, an advanced solution that continuously detects and protects against attacks. "There's really a lot on the roadmap to address the top threats," Robison said, "but these things are the big-ticket items."

He also hopes to explore more fully how students and staff can work from cellphones, how to protect students' data and devices, and secure more of the university's dev ops and cloud-based solutions.

A peaceful night's sleep

Robison said he is grateful for the assistance AT&T Business provided to LAPU. "I would highly recommend a cybersecurity consultation from AT&T," he said. "There are a lot of benefits to it, from any standpoint." One of these is peace of mind, which is a difficult concept for most IT managers.

"Lots of them go home at night and wake up in a sweat, worrying that their firewall has been compromised, or their system went down, and they did not have system backups," he said. "So when you're new to an organization, you want to get an assessment besides your own to validate what's happening."

"AT&T Business gave me and the university's upper management a proper cybersecurity roadmap of what needs to happen over the next 18 to 30 months," Robison concluded. "And at that point we would do the assessment again to see what technologies have changed and move from there."