



Degree offered in biometric security

Biometric security identifies people based on unique characteristics

By James Prichard

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GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. - Todd Fortier is banking on the day when ATMs will be required to confirm a user's face, voice or thumbprint before spitting out cash.

Fortier, 19, is seeking a degree in biometric security at Davenport University, one of the first such programs in the nation. He's seen trends in favor of biometrics and is confident he'll be getting into a lucrative field by the time he graduates.

"I think with the advancements in this technology and with how security is becoming a really important issue ... I think there's going to be huge job growth in this field," Fortier said.

About 55 students are enrolled in either the two- or four-year biometric security degree programs at Davenport, a 141-year-old school of 13,500 students with its main campus in Grand Rapids.

Biometric security — which identifies people based on unique personal characteristics — has become more common since the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Government agencies and private businesses are investing in biometric devices that grant or block access after scanning fingerprints, eyes, facial features or vocal patterns.

The industry has grown from barely \$300 million in 2001 to more than \$2 billion last year, said Russ Ryan of the National Biometric Security Project, a nonprofit consulting service.

Fingerprint scanners have been installed at Walt Disney World theme parks in Florida to help block phony tickets. Iris-recognition devices in airports in Amsterdam, Netherlands, and Frankfurt, Germany, are used to help move passengers along.

"Biometrics is the wave of the future. You're seeing fingerprint scanners or readers on every device, from your laptops to your door entry," said Scott Meuser, systems specialist for D/A Central Inc., a 50-year-old security company based in the Detroit suburb of Oak Park.

West Virginia University is the only other college in the country with a degree program in biometrics, officials at the two schools said. Since 2000, West Virginia has offered a bachelor's of science in biometric systems that focuses on the engineering and design of biometric devices.

By contrast, Davenport emphasizes the technology's application in security in business or government. Davenport students are taught how to create security systems — and understand their ethics, said Reid Gough, dean of Davenport's School of Technology.

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