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BY ANNABEL ADAMS

Identification Chips No Bigger Than a Grain of Sand May Aid Campu

College students don't just attend class with a notebook and pen anymore. Some college students walk around campus with hundreds of dollars worth of technology in the form of laptops, iPods, digital cameras and cell phones—items that are hard to recover if stolen.

DataDots, a new product available at the UCI Bookstore, may help police with the recovery of lost and stolen personal property.

"DataDots are little polyester dots about the size of a grain of sand that, when magnified, produce a series of PIN numbers. They're used to find or recover a stolen or lost item," said Ken Walton, regional manager of MicroID Technologies, the distributor of DataDots.

DataDots are placed on personal valuables with a special applicator. The same PIN number is engraved repeatedly on every dot from the same package (they come in packs of no less than 400 dots).

The placement of the dots is entirely up to the individual. The individual registers this PIN number on a database that is accessible to law enforcement at all times. When an item is lost or stolen, the owner reports it as "dotted" to the police who are trained to use a special black light to read the dots whenever they recover stolen property.

"The idea is that thieves don't know the dots are there, unless you want them to," Walton. Said.

One can place several dots in conspicuous places, along with a sticker (included in the kit) that announces that the property is protected by DataDots to work as a theft deterrent. Otherwise, the dots placed in inconspicuous places will go unnoticed to thieves.

San Diego State University was the first state university on the West Coast to offer this product, and UCI is the first UC campus to do so.

MicroID Technologies makes it a practice to "inform, train and help equip [the police] in those areas where DataDots are being actively marketed," said Steven Campbell, the president of the company.

UCI's police department has been supportive of MicroID Technologies and has been trained in DataDot technology.

"We are supportive of any program that can help us recover stolen property," said Paul Henisey, UCI chief of police.

Not all members of the campus community are concerned about personal theft.

Vatana Kang, a fourth-year sociology major, won't be buying DataDots any time soon.

"I think it's just another toy for the paranoid," Kang said.

Paranoia aside, Henisey said that theft is a significant problem at UCI.

"The most common crime on the UCI campus is theft of personal property," Henisey said. "Recovery to the rightful owner is difficult at best. DataDots allows us a better job of tracking personal property to identify who it belongs to. This is a safe campus and county to live in, but that does not mean that crime does not occur."

UCI had a total of 500 property thefts in 2005, Henisey said. This is down from a total of 665 in 2004. Only 28.9 percent of stolen property was recovered in 2005.

Laptops, iPods and cell phones are the three most commonly stolen items, followed by bicycles, stereos and camera equipment.

"Students don't really keep track of every serial number of every product they purchase," Henisey said. Also, marking valuables with personal information, such as driver's license number, allows thieves access to personal identifying information.

Although Walton is confident that thieves would find it near-impossible to remove all DataDots from an item, some students are skeptical that thieves wouldn't get crafty enough to remove them.

"It won't be long before people figure out how to find them and remove them," said Akbar Khan, a fourth-year sociology and political science double major.

Henisey is more optimistic about DataDots' effectiveness.

"I do think [DataDots] will [help us] to track, identify, recover stolen property and in the prosecution of those who steal," Henisey said. "[However], it remains to be seen how effective it is."

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