Blue Lights: Beacons of Safety or Pillars of Antiquity

INTRODUCTION

With the tragedy at Virginia Tech still being fresh on everyone’s mind, safety of the students in the university setting has become an important topic throughout the nation. Illinois State University uses an emergency phone system throughout campus, in order to increase its safety. However, I have been at the University for going on three years, and I did not really know how the emergency phones worked or really even what they did. As a safety device on campus, one would think the university would want to make the student body very aware of the emergency phones. It seemed to me, when I began my research that the university had failed at this endeavor toward campus safety.

CAMPUS SAFETY

Each year the Illinois State University (ISU) police department releases a Crime Report. This report lists all the incidences of crime on the campus by location, nature of the crime, approximate time of the crime, and the sex and age of the people involved. It then compares the ISU crime statistics to those of the town of Normal. In examining the ISU crime reports back seven years, I have realized that ISU is actually as safe as it claims to be, according to the ISU police department. And, overall, it seems that since 2000 the campus has just been getting safer—as the already low incidence of crimes has diminished. When it comes to people being physically harmed, the quad and the area immediately around the quad is the safest. In examining the crime reports, it is actually the residence halls where the most violent crimes happen. So, it makes one ponder, why put emergency
telephones all over campus when it is not the safety of the outdoors that needs improving but that of the residence halls’ that is in need of some revamping?

EMERGENCY TELEPHONES (BLUE LIGHTS)

Universities across the nation have now implemented emergency phone systems in order to increase campus safety. Emergency telephones are meant to be tall enough to be seen from a distance and have a distinguishing light on top (in the case of ISU the light is blue). The phone is actually a box with a button that when pushed connects that person with the university police or a security system. Many of the emergency phone systems also allow the university police to trace a person who is running if they are hitting the emergency telephones along the way. When an emergency telephone is activated the university police are supposed to be able to arrive and assist in five minutes. Illinois State University put the emergency blue lights into use in 1992, referred to as “blue lights” at ISU. The original eighteen emergency blue lights were put in on campus in by a committee made up of ISU engineers, facility management, and the university police. The blue light were put in place in response to a trend in university campus safety and as a proactive step towards campus safety at ISU. There was no one occurrence or crime that spurred their construction. When placed on campus, the committee decided to evenly spread the phones throughout the campus. This way all areas on and around the quad would have a blue light near by. Since 1992 there have been additions to the original 18 making the number of blue lights on the campus 26.

METHODOLOGY:
My research for this paper is based mostly on interviews with 4 current and past students and informal conversation with many others, differing in sex and age, in order to assess their opinions on the blue lights. It also enabled me to get an idea of how informed the ISU student body was about the twenty-six blue lights throughout the campus. I also went to the Chief of the ISU Police. In my interview with him I brought up my findings about the student’s feelings and knowledge about the blue lights on campus in order to get his opinion on the matter. I also used my interview with the Chief of Police to better understand blue light history at ISU.

My research also included examining the ISU website and ISU Crime Reports from the past seven years. While browsing ISU’s website, instead of noticing what was written, I noticed more that there was a lack of information about the blue lights on campus and where it was placed. In order to better understand the history of the blue lights at ISU and how they have been implemented, I went to websites of the other schools in the area (Wesleyan and University of Illinois) and compared.

**FINDINGS:**

On the Illinois State University website there is very little information about the blue lights that occupy the campus. On every other university website I visited there was an easily accessible map that explained where the emergency telephones were located on their campuses. However, the only place on the website or around campus that I could find a map that included blue light locations was a parking map that was given to me by the Chief of Police. It was also strange to me that the only place that had information about the blue lights on the ISU website was in the International Studies page, and even there all that
was said about them was basically that they are there. In comparing ISU with other universities, I found that most other universities had entire pages devoted solely to their emergency telephones, explaining why they are there, what they are, how they are used, etc. After looking at the ISU website I began to interview current and past students.

It was at this point that I began to come across some very conflicting opinions on the blue lights between ISU students and the Chief of Police. When interviewing students I found an overall distrust of the ISU blue light system. Of the five students that I interviewed or spoke to informally every one of them doubted their functionality and stated that in an emergency it probably would not even cross their mind to seek out a blue light. Jim illustrated this in saying, “does it make me feel safer? Yes, but I don’t think I would ever use them.” In saying this Jim brought up an interesting dichotomy. Even though many of the students that I interviewed expressed doubt in the efficiency of the blue lights, three of the four of them, at the same time, also stated that their presence made them feel safer. One student said she felt “as if they are watching over us.” I also found that many people were not well informed about how the blue lights work and their many different functions. Some of the students I talked to expressed anger at the inefficiency of the blue lights on campus. One student angrily asked, “If I am being chased and press the blue light button what then, do I just stand and wait, does the bad guy just disappear, or does the blue light create a force field around me?” Although this student was being sarcastic in his possible happenings after the activation of the blue lights, he was expressing the same feelings that many of the students interviewed had regarding the blue lights. I realized this even further while talking to the Chief of Police and finding out how little I even knew about them even after my research. Of the students I talked to, most had never heard of
anyone putting the blue lights to use. The couple of students that did have related stories were disappointed and said that it furthered their distrust of the blue lights. One of the stories told was from a student who witnessed the use of a blue light from her window while living in the residence halls. A person who was holding an apparently unconscious person pressed the emergency telephone button and left the unconscious person at the light, however no one ever came to assist. About an hour later the unconscious person woke up and just walked away.

The Chief of the ISU police has some very different ideas about blue lights on campus. The Chief of Police stated that blue lights are very effective. I was surprised to hear that the ISU police test the blue lights on a regular basis, especially after hearing some of the student stories. I was also surprised to hear that when a blue light is activated it should take an officer five minutes to get to the location. I was surprised because in an emergency five minutes is a very long time. The Chief of Police maintained throughout the interview that it was better that the blue lights on campus were not regularly used; it just means that the campus is safe. While crime statistics show this to be true; I could not help but feel that he was being a bit of an idealist since most crimes do not happen on the quad and surroundings. He pointed out that the blue lights have multiple uses for the blue lights, such as use by people during the day when accidents occur. The contrast between the Chief of Police’s perspective and the students’ made me realize even further how little the ISU student body, myself included, knew about the emergency phones. For instance, I had never even considered that the blue lights might be used in the daylight if someone passes out, there is a bike accident, etc. This may just be me being naïve, but I thought it illustrated my thoughts on student knowledge very well.
ANALYSIS:

Symbols, as defined in Anthropology: The Human Challenge, are “signs, sounds, emblems and other things that represent something else in a meaningful way.” Through this research I have come to see blue lights more as symbols of safety rather than effective tools. In fact, this was their purpose from the beginning, to show that the campus was proactive about student safety. I have been led to believe this due to overall student opinion, location of the blue lights on campus and when and how the University informs the public about the blue lights.

In talking to students I have come across a strange trend. Not only did most of the students I talked to doubt the effectiveness of the blue lights most of them also expressed overall disinterest and a lack of information concerning the blue lights. Many also doubted that they would ever use them even in an emergency situation. However, their presence leaves many students feeling safer, as if the area is watched over. Even the location of the blue lights on campus leads me to believe that they are symbols of safety rather than tools. Blue lights are located on and around the quad. There are no blue lights or equivalents in the residence halls. However, it is the residence halls and not the areas surrounding the quad that have the highest crime statistics. Having the blue lights on and around the quad makes them more readily visible to the public. This as I have said before, gives the public a feeling of safety. Because even though most instances of crime happen in the privacy of the residence halls, people have a tendency to feel safer in private than in public.¹ The presence of the blue lights is to create a feeling of safety in the public matches feeling people have in the residence halls.
This led me to contemplate exactly who else the blue lights were for. It is in my opinion that the blue lights on the ISU campus are here not only for the students ease of mind but also for people outside the ISU community. Their presence is geared towards prospective students and their parents, also toward the parents of current students. The tours that take prospective students and their parents around the campus include some minimal information about the blue lights. Then there is a slight reference to the blue lights during freshman preview of the university. After this indoctrination period the blue lights are not mentioned by the University to the students again. Rather that being safety tools they have turned into selling points of the university.

**CONCLUSION:**

This small look into the ISU emergency phone system shows the weight a symbol can hold. Although, through my research, I have found that blue lights are not effective safety tools on the ISU campus, I have also found that they are very effective symbols of safety. They work by creating a safe feeling on the ISU campus and possibly deterring random crimes on campus. The blue lights also play the part of a selling point of ISU. As symbols, not only for the ISU community, the presence of blue light at ISU makes prospective students and their parents feel that ISU has a proactive stance toward student safety. However, if ISU would like the students to see the blue lights the same way the ISU police sees them some things will have to change. If blue lights are to become effective tools, information about them should be disseminated better. ISU should talk to freshmen about them more extensively during “previews” and on the tours they go on before coming to ISU. The ISU website has to change also. An easily accessible map
should be put on the website with the blue lights positions throughout campus. There should also be more information about them on the website. Even more public, maybe the ISU police should more publicly test the blue lights, just so students become more aware of the presence. There are plenty of things Illinois State University could do to make the emergency phones more effective tools, but it seems right now they are being more than effective as symbols.

Works Cited: