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## The SFS summer research study at UMBC: Project-based learning inspires cybersecurity students

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### ABSTRACT

May 30–June 2, 2017, Scholarship for Service (SFS) scholars at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) analyzed the security of a targeted aspect of the UMBC computer systems. During this hands-on study, with complete access to source code, students identified vulnerabilities, devised and implemented exploits, and suggested mitigations. As part of a pioneering program at UMBC to extend SFS scholarships to community colleges, the study helped initiate six students from two nearby community colleges, who transferred to UMBC in fall 2017 to complete their 4-year degrees in computer science and information systems. The study examined the security of a set of “NetAdmin” custom scripts that enable UMBC faculty and staff to open the UMBC firewall to allow external access to machines they control for research purposes. Students discovered vulnerabilities stemming from weak architectural design, record overflow, and failure to sanitize inputs properly. For example, they implemented a record-overflow and code-injection exploit that exfiltrated the vital application programming interface (API) key of the UMBC firewall. This report summarizes student activities and findings and reflects on lessons learned for students, educators, and system administrators. Our students found the collaborative experience inspirational; students and educators appreciated the authentic case study; and IT administrators gained access to future employees and received free recommendations for improving the security of their systems. We hope that other universities can benefit from our motivational and educational strategy of teaming educators and system administrators to engage students in active project-based learning centering on focused questions about their university computer systems.

### KEYWORDS

code injection; computer and network security; cybersecurity; CyberCorps: Scholarship for Service (SFS); firewalls; NetAdmin; project-based learning; record overflow; security evaluation; UMBC SFS Summer Research Study

## Introduction

During four summer days in 2017, cybersecurity students at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) analyzed the security of a targeted

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aspect of their university computer systems. We report on this novel summer research study, its technical findings, and takeaways for students, educators, and system administrators.

In fall 2016, UMBC was one of 10 schools that pioneered a new strategy for attracting talented cybersecurity professionals into government service: extend *CyberCorps: Scholarship for Service* (SFS) scholarships to nearby partnering community colleges (CCs). There are outstanding students at CCs and, for many of them, the financial challenges of attending a 4-year college full-time are daunting. With support from the National Science Foundation (NSF), UMBC offered six students the following contract: after completing an associate's degree, transfer to UMBC and complete a bachelor's degree in a cybersecurity-related major. In return for 3 years of generous support (tuition, fees, health insurance, stipend, and more) starting in the last year of CC, students work for government (federal, state, local, or tribal) for each year of support. UMBC inducted three students from Montgomery College (MC) and three from Prince George's Community College (PGCC), who are all now pursuing degrees at UMBC in computer science, computer engineering, or information systems.

To integrate these students into the existing UMBC SFS cohort, to enhance their cybersecurity knowledge and skills, and to inspire them, Alan Sherman organized a 4-day SFS Summer Research Study at UMBC for all SFS scholars at MC, PGCC, and UMBC. Sherman also invited professors, researchers, and graduate students from UMBC and personnel from the National Security Agency (NSA) to interact with the students as technical experts. Everyone worked collaboratively on the same focused practical problem: analyze the security of the NetAdmin capability of the UMBC computer systems, which, through a web interface, enables UMBC faculty and staff to open the UMBC firewall to allow external access to machines they control for research purposes. The project enjoyed strong cooperation from UMBC's Division of Information Technology (DoIT), which is responsible for managing UMBC computer systems in support of teaching, research, and administration. Participants were given access to all relevant source code. The students explored all aspects of the problem, including adversarial models, architectures, key management, use of cryptography, authentication and key-establishment protocols, software implementations, configurations, and policy.

By the end of the first day, the SFS scholars identified several potential vulnerabilities and began devising exploits, working safely in a virtual copy provided by DoIT of the actual network. Throughout and after the study, students presented their findings to DoIT and made several recommendations for mitigating the issues they discovered. Particularly interesting and illuminating were the end-of-day discussions between students and DoIT

staff (including the primary NetAdmin script author) during which each side shared their perspectives on the situation, how the vulnerabilities arose, the risks they pose, how to deal with them, and how to improve DoIT's processes.

Although the ideas underlying the attacks are not new, the analysis of UMBC's NetAdmin is. More importantly, we hope that other students, educators, and system administrators may learn from our experiences in collaborative project-based learning. All of our students reported that the summer study inspired them and enhanced their knowledge and skills. Students and educators appreciated the authentic case study. UMBC's system administrators gained access to highly qualified potential student employees (several of whom now work for DoIT) and received free consulting on how to improve the security of their system. There are many benefits for educators to partner with their university's IT department to use their university's computing systems as a cybersecurity learning laboratory.

UMBC is a midsize public university that emphasizes science and technology. Recognized as a National Center of Academic Excellence in Cyberdefense Education and Research (CAE, CAE-R), UMBC offers undergraduate and graduate tracks in cybersecurity leading to BS, MS, and PhD degrees in computer science and information systems, and the MPS degree in cybersecurity. In 2017, it won first place at the National Collegiate Cyberdefense Competition.

We assume the reader is familiar with the basics of cybersecurity, as introduced, for example, by Kim and Solomon (2014), Bishop (2003), and Sherman et al. (2018).

### **The SFS summer study at UMBC**

This section identifies some of the key decisions we faced in organizing the summer study and our rationale behind the choices we made.

A summer study appealed to us because it emphasized collaboration, problem solving, and independent thinking in addressing an important, practical, challenging problem involving a variety of issues. Cybersecurity is a broad discipline in which it is essential to form teams with appropriate diverse skills and talents. Our collaborative approach resonated with the cohort philosophy of the SFS program. Inspiration also came from the SCAMP (Summer Conference on Applied Mathematical Problems) summer studies organized by the Institute for Defense Analyses, in which a team collaboratively works on one or two research problems.

We reasoned that the most effective way to initiate new SFS scholars (especially from CCs) into UMBC's SFS cohort was to engage them in

solving a technical research problem. We decided to remain focused on this task and not to spend any time on anything else, such as informational presentations about UMBC.

We sought a problem that was rich and challenging, yet tractable in 1 week. Choosing a problem that directly benefited the UMBC community was a major benefit, promoting the service tenet of the SFS program. During the academic year, each SFS scholar at CC took a special research course through which they solved IT security problems for their county government. Analyzing the security of a focused aspect of the UMBC computer systems offered all the elements we sought.

Focusing on custom scripts written at UMBC provided many attractive properties. First, it was essential that the students be given all source code. There would be much greater legal and administrative barriers to providing source code written by third parties. Access to source code was important because security should not be based on the obscurity of the NetAdmin process, and we assume that an adversary could obtain the source code. Second, the NetAdmin scripts are short; by contrast, dealing with UMBC's huge commercial products (e.g., PeopleSoft) would be difficult. Third, these scripts had never undergone any critical technical security evaluation and the likelihood of there being vulnerabilities seemed high.

Given the sensitive nature of the problem, each participant signed a non-disclosure agreement with DoIT. Students acted responsibly and responded positively to the trust bestowed on them. For DoIT, it was easy to trust the students because they were carefully vetted into the SFS program, some held top-secret clearances, and any malicious behavior would jeopardize their scholarships.

DoIT staff gave students all relevant system information—including source code, scripts, network architectures, protocols, and configurations—and were available to answer questions about them. They also provided a virtual machine of the relevant parts of the campus network, together with the Kali Linux suite of cybersecurity tools.

The diverse in-person participants comprised six CC transfer students, three UMBC undergraduates, and one PhD student. The problem-solving process was entirely student driven. Two UMBC professors and two NSA experts visited each day, to answer any questions about technical subjects or use of tools.

The study took place from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Friday in a large room with tables, whiteboard, and projector. Basing our approach on the tenets of Project Based Learning (PBL) (Blumenfeld et al. 1991), we presented the challenge and tasked the team to create a structure that would achieve the desired goals of analyzing the security of NetAdmin. We encouraged students to approach the project in any way they saw fit.

Replicating authentic scenarios of work places, our student-centered approach forced students to negotiate group dynamics and to apply their technical skills while fully engaging in a real-life task. This structure supported sustained inquiry and reflection.

Students self-selected into teams, each exploring some focused aspect of the problem. For example, one team surveilled the landscape, identifying the network topology, operating system, machines, and versions of component software. Other teams focused on architectural issues, source code analysis, and known vulnerabilities of the operating system and component software in use. More experienced students emerged as leaders.

Late each afternoon, representatives from DoIT, including the primary NetAdmin script author, joined the group for a discussion of the day's findings. To involve students who were unable to attend in person (e.g., due to required internships, some of which were out-of-state), one of the students led a 1-hour evening chat session on Google Hangouts.

PBL is an instructional approach in which small groups of students engage in authentic tasks and learning occurs through their consideration of relevant problems. Students pursue solutions by asking and revising questions, debating ideas, generating predictions, experimenting, collecting data, drawing conclusions, communicating their ideas and findings, refining approaches, and creating products (Blumenfeld et al. 1991).

PBL holds great promise in cybersecurity because there is a proliferation of complex problems in the field and projects can support students to sustain their effort and direct their learning. PBL supports students to develop diverse approaches to solving real-world problems. Students are task focused and they can try out a variety of solutions and receive timely feedback on their approaches. They engage in collaboration and reflection that deepen their learning and enhance the transferability of skills.

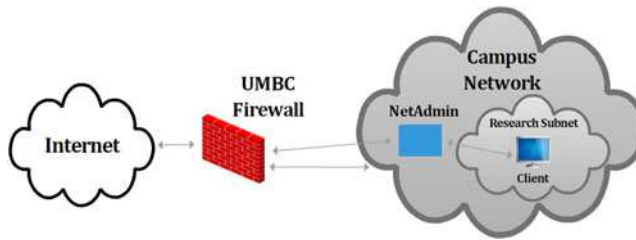
There are many examples of PBL in cybersecurity (e.g., New Jersey Institute of Technology's [NJIT's] Cyber-RWC Summer Camp<sup>1</sup>), though there are relatively few scholarly articles on this subject (e.g., Conklin and White 2005), whose graduate course includes some elements similar to our study). We are strong believers in the value of PBL, as evidenced by our participation in the INSURE Project (Sherman et al. 2017).

## The problem

We define our research problem by describing the UMBC campus network, the origin and use of the NetAdmin tool, our research questions, and our adversarial model. In short, our task is to analyze the security implications

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<sup>1</sup><https://sci.njit.edu/gencyber/RWCCybersecurityCampBrochure-Summer2016.pdf>.



**Figure 1.** Architecture of the UMBC network including the NetAdmin tool, which is accessible to machines on the research subnet.

of using the NetAdmin tool and to make appropriate recommendations to DoIT.

### ***The UMBC campus network***

UMBC maintains a Palo Alto firewall on the network boundary that filters traffic originating from, or destined for, addresses residing outside of the campus network. All traffic between the Internet and the UMBC network passes through the UMBC firewall. As shown in Figure 1, the NetAdmin server is behind the UMBC firewall and is accessible from machines located on the research subnet or via certain authenticated virtual private network (VPN) connections. The research subnet connects faculty-operated servers and machines. All users authenticate to the system through a single sign-on myUMBC Sibboleth service.

Defending the UMBC network is a daunting challenge. There are over 10,000 users, including over 500 faculty and staff members, some of whose credentials are lost or compromised on a daily basis. Over 15,000 devices connect on any given day. As a university, UMBC must support an open and collaborative environment—much more open than would be typically found at a commercial institution. In recent years, the main goal of attackers seems to be to compromise personal data. The Privacy Rights Clearinghouse estimates that, since 2010, educational institutions have experienced 411 data breaches impacting 18.7 million identities.<sup>2</sup>

For cybersecurity, DoIT employs five full-time professionals and 13 students, of whom four are graduate assistants. Their total annual budget for cybersecurity is approximately \$900,000.

### ***Origin and use of the NetAdmin tool***

DoIT created the NetAdmin tool circa 2005, primarily to automate the process of making certain exceptions to firewall policies. Motivation for the

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.privacyrights.org>.



NetAdmin tool was to provide the protection that firewalls and intrusion-prevention systems give commercial users, while enabling researchers the ability to have an open network to perform their research unencumbered by network security devices. In 2006, when DoIT launched NetAdmin, UMBC was one of the first research universities to implement a default-deny firewall policy. Typically, less than 200 machines are exempted from firewall rules by faculty and staff.

Many researchers demanded the ability to connect from the outside, including via SSH, FTP, and HTTP, to their research machines, which ran web servers and research tools. Before NetAdmin, researchers would submit a service ticket to be handled on a case-by-case basis by DoIT staff, imposing significant delay and requiring DoIT staff hours. Furthermore, this manual procedure made it difficult and error-prone to monitor and audit firewall exceptions and to terminate these exceptions upon expiration.

The real-time automatic NetAdmin tool addressed all of these issues, allowing faculty and staff to open the UMBC firewall to allow access from certain external systems to the machines they control on the research subnet. The tool also greatly facilitated DoIT's ability to track firewall exceptions. DoIT used it extensively.

DoIT reasoned that the tool introduced little marginal risk to research machines because machine owners could do whatever they pleased to their own machines. As the students pointed out, however, there was risk to other UMBC systems because the possibility loomed that NetAdmin could introduce vulnerabilities allowing an adversary to modify the UMBC firewall in a way that affected other machines, including machines outside of the research subnet.

For over a decade, the tool ran untouched and seemed to work well. There were no detected compromises, and state auditors were satisfied with the process. No one, however, had ever subjected NetAdmin to a critical technical security evaluation. No attempt was ever made to update or patch any of the component subsystems on which NetAdmin depends.

Machines on the research subnet may have their own additional local firewalls, but most do not or do not have them adequately configured. Such local firewalls might add some additional protection in depth. Regardless, the issue of local firewalls is mostly outside the scope of this study.

### ***Research questions***

During the four-day research study, students focused on the following questions.



1. What potential vulnerabilities (including from design, implementation, or configuration), if any, does NetAdmin introduce?
2. What potential attacks, if any, does NetAdmin enable?
3. What risks, if any, does NetAdmin introduce, especially beyond those present without NetAdmin?
4. Can an adversary—possibly a corrupt faculty or staff member—use NetAdmin to modify the firewall rules for any machine outside of their control?
5. Is the NetAdmin architecture appropriate for its intended purpose?
6. Does NetAdmin use appropriate cryptographic functions and does it use them appropriately? Are the key lengths appropriate and are keys managed properly?
7. Does NetAdmin use appropriate protocols and does it use them appropriately?
8. Is DoIT's policy involving NetAdmin clear and appropriate?

Through discussions with DoIT in spring 2017, the study group came to a consensus on the choice of the study topic. DoIT suggested targeting NetAdmin and they suggested some of the initial research questions, in much the way a client might engage a cybersecurity consultant for penetration testing. Through further discussions and over the course of the study, students refined and augmented the initial questions.

In answering the research questions, the students could follow whatever approach they deemed fit, using whatever tools they chose. Throughout, the study group had access to DoIT staff, who gladly provided any appropriate information requested.

The role of the study group was to advise DoIT on the facts concerning potential vulnerabilities, attacks, risks, and mitigations. As for the balance of risks and benefits of NetAdmin, that was a judgement only for DoIT to make in consultation with the UMBC administration. A compromise of computer systems or data could expose UMBC to liabilities, diminished reputation, and recovery costs.

### ***Adversarial model***

We explain our adversarial model and trust assumptions. In summary, our primary adversary is an outsider with compromised faculty or staff credentials with the knowledge, skills, and resources of an excellent graduate student in computer science.

One way we characterize adversaries is by their level of access: (1) an outsider with compromised UMBC faculty or staff credentials, (2) a

malicious faculty or staff member on the research subnet, and (3) a corrupt DoIT administrator.

The current situation offers no technical protection against a corrupt DoIT administrator: DoIT manages the networks, the UMBC firewall, and NetAdmin, including the cryptographic keys and physical machines. They control and monitor the log files. Safeguards against corrupt system administrators depend mainly on observation, logs, and personal trust. UMBC would, however, like to protect against levels (1) and (2).

We also consider the adversary's increasing level of capability: (a) a "script kiddie" who can download and run basic malware and follow simple instructions, (b) a computer science graduate student with access to the university's computing resources, and (c) a nation state. It would be impossible for UMBC to defend against a nation state, but UMBC would like to guard against levels (a) and (b).<sup>3</sup>

We do not consider attacks on the underlying cryptography, the physical security of servers, nor social engineering of DoIT staff. Similarly, despite their practical importance, we do not analyze existing procedures nor their security implications for recovery after disaster or compromise, including of the firewall API key or NetAdmin server. We do, however, consider whether cryptography is properly used.

The main goal of the adversary is to make unauthorized changes to the UMBC firewall without detection. The adversary may also wish to use NetAdmin as a possible pivot for other attacks against the UMBC network.

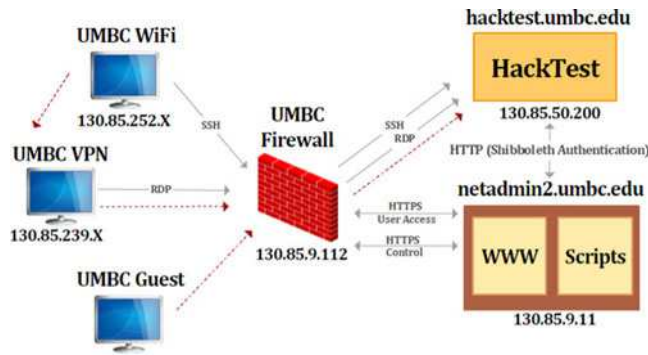
## How NetAdmin works

The NetAdmin tool is a custom web application that enables an authorized user to create and manage rules for the UMBC firewall that pertain to machines on the UMBC research subnetwork under the researcher's control. It is responsible for enforcing network policies on user-created firewall rules and authenticating users during this process. NetAdmin receives firewall rules from clients and applies them to UMBC's Palo Alto firewall through application programming interface (API) calls. Additionally, UMBC network administrators frequently use NetAdmin to maintain and audit firewall policies for a variety of campus network services. We explain how NetAdmin works by describing its placement and implementation, authentication and authorization policies, user interface, interaction with the UMBC firewall, and method for storing firewall rules.

As shown in [Figure 1](#), NetAdmin resides on a dedicated restricted server located on the UMBC network behind the UMBC firewall. The server is

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<sup>3</sup>With the availability of increasingly sophisticated malware (e.g., flame), defending against even script kiddies is becoming a daunting challenge.



**Figure 2.** Architecture of the “HackTest” virtual testing environment for the research subnet.

configured to allow NetAdmin to be reachable only through connections from the campus network, including by clients originating from authenticated VPN connections. Clients wishing to make changes to the UMBC firewall directly in real time communicate with the server through a web browser to create and modify firewall rules. Alternatively, a client may send a request to DoIT; if the request were approved, a DoIT staff member would implement the request using NetAdmin. DoIT implemented NetAdmin in PHP 5.1.6, running on a 2.2.3 Apache HTTP server.

NetAdmin recognizes several user groups including full-time faculty, staff, and network administrator superusers. These groups are defined in a file residing in the application directory on the NetAdmin server. NetAdmin authenticates users and tokens they submit via UMBC’s single sign-on Shibboleth service, which is a Kerberos-like system. Superusers may create and modify arbitrary firewall rules for any IP address on the UMBC network, and they may view any firewall rule created by any user. Faculty and staff users may create and modify some firewall rules for certain common ports associated with their own network address.

Users specify firewall policies through a web-interface wherein the user’s browser sends web forms defining firewall rules to the NetAdmin server. A faculty or staff user may create, modify, or delete certain rules for any IP address they own. Rules that specify ports to open must reference ports on a list for commonly used services—for example, SSH (22), HTTP (80), HTTPS (443), and DNS (53). Proposed rules violating these restrictions must be submitted out-of-band to DoIT for special consideration. After 1 year, rules expire and are marked “inactive,” regardless of use. Users may activate, deactivate, or renew their rules through NetAdmin.

Through API calls invoked by Perl scripts, NetAdmin pushes rules to the UMBC firewall, which is physically and logically separated from NetAdmin. The firewall authenticates API calls using a 360-bit symmetric API key stored in a file on the application directory of the NetAdmin server. The file is neither digitally signed nor hashed.

NetAdmin stores firewall rules and logs in unstructured files on the NetAdmin server. The rules file helps preserve state through failures and restarts. In this file, each rule is described by one record. Newline characters delimit records and pipe characters delimit fields within any record.

Figure 2 shows the architecture of the virtual testing environment, called HackTest, used in the study. This environment includes guest UMBC accounts and allows access to all communications between the UMBC firewall and the NetAdmin server.

## Potential vulnerabilities, attacks, and risks

Our initial efforts focused on identifying potential vulnerabilities, which we now summarize. We also identify potential attacks that exploit these vulnerabilities and discuss associated risks.

### Potential vulnerabilities

1. The network architecture, and its use of a single firewall for the entire campus network, does not provide a segmented layer of defense for the research subnet. NetAdmin implements a capability that is supposed to affect only the research subnet. However, if an attacker could compromise NetAdmin, then there is no architectural protection that would limit the attacker's ability to affect the entire campus network.
2. The NetAdmin server runs on an unpatched, out-of-date operating system (OS)—CentOS 5.11—using Linux kernel (2.6.18), which is known to have at least 451 vulnerabilities.<sup>4</sup> As of March 2017, CentOS 5.11 is no longer supported.<sup>5</sup> Compromise of the NetAdmin server could result in complete security failure of NetAdmin's firewall change process, allowing an attacker to issue arbitrary firewall rules, modify log files, and exfiltrate the firewall API key.
3. NetAdmin authenticates the firewall (using a self-signed certificate), but the firewall does not authenticate NetAdmin. The firewall checks only that forms purportedly from NetAdmin have the firewall API key. Anyone with the firewall API key could issue arbitrary firewall rules.
4. All communications between users and the NetAdmin server use unencrypted HTTP without integrity protection, allowing an adversary to read and modify traffic and to carry out possible man-in-

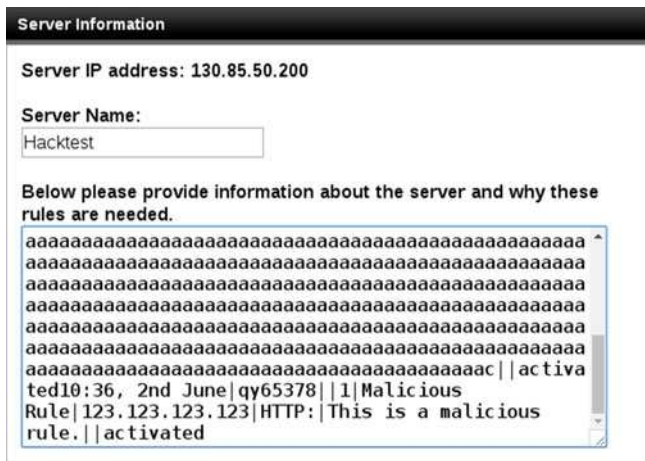
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<sup>4</sup><https://www.cvedetails.com>.

<sup>5</sup><https://wiki.centos.org/FAQ/General#head-fe8a0be91ee3e7dea812e8694491e1dde5b75e6d>

the-middle (MitM) attacks. The user's browser sends NetAdmin rule changes via web forms, which the browser authenticates using UMBC's Shibboleth service. By modifying the web forms sent from the user to the server, an adversary can cause NetAdmin to implement firewall rules that enable unauthorized access to the user's machines.

5. If an adversary could hijack an authorized user's entire session when the user logs into myUMBC, then they could masquerade as the user to NetAdmin.
6. While communications between the NetAdmin server and the firewall are protected by HTTPS, there seems to be an opportunity for a possible additional MitM attack on the initial communication that exchanges the self-signed authentication certificates
7. Because NetAdmin authenticates the firewall using a self-signed certificate, compromise of UMBC's key used to sign certificates would enable an adversary to forge certificates.
8. Committing some of the most common software security errors (see Kaza, Taylor, and Hawthorne 2015), NetAdmin does not adequately check and sanitize inputs and form fields, allowing the possibility of attacks that inject code and/or manipulate form field data.
9. NetAdmin permits firewall rules to include HTML and JavaScript descriptions, allowing possible code injection attacks (The OWASP Foundation, 2018). For example, such injections might permit the execution of arbitrary code in the browser of a user or system administrator using NetAdmin.
10. NetAdmin does not check the length of firewall rule descriptions, allowing possible record-overflow attacks and/or denial-of-service (DoS) attacks. In particular, NetAdmin's use of the PHP command `fgetcsv()` assumes that each record is at most 999 bytes long. The source code does not verify this assumption, with the unintended result that any bytes following any 999-byte record will be treated as a new record.
11. Violating the principle of least privilege (Bishop 2003), NetAdmin uses a firewall API key with more permissions than are needed: this key permits arbitrary changes to the firewall.
12. NetAdmin stores critical information, including the firewall API key and log files, rules, in unstructured plaintext files on the NetAdmin server. The file is relatively easy to exfiltrate and is stored unencrypted. The integrity of the file is not protected.
13. NetAdmin permits VPN access via the UMBC network, facilitating remote attacks.



**Figure 3.** Screenshot of NetAdmin web interface with record overflow.

### Potential attacks

A variety of potential attacks are possible that exploit the identified vulnerabilities. We list a few examples. Combinations of these attacks are also possible. Because NetAdmin allows VPN connections via the campus network, adversaries can mount many of these attacks remotely. To demonstrate the feasibility of these attacks, students implemented a record-overflow and injection attack.

1. (record overflow) An authorized user (or an adversary with compromised credentials of an authorized user) enters a long malicious rule that causes NetAdmin to implement an arbitrary rule for the UMBC firewall affecting any machine. Failure to check field lengths in user inputs results in NetAdmin accepting data beginning with byte 1000 as a new and valid firewall rule. See [Figure 3](#).
2. (injection attack) Similar to the record-overflow attack, but the payload is a firewall rule with malicious HTML and/or JavaScript. Victims can include users and administrators. The JavaScript can submit arbitrary rules to NetAdmin without the user knowing. It can submit rules via AJAX and then, when viewing the rules, simply delete that row from the HTML table, so the user never notices. Alternatively, this attack might cause the web front-end to steal credentials or trick the victim to perform actions they do not wish to perform. The malicious code can also execute arbitrary commands on the NetAdmin server, for example, exfiltrating the firewall API key.
3. (server attack) Exploiting known vulnerabilities of the Linux kernel version 2.6.18, the adversary learns the firewall API key and executes arbitrary commands on the NetAdmin server.

4. (network attack) Because the communications between users and NetAdmin are not protected for confidentiality or integrity, a passive adversary can monitor all such communications. An active adversary can modify messages to implement firewall rules affecting the user's machine or to launch an injection or record-overflow attack described above. For example, an adversary can mutate form fields to submit firewall rules that do not correspond to IP addresses for which they are authorized.
5. (MitM session hijacking) An adversary on the research subnet can attempt to hijack an authorized user's entire session as the user logs into myUMBC. For example, the adversary might try to do so by redirecting the user's traffic to the adversary's machine using ARP poisoning or by posting a fake access point. Easily available malware, such as SSL Strip, might facilitate such an attack.<sup>6</sup> Thereby, the adversary might be able to obtain a cookie that the adversary could use to authenticate to NetAdmin and to other UMBC services.
6. (MitM attack during initial key establishment) A sophisticated MitM attack between NetAdmin and the firewall can likely intercept the firewall API key and cause NetAdmin to accept an erroneous public-key certificate of the firewall. This attack requires access at the crucial key-establishment time.

### **Potential risks**

The attacks listed above are feasible and well within the capabilities of computer science graduate students. The adversary could learn the firewall API key, from which the adversary could implement arbitrary rules on the UMBC firewall. Thus, the adversary could open any port for any machine on the UMBC firewall. By opening ports, the adversary might move throughout the campus network, exfiltrate data, steal credentials, steal intellectual property, sabotage research, disrupt services, and launch DoS attacks. By manipulating log files on NetAdmin, the adversary could try to remain unnoticed.

The UMBC network is under constant attack. DoIT believes that most of the current attacks aim to steal personal information, including credit card numbers. DoIT is not aware of any attack having been mounted on NetAdmin. Perhaps this situation reflects that no adversary bothered to explore possible vulnerabilities in NetAdmin and that there may be other more attractive avenues of attack.

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<sup>6</sup><https://www.blackhat.com/presentations/bh-dc-09/Marlinspike/BlackHat-DC-09-Marlinspike-Defeating-SSL.pdf>.

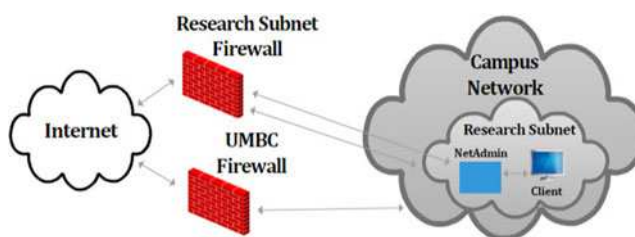


## Recommendations

To address the potential vulnerabilities, attacks, and risks identified above, the students recommend that DoIT carry out the following mitigations and additional actions.

### *Recommended mitigations*

1. (keep software up-to-date) The NetAdmin server should run a well-patched and maintained operating system. For example, replace CentOS 5.11 (which is deprecated) with the most recent version (CentOS 7 as of March 2018). All software used by NetAdmin, particularly the Apache HTTP server, PHP engine, and Perl interpreter, should be up-to-date. Doing so reduces the ability of an adversary from using easily available known attacks.
2. (sanitize inputs) Sanitize all form inputs on the server side. Special characters, particularly the pipe character used to delimit records in the data file, should be prohibited in firewall rule descriptions. Form fields should not accept HTML or Javascript values.
3. (check IP addresses) For nonsuperusers, the server should ensure that the IP address of a firewall rule corresponds to the IP address of the user. Although an adversary might be able to spoof her IP address, it would be prudent to add this check.
4. (check record sizes) In firewall rules, enforce maximum sizes for fields including server names and rule descriptions. For example, one might impose a 128-byte limit on server names and a 256-byte limit on rule descriptions. Doing so prevents an adversary from mounting record-overflow attacks to create arbitrary firewall rules. Read data files in such a way that records larger than 999 bytes are rejected, or truncated, rather than interpreted as multiple records.
5. (encrypt communications) To protect confidentiality and integrity, communications between the NetAdmin server and NetAdmin users should use end-to-end encryption with authentication and integrity protection, such as that offered by implementations of OpenSSL.
6. (limit capabilities of firewall API key) Limit the capabilities of the API key used to communicate with the UMBC firewall so that it can only create, modify, and delete firewall rules pertinent to the UMBC research subnet. Different API keys should be used for pushing firewall rules defined by users versus pushing firewall rules defined by superusers.
7. (improve key management) The firewall and NetAdmin each should have a certificate signed by a trusted third party. Each machine should authenticate the other. Improve the initial establishment and storage of the firewall API key by NetAdmin. Use a key-



**Figure 4.** Recommended architecture to provide compartmentalized defense, architecturally limiting the scope of NetAdmin functionality to the research subnet.

establishment protocol that is not vulnerable to MitM attack. Do not store the API key in plaintext in an unprotected file. Consider using a trusted platform module (TPM).<sup>7</sup> Some database products might provide some degree of protection for key storage.

8. (deny VPN access to NetAdmin) Require all connections to NetAdmin to originate from campus, as enforced in part through physical network connections to the NetAdmin server. To reduce the risk of remote attacks, VPN access to NetAdmin should be denied. Doing so, however, would still allow the possibility of a user connecting to NetAdmin indirectly after remotely connecting to another campus machine, an unfortunate reality that would be hard to prevent.
9. (segment NetAdmin) For defense-in-depth, segment NetAdmin into two services: a web front-end, and a back-end that communicates with the firewall. The front-end accepts input, validates whom it came from, sanitizes it, and passes it to the back-end. The back-end performs additional validation and sends instructions to the firewall. Only the second service is permitted to read sensitive data (e.g., firewall API key). The services should run under separate accounts. The front-end should be unable to run shell scripts, and the back-end should be permitted to communicate only with the front-end and the firewall.

### **Additional recommendations**

1. (deploy a segmented architecture) To limit the possible scope of failures in NetAdmin, deploy a segmented architecture as shown in Figure 4, so that the architecture will prevent NetAdmin from affecting any machine outside of the research subnet.
2. (physically secure NetAdmin and firewall in same room) Improve the security of the connection between NetAdmin and the proposed

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<sup>7</sup>Trusted Platform Module (TPM).

- separate firewall by placing both machines in the same physically secure room physically connected by a dedicated subnet. Enforce this architecture in part through physical network connections between the NetAdmin server and the proposed separate firewall for the research subnet.
3. (conduct technical security audits) In addition to periodic administrative audits, DoIT should also commission technical security audits carried out by qualified independent cybersecurity consultants.

## **Discussion**

We now discuss a number of issues raised by our experiences, including vulnerabilities discovered, takeaways for study organizers, UMBC's extension of SFS scholarships to two community colleges, and reflections from a UMBC system administrator.

### ***Observations on vulnerabilities discovered***

Our case study exposes why certain common vulnerabilities arose and the costs and complexities needed to avoid or mitigate these vulnerabilities. For example, the NetAdmin server ran an obsolete and unpatched OS partly because DoIT did not invest the staff resources to keep the system current. DoIT feared that updates to the OS might break the custom system, requiring more staff time to fix. There is no escaping the harsh reality that maintaining a secure system demands considerable ongoing attention and resources, and any changes to the system (including ones mitigating known vulnerabilities) also risk the possibly of introducing new vulnerabilities.

### ***Takeaways for study organizers***

Overall the study went very smoothly. Project-based learning sustained inquiry and critical thinking. The virtual environment enabled the students to work on an essentially identical copy of the network environment without interfering with the actual network. The evening chat sessions provided a way for students to participate, even if they could not attend the regular session. We found that chat worked better than video conferencing because it created a written record and it more easily enabled students to enter the session late. Using the study room's data projector and whiteboard facilitated discussions. Throughout each day, the group posed questions to DoIT and received written answers via a GoogleDoc. Talking with the developer was very useful. The study room could have benefited from more electrical outlets and power strips.

Participants completed surveys at the end of the summer project in which they all reported that the project increased their cybersecurity knowledge and skills (86% responded strongly agree, 14% responded agree). Participants identified the following elements as valuable: teamwork, hands-on nature of the task, real-world challenge, critical thinking, and problem solving. All participants reported that they would recommend the summer study project to other cybersecurity students.

At UMBC, we were fortunate to enjoy strong support and cooperation from DoIT. Some other schools, however, might face a defensive administration fearing embarrassment or unwilling to trust students with sensitive system security information. We commend UMBC's DoIT for their constructive attitude which, through encouraging analysis of their systems, helps them enhance the security of their operations. Most SFS students are highly trustworthy: schools select SFS students carefully and the students are expected to be able to attain at least a secret clearance (many hold top-secret clearances).

Our choice to schedule the study in early summer immediately after commencement created a conflict with several students who were starting required summer internships. To avoid such conflicts, this year we held the study in January, the week before classes resume. While better for most students, this new schedule created conflicts with some students who took classes in January.

### ***Extending SFS scholarships to community colleges***

So far, the new venture to extend SFS scholarships to community colleges appears to be working well. We are attracting highly qualified students and, for some students from modest backgrounds, the scholarship is a life-changing opportunity. There is an opportunity cost in that, given finite budgets, a scholarship awarded to a CC student who transfers to UMBC is a scholarship not awarded to a nontransfer student at UMBC. Awarding one SFS scholarship to each of two CCs per year seems like an appropriate balance for UMBC.

Among CC students, we restrict our attention to CC students pursuing associate's (AS) degrees who intend to transfer to a 4-year school. UMBC's articulation agreement with Maryland CCs ensures that any student who earns an AS degree at any Maryland CC with a GPA of at least 3.0 will be admitted to UMBC. There remains the issue, however, that many CCs target their cybersecurity courses at associate of applied science (AAS) students who intend to enter the workforce after 2 years at a CC. Typically, the AAS students are not prepared to transfer to 4-year schools and, often, AS students have limited available time to take many cybersecurity courses.

### ***Reflections from a UMBC system administrator***

Jack Suess, Vice President of Information Technology and Chief Information Officer (CIO) at UMBC, remarks:

“As the CIO and a former student IT employee (1979–1981), I greatly value this experience for our staff and students. For staff, we are forced to move out of our imagined protective bubble and look at the consequences of our decisions if we have a motivated and highly skilled attacker. In this case, we can ‘imagine’ that no one will ever take the effort to dig deep enough to find our flaws; when the students unmask these flaws, it shows that we need to be more conscious of flaws! For students, they are able to leave the academic bubble of the theoretical and operate in the real world of people writing code that needs to be secure and to think about what can go wrong. This effort will make those who program much better at thinking about security from the beginning of their design. As a CIO, I love that we have repeated this exercise with the SFS scholars and, in both exercises, we gained valuable feedback that improved the security of our services for free!”

### **Conclusion**

In only 4 days, SFS scholars in the UMBC summer study identified significant security vulnerabilities with UMBC’s NetAdmin system that enables faculty and staff to open the UMBC firewall for machines they control on the research subnet. These vulnerabilities include unpatched systems, record overflow, uncompartimentalized architecture, and failure to sanitize inputs. Students also suggested mitigations. The details provide an instructive authentic case study in cybersecurity.

As evidenced by responses from the student exit questionnaire, the experience engaged and motivated students. The participants who had transitioned from community colleges demonstrated that there are highly capable students at community colleges who can contribute to our nation through cybersecurity.

The study illustrated advantages that can arise when educators partner with university system administrators to allow qualified students to use the university’s computer systems as a learning laboratory. Students gained exciting, concrete, hands-on collaborative experience. Educators were given a rich and inspiring detailed realistic case study to support project-based learning. The university’s system administrators received a free cybersecurity consultation and hired several of the SFS scholars to join their security team.

We look forward to continuing the research study experience each year, and we hope that other schools can also benefit from such collaborations.

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