Be Aware of Online/Telephone Scams and Identity Theft

Start with this quick video (0:49) about scams from the Federal Trade Commission for immediate info and continue to read below:

Unfortunately, international students and immigrants are sometimes targeted by phone and email scams. These scams are designed to frighten individuals or to place them in a stressful situation in order to manipulate and take advantage of the vulnerable person. These criminals will often pose as government officials, local law enforcement, or federal agencies using minimal details they possibly obtained about you to their advantage. They will try to convince you that there is a problem such as a social security number issue, a threat to your visa status, or state that your legality in the U.S. is in jeopardy.

These scammers often will make it seem that they were very fortunate to get a hold of you and that they are the only ones that can help in the situation. They will often create a scenario that you must solve immediately where you must transfer them money, purchase a gift card, or give them access to bank information in order to resolve the issue with a promise that you will be reimbursed. They will often tell you not to consult with others or contact friends, family, or your school to verify. When you refuse or do not cooperate, the threats and tactics can worsen in order to escalate fear as they continue to threaten to report that you were unwilling to cooperate with government authorities.

Frequently, scam artists use software to change the information shown on caller ID to real government phone numbers like the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, IRS, or even 911 emergency. Do not engage in these discussions or emails. Hang up the phone right away and do not click on links in the email.

The frequency in which these scams occur often will increase around certain times of the year when international students and immigrants are particularly vulnerable. This often occurs at the beginning or end of the school year, during tax season, or when there are changes in immigration policies.

If you find yourself involved with this type of scam, it is important that you do protect your:

- Credit Card or Bank Information
- Internet Usernames & Passwords
- Tax, Social Security, or WVU ID Number
- Date of Birth
- ATM Pin
- Passport/Visa Info
- Personal Details

What you need to know to avoid these scams:

- Government or law enforcement agencies will NEVER call to warn you ahead of time that you could be arrested or fined.
- These agencies will also NEVER call to demand money to fix a situation and ask for immediate payment over the phone.
- NEVER open, respond to, or click on links in a suspicious email (even if it appears to be from an official source). If you suspect an email to be a scam, please forward this information to WVU
Information Technology Services to investigate: defendyourdata@mail.wvu.edu, ITShelp@mail.wvu.edu, or call 304-293-4444. ITS also provides some helpful information about protecting your data and identity.

- Do NOT use unsecured wi-fi networks when you are providing payment information from debit or credit cards and avoid using public computers, especially if the history of your search or activity is being saved on a browser. Log out of sites, delete cookies, and completely log out of any public computer.
- ALWAYS remember to shred credit card applications, bank statements, and other financial paperwork before putting them in the recycling or trash.

**The Bottom Line:** If you receive a phone call or an email from someone who is stating that you are in some type of trouble with remaining in legal status in the U.S. or they claim that there is an issue with your government issued documents such as your social security number while also threatening that you could be arrested, lose your immigration status, or face legal proceedings if you don’t arrange for payment, **IT IS FAKE.**

Hang up immediately or delete the email and do not give them any type of information about yourself or payment to solve any fraudulent issue. This is even if your caller ID shows the name or phone number of USCIS or a law enforcement agency and they make it seem that they are a part of these agencies with false case numbers, agent ID numbers, or if they transfer you to other departments or individuals claiming to be the U.S. government or law enforcement. **DO NOT BELIEVE THEM.**

If law enforcement or a government agency needs to speak with you, they will either show up face-to-face with proper ID or send you a letter with instructions on how to verify their identity and contact them. They will not initiate a call to you and demand money to fix a situation.

**What You Should Do If You Are Contacted:**
If you receive a threatening phone call or email, our office can assist in determining the validity and give you options for what you should do next. We recommend asking to speak with the Office of Global Affairs Student Advocate or a student advisor. You can visit our office during normal business hours, call 304-293-3519, or email us at isss-students@mail.wvu.edu or globalaffairs@mail.wvu.edu. We can help you report the call or email. We also want to gather information about these scams and provide support to people who have also been affected or perhaps prevent others from falling victim.

If you have already paid money or become a victim of a phone or email scam, contact the West Virginia University Police Department right away (304-293-3136). It is also recommended that you contact customer service at your local bank to report the fraud and see if someone can assist in recovering or freezing the funds. Please also reach out to our office for advice or follow-up steps.

If you received a phone call/email but did not pay money, report the call/email to Federal Trade Commission. If you receive a suspicious email from a WVU account, forward it to defendyourdata@mail.wvu.edu or call 304-293-4444 and then delete it.

If you feel any information about your social security has been stolen, it is recommended that you contact the social security administration office here in Morgantown and consult the helpful information that the SSA has available if you have been a victim of this type of scam.

3596 Collins Ferry Rd, Suite 100
Additional Resources

- Tips from ITS and UPD involving phishing scams
- USCIS Information About Immigration and Visa Related Scams
- Study in the States: Scams Targeting International Students Blog Post
- IRS Information on Tax Related Scams
- Federal Trade Commission: How to Recognize and Avoid Phishing Scams
- USA.gov info about rental scams
- USA.gov info about identity theft
- Federal Trade Commission Info and video about tech support scams
- Federal Trade Commission Info about Imposter Scams