

Every Semester Resets the Attack Surface

14.9% of students hit by lateral attacks—
5.5x the global average

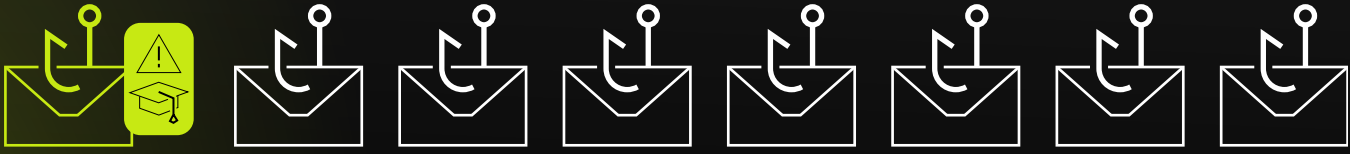


Lateral attacks (where a compromised internal account is used to attack others inside the same institution) are rare in most industries, but endemic in higher education. The structural conditions of a university make it uniquely hospitable to this threat. And because the user population resets every semester, the vulnerability never improves, it just starts over.

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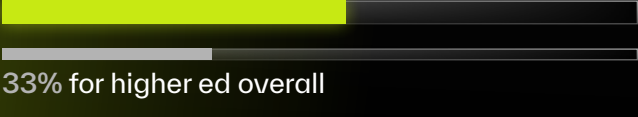
Students Are the Primary Target

Lateral attacks in higher education concentrate on students, not staff—and the numbers are striking.



1 in 8 phishing attacks received by students comes from inside their own institution

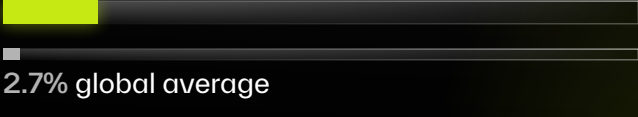
54% of BEC targeting students is lateral



33% for higher ed overall

14.9%

overall lateral attack rate for students—the highest of any job category in the dataset



2.7% global average

Why Higher Ed Is Uniquely Vulnerable

Several structural features of the university environment, not just user behavior, create the conditions for lateral spread.



Constant Turnover

Thousands of new accounts every semester, no institutional memory from the prior cohort



Password Reuse

Common across student populations, making credential harvesting straightforward



Dormant Accounts

Alumni, transfers, and withdrawn students often stay active long after they've left, providing unattended footholds

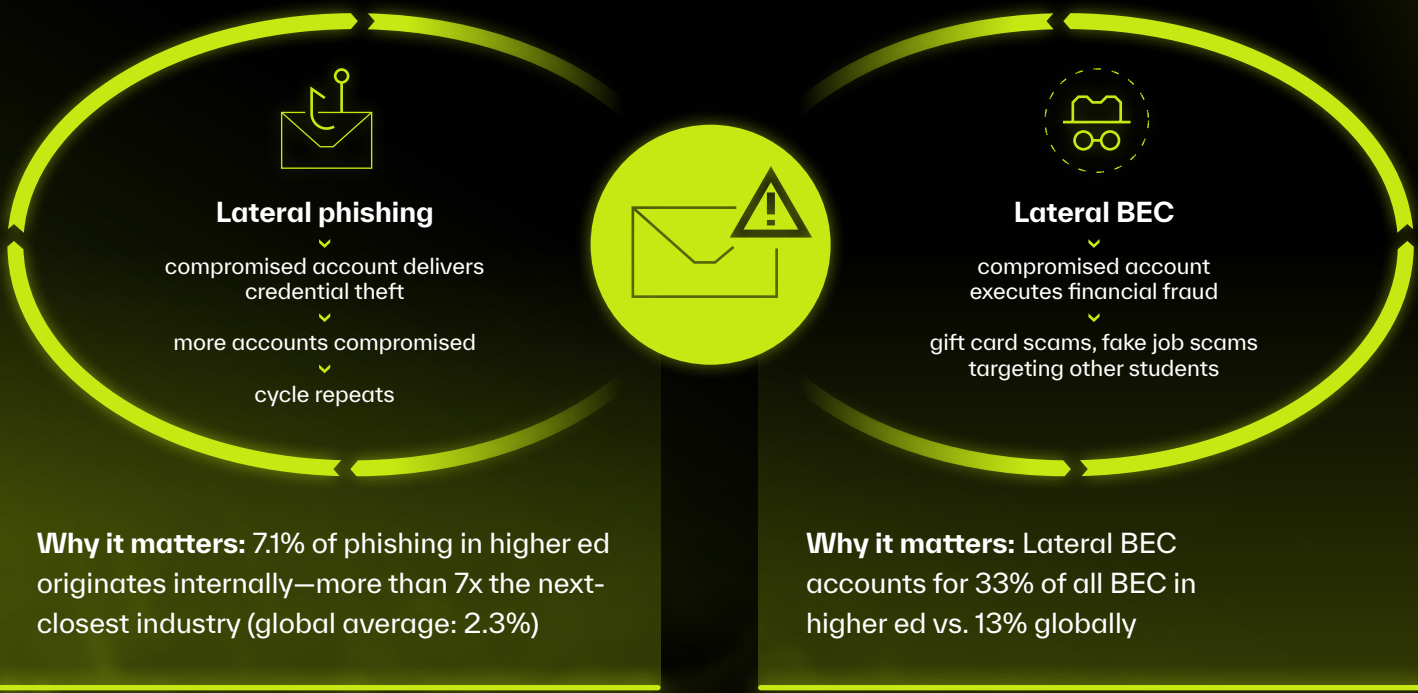


Built-in Trust

.edu addresses carry implicit credibility; academic email systems are open and federated by design

The Self-Propagating Cycle

Once one account is compromised, it becomes a launchpad to compromise more. The cycle sustains itself, and can reset with each new class.



Attacks that originate from inside the institution look identical to legitimate email at the infrastructure level. Stopping them requires understanding what normal communication looks like, and flagging when something doesn't fit.

Higher education is one of 8 industries covered in the 2026 Attack Landscape Report, analyzed across ~797,000 attacks.

Get the Full Report >

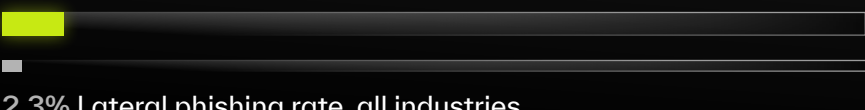
See How Abnormal Protects Higher Education >

Stats Quick Reference

~797,000
Messages analyzed

Sample base for the full report

7.1% Lateral phishing rate, higher education — 7x+ the next-closest industry

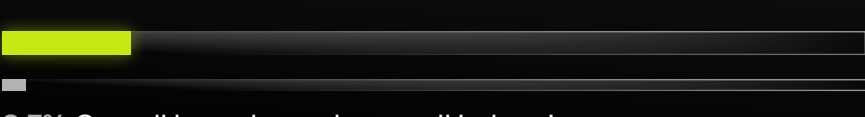


2.3% Lateral phishing rate, all industries

1 in 8

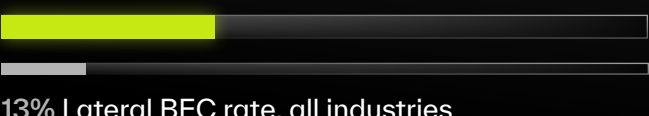
Phishing attacks received by students that come from inside their institution

14.9% Overall lateral attack rate, students — highest of any job category



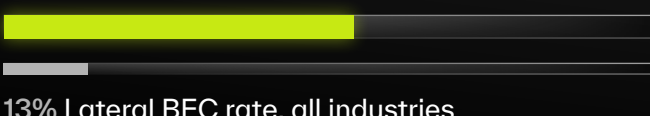
2.7% Overall lateral attack rate, all industries

33% Lateral BEC rate, higher education overall



13% Lateral BEC rate, all industries

54% Lateral BEC rate when targeting students specifically



13% Lateral BEC rate, all industries