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Briscoe center desk employees sorted through the last batch of student mail Oct. 17, delivered earlier that day by U.S. Postal Service.

With the rhythm of an assembly line, they separated the pile of boxes, labeled each individually and scanned them into a notification software system.

An endless sea of nearly identical Amazon Prime boxes filled the mail room, punctuated by the occasional care package adorned with stickers or an H&M box.

But on that October afternoon, a package addressed to Room B306 stood out to the Briscoe center desk staff.

B306 was a single occupancy dorm room belonging to freshman business student, Brendan Matarese.

The delivery didn’t have a bright blue Amazon Prime logo, and it didn’t look like it was from a clothing retailer. It looked normal.

But it smelled as if it had been marinating in the basement of a college house party: densely vegetal, musky and dank — the all-too-familiar scent of weed.

As staff members took turns lifting the box to their noses, they knew what they had to do.

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With faster shipment times and more packages being shipped each year, major delivery companies have reported an increase in the interception of packages containing illegal drugs.

Despite those seizures, many illegal drugs still slip through the cracks, making non-courier personnel — like Briscoe’s center desk staff — the last line of defense.

The Postal Inspection Service saw a 1,000%surge in international package seizures and a 750%jump in domestic opioid package seizures between 2016 and 2018, according to an internal assessment report.

Among the main mail carriers — the U.S. Postal Service, FedEx and UPS – the shipping service trusted most by many drug dealers is the government’s very own.

Private companies such as UPS and FedEx are required by federal law to collect and log package information such as mailing addresses, weight and package contents. This makes it easier for government agencies to investigate and observe suspicious shipment patterns if needed.

But the federal government does not impose those same strict rules on the Postal Service, whose packages often enter and exit shipment facilities without a clearly documented path.

Dealers capitalize on these loopholes, transforming federally paid Postal Service employees into unsuspecting middlemen in the illegal drug trade.

Even the Office of the Inspector General’s annual Postal Service audit report states, “Continued vulnerabilities make the Postal Service network susceptible to use by drug traffickers.”

The report contains dark web confessions from traffickers who claim they used the Postal Service to facilitate all their shipments.

“A cocaine trafficker claimed to have used the Postal Service to successfully distribute nearly 4,000 shipments, stating that they had a 100%delivery success rate.”

Dark web traffickers are so confident they won’t get caught by the Postal Service, nearly half in the report offered buyers full or partial refunds for confiscated packages.

Of the 104 dark web dealers that the Office of the Inspector General investigated, 96 said they primarily used the Postal Service to ship drugs.

A quick web search can reveal Reddit boards, eBay comment threads and Craigslist discussions about how to discreetly ship drugs through the mail.

Reddit’s popular “r/DarkNetMarketsNoobs” page contains an endless supply of advice on this topic with posts titled “Sending packs to my dorm” and “Selling weed, sent to school.”

The most common tip: “Use USPS.”

IU’s Annual Security and Fire Safety Report shows that on-campus arrests stemming from drug law violations have consistently increased over the past few years.

In 2015, the report cited 38 arrests. That number increased to 55 in 2016and 69 in 2017.

“You throw 7,000, 8,000, 9,000 people together on campus, you know, you get all kinds of people,” said Troy Wood, assistant director of Residential Programs and Services. “Recently, I don’t know. These numbers could be better. There’s always room for improvement.”

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The IU Police Department received a phone call from the Briscoe center desk around 6 p.m. Oct. 17 about a delivery they said they believed contained illegal drugs.

Within minutes IUPD Officer Amanda Harden pulled into the circle drive of Briscoe and walked up to the center desk.

On-duty residential assistant Lauryn Johnson gave her the package. Harden noticed the pungent smell, handed the package back and quietly called for backup.

In order to make an arrest, the package needed to be in possession of the intended recipient.

At 7 p.m., the mailroom’s notification software alerted students with new deliveries to come to the center desk for pick-up.

The student whose room was addressed on the package, Matarese, arrived at the desk minutes later.

Center desk employees scanned his ID, matched it to his delivery and handed him the box.

According to court documents, officers had been quietly waiting for him to take hold of the delivery.

As Matarese walked back to his room, IUPD Officer Josh Cooksey emerged from an inconspicuous position inside the building and confronted the student.

Cooksey handcuffed Matarese and escorted him into the the back of a parked patrol car, all as students looked on.

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Brendan Matarese was arrested on a misdemeanor charge of possession of marijuana and a felony charge of dealing hashish oil after a search warrant revealed that there were 30 potent hashish oil cartridges inside the odorous package.

The cartridges were intended for use in portable electronic vaporizers or vapes.

The viscous honey-colored drug of choice is popular on college campuses and among 18- to 24-year-olds, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. One hit can contain more than five times as much THC as a regular joint or bowl.

Matarese was transported to the IUPD station but refused to answer detectives’ questions regarding the delivery or his room.

A second search warrant was filed and granted for Room B306. Inside, police found a safe containing $750 in cash and several more THC cartridge packages.

Near the safe, authorities found a trade log spreadsheet that had been taped to the business major’s wall.

Police collected the drugs, money and trade log as evidence.

IUPD Captain Craig Munroe said this is not the first incident of residence hall mail services being used to ship all kinds of drugs, from marijuana to Xanax.

“Unfortunately, we have seen this before with students sending drugs directly to their dorm rooms,” Munroe said. “Some of them get caught, but it is hard to tell how many go undetected.”

After being taken into custody, Matarese was held at the Monroe County jail before paying a $1,000 surety and $500 cash bond.

Two days after his arrest, Matarese took to YouTube to post a vague 60-second personal business brand pitch. In recently deleted the video he appears seated at his desk claiming, “Over the past three months, I’ve been able to achieve over 100 percent return on my portfolio.”

In the video, a wall decal reading “Fast Money” can be seen hanging behind Matarese. “Fast Money” is the catchphrase and record label of New Jersey rapper, RetcH who has had several drug-related run-ins with the law in recent years.

The Virginia state flag can be seen hanging next to it. The state seal at the center of the flag reads, “Sic Semper Tyrannis,” Latin for “Thus Always to Tyrants.”

As Matarese sat quietly at the IUPD station, those words loomed over authorities as they meticulously combed through the room, looking for any additional evidence.

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According to the Inspector General’s less-than-stellar audit of the Postal Service, it’s not uncommon for a package containing illegal drugs to arrive undetected at its final destination.

“IU residence halls alone receive more than 300,000 packages each year. That number is a big increase from just last year," Wood said. "So unfortunately, yes, it is likely that some of those would statistically contain illegal items.”

But with that increase comes greater responsibility for the center desk staff who, Wood said, have been trained to call police if a suspicious-smelling package rolls through.

“We train staff to notify authorities if they see or smell something strange, but besides that, there’s not much more we can do unfortunately,” Troy said.

On Fe. 27, a plea agreement was filed for Matarese.

Judge Mary Ellen Diekhoff told Matarese if he avoids additional charges and completes 35 hours of community service within the next year, the case will be dismissed. If not, the case will be revisited, and he could face more consequences.

When asked to comment for this story Matarese said, “Nah, man. I got nothing to say.”