

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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The buck stops where?

An article in last week's newspaper has led me to deviate from the local topics that usually fill the space of the Byline. It was a story about the investigation of an incident involving Princeton and Yale. The story surprised me because of what it shows about ethics in our twenty-first century.

You may read the original story last month. Princeton's director of admissions, Stephen LeMenger, used the birth dates and social security numbers of Princeton applicants to access a secure Yale website. Hacking into a site the day acceptances were posted, he and other staffers were able to discover whether certain students had been admitted to Yale. He entered the personal data on a Yale website that warned viewers that it was to be used only by the student applicant. LeMenger has stated that he was simply testing the security of the website. He informed his boss, the dean of admission, who took no action to halt or report the activity.

In announcing their documentation of 18 apparent Princeton break-ins to its computer system, Yale asked the FBI to investigate the impropriety. Princeton placed its director of admission on paid administrative leave and promised an aggressive investigation. Two and a half weeks later the investigation was completed and the report was filed. According to my interpretation of the report, it says nobody did anything very bad and nobody will suffer very much.

Princeton found that actions were motivated solely by the desire to check out the Yale website's security and by simple curiosity (The competitive advantage of knowing Yale's action on a Princeton applicant was not deemed an incentive).

The school will reassign the director of admission to another job. The dean of admission, who accepts responsibility for "inappropriate actions," will retire next June (The retirement was previously scheduled). Everyone involved in the break-ins and any employees who knew of and failed to report them will be disciplined. (Excluding the aforementioned dean of admission). Shirley Tilghman, president of Princeton, announced the results and Richard Levin, president of Yale, said that he was impressed with Princeton's investigation. The status of the federal investigation is unknown.

The incident appears to be closed to the satisfaction of both universities. It ends an unpleasant episode between two elite institutions with minimal harm to any individual, but in so doing it teaches their elite student bodies a new ethical standard.

Princeton personnel used confidential information from their own admissions files to gain access to privileged information on a secure website. Their activity seems to have been known by a number of employees who may have surfed through the files of prospective students, including on celebrity applicant. And they did not think it was wrong! Their claim that they acted out of simple curiosity stands unchallenged.

Their president validates this thought process by stating that "even individuals with a high degree of sensitivity to ethical principles in traditional settings can fail to be equally sensitive when technology is involved as when someone who would never open a sealed envelope addressed to another person enters a secured website." I am tempted to ask this question: if they had access to the sealed envelope and could open it without discovery, why does she assume they would not do so?

My alma mater had an honor code that would have treated the whole episode a serious breach, but the students would not have needed an official code to tell us such snooping in private files was wrong. As another school year begins, will you join me in working to teach the students in our lives how to know what's right and what's wrong. And to act on their convictions. Please send any comments to Mary@Rogeness.com or call me at 567-1661.