

Harvard explains searching deans' email accounts (Update)

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(AP)—Harvard University administrators on Monday offered an explanation for secretly searching the emails of deans last year for the source of a leak to the media about a cheating scandal, saying the searches were done to protect confidential student information.

Faculty of Arts and Sciences deans Michael Smith and Evelyn Hammonds said in a statement posted on the university's website that after consulting with university lawyers, Harvard conducted a "very narrow, careful, and precise subject-line search."

The email accounts belonged to deans on the Administrative Board, a disciplinary committee addressing the cheating, The Boston Globe and The New York Times reported Sunday, citing school officials. The deans were not warned about the email access.

"While the specific document made public may be deemed by some as not particularly consequential, the disclosure of the document and nearly word-for-word disclosure of a confidential board conversation led to concerns that other information—especially student information we have a duty to protect as private— was at risk," they said in Monday's statement.

The secret searches drew criticism from some faculty and staff at Harvard.

Monday's statement said the search was limited to the administrative

accounts of the resident deans.

"To be clear: No one's emails were opened and the contents of no one's emails were searched by human or machine," the statement said.

That search found that an email from a disciplinary board had been forwarded from a resident dean to two students. That dean was not identified.

The dean whose account had been identified was asked about the incident and voluntarily reviewed sent items and confirmed having forwarded the message.

The statement said the university determined that the leak was "an inadvertent error and not an intentional breach," and no further action was taken.

Smith and Hammonds said in their statement that questions about the secret search were fair, but defended their actions.

"Operating without any clear precedent for the conflicting privacy concerns and knowing that no human had looked at any emails during or after the investigation, we made a decision that protected the privacy of the resident dean who had made an inadvertent error and allowed the student cases being handled by this resident dean to move forward expeditiously," they said in the statement.

Harvard said last month that it issued academic sanctions against about 60 students who were forced to withdraw from school for a period of time in a cheating scandal that involved the final exam in a class on Congress. The school implicated as many as 125 students in the scandal when officials first addressed the issue last year.

The inquiry started after a teaching assistant in a spring semester undergraduate-level government class detected problems in the take-home test, including that students may have shared answers.

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