

Student Privacy Issues: A Preliminary Study at Stanford University

Project Authors
Ruchika Agrawal
Lily Sarafan
Tami Kameda
Matthew Waddell
Eric Albert
Alana Aldag
Jed Burgess
Enoch Chen
Chris Countryman
Jeremy Ginsberg
Art Hu
Sandra Liu
Walter Luh
Brad Markham
Derek Shanahan
Dr. Barbara Simons

Project Advisor

Dr. Barbara Simons

The full report is accessible via <http://www.stanford.edu/group/privacyproject/>.

INTRODUCTION

The Stanford Student Computer and Network Privacy Project conducted a pilot study of computer and network related student privacy issues. As far as we know, this is the first such study to have been done on a major university campus. We address important issues that do not receive much attention, including the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act's vague definition of "student educational records" and the faulty presumption that subpoenas implicate judicial review. One of the positive side effects of the study is that it may have uncovered privacy issues that either were not known or were not given high priority by Stanford officials.

Stanford is one of the better-prepared universities in the area of student privacy, and yet Stanford policies and practices manifest troublesome aspects that deserve immediate attention and require improvement. We hope to encourage other schools to similarly examine the state of student privacy on their campuses; we suspect that doing so will uncover weaknesses in student privacy protection at other universities.

METHODOLOGY

First, we surveyed a small sample of the student body to consider their expectations and perceptions of student privacy rights on the Stanford network. Second, we identified and exposed many of the privacy risks associated with the Stanford Network. Third, we considered the following laws and policies in the context of student privacy protection: Electronic Communications Privacy Act (ECPA), Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA; also known as the Buckley Amendment), Stanford's Student Life/Codes of Conduct/Fundamental Standard/Honor Code/Student Judicial Charter/Judicial Affairs, Stanford's Principles of Privacy in the University and Stanford's Computer and Network Usage Policy. Finally, we attempted to analyze where Stanford is headed in its protection of student privacy. We interviewed several University officials and attempted to analyze what Stanford has planned from both a policy and technological point of view. We also considered other universities' privacy policies to help us gain perspective on Stanford's privacy policy.

FINDINGS

Based on our study, we suggest that the University place greater emphasis on increasing awareness of student privacy issues through literature distribution and educational programs. Students should play a part in their own protection through: revealing less information on personal webpage; controlling what information is shared with Stanford community members and what is shared with the outside world; specifying access permissions to "Read-Only" when sharing files; and when using cluster computers, being mindful not to give sensitive information (which may be cached via cookies for example), closing browser windows, and making sure to logout from email sessions. Regarding legal and policy issues, we recommend that Stanford officials: limit what types of subpoenas can warrant disclosure of student information; establish a formal interpretation of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, educate students, faculty, staff and system administrators about it, and put it into practice in a timely fashion; and expand Stanford's Principles of Privacy in the University to

address computer and network privacy issues to protect students from other students, faculty, and staff. Furthermore, we suggest that the Security Office keep an audit log to ensure proper use of access privileges. Finally, Stanford's privacy policy should be revised and made easily accessible as soon as possible.

CONCLUSION

Stanford is one of the better-prepared universities in the area of student privacy, and yet Stanford policies and practices require improvement. We hope that other universities will conduct a similar analysis of student computer and network privacy issues and make serious attempts to improve student privacy protection on their campuses.