Deans' Panel Abstract
Fall 1991
Larry, Dan, Charles and Shep

Summary
One night after midnight, using the key Dan had for his computer class, four students (Dan, Larry, Charles, and Shep) entered a computer center to check their VAX accounts. When they realized that it was April 1st, they decided to lock up several VAX accounts as a prank, and proceeded to do so. The next morning about 50 people discovered that they could not log on to their accounts; the victims included administration, staff, and students. The computer center staff spent over 40 person-hours unlocking all of the accounts. Because both the misuse of college resources and possible Honor Code issues of privacy and respect were involved, a deans' panel comprised of four Honor Council members and two deans was convened. One dean chaired the proceedings, and the other dean observed the procedure but was not part of any consensus.

Fact-Finding
The director of academic computing, Mr. Lucy, spoke first:
He explained that he had come to work on April 1st and had been unable to log into his account; a few minutes later he received a number of phone calls from administrative staff who were also unable to log into their accounts. He soon discovered that between 50 and 75 accounts had been locked the evening before, and the computer center staff began the painstaking process of unlocking each account. He explained that unlocking an account takes a long time and that a total of about 40 person-hours of computer center staff time were spent in the process. At an average staff wage of $25/hour, about $1000 of the college's money had been wasted.
He continued, saying that the computer center's electronic lock showed that Dan had entered that center just before the VAX attack. Mr. Lucy approached Dan, who readily admitted to having played a part in causing the crisis. Over the next few days the other three students also admitted their roles.
Mr. Lucy added that it was his understanding that this constituted a violation of the Honor Code. He pointed to the section of the Students' Guide which deals with VAX accounts (page 9) and mentioned that it was his understanding that in the past when similar things had happened they had been considered violations. He stressed the time and energy that the students' thoughtless act had wasted.

Dan, Larry, Charles, and Shep then separately gave their versions of what happened, basically agreeing on the following:
They were coming back from a late-night game of shuffleboard when Dan suggested that they check their vaxes. In the midst of this activity, someone mentioned that it was April Fool's Day. Dan knew a simple way to lock up someone's VAX account without breaking into it, and Larry said that it would be quite funny if many of the chronic VAX users were unable to log on the next morning. They began to lock people out and continued for 20 to 30 minutes. At no time, they all insisted, did they ever attempt to break into someone's account. They targeted those people who used the VAX frequently. Dan explained that he had targeted those people that consistently disagreed with his VAXnotes postings on H-Sex-Talk. Shep admitted to locking out the president of the College, but Larry and Charles didn't remember doing anyone except friends and popular names. When asked, Charles said he expected to be caught, but figured he would only "have [his] hand slapped." None of them had had any idea how difficult and costly it was to unlock VAX accounts; Dan had been very surprised when Mr. Lucy had confronted him with this information.

Deliberation

The confronted students left, and the panel began discussing whether the prank constituted a violation of the Honor Code. One Honor Council member felt that the students had violated the trust of the community by denying many people access to their accounts. She added that their actions showed disrespect for these inconvenienced students. Another council member, however, said that by their nature all pranks are "disrespectful" and "violate trust", even minor ones such as sneaking up behind people and shouting "Boo!". This situation is different, the first member insisted, because it affected such a large portion of the community, represented such blatant disrespect, and was perpetrated through a misuse of college property. Another council member asked if every prank that was played on a large group of people, Swarthmore students for example, should be an Honor Code violation. Eventually, everyone agreed that the Honor Code did not apply to this action because it was meant as a harmless prank, because the locked-out community members were not exceedingly inconvenienced, and because the inconvenience to the computer center staff was unintentional.

However, affirmed the Dean, something had to be done to address the inconvenience of locked out community members and the wasted time of computer center personnel. The action could not be forgotten just because it was unintentional. Several different ways to address the action soon emerged:

- Larry, Dan, Charles, and Shep could work with the computer center to make up the 40 lost hours.
- They could make up the lost hours by doing community service.
- They should apologize in some way to those affected by their thoughtlessness.
They could write a paper or design a pamphlet outlining misuses of the VAX system. This would serve to educate the community about the proper uses of the VAX and the often extensive impact of misusing the system.

They could write a letter to the community.

An abstract could be written up (never done previously for a Deans' Panel)

After discussing the first option with Mr. Lucy, it became clear that there was little that Larry, Dan, Charles, or Shep could do to help the computer center. Mr. Lucy was understandably skeptical about introducing them to the heart of the college's computing system, and added that the time spent teaching them to help would negate any time saved by their help. The second option immediately raised the question of how community service would address the breach of trust to the community and serve as a meaningful recompense for the 40 hours lost by the computing center. After some discussion, one of the council members raised the possibility of volunteer monitoring at the student computer centers. This requires about 5 minutes of training and would be a service to both the computer center and to those who frequently use the VAX. After conferring with Mr. Lucy, the panel agreed that Larry, Dan, Charles, and Shep would serve as volunteer computer center monitors.

The panel then turned to the third option. How should the apology be presented? Some felt that they should apologize in person, but others disagreed, saying that this would deny them the confidentiality ensured by the Honor Code. The panel quickly decided not to make its decision before asking Larry, Dan, Charles, and Shep how they felt about breaking confidentiality. One of the council members then mentioned the possibility of their writing a public apology to be placed in the login banner that everyone sees when they log onto the VAX. This would allow them to apologize only to those members of the community who use the VAX without wasting tons of paper and crowding mailboxes. Another council member then asked if that apology should be signed. The panel agreed also to ask Larry, Charles, Dan, and Shep how they felt about signing the public apology.

The idea of the letter to the community was quickly discarded because of the general lack of respect accorded to such letters in the past.

Many of the panel members felt uncomfortable with the idea of forcing Larry, Dan, Charles, and Shep to write a pamphlet or paper. Although such a resource might be helpful it seemed largely punitive, and concern was expressed that the project might not be undertaken in the most conscientious fashion. The panel decided that distribution of an abstract would serve to educate the community about the repurcussions of misusing the VAX, so they chose this alternative rather than ask the pranksters to write a paper or pamphlet.
Presentation of the Resolutions

Larry, Dan, Charles, and Shep were asked back in to discuss the panel's decisions. None of the four had any problems with either apologizing in person or signing the public apology, and they agreed to do so as soon as possible. At first they did not understand the rationale behind the volunteer monitor hours, so the panel explained the thought process behind that resolution. The four reluctantly agreed to serve as volunteer monitors in the two weeks before they graduated.

Final Letter of Panel Resolutions

Dear Larry, Dan, Charles, and Shep:

The findings of the Deans' Panel indicate that, while your behavior was not a clear-cut breach of the Honor Code, it was a prank that led to substantial expense to the college and curtailed access to an important educational and administrative resource.

In light of these findings, the Deans' Panel came to the following resolutions, to which you have agreed:

1) You will apologize in person to the Computing Center Staff.

2) You will write an apology to those affected by your prank which will be posted in the VAX login banner by Mr. Lucy. You have agreed to sign your names to the apology.

3) You will each perform 9 hours of service as a volunteer monitor in the computer center during finals week.

4) This Deans' Panel will release a short abstract to educate the community about the issues that arose in this case.

We appreciate the spirit with which you participated in the Deans' Panel, and we hope that this has been a positive learning experience for you.

Sincerely,

The Deans' Panel
Questions:

Do you agree that Larry & Co. did not violate the Honor Code? What is the place of pranks within the Honor Code?

Do you feel that the resolutions were fair in addressing the relevant issues?

Do you think it is generally worthwhile to release abstracts about Deans' Panels dealing with similar or other issues?