



BUTTE COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY



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PRESS RELEASE

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Chico State Hacker Sentenced

A 22-year-old Chico man appeared in Butte County Superior Court today where he admitted to illegally hacking numerous computers at Chico State University and was sentenced to probation, fines and community service. The illegal “hacking” led to the online posting of a list of University students who had applied for COVID-19 vaccine exemptions.

Butte County District Attorney Mike Ramsey said an extensive investigation by University Police lead to **Alejandro Benitez**, a recent graduate of the University, who worked in the Information Technology Support Services Office on campus. Ramsey said the investigation began when a Sacramento newspaper published an article in August describing a spreadsheet that had been posted on several online forums. The spreadsheet included requests from about 130 students who requested religious exemptions from the University’s vaccine mandate. Student names and personal information were included in 18 of the entries.

Ramsey said the Chico State University Police examined the posted spreadsheet and were able to back trace a trail to Benitez. The police also discovered it was a Chico State professor who had tipped off the media as to the existence of the online posts. The professor told police rather than alerting the University about his discovery, he instead alerted his union and the media with the hope any potential civil rights and privacy violations would be investigated. Ramsey stated the professor would not be facing charges, as his actions were not criminal. Ramsey explained the criminal conduct involved in this case was unlawfully accessing the University’s computers.

Ramsey said it was determined Benitez got the confidential exemption lists by illegally accessing and downloading files during the course of his employment from at least two computers assigned to Chico State administrators.

Ramsey said prior to his posting the spreadsheets on the internet, Benitez attempted to redact the students’ personal identifying information but he failed to note some of the students’ personal identifying information was located in other columns of the spreadsheet.

Benitez entered a plea of no contest to the crime of Unauthorized Computer Access. Butte County Superior Court Commissioner Kurt Worley sentenced Benitez to three years of probation and fines of \$370. Benitez terms of probation include completing 80 hours of community service and a prohibition from accepting employment where he could have access to a computer unless that employment is approved by the court. Commissioner Worley warned Benitez he will be required to serve a minimum of 180 days in Butte County Jail if there are any violations of probation.