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How much did hacker who taunted Rutgers cost the school?

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Former Rutgers student Paras Jha, left, with attorney Robert Stahl, leaving the federal courthouse in Trenton on Wednesday, Dec. 13, 2017. (Jeff Granit | For NJ.com)

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The mystery is solved.

The enigmatic hacker who repeatedly crashed Rutgers University's computer network between 2014 and 2016 -- then taunted campus officials online for their weak cyber security -- was one of the school's own students.

Paras Jha, 21, admitted in federal court Wednesday that he was behind the series of cyber attacks that shut down campus websites and knocked tens of thousands of members of the Rutgers community off the internet.

The former computer science major caused days of frustration for students trying to submit assignments, professors trying to post grades and researchers who couldn't work on their projects.

But, he also cost Rutgers money -- lots of it, prosecutors said.

Jha's online pranks may have cost Rutgers between $3.5 million and $9.5 million, said William Fitzpatrick, the acting U.S. Attorney in New Jersey. The exact amount will be determined at Jha's sentencing hearing in March.

"These computer attacks shut down the server used for all communications among faculty, staff and students, including assignment of course work to students, and students' submission of their work to professors to be graded," Fitzpatrick said. "The defendant's actions effectively

paralyzed the system for days at a time and maliciously disrupted the educational process for tens of thousands of Rutgers' students."

The Rutgers attacks were one of several crimes Jha pleaded guilty to in federal court this month. In a separate case filed in federal court in Alaska, Jha pleaded guilty to conspiring with two other hackers to create computer viruses, including the "Mirai" botnet that was used by other hackers to disable much of the internet in an October 2016 worldwide cyber attack.

Investigators opened the case in Alaska because that is where some of the first devices were infected by the "Mirai" botnet virus, which was named after a Japanese anime character Jha and his co-conspirators liked, prosecutors said.

Jha faces up to 10 years in prison, though he is expected to get less under the plea agreement he reached with federal prosecutors. He faces a fine of at least $250,000, but he could also be fined as much as twice the amount of money his victims, including Rutgers, lost because of his crimes.

The former student, who left Rutgers after two years, has already agreed to forfeit his bitcoin account, which he used to get online payments as a cyber-attacker-for-hire, prosecutors said. His account had 13 bitcoin-- currently worth about $220,000 due to a recent spike in the value of the online currency.

A Rutgers spokeswoman declined to comment on how much money the university lost because of Jha's cyber attacks, citing the ongoing legal proceedings. In 2015, university officials said they were spending at least $3 million to upgrade cyber security in campus due to the repeated DDoS, or distributed denial of service, attacks on its servers.

Rutgers officials later said the extra money spent on cyber security upgrades was one of the reasons they hiked tuition for the following school year.

In 2015, Jha used a Twitter account with the the screen name "Exfocus" to taunt Rutgers officials about the latest cyber attack that crashed Rutgers' websites and cut off internet and wifi to the campus.

"where internet go?? 3m dollar gone?" read one tweet, referring to the $3 million Rutgers said it spent on consultants and new software and equipment to upgrade its cyber security.

In a letter to the Rutgers community sent Wednesday, Rutgers' top internet security official said the university has made big improvements to it technology infrastructure since Jha's attacks.

"We recognize the threat posed by cybercriminals, and we will be tireless in working with law enforcement to pursue individuals who attempt to compromise the Rutgers network," wrote Michele Norin, Rutgers' senior vice president and chief information officer.

Jha, who lives with his parents in Fanwood, is remorseful for his attacks on Rutgers and his other crimes, his attorney said.

"He is fortunate to have loving, supportive parents and a bright future ahead. He has pled to charges here in the District of New Jersey, and in the District of Alaska, as the first step in his evolution into adulthood and responsibility," said Robert Stahl, Jha's attorney.

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