Making Florida the Nation’s Most ‘Cyber-Secure’ State

Former Director of U.S. National Intelligence Mike McConnell often says, “There are two kinds of organizations … those that have been hacked, and those that don’t know it yet.” McConnell, who also served as director of the National Security Agency and vice chair of a multibillion-dollar technology consulting firm, was recently named executive director of Cyber Florida: The Florida Center for Cybersecurity, and he’s made the cybersecurity of the state’s citizens, businesses, and governments a top priority.

It couldn’t come at a more critical time. Florida and the nation have become increasingly reliant on technology to do just about everything — from working and shopping to going to school — and that makes us more vulnerable to cybercriminals and cyberespies.

And as COVID-19 has forced us to live almost our entire lives online, we’ve become even more vulnerable. That’s what keeps McConnell and his Cyber Florida team awake at night, and they are working with all 12 of Florida’s State University System (SUS) institutions to do something about it.

A New, More Collaborative Approach

The state created Cyber Florida — part of the University of South Florida — to better integrate the cybersecurity research, education, and outreach efforts of Florida’s SUS schools, and the good news is that individually, they have tremendous expertise in these areas. In the words of McConnell, “No other state can boast the number of cybersecurity scholars and degree programs that Florida has, and if we collaborate and work together, we can leverage them for the greater public good.”

McConnell’s team, aided by new Staff Director Dr. Ron Sanders, a USF grad fresh off his tour as head of USF’s School of Public Affairs, has already accelerated that collaborative approach. With the support of USF President Dr. Steven Currall and Provost Dr. Ralph Wilcox, they’ve created a Governing Council with deans from nine of Florida’s 12 SUS institutions to do something about it. The Council for Cybersecurity was formally launched in March 2021 with support from nonprofits like the National Cryptologic Museum, that effort is well underway and includes a collaborative grant proposal with Florida International University (FIU) that could expand this work nationally.

Half-a-Million Cybersecurity Vacancies and Counting

More interest in cybersecurity careers — experts estimate up to 500,000 vacancies nationwide with $80,000+ starting salaries — means more demand for degrees, and the state’s colleges and universities are stepping up with an array of programs that encompass students in engineering, business, data science, criminology, and other areas that provide cybersecurity-related skills.

For example, students at Florida Gulf Coast University get hands-on experience with cyberattack and defense tools, and this fall, Florida Atlantic University will include a cryptology track in its M.S. in Applied Mathematics and Statistics. The University of Central Florida (UCF) is preparing to launch an M.S. in Cyber Security and Privacy next year, and FIU’s interdisciplinary cybersecurity program is even being ‘exported’ internationally across the Americas.

And it pays off … for students, the state, and the nation. For example, UCF’s award-winning student hacking team has placed either first or second in ‘cyber games’ across the country, and as a result, Cyber Florida has asked UCF to partner on another grant proposal, to create a nationwide cybersecurity competition — think of it as March Madness for cyber ninjas — along with several Florida-based e-sports companies.

Learn more about these and other Cyber Florida initiatives at cyberflorida.org. If you would like to get involved, email info@cyberflorida.org.

The Department of Homeland Security and National Security Agency have designated nine of Florida’s 12 SUS institutions as Centers of Academic Excellence in cybersecurity-related disciplines. They include:

- USF University of South Florida
- UNF University of North Florida
- UWF University of West Florida
- FAU Florida Atlantic University
- FIU Florida International University
- FGCU Florida Gulf Coast University
- FAMU Florida A&M University
- FSU Florida State University
- UF University of Florida

“Cyber-secure”

“... these programs to a national audience.

Cybersecurity Begins in Grade School

Degrees and high-paying jobs in cybersecurity represent the culmination of the workforce development pipeline, but interest must begin in grade school.

To that end, Cyber Florida has partnered with USF’s Florida Center for Instructional Technology to develop a model K-12 cyber curriculum for use across the state. With funding and support from nonprofits like the National Cryptologic Museum, that effort is well underway and includes a collaborative grant proposal with Florida International University (FIU) that could expand this effort nationally.

Michael McConnell, Executive Director, Cyber Florida