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U.S. seeks 'top guns' for cybersecurity

Grant Gross

July 27, 2009 ([IDG News Service](#)) Amid concerns that the U.S. has a shortage of cybersecurity professionals, a new consortium of U.S. government and private organizations aims to identify students with strong computer skills and train them as cybersecurity guardians, warriors and "top guns."

The consortium, including the U.S. Department of Defense Cyber Crime Center, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the Air Force Association and the SANS Institute, today announced an initiative to identify, train and find jobs for students interested in cybersecurity.

The [U.S. Cyber Challenge](#) initiative will bring together three cybersecurity competitions for high school or college students and launch new in-person competitions, said Alan Paller, research director at the SANS Institute, a cybersecurity training organization.

The organizers of the U.S. Cyber Challenge also plan to offer scholarships to promising students and hook them up with internships and jobs, Paller said.

The initiative is a response to a growing concern that the U.S. will not have enough cybersecurity professionals in coming years, participants in a kick-off event said. Some experts have said the U.S. has about 1,000 world-class cybersecurity experts when it needs 20 to 30 times that many, Paller said.

The U.S. Department of Defense trains just 80 cybersecurity professionals a year, noted James Lewis, director of the CSIS Technology and Public Policy Program.

The pipeline for cybersecurity professionals in the U.S. is "a trickle," said Richard Schaeffer Jr., director of information assurance at the U.S. National Security Agency. "It is a really, really, really, really tiny number."

Nations including China are actively recruiting and developing cybersecurity professionals, Paller added. Without training and development programs, the U.S. faces getting further and further behind, he said.

One of the goals of the initiative will be to promote cybersecurity careers as "cool," organizers said. Two of the competitions that will be part of the program, the Air Force Association's CyberPatriot Defense Competition and the SANS Institute's NetWars Capture the Flag Competition, use a video game format to draw students' interest.

"You can't find a kid today who doesn't know what 'Grand Theft Auto' is," said Sanford Schlitt, vice chairman of the board for aerospace education at the Air Force Association.

The association launched a limited version of its CyberPatriot Defense Competition in January. A second round of the competition, with registration closing in September, has attracted 270 high school teams from 44 states, plus Japan and South Korea, he said.

The NetWars competition, with high school and college students focused on attacking and defending computers, drew 80 competitors in its first round held in June, said James Shewmaker, founder of cybersecurity vendor Bluenotch and key developer of the game. The winner of the first round was able to find

a vulnerability in the scoring system and give himself additional points, and organizers decided that was fair game, Shewmaker said.

While parts of the U.S. Cyber Challenge are still coming together, the organizers are getting offers of support from many groups, including Google Inc. and the FBI, Paller said. Companies and organizations can help in many ways, including helping to organize cybersecurity camps, he said.

The new initiative is the "best news story in cybersecurity," Paller said. "The Cyber Challenge is a step in the right direction."