Fast Forward: UW-Stout to develop model cybersecurity internship program with $299,000 system, state grant

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Menomonie, Wis. — A cybersecurity internship grant addressing the needs of the Wisconsin's critical infrastructure utilities has been awarded to University of Wisconsin-Stout, a higher education leader in the field.

The $299,000 Fast Forward grant from the state Department of Workforce Development and University of Wisconsin System will provide paid industry internships to adult learners, including state university and technical college students who are seeking to enter the information technology and cybersecurity field or enhance their skillset.

Students who are unemployed, underemployed or from underrepresented groups in the field, including women and veterans, are encouraged to apply. UW-Stout has an undergraduate program in cybersecurity.

According to Cyber Seek, more than 1.1 million people are employed in the industry in the U.S., but there are more than 755,000 job openings, including more than 7,800 in Wisconsin. The Wisconsin shortage is despite a high average salary for an entry-level cybersecurity analyst in the state: $75,000.

The goals of the program are to increase students' work-based opportunities, enhance awareness career possibilities and educational pathways in Wisconsin, and create industry connections for students and regional employers.

In addition to the work experience, interns will benefit from establishing industry connections that could lead to future job opportunities with regional employers. State companies already supporting the program include Aspirus, Dirksgroup, Malisko, Marshfield Clinic and Rockwell Automation. More companies will be recruited. The program matches students to industry mentors.

"This program will benefit many students and unemployed workers who want to upskill and transition into cybersecurity, help them develop skillsets they need to be successful and inspire them to pursue a full-time profession in IT and cybersecurity," said Professor Holly Yuan, grant director, program director and cybersecurity center director at UW-Stout.

The program will begin in May with 20 interns, followed by 20 more interns in late summer or fall and run through June 1, 2024.

Students can apply via a website that will be developed by UW-Stout. In the interim, interested applicants should email centerforcybersecurity@uwstout.edu. A project coordinator will be hired to coordinate the day-to-day management of the internship program and industry partner relationships.

"As a polytechnic institution, it is within UW-Stout's mission for students to gain hands-on experience," said Anne Hoeltke, director of the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs. "Through this grant, students will have the opportunity to gain valuable work experience and apply academic concepts in real-world settings. Employers will have the opportunity to evaluate prospective new hires, obtain fresh ideas and foster stronger relationships with UW- Stout. For these reasons, the ability to apply scholarships to internships is an easy win-win for students, employers and the university."

Yuan will work with UW-Stout's Career Services, the Cybersecurity Research and Outreach Center, and a project coordinator to administer the internship program. Career Services oversees an existing Cooperative Education and Internship Program on campus that served more than 1,100 students in 2021-22.

Interns will work a minimum of 240 hours and be paid an average of $20 an hour. They can apply for gift cards to assist with barriers for internship completion, including for transportation and gas.

The next-level goal of the grant will be to replicate UW-Stout's program across the

UW System. A scalable, statewide IT and cybersecurity internship program will "provide the state with a head start in the development of critical infrastructure," Yuan said.

UW-Stout has been a cybersecurity higher education leader in Wisconsin since 2017, when it became the first four-year institution in the state to be designated a cybersecurity center. The designation coincided with being named a National Center of Academic Excellence in Cyber Defense by the National Security Agency and Department of Homeland Security.

In 2022, the university's Bachelor of Science program in cybersecurity was approved by the UW System Board of Regents. UW-Stout also offers a minor, two certificates and two concentrations related to cybersecurity.

UW-Stout is Wisconsin's Polytechnic University, with a focus on applied learning, collaboration with business and industry, and career outcomes. Learn more via the FOCUS2030 strategic plan.