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Cyber-security experts take first place



A team of Northeastern students took the top prize at the 2010 National Collegiate Cyber Defense Competition. Photo by Art Conklin-University of Houston

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A group of Northeastern University computer science students has bested seven other teams from institutions around the United States to earn top honors in the 2010 National Collegiate Cyber Defense Competition.

Northeastern's team consisted of graduate students Weiwei Hu and Alagu Irulappan, and undergraduate students Marc Held, Shawn Smith, William Nowak and Channing Conger. Kevin Amorin, a lecturer in the **College of Computer and Information Science**, coached the team.

Now in its fifth year, the Cyber Defense Competition was held from April 16 to 18 in San Antonio, Texas. To win the top prize, known as the Alamo Cup, participants have to figure out ways to manage and protect a fictional company's network infrastructure. Each team quickly assesses its network's current protection level, then tries to fend off a series of cyber attacks.

Teams are judged on how well they detect and respond to outside threats, maintain their business's operational needs, stay responsive to user demands, and meet service-level agreements for all critical Internet operations.

The Northeastern team started training in December for this year's event. Smith, the Northeastern team captain, says the experiential-learning opportunities he and his teammates received at their various co-op jobs—which included working at Google and Microsoft—paid huge dividends during the competition.

"We can talk with one another about what we know," Smith says. "I might not know how to do something, but, instead of having to search online for a few minutes, I can get a straight answer from one of my friends."

The competition, the world's largest college-level cyber-defense contest, provides students with practical experience and the opportunity to meet and interact with industry professionals. Universities use the event to evaluate the efficacy of their cyber-security curriculum. Even Howard Schmidt, the White House's cybersecurity coordinator, attended the event to observe the teams at work.

Northeastern's team has shown remarkable growth over the three years it has competed. In 2008, the team finished second in the Northeast regional contest. Last year, the team won the Northeast regional and took second in the national competition. This year, Northeastern defeated eight other teams in the regional in March before winning the national competition.

"We were kind of coming back with a vengeance, I guess," says Smith, who has competed each of the last three years. "It felt really good to win."

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