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Smarter rules for the Smart Grid



Dean Larry Finkelstein expresses Northeastern's commitment to security-based research. Photo by Mary Knox Merrill

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Federal officials have been working with partners in the private and public sectors to develop an advanced digital Smart Grid infrastructure for the U.S. electric power system, making it more reliable, energy-efficient, and better able to serve new technologies, such as electric vehicles.

But the new intelligent infrastructure comes with greater complexity, which increases exposure to cyber-security threats such as deliberate attacks and even natural phenomena like hurricanes and earthquakes — which is where Northeastern

University's commitment and capabilities enter the picture.

Northeastern's **College of Computer and Information Science** hosted a session this week for local officials, regulatory organizations, industry and academia to review the 2011 Smart Grid Guidelines for Cyber Security, which were released in August. The guidelines were developed by federal regulators and more than 450 industry leaders specifically to address security concerns that would arise from the transformation to a Smart Grid.

"We are so pleased to participate in this critical effort and to support the important work of the leaders who collaborated on the project," said Larry Finkelstein, dean of the College of Computer and Information Science, which includes federally supported research and education programs in information and cyber security.

Today's grid relies heavily on coal and oil, has limited automation, and fails to provide consumers with the data necessary to manage their energy usage. A Smart Grid would utilize digital technology to provide two-way communication between suppliers and consumers' home electronics through the use of smart meters. Using the new system, for example, consumers could program their air conditioning while out running errands, monitor energy consumption and even save enough local power to sell back to the grid.

"The shift from the old grid to the Smart Grid will enhance reliability and security of the electric system as well as support the growing use of electronics, including plug-in vehicles," said Alan Greenberg, technical director of the Cyber Business Unit at the Boeing Company, and vice chair of the Smart Grid Cyber Security team.

Northeastern has made a major commitment to protecting information networks. Security, along with health and sustainability, is a major research focus for the University. It is something Finkelstein noted is reflected in "the important security-related research projects undertaken by our faculty."

In addition to research, Northeastern offers academic programs in information security, including a longstanding professional master's program and a new interdisciplinary PhD.

"Our programs address the demand for the next generation of leaders who understand not only the technical but also the legal, policy and social requirements of cyber security," said Finkelstein.

These collective efforts have led to Northeastern's designation as a National Center of Academic Excellence in Information Assurance Research and a National Center of Academic Excellence in Information Assurance Education by the National Security Agency and the Department of Homeland Security.

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