

Google backs creation of cybersecurity clinics with \$20 million donation

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Google CEO Sundar Pichai attends a workshop with college students at the Google office in Washington, Thursday, June 22, 2023. Credit: AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana

Free medical clinics and legal aid clinics, where college students and

their instructors help their communities while also learning more about their professions, are now commonplace. Google hopes to add cybersecurity clinics to that list.

Google CEO Sundar Pichai pledged \$20 million in donations on Thursday to support and expand the Consortium of Cybersecurity Clinics to introduce thousands of students to potential careers in cybersecurity, while also helping defend small government offices, rural hospitals and nonprofits from hacking.

Pichai said the new initiative addresses both the rising number of cyberattacks—up 38% globally in 2022—and the lack of candidates trained to stop them.

"Just as technology can create new threats, it can also help us fight them," Pichai said, announcing the commitment at Google's Washington offices. "Security was critical to the work I did early in my Google career, including when we built our Chrome browser. Today, it's core to everything we do, and the current inflection point in AI is helping take our efforts to the next level."

The tech giant launched the Google Cybersecurity Certificate program last month to help prepare people for entry-level cybersecurity jobs. It also partnered with universities in New York on a research program to create learning and career opportunities across the cybersecurity sector.



Google CEO Sundar Pichai speaks to college students about strengthening the cybersecurity workforce during a workshop at the Google office in Washington, Thursday, June 22, 2023. Credit: AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana

"Making sure we protect and safeguard both the consumer services and the enterprises services we provide is foundational to the company, which is why we treat it as such," Pichai told The Associated Press in an interview after the announcement. "We've been building security from the ground up for a long time and training to innovate and stay ahead."

Google's announcement had support from Congressional members on both sides of the aisle. Republican Rep. Jay Obernolte of California said addressing cyber threats is essential to the country's economic competitiveness as well as national security. He added that China will

likely produce twice as many computer science students with doctoral degrees this year than the United States.

"We need to incentivize students to pursue careers in fields like cybersecurity to reverse that trend," he said. "We must all embrace the idea of becoming lifelong learners."

Rep. Joaquin Castro of Texas said Google's initiative helps democratize cybersecurity, providing more employment opportunities and more protection to those not located in Silicon Valley.

"Small businesses literally can lose hundreds of thousands of dollars every year," Castro said. "I'm grateful to Google for building on their commitment to support the growth of a workforce necessary to do everything from securing critical infrastructure in local communities to bolstering our national security."



Google CEO Sundar Pichai talks with college students during a workshop at the Google office in Washington, Thursday, June 22, 2023. Credit: AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana

Pichai said there are currently more than 650,000 open cybersecurity jobs and there is a need for a diverse workforce to address the issue. "We have seen this in the past when we've gone to communities and open data centers in rural communities," he said. "It creates a spark. It inspires more people... These are catalyzing moments."

Justin Steele, director of Google.org, the company's philanthropic arm, said the initiative appealed to his team because it seeks projects where the funding can spawn change on multiple levels.

"It's a challenge," Steele said. "But there's a huge opportunity here."

Steele anticipates the cybersecurity clinics will have students help small organizations that lack their own technology departments with threat assessments and installing defenses.

"Those students get hands-on experience and they get to increase their marketability for all of these open jobs in cybersecurity," Steele said.

"We get to diversify the field of cybersecurity by training these students and we get to protect critical U.S. infrastructure."



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Ann Cleaveland, executive director of the Center for Long-Term Cybersecurity at the University of California, Berkeley, said the clinics can help organizations "get over a sense of nihilism" about dealing with hackers. While many groups think there is nothing they can do against a state-supported hacker or ransomware attacks, the clinics can offer low-level solutions that can combat a large number of threats.

"Students can really help organizations overcome 80 to 90% of the problems and give them a much more resilient stance," said Cleaveland, adding that the Consortium of Cybersecurity Clinics hopes to establish clinics in every state by 2030.

Mark Lupo, coordinator of the University of Georgia's clinic, known as CyberArch, said demand continues to increase for the clinic's services because more and more data is at risk. "We have continued as a society to bring more of our sensitive information online, so that vulnerability has only increased," he said. "The malicious actors understand that sensitive data can be monetized, which, at some point in the past, was not even a thought. Now that there's money there, they're going to gravitate toward that."

That makes cybersecurity and "all hands on deck" issue, said Cleaveland, who is co-chair of the consortium's executive committee. She said Google.org's donation will help the consortium establish new clinics, as well as provide mentors to the students staffing them.

"The funding is critical, especially for the smaller universities and colleges and for some of the minority-serving institutions," she said. "And I think it will be transformative just in terms of making other institutions of higher education aware of the opportunity to have a cybersecurity clinic."



Google CEO Sundar Pichai greets college students during a workshop at the Google office in Washington, Thursday, June 22, 2023. Credit: AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana

Kevin Harris, program chair of the Department of Computational and Information Sciences at Stillman College, said he is ready to apply for a grant from Google.org to expand the cybersecurity clinic at his school, the first member of the consortium at a historically Black college or university.

"We're still pushing to make the field more inclusive," Harris said. "When you look at an unfilled demand of 700,000+ jobs, why shouldn't everyone be able to take advantage of those opportunities no matter where you're located?"

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