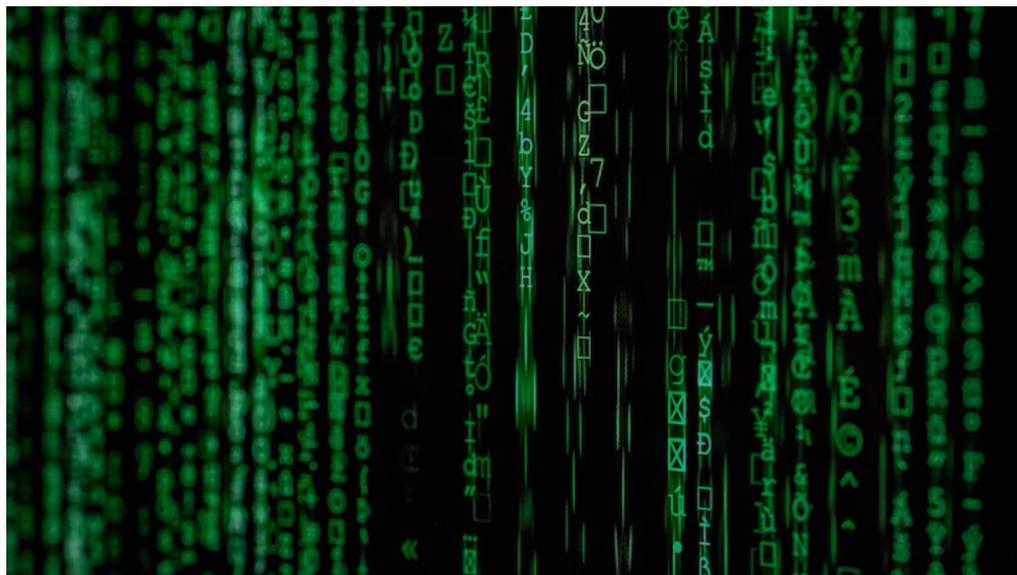


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Miami Dade College Cybersecurity Program Opening Up World of Opportunity for Students

Brian Boyd is one of more than 600 students enrolled in Miami Dade College's cybersecurity program that has grown by leaps and bounds since it was established in 2017.

By — Zahida Hafeez

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In his journey of redemption away from street crime, Brian Boyd found his calling in fighting cybercrime with the help of a program at Florida's Miami Dade College (MDC). His hope for the future is a well-paying job as a cybersecurity analyst, a life-long dream that is no longer out of reach due to student scholarships, training, and sheer determination.

Boyd is one of more than 600 students enrolled in Miami Dade College's fledgling cybersecurity program that has grown by leaps and bounds since its start in 2017. Catering to a largely Hispanic and Black student body, MDC's program aims to fill in gaps in the technology workforce. To that end, MDC received \$2 million in state funding this

summer. College officials said they will use the grant for providing scholarships, internships, and renewing the high school pipeline to tech careers while focusing on creating opportunities for minority and underprivileged students.

"We are helping the right people get hired This is the American way," said Antonio Delgado, regarding promoting students like Boyd and other minorities enrolled in MDC's program. Delgado, a former dean of the School of Engineering, Technology and Design, was named Vice President of Innovation and Technology Partnerships at MDC in 2021. He now works to create career opportunities for MDC's tech graduates — all 13 students who graduated this year have jobs. Both large companies such as Amazon and small- to medium-sized local businesses based in Florida employ graduates of Miami Dade College's technology program, said Delgado.

With cybersecurity jobs in all sectors of the economy growing faster than they can be filled, Delgado is hopeful all of MDC's upcoming tech graduates such as Boyd can land jobs or an internship.

Identified as gifted in elementary school, Boyd was always drawn to technology, breaking apart computers and rebuilding them successfully. However, his life was derailed when he spent two and half years in prison for a one-off crime.

"During (prison), I felt mostly alone and like a failure. I knew I would be released one day and was also aware that unless I made changes to my mindset, I would just be in the same position upon my release," said Boyd. "Anybody who finds themselves in impossible situations can always take solace in the fact that they were once in a different situation, and it is up to them if they are going to allow their current failures to determine their future success."

But Boyd's story of getting back on track also shows that embracing personal responsibility alone is not enough sometimes. Outside funding for higher education is an absolute necessity for success.

"Financial hardship has affected me, especially during the pandemic," said Boyd, who currently works an evening job at a third-party Apple support center to make ends meet. He hopes to graduate in May 2023, but his career goals might have remained a distant reality had it not been for the financial and training support he received at MDC.

About \$250,000 of the recently allotted state funds have already gone on to support scholarships, according to Delgado.

Meanwhile, a third of the grant money will also be used to support a 10-week internship program.

Adonis Sardinias, who consults with businesses in South Florida on their cybersecurity needs and serves as chairman of the advisory board for MDC's cybersecurity committee, likens the cybersecurity internship program to clinical training for doctors after graduation.

"The students need to translate their learning into practical experience. And while smaller businesses are often not able to afford experienced cybersecurity analysts, they can address their needs with newbies. And so, the internship program serves as a win-win for both students and businesses," he said. With the goal to expand the internship program, Sardinias routinely advises businesses on a client's existing cybersecurity program or building it from the ground up.

"It has to be fruitful for both the company and the student," Sardinias said.

Along with the skill set acquired through MDC's training, students like Boyd bring a unique perspective to the table, Sardinias said. "An awareness, understanding and acceptance of your flaws" can go a long way towards succeeding in the real world, especially in cybersecurity careers, he explained.

Careers in cybersecurity can be lucrative with an average starting salary of about \$73,000, according to Salary.com's employer-reported data.

But aside from getting a high paying job, the goal of fighting cybercrime is personal for Boyd given that his mother was the victim of identity theft while his brother also got pulled into a cyber scam. "Cybercrime is increasing rapidly, and many people are not even aware of the ways they can protect themselves," said Boyd. "I would hope to have an internship in an organization where I can work with and learn from like-minded people."

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