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Eastern Washington University students take home national title for cybersecurity in Florida competition

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David Bowman, dean of the College of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, photographs Eastern Washington University cybersecurity students at the Spokane International Airport on Sunday after they won a national title in cybersecurity in Florida the previous day. (Photo by Quinn Welsch)

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Eastern Washington University students received a warm welcome from school officials at Spokane International Airport on Sunday after winning a national cybersecurity title in a competition in Tampa, Florida.

The 10 EWU "Cyber Defenders" and their coach left Washington on Friday to begin an eight-hour competition in the National Centers of Academic Excellence "Cyber Games." The Eagles won the competition with a score of 6,274 total points, defeating the University of Florida by a mere seven points.

"Most of these teams are pretty well-established," said Sean O'Dowd, a senior at Eastern and the Cyber Defenders team captain. "I think it proves that we're definitely capable of competing on a national level."

The competition on Saturday was so fierce, the team of 10 wasn't sure who had won the title for about 10 minutes, said O'Dowd.

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"If we had gone for another minute, we may have lost," he said.

The National Centers of Academic Excellence in Cybersecurity invites college-level cybersecurity teams from around the country to compete against each other in a simulated cyberattack. The competition included teams from Cal Poly, Pomona, Syracuse

University and Brigham Young University. Eastern Washington University was the only school represented between Washington, Oregon and Idaho.

The competition tasks students with bringing a simulated computer system online and then defending it from real-world cybersecurity professionals who act as hackers. Points are awarded depending on how long each team can keep its system infrastructure online.

"Everyday you see in the news something about businesses getting hacked," O'Dowd said. "What we're doing is applicable to corporate breaches."

EWU earned recognition in 2021 from the Department of Homeland Security and National Security Agency for its cybersecurity program. This year marked Eastern's second time competing in the Cyber Games after also making it into the competition finals last year.

"We've always known we're outstanding, but they needed to have that validated for themselves," said David Bowman, dean of the College of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. "This is the best program in the West and in the U.S. They're national champions. You don't get to just say that."

Bowman, EWU President Shari McMahan and Eagles mascot Swoop welcomed the small team of cybersecurity students as they arrived at the airport on Sunday morning.

"We are so proud," McMahan said. "Our Eagles continue to soar."

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