

GW Brings Industry and Government Leaders Together for Inaugural Cybersecurity Forum

The daylong event further strengthened the university's commitment to cybersecurity research and education.

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Sen. Mark Warner (D-Virginia), B.A. '77, and GW President Mark S. Wrighton. (Linnea Farnsworth)

The George Washington University was a bad place to be a hacker last Tuesday.

The inaugural [GW Business and Policy Forum](#) brought hundreds of policy and industry leaders in the cybersecurity sphere together at a university positioning itself to be the epicenter of cybersecurity education and research for panels and keynote discussions on how the private and public sectors can come together to address the ever-evolving landscape and implications cybersecurity has for global business, markets and regulations.

GW leveraged its location in Washington, D.C., to host a forum on the intersection of emerging technology and policy—called “Attacking Cyber Security Risks”—as speakers from around the world shared their expertise with capacity crowds of students, faculty, staff and business and industry leaders. Deloitte, Google, IBM, Intel, Microsoft, Northrup Grumman and Verizon were among company participants, as was the Department of Defense from the government sector. Sen. Mark Warner (D-Virginia), B.A. '77, highlighted a noteworthy group of keynote speakers.

The event, taking place in both the Jack Morton Auditorium and the University Student Center, showcased a new strength of the university: addressing cybersecurity through a multidisciplinary lens. The GW School of Business, GW Law, School of Engineering

and Applied Science and College of Professional Studies collaborated to make the event possible. These four schools are at the vanguard of cybersecurity education and national security law.

In fact, at the forum's kickoff on Tuesday, GW President Mark S. Wrighton announced the launch of Cyber@GW, which will serve as a facilitator for cybersecurity collaboration between GW and the private and government sectors. Through the initiative, GW will continue to be a global leader in cybersecurity and privacy, integrating technical depth with social science to develop, form and teach solutions, strategies and policies locally, nationally and globally.

"Our diverse and distinctive programs span multiple schools and colleges, and our unique location in the nation's capital enables deep partnerships with government agencies, technology firms, including defense industries and those who lead IT in the country and the world," Wrighton said. "Our educational programs range from certificate and bachelor's completion programs that provide upskilling opportunities for working professionals to undergraduate and graduate programs that educate the next-generation of cybersecurity innovators and leaders who are poised for real-world impact."

GW Business student Soji Maksudova, majoring in information systems with a concentration in public policy, is one such student already taking advantage of the cybersecurity education at GW. She was among many GW students who took the opportunity to hear from top industry professionals at the forum. She is currently taking a security ethics class that is exploring business tech law, a course that has confirmed just how relevant cybersecurity will be in her future. She went to all five keynote conversations and four panel discussions and appreciated the opportunity to learn.

"GW should definitely do more forums like this because I'm seeing how some of the lessons that we're learning in class are applied outside of the classroom environments and to the industry itself and how it's being used within the realm of cybersecurity," Maksudova said.

GW's commitment to cybersecurity education and digital protection was on full display throughout Tuesday, as Chair of the Business Executives for National Security Board Mark Gerencser humorously noted when he got locked out of his iPad while moderating a panel—fittingly called "U.S. Cybersecurity Landscape: Identifying Solutions for the Future." He needed both a password and verification code to get back in and find questions the audience had virtually submitted.

"I just have to say, GW, you're doing a great job," he said to a round of laughs as someone from behind the scenes snuck on stage to enter in the password and code.

The forum was created with the intent of laying the groundwork and building a strong foundation of collaboration between sectors, and organizers envision its impact to be long lasting.

"This confluence of industry, government and academia—and policy and industry, is going to be vital to coming up with solutions for the challenges that lay ahead in cybersecurity, which is why this forum was envisioned," GW Business Dean Anuj Mehrotra said. "And this will culminate in a white paper that we will prepare and circulate following the forum that will help navigate the challenges and opportunities for further collaborations between academia and industry and government."

Verizon was the forum's platinum sponsor, while AON and Mosaic Insurance were gold sponsors. Business Management Associates, Cushman & Wakefield, Globant and KPMG were all silver sponsors.

Government's role

Warner, an alumnus and U.S. senator from Virginia, discussed the importance of cybersecurity in the digital age and how it pertains to national security in a conversation with Wrighton. Warner has been a prominent congressional leader in addressing the growing cyber threats. He currently serves as the chair of the Senate

Intelligence Committee, co-founded the bipartisan [Senate Cybersecurity Caucus](#) back in 2016 and co-sponsored the Cybersecurity Improvement Act of 2020 and Strengthening American Cybersecurity Act in 2022.

Warner candidly said he doesn't think Congress has moved fast enough in embracing cybersecurity. He would like to see cybersecurity decision making become proactive instead of reactive, and frankly more creative. He stressed the importance of academic institutions preparing a workforce well versed in "cybersecurity hygiene."

"Going forward, if we start building in cybersecurity and the minimum standards with some ability to upgrade in new devices, new equipment and new software systems, we're going to be safer over the long run," said Warner, who discussed at length the ransomware threats to the health care industry as an immediate need to act.

Warner said addressing cybersecurity provides a tremendous chance for non-authoritarian nations to work together, and that the United States shouldn't approach the challenge as just a United States versus China, Russia or North Korea operation.

"There's going to be an opportunity for international cooperation on research and cyber," he said.

Protecting against "bad apples"

This all-encompassing forum took place just weeks after a 21-year-old National Guard member was apprehended for posting leaked documents over the instant messaging social platform Discord.

In a keynote conversation moderated by Mosaic Insurance co-founder and co-CEO Mitch Blaser, B.B.A. '73, U.S. Marine Corps Assistant IT Director/Deputy CIO of Information, Command, Control, Communications and Computers Renata Spinks said the incident provided an opportunity for the government sector to course correct and put some parameters in place. It also magnified the need to add to the cyber workforce.

"Can you pick out all the bad apples acting? Absolutely not," Spinks said. "But can you increase your entire cyber program in ways that you can use automated tools to detect some of those anomalous behaviors that could potentially prevent this from happening again? I would say, sign me up. I think there are some opportunities there to do that."

Microsoft Corporation Vice President Tom Burt sat down with "The New York Times" White House and National Security Correspondent David Sanger to talk about how the technology industry is protecting against cyberwarfare and attacks from adversaries, especially looking at it through the geopolitical lens of Russia's war with Ukraine.

While Russia hasn't necessarily proven to have a warehouse of cyber weapons, Burt said it has infiltrated media markets to spread false information justifying their actions. "Russian state-controlled media is the most highly consumed source of media and news, and they do that by having local language, quality local journalism, and then their nation state propaganda is worked into that messaging," said Burt, who mentioned that China has also been investing heavily in their influence operations.

While authoritarian states have deployed artificial intelligence for disinformation purposes, Burt thinks that private and government sectors from non-authoritarian states are already countering that with AI algorithms that detect suspicious codes, and that will only become more effective.

"I'm very optimistic AI is going to continue to provide the defenders with a significant advantage," Burt said.

Embracing a digital world

Digital access and inclusion will only increase with the rapid rate of technological advances.

Verizon CEO Hans Vestberg joined Mehrotra to discuss 5G technology, which can connect the world faster than it ever has before. Vestberg advocated for affordable broadband coverage for everyone on Earth, saying that such affordable access will become a basic need sooner than later.

"It's embedded in everything that is going on in society," Vestberg said, noting the ability now to access banking and health care services online.

Therefore, having a digital infrastructure to protect the rights of consumers will become that much more important. Vestberg also stressed the need to be proactive and that when leaders try to regulate quick-moving technology, they often regulate a

technology that has already passed and progressed.

“It’s much better to have multi-stakeholder discussions coming out with guidelines,” Vestberg said, noting that having a diverse and inclusive approach is ultimately better for both the company and society.

Citing life quality improvements the digital world can provide, Google President of Global Affairs Kent Walker said cybersecurity needs to be built into the fabric of everything humans do and that, while it’s a significant threat, it’s also a significant opportunity.

Walker, who spoke with GW Provost Christopher Alan Bracey in a keynote speech, gave a tangible example of AI’s practicality: The software system AlphaFold folded 200 million proteins in a year, saving roughly a billion years of biology research time.

“Imagine that kind of technology, then applied to all kinds of fields of human endeavor,” Walker said. “Nuclear fusion. Clean water. It’s an extraordinarily exciting time.”

There’s a critical balance between risk and opportunity, and Deloitte CEO and Chair Dan Helfrich said striking that balance will require humans evolving their skillsets, understanding the context of data generated by technology and learning how to apply it. Like Walker, he sees an improved future for knowledge workers, and he challenged those in the audience to embrace the digital future, stating that the opportunities in the cybersecurity and AI workforce are endless.

“Part of retraining is staying current with the body of knowledge and skillset that one needs to navigate the moment,” Helfrich said in conversation with Mehrotra. “The opportunity is to innovate for good at a faster rate than we’ve ever innovated before. If you do that in an ethical framework, progress will be the outcome.” **GW**



Panelists: Robert Cunningham, Adam Mattina, M.B.A. '13, and Tabassi in the panel AI-powered Cybersecurity and How We Can Stay Ahead panel. (Linnea Farnsworth)

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