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LSU earns rare recognition for cybersecurity from NSA, only the 21st university to do so

[The Advocate](#)

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The federal agency tasked with protecting America from hackers has awarded LSU an elite designation that positions it among the premier universities for cybersecurity in the country.

LSU announced Monday that the National Security Agency named it a Center of Academic Excellence in Cyber Operations, or CAE-CO. Now one of only 21 universities nationwide with the designation, LSU has been identified as an institution capable of educating high-performing students and advancing operational technologies, according to the NSA.

Other universities with CAE-CO designation include Carnegie Mellon, New York University, the Naval Postgraduate School, the U.S. Air Force Academy and the U.S. Naval Academy.

Golden Richard, director of the LSU Applied Cybersecurity Lab and faculty lead for CAE-CO at LSU, said the designation will raise the university's profile for potential students and workforce development.

"The designation puts us among 20 schools in the United States that have it and that's essentially like a shopping list for people that are looking for graduates or looking for places where they want to study," Richard said.

Richard said that LSU was the only school invited to apply for the CAE-CO designation in the last two years, meaning the university met rigorous curriculum standards from the NSA about what will be taught within its cybersecurity department.

"Getting the CAE-CO designation means the agency that does the most important cybersecurity work in the world has taken a deep-dive into your curriculum and basically given you a thumbs-up," Richard said.

The designation will immediately position LSU computer science students to secure internships at agencies like the NSA, CIA, FBI and the Department of Homeland Security, as well as make them among the most coveted cyber graduates, Richard said.

LSU president William Tate identified cybersecurity and defense as two tenets of his [five-point Scholarship First Agenda](#) designed to generate academic scholarship in the form of research and creative works.

"After establishing our Scholarship First Agenda, we committed to attaining elite status and impactful outcomes in each of the five areas," Tate said in a statement. "With a cluster hire of cyber experts joining a strong LSU faculty and now receiving the Center for Academic Excellence in Cyber Operations designation, we march forward on a pathway of promise that leads to world-class standing."

Richard said that, after being brought on to start building a cybersecurity program at LSU in 2017, he saw the university flourish in its cybersecurity operations once Tate took over in 2021.

"We established a concentration in computer science for cybersecurity majors, we got funding from the National Science foundation for cybersecurity scholarships to start on the path to get to CAE-CO designation," he said. "President Tate arriving and making cybersecurity one of his priorities electrified everything, it's made everything move so much faster."

As part of the school's accelerated cybersecurity focus, LSU recently added two top cybersecurity professors to the department.

Ibrahim 'Abe' Baggili, former director of the Connecticut Institute of Technology, and Aisha Ali-Gombe, formerly an assistant professor at Towson University in Maryland, are now in their first semesters teaching cybersecurity students at LSU.

Baggili said the diverse student body, geographical location and cybersecurity potential at LSU were his driving factors in choosing to move to Louisiana and teach at the university.

"All of these things sort of make sense when you look at a university and all the things that are needed for it to succeed," he said. "On top of that, the new leadership that LSU has is operating with purpose."

Ali-Gombe said she's most excited to be able to teach students cybersecurity skills that will help them in their future careers and inspire students across various backgrounds.

"I will be training students to show them that they will really be able to take on any challenge, it doesn't matter who they are where they're coming from or their background," she said. "They can get this skill set and they can be able to succeed just by kind of being an inspiration for them."

The NSA designation is a starting point towards LSU positioning itself as a premier cybersecurity destination, Ali-Gombe said, for talented incoming high school students and prestigious grant programs.

"This is just a stepping stone, getting this designation, this is going to open opportunities to apply for grants that we otherwise could not apply for," she said. "It's also going to open up opportunities for us to collaborate with industry partners because now we're a CAE-CO school."

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