San Antonio Express-News (TX)

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UTSA to train 'cyber warriors'

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Publication Date : March 26, 2007

With a $3.5 million state grant to be announced today, the University of Texas at San Antonio will open a new computer-security research institute that one day could protect you from theft or identity theft.
Striving to emerge as a leader in the field of "cyber security," UTSA has recruited an internationally recognized scholar, Ravi **Sandhu**, to lead the new institute, university president Ricardo Romo said.

"The expertise of **Sandhu** is how to protect your investments and your payments online so that no one else has access to information you are sending when you buy something -- that that information is secure," Romo said, adding: "We want to become a national leader."

The new institute will complement efforts begun years ago with the university's push into fighting cyber terrorism. UTSA researchers have developed and honed a program to teach community leaders how to respond if hackers were to disrupt computer systems that control 911 call centers or power grids.

"But now we also want to train young people in college who want to excel and understand how to keep computers running, how to keep them safe, how to feel secure about what you have," Romo said. "We call them 'cyber warriors.'"

Sandhu, 53, will leave his position as a professor at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va., where he has worked for 18 years, to head the newly formed Institute for Cyber Security Research. It is UTSA's latest step toward becoming a standout in the rapidly expanding field.

The need is great, **Sandhu** said, because increasingly sophisticated hackers have learned to exploit vulnerabilities in, for example, business-to-business deals involving large sums of money. He begins work at UTSA on June 1.

"We would like to create an institution which is known worldwide for high-quality research," **Sandhu** said.

Around the country, universities are vying to hire stars in this field and win government money to study these issues. From Stony Brook University in New York to Indiana University to Florida State University, administrators have founded cyber security research centers.

"What's happened is the threats are now potent and the threats are actually happening in increasing amounts as organized crime develops its own programs to steal from online commerce and banking systems," said Peter Cassidy of the Anti-Phishing Working Group, an industry association that tracks Internet scams. "The need is obviously there."

The $3.5 million grant will come from the Texas Emerging Technology Fund, an initiative of Gov. Rick Perry.

"This grant is exactly what the ETF legislation envisioned in terms of improving the economy of Texas," said David Spencer, chairman of the fund's advisory committee.

The grant, Spencer said, will put UTSA in a position to gain national recognition quickly.

"There are few areas UTSA can be nationally competitive in tomorrow," he said. "That's why it's so important right now."

The money creates an opportunity to recruit top talent such as **Sandhu**, Spencer said, adding a baseball analogy: "If you have the best athletes, you win more games."

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