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Link to original story: <https://www.uwsp.edu/news/digital-forensics-and-recovery-analysis-lab/>

**Innovations in Technology: UWSP data security lab to enhance student experiences**

Written by University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point

When you think of evidence that can be used in court cases, recovered data on an electronic device might not be the first thing that comes to mind. However, it is critical that trained technicians can draw on their expertise to gather evidence that can trace digital fingerprints.

The University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point will have a resource for that very circumstance in the coming weeks, with students engaged directly in forensic analysis and data recovery work. Computer information systems-cybersecurity major Brady Peer will be one of the first digital forensic examiners working in the UWSP Science Building, inside the newly launched [Digital Forensics and Recovery Analysis Lab (DFRAL)](https://www.uwsp.edu/smcpa/school-of-mathematics-computing-physics-and-astronomy/center-for-cybersecurity-studies-and-advanced-research/digital-forensics-and-recovery-analysis-lab/).

Peer installed the software for the lab computers and helped organize workstations for inspecting and analyzing devices. From cell phones and tablets to computer components, the staff of the DFRAL will tackle cyber investigation and data recovery services for UWSP community and beyond.

With a minor in criminal justice, the Green Bay junior said the experiences he can gain in the DFRAL will give him practical experience and specialized skills in data recovery and forensic analysis to give him an edge. Peer said he became intrigued by the field following his first cybersecurity course on campus.

“In solving problems working with data, it is so satisfying to find the piece of evidence you’re looking for,” he said.

In his Digital Forensics class, required for his major, Peer said he ran simulations of cases. In his role working in the DFRAL, Peer will have the opportunity to troubleshoot for real-world clients and gain experience handling evidence.

“It takes a rare set of skills that we make available to people,” said Chad Johnson, lead coordinator of the DFRAL and assistant professor in the [Department of Computing and New Media Technologies (CNMT)](https://www.uwsp.edu/smcpa/school-of-mathematics-computing-physics-and-astronomy/department-of-computing-and-new-media-technologies/).

The lab will closely mirror the digital forensics process used by information technology security professionals. The tools and knowledge students can gain will allow them to hone their critical thinking skills as they develop their technical investigative capabilities.

With funding secured from the College of Letters and Science Innovation Fund, Johnson began to put together plans for the necessary equipment (servers, computer monitors, diagnostic equipment) and tools of the trade in cyber intelligence and forensics. The focus in cybersecurity is to use data skills in defense of problems. In setting up the DFRAL as a working lab experience, Johnson said, he hoped to give students that sense of urgency in information security and a willingness to be of service to others.

“Johnson’s extensive experience in digital forensics as an educator and practitioner is essential for the success of DFRAL. We are looking forward to the first projects getting underway and recruiting students to work in the lab,” said CNMT chair and Associate Professor Tomi Heimonen.

Johnson is a member of the American Association of Forensic Scientists and has been tapped for his expertise in data recovery. Most recently, Johnson spent 800 hours over the summer collaborating in analysis and evidence recovery on behalf of the University Police Department and attorneys. He was asked to perform work on personal devices, evidence recovery in a harassment case, along with a special discovery on an international drug trafficking case.

**National excellence designation from NSA**

The university’s cybersecurity program has recently earned the backing of the National Security Agency (NSA) Center of Academic Excellence (CAE). This prestigious designation acknowledges the commitment of the Department of Computing and New Media Technologies to high standards in cybersecurity education, research and workforce development. This recognition brings added credibility to the Bachelor of Science in Computer Information Systems program at UWSP.

The designation will be valid for an initial period of five years after which there is a renewal process.   UWSP joins about 400 institutions across the United States which have earned a Centers for Academic Excellence in Cyber Defense (CAE-CD) designation. Johnson’s advocacy for the initiative helps greatly to enhance the quality and effectiveness of the student experience.

“The designation is proof positive that we’ve got the support and the expertise we need to keep pushing this forward. We are growing what is undeniably the best cyber program in the Midwest,” Johnson said.

He envisions active student interns, as well as two staff dedicated in the future to project needs for the DFRAL. From internship work in the lab, to sponsorships for student projects in the [Center for Cybersecurity Studies](https://www.uwsp.edu/smcpa/school-of-mathematics-computing-physics-and-astronomy/center-for-cybersecurity-studies-and-advanced-research/), the expansion of access and opportunities for students all serve to deliver high level job-ready experiences to keep pace with demand in the field of data security.

Peer aspires to work as a federal investigator in the digital space. Students interested in the industry may potentially get immersed in data investigations on behalf of clients across the region and state-wide. The DFRAL will have approval to begin client work in early 2025.