

Episode 24: Talking Cybersecurity with Dr. Marwan Omar

Speaker 1:

Saint Leo 360, a 360 degree overview of the Saint Leo University Community.

Greg Lindberg:

Welcome to another episode of the Saint Leo 360 Podcast. Once again, this is your host, Greg Lindberg, here with you. On this episode, we are celebrating cybersecurity awareness month, the month of October. And to help us do that, we have one of our esteemed faculty members. His name is Dr. Marwan Omar, and he is an Assistant Professor of computer science in the Tapia College of Business here at Saint Leo University. Dr. Omar, welcome to the podcast.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

Thank you so much for having me. It's a pleasure to be here. Thank you, Greg.

Greg Lindberg:

Absolutely. Really looking forward to this. I know cybersecurity is such a huge field and just continues to grow, so we have plenty to talk about today.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

Yes, absolutely.

Greg Lindberg:

So first off, Dr. Omar, can you just introduce yourself, your background, your education, what you've been teaching and how long you've been with us?

Dr. Marwan Omar:

Yes, absolutely. I'm happy to answer that. Yes. I have been in the teaching field for about a decade now. I started out teaching at the community college level back in 2011, that was in Houston Texas. I started off teaching computer science and some basic introductory computer security courses as well. Very soon I found myself to be passionate about cybersecurity. I've always wanted to know. I think the bad guy that always wanted to know what motivates them to break into our systems and steal our data and wreck havoc. So that actually drove me to pursue in my terminal degree, which is in digital system security, which is basically a cybersecurity at the time, about 10 years ago, and I started my PhD, they didn't call it cyber, it was called information assurance or information security, so cyber is now the buzz word.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

So that's where my terminal degree is from. I do have a track record of applications that field, I have edited even books in the cybersecurity field. I have about a half dozen of certifications, including the sec plus, which is one of the biggest certifications for anyone entering the cyber field. I'm also a certified ethical hacker CEH from EC-Council, and they also hold a couple of digital forensics certifications as well. Cybersecurity is a huge field, as you mentioned, it's encompassing so many different areas, so I like to be multi-dimensional. I like to specialize in one area, but I also know about many other areas as well, including the forensics. So industry certifications, terminal degree, and also industry experience.

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Dr. Marwan Omar:

I have had the privilege of providing consulting cybersecurity services for a couple of companies. Some of them here are in Tampa and otherwise teaching is my full-time job and I have been with Saint Leo coming on year six now. I have been teaching in both programs, the undergrad cyber, and the grad cyber, both on ground and online.

Greg Lindberg:

Very nice. And that's quite a resume, quite a background, I must say.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

Thank you.

Greg Lindberg:

So I know you did mention the undergrad and grad cybersecurity programs that we offer here at Saint Leo. Let's dive into those and let's start with the bachelor's program. Talk to me about how long, when we started offering that, how long we've offered that and the reasons behind starting that program.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

Absolutely. Yes. So actually one of the reasons Saint Leo decided to bring somebody like me on board and hired me is for them to have a dedicated cybersecurity professor who can teach cybersecurity classes. So this course, sorry, this program has been around since 2014. So a year before I was onboarded, they started this program. They started offering it on-ground and soon after that online, as you know, Saint Leo has a big presence in the online teaching modalities. So they have offered these programs since 2014 and the major reason behind offering these is, again, market, so they are market driven, so industry needs and requirements. So Saint Leo looked at the research data, the market and daytime, they saw the need for professionals with cybersecurity degrees who are qualified, who have the knowledge and the skills to go out to the industry and protect and secure enterprise networks, the sensitive information they have. So it's definitely in a response to industry demands. There's still a gap, believe it or not, the unemployment rate is negative. So the industry cannot find enough qualified people to fill those cybersecurity positions.

Greg Lindberg:

Wow. Interesting. And then this particular bachelor's program, where's this actually offered, is it just on ground?

Dr. Marwan Omar:

So both, on-ground and online. Again, because Saint Leo is big online, they have a big footprint online, so it's being offered completely online and also completely on ground.

Greg Lindberg:

I see, very nice. And that definitely gives a lot of students flexibility and some nice options there.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

Yes.

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Greg Lindberg:

Talk to me about some of the students who have enrolled in the program, who've gone through the program and their backgrounds, their interests and I'm curious, is it primarily the traditional age college student, or do we have some adult learners as well?

Dr. Marwan Omar:

Right. To talk to you about the student body, so to speak, so the student body and compasses I would like to categorize in three different categories. So the bulk of the student body is definitely traditional students, fresh out of high school. They have that drive again, that passion, that interest, that desire to pursue cybersecurity. Believe it or not, some of them come to me and they want to become a certified ethical hacker right of the bat, coming out of high school. So it's impressive because I think the high schools are doing a good job as well, trying to offer them those literacy classes and computer science and some of them cyber. So I've had the college kid... High school kids, they come to me, they want to become a certified hacker like me. So that's one of the nice thing about having faculty with industry search, because we can inspire them and we can show them how we stand out. So the traditional students are fresh out of college, that's the majority of them.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

We have the second category. If I categorize them, would be the military veterans. We have several of them in every class, actually. So people who have served in the military, they have the GI Bill and that's come out of the military. So now they want to transition into the civilian life and they want to start their career in cyber, because again, they're interested and they're passionate about protecting our networks and stalking the hackers, so that's the second category.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

The third category is also adult learners, but not necessarily from the military population. I have students who are working adults and some of them, they've just decided they want to come and do their bachelor's because they had, let's say an associates degree in computer science or in IT from a community college, so they have... They transfer some of them, so they have some credit hours, they only do two years here. Those are the adults learners for again, different reasons. Some of them come from different States, some of them are here or called, so those are the three major categories; fresh out of college, military and regular adult learners.

Greg Lindberg:

Gotcha. Very interesting. And then in terms of the faculty who teach in this bachelor's program, talk to me about the faculty and perhaps some of their backgrounds and just how they're really there for the students.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

Yes. What are the things that sets us apart is definitely our ability to spend time with students, even one-on-one if needed. So students are the center of our attention and everything is centered around student learning. So the student learning is our priority here. The faculty have advisees, so every faculty member has 20 to 30 advisees assigned to them. So we work with them individually to set up their schedule and to help them navigate and sometimes they come to us, they need guidance on what certifications to pursue, what career path is, all of those things.

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Dr. Marwan Omar:

As far as our background, I already mentioned my background, which is the combination of the best of both worlds. If I may say, which is academia and industry, so that's what we strive for, is to bring faculty, you can bring the best of both worlds. Because the nature of this field requires people to have actually worked in the industry to know how the technology works, and to be able to provide context to students. It makes a world of difference when you bring somebody with real life experience and having industry search that's even much better. So some of the other faculty members, some of my colleagues they come from similar backgrounds, they have done some type of industry, they have some industry certification and they have also publications.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

So that's the team of the faculty's background, is to bring teaching experience, industry experience, and search. So bringing the best of all worlds so that we can inspire our students and deliver the best learning experience possible.

Greg Lindberg:

Nice, very well said. In terms of the topics in the curriculum and then I guess we could even dive into some of the courses. Talk to me about some examples of what the students specifically study in this bachelor's program.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

Yes. Even though it's called the bachelor's of cybersecurity they do actually get well-rounded knowledge in other areas of IT, because all these areas of IT including the cyber, they overlap and circle back, so they converge. So even though it's a cybersecurity program, they do have to take programming classes like Java, C++, and Python, HTML, web design, introduction to networking, database development. So they take a range of other classes to give him the necessary background to be multi-dimensional as I was mentioning, to know a little bit about everything, but then specialize in cyber. Because if somebody wants to specialize in cyber, they will not be working in a cyber.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

They need to know programming, they need to know web design, they need to know networking principles, database, and so on. So they do get good exposure to other areas of computer science and on IT. Specifically the cyber classes that they take, our introduction to cyber, information security principles, introductory ethical hacking, and then also advanced ethical hacking classes, network security, network defense, digital forensics, these are penetration testing. These are just a few of the courses specific to the cyber specialization.

Greg Lindberg:

I see. Nice. And then I know we've touched a little bit on career tracks and then potential career opportunities and jobs within this field. Let's dive a little deeper into specific roles that one could pursue with this degree. And if you want to even include specific examples of our alumni that you've perhaps kept up with, who've gone on to careers.

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Dr. Marwan Omar:

Absolutely. Yes. So a typical role for somebody with a cyber degree program would be what you call the SOC analyst. As a SOC, or SOC stands for Security Operations Center. Companies, enterprises, most of them have what you call the Security Operations Center or SOC. So basically a fresh graduate won't be working as a SOC Analyst. A SOC Analyst is a person in an entry level position for a person with cybersecurity degree education and the skills and the knowledge. So on a regular daily basis, they will be reviewing the log files, they'll be looking at network traffic, they will be ensuring the security of the workstations of users, if there were to be an incident or any compromises. They are the first responders so to speak. So they are the boots on the ground to ensure the security of the stations and the day-to-day computer operations for an enterprise. So SOC Analysts, this is something that I see.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

I can give you specific examples. Just this past year, one of my, or actually I should say the beginning of this year. In January, one of my graduates obtained a job with a company locally here called of ReliaQuest. So ReliaQuest is a company that provides cybersecurity to enterprises, and that's exactly what he's doing, he's a SOC analyst. So he's very successful, he's a smart guy, he's actually [bolus 00:00:14:49], believe it or not. He reached out to me and he actually commended him and they said, "We're very happy that your graduates are well-rounded and they have the knowledge and the skills to hit the ground running, so to speak." And so that's also something that sets us apart. This program is we get them ready to hit the ground running. So not only do we teach them theories and concepts and principles, but also hands-on education, practical things that they use, the tools and the technologies that are used by security professionals on the job, on a regular daily basis.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

Another student actually worked very similar role, also SOC Analyst with a different company and then he moved on to work with Deloitte. Deloitte is a consulting firm, but they do have a big cyber division. So he now works with them as a Cybersecurity Engineer, he moved up the ranks. So he started off as a SOC Analyst, and now he's doing some cybersecurity engineering work.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

So these are typical jobs. Obviously somebody with undergrads, they will just get an entry level initially. One thing that I would like to mention here is that the degree by itself, as a piece of paper does not necessarily guarantee a job. We need graduates who are paying attention. So just coming to the undergrad and thinking that getting that piece of paper under your belt will not necessarily help you land a job. The students need to pay attention, they need to listen to their professors, they need to seek internships, they need all the skills and they need to master those skills and do the actual work in order for them to be successful. So that's something I wanted to emphasize.

Greg Lindberg:

Sure. That's a great point. And those are wonderful examples of alumni and just how this education and certainly other experiences I would imagine have benefited our graduates.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

Yes, absolutely.

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Greg Lindberg:

Let's move on to the master's program. So obviously in addition to the bachelor's in cybersecurity, Saint Leo also offers a master's in cybersecurity. And was this program developed, I would imagine around the same time as the bachelor's program?

Dr. Marwan Omar:

Yes. The vision of the department was that they saw the need, the industry need, they saw the opportunity, so they captured the opportunity. Once they started opening the undergrad, they said "We should probably", that was their vision. So they started offering the master right away. The master program started around 2014, and it's offered both modalities. Fully online, so as students can take it fully online, remotely, virtually, and some students take it on ground here on campus.

Greg Lindberg:

And then in terms of the students in this program, and I would imagine they tend to be more so the adult learner compared to the bachelor's program?

Dr. Marwan Omar:

Yes, that is true. So the majority is adult learners. And to be honest with you in the majority, the bulk of the program is doing it as the bulk of the student body is from our online modality, actually, because of the fact that those people are professional working adults, they have full time jobs, they have families and they have lives and they need to juggle all these commitments and responsibilities. So they prefer the online modality because of the convenience. Yes. Most of them actually have jobs. Some of them are already in the field, they're looking for a promotion or a pay raise. Some of them are not necessarily in the field, they're in other fields. There are, some of them are in business actually, but they want to do a career change.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

The biggest reason again, they see the opportunities out there. They have a vision, they see the opportunity, so they want to start a new career. So some of them actually transition. And again, we also have... We always have the military veteran population. They all were... Saint Leo is a very military veteran friendly institution. So we always have veterans in our online program as well as the on-ground.

Greg Lindberg:

Interesting. And as far as the faculty in this master's program, I would imagine it's ones that also teach in the bachelor's program?

Dr. Marwan Omar:

Yes, that is correct. So most of us who teach in the undergrad, we also teach in the graduate. So right now I teach a graduate course on ground every Saturday, but I also teach an online course, advanced penetration testing on ethical hacking online. So I teach graduate courses in both modalities, on ground and online and that's also true for my other colleagues. In addition to that, we have a couple of adjunct faculty members who are remote. Sometimes if we are overloaded and if we have to offer more online sections of courses, then we reach out to those adjuncts and they help teach some of those online sections if there's a need.

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Greg Lindberg:

Nice. And let's talk more about the curriculum and then how does this master's program... I would imagine it's definitely at a higher level and more advanced coursework in terms of just that the topics covered and then the depth of the study. If you could elaborate on that?

Dr. Marwan Omar:

Yes, absolutely. I have to do that. Yes, absolutely. So, one of the differences between this, between... Or one of the things I should say that actually sets this graduate program aside from, or differentiates this from the undergrad is that this cyber program, the graduate program, actually combines two areas, the technical depth, but also the managerial aerial cyber. And that's attractive points where actually learners who are pursuing their graduate. Some of them, believe it or not, they come to the master program because they want to become a Cybersecurity Manager or what you call them, that type that is CSOC, so Cyber information, Security Officers, these are just high level top managers. Some of them become virtual CSOCs, so they can virtually provide cybersecurity leadership to their enterprises or companies. So there's a technical depth of it and there's also the non-technical depth, which is the managerial side of cybersecurity. That's one of the differences.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

Of course the coursework is yes, more advanced, high expectations. They have to be engaged in research papers, so there's the research part. And just about every course involves the research paper on a higher level, our expectations. And obviously as the technical depth, there's more technical depth to some of the courses. For instance, there's an ethical hacking course that is also in the undergrad, but that's more introductory. In the graduate level, on that level, it's more, in-depth more advanced and requires more skills. One of the other things that I should mention about this graduate program is that we assume that somebody who is entering this program, they have a background in computer science or IT in general. So it's best suited for people who already have an undergraduate degree in computer science or IT in general. Although, we do have people from other areas, even from business administration, accounting, other people, like I said, they're looking to transition and change their career paths or jump ships, as they say.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

They still become successful, but that requires more work, because they lack that technical expertise and the technical background that's required for them to be successful. So they have to work harder, but they still succeed. Again, it boiled down to the passion. They have a passion, they have an interest, and that's what drives them to be successful.

Greg Lindberg:

Right. Very nice. And then I know you did mention earlier about students within the master's program generally are working, they have jobs, I would imagine a fair amount already in cybersecurity or some type of IT role. And would you say that this degree is designed to help one advance in his or her career?

Dr. Marwan Omar:

Yes, absolutely. So what they can do with this degree, some of them pursue this degree because they want to get a promotion. So if somebody is just doing, let's say tier two security analyst services, their employer says, "If you go and get an advanced degree, a master degree, then we can give you a promotion." With that promotion comes more opportunities, obviously comes more money. So those

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are the attractive points for learners. Some people just do it to advance their knowledge and skills. They're not necessarily looking to get a promotion or even a pay raise. They just want to advance their education and maybe one day an opportunity arise, they will.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

As far as the military population and military veterans, as you know, they use the GI Bill. So some of them says, "Well, I have the served in the military, this is something that I'm privileged to use." So they use their GI Bill to advance their degree and many of the military population people, they actually, the veterans, they do it because again, they want to transition. So they've gotten out of the military, they worked for department of defense as a contractor, they're getting their masters. After they get that, then usually they transitioned to the civilian life and they work for the private industry. So different reasons, different motives.

Greg Lindberg:

Right. I see. And then I know, like we spoke about with the bachelor's program, just giving examples of alumni, those who have attained this degree. And I'm wondering if you could do the same for this master's in cybersecurity degree and just examples of alumni who've gotten this degree and how it's really benefited them.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

Sure. I'm happy to answer. Yes. So one of the the examples that come to mind, I have an alumni, his name is Garrett Cole. So Garrett Cole also works for ReliaQuest. Again, ReliaQuest is a big provider of cybersecurity here in Tampa, but they have locations. I believe they have a location in Las Vegas and they may have also a location somewhere in Europe, in Ireland, I believe. So they're growing, they're expanding they're surging in this area. So Garrett Cole earned his master's degree here from Saint Leon. I believe he even earned his undergrad as well, but that would have been before I started off. So he was my student when I taught in the graduate program. He graduated a couple of years ago. So right now he is what he calls a Shift Lead. So he's in charge of a group of Cybersecurity Analysts.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

He is literally in charge of [inaudible name 00:26:44] who just graduated and like I said, he got this job with them. So we have a couple of graduates who work there. So Garrett Cole, again, he is doing high level cybersecurity services. I would say maybe tier one, if we were to call it. He's very successful, he's growing and he's doing great. And so that's, I think one of the best examples to bring about the alumni. Of course there're many examples, but this is one that has always coming to mind, is very successful.

Greg Lindberg:

That's great, that's wonderful. And then I know that we do offer some other options. I know that we have a concentration within the MBA program related to cybersecurity and some other certification options. If you could just touch on those and the benefits of those options as well.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

Right. Yes. I'm happy to answer it. Yes. So within the MBA program, we do have a graduate, so a master of business administration. So we do have an MBA both online and on ground. Within that MBA program, there is a path where students can specialize in cybersecurity by earning a certificate. And that certificate program has about six courses. So those six courses are actually taken from the actual

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cybersecurity program. They won't get to a degree, they will only get an MBA with a specialization in cybersecurity management. So that's the key difference, it's cybersecurity management. So what we did, we pulled all the non-technical cybersecurity courses from the graduate program and we offer them as a certificate program for the MBA. Because the MBA, they don't necessarily need the technical depth of cyber. They need that cybersecurity management background to be able to lead their organizations in cyber, or even if those MBA graduates, even if they become top managers or CEOs, then they will know how the cybersecurity impacts the rest of the organization, their objectives.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

Obviously cybersecurity nowadays has become a management issue and it impacts every area of the organization. So only about six courses from the non-technical courses are taken. So they earn an MBA with a specialization in cybersecurity management.

Greg Lindberg:

I see. Got you. So just to wrap up here, I just had a few other quick topics I'd like to touch on. I know we've talked a lot about the cybersecurity field and just the tremendous growth and an opportunity, and I'm sure that's just going to continue to grow. And could you just speak to the current state of the cybersecurity field and just from your standpoint, as an instructor in this discipline, and also where you see things going in the near future?

Dr. Marwan Omar:

Yes. Like I mentioned earlier, so cybersecurity is not going anywhere. Cybersecurity will become a management issue, that it has already become. So cybersecurity jobs will just be increased. We know that for sure. There is definitely like I said, a need. There's actually a big gap. Right now industry is struggling. Business organizations are struggling to find enough qualified people to fill those jobs. But again, the secret is not just that piece of paper, but that piece of paper with all the knowledge and the skills that comes with it will get them jobs, will get that graduates jobs. So this field is a fascinating, interesting dynamic field. Everyday, there are new jobs, everyday there are new positions, new opportunities. So I can imagine how many different job opportunities will be available in five years from now as more and more of our lives go online. I've seen people, even their dryers.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

They have IP addresses that are connected to their wifi and they're connected to the internet. So more of more and more of our lives go online, that means we need more security. More security requires more qualified people to fill those jobs. So there is definitely a big demand for cybersecurity professionals and the field is ever growing and there's a shortage. And so, yes, absolutely, I think that future is bright. We just need the people to come and get educated and take advantage of this.

Greg Lindberg:

Exactly. Certainly a lot of opportunity out there. In terms of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has just changed the world and changed so many of our lives in so many different ways. Millions and millions of people have been working from home, who normally would be working in an office using the company's wifi network and whatnot. I'm curious what your take is on how cybersecurity has played into all this and perhaps challenges that companies maybe have faced and how they've tackled those potentially even during COVID-19?

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Dr. Marwan Omar:

Sure. I'm happy to answer that. Yes, absolutely. So we've definitely seen an uptick in the number of cyber breaches. So cybersecurity crime has skyrocketed ever since COVID-19 hit. One of the biggest reason is that most of the companies were not really ready, nor did they have the infrastructure to move their workforce online in such a rapid pace, moving resources online is not easy. Obviously when we are in our offices we enjoy all the network security features that we have. So for instance, here, when I'm in my office, I'm connected, not necessarily to the wifi, but I'm connected to the hard wire, which has all the security features. You don't have to worry about the insecurity of wifi or the wireless insecurity. So when you have to move on and shift everything online, all of a sudden, not having all the infrastructure, having the planning, not having a strategy was very difficult and challenging.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

This is where the bad guys took advantage. It was a slam dunk. So to speak for the bad guys, because this is now a perfect opportune time for them. This is the prime time, because the users are not educated necessarily, they don't have the infrastructure, the company didn't have a vision or a strategy. So we definitely have seen an uptake. So the bad guys are targeting and hitting us where we are most vulnerable. So they will send out these spam emails to these users who are uneducated to entice them and make them click on these things. Believe it or not, the bad guy that are now actually stealing intellectual property from the vaccine progress.

Greg Lindberg:

Wow.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

So yes. Even pharmaceutical companies are falling victims that you don't necessarily, or you may not necessarily hear about that in public, in the newest that this happen in actually, as we speak. That cyber criminals are targeting everyone and it's a game, it's a money thing. So they're after money.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

They used to be after fame or other things, now to them it's a money game, so they will target a company, they will encrypt everything with ransomware to say, "If you don't pay us this. You have to pay us this, otherwise we will destroy everything." Now they have taken that during COVID actually recently, they took it to another level. Now they will encrypt your data right, as a company and they will... If you have a backup, you're safe, you can say, "Okay, have fun with the encrypted data because I have my backup, right? I can restore my backup and no problem." They say, "Well, guess what, if you don't pay us, we're going to post your sensitive data online to the public."

Dr. Marwan Omar:

So this is the nastiest form ever of cyber crime. And they have done it. They actually, what they did recently, they compromised some companies, they encrypted their data and the companies refuse to pay for ransom because they had backup. So what they did, they actually took some data, not only on the data and they posted them online. They said, "Look, this is just a fraction of what you posted." So imagine if you are a DOD contractor and have government sensitive data and somebody threatened you to publish your secret of data online. I mean, that's what makes the difference between life. This is a life and death situation for a company. So that's how nasty it has gotten recently.

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Greg Lindberg:

Wow. That's, that's really incredible. Just the extent to which these hackers will go and obviously all this just really emphasizes the need for more and more cybersecurity professionals out there.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

Right. Yes. So that's why more and more companies are looking because they're under pressure, they're feeling the heat. In the past they were reluctant and they're still reluctant, but what's happening is that more and more companies are paying a big price and they're falling victims. So now they're realizing that they need more and more cyber professionals to protect those data down and stop the hackers in their tracks.

Greg Lindberg:

Right. Very interesting. Okay. And just to officially wrap up here and put a bow on this episode, I wanted to mention that you can visit Saintleo.edu and search for cybersecurity to learn more about the programs that Saint Leo University offers. And also we will include, in the show notes links to the relevant program pages, as far as the programs that we've discussed in this episode. So again, we've been speaking with Dr. Marwan Omar. And Dr. Omar I want to thank you so much for joining us here on the Saint Leo 360 Podcast.

Dr. Marwan Omar:

Thank you so much Greg. Thank you for the opportunity, it was a great pleasure to talk to you today.

Greg Lindberg:

Absolutely. Alrighty. I really appreciate it.

Speaker 1:

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