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Linn F. Freedman

Roger Williams University School of Law

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Recommended Citation

Freedman, Linn F., "Trending @ RWU Law: Linn F. Freedman's Post: The Goal of Gender Equality in Cybersecurity 08/23/2016" (2016). *Law School Blogs*. 447.

https://docs.rwu.edu/law_pubs_blogs/447

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Linn F. Freedman's Post

August 23, 2016

The Goal of Gender Equality in Cybersecurity

Posted by Linn Freedman on 08/23/2016 at 03:53 PM



I have the privilege of teaching the Privacy Law class at RWU Law. It is a required course for the school's Joint Masters in Cybersecurity/Juris Doctor program, which is, to my knowledge, the only joint program offered by a university and law school in the U.S.

A recent statistic states that only about 25% of law schools in the country offer a Privacy Law class, let alone any substantive classes in cybersecurity. Based upon my practice and experience, such offerings should be a high priority for educators from grade school through advanced degree programs. Why? Because based on several governmental studies, there is a dearth of qualified individuals in the United States that can provide expertise in information technology (IT) or cybersecurity, both for the government and private industry.

In Rhode Island, Governor Raimondo has set a goal for all students to be offered computer science classes, which is a commendable start. But businesses in the U.S. are recruiting qualified IT and cybersecurity professionals from other countries every day because they can't fill open positions domestically.

You needn't look past the front page of the newspaper every morning to find news of yet another cyber intrusion, in which a company has become the victim of a hacking or data breach. RWU Law has placed itself ahead of the national curve by offering classes that are relevant to fulfilling the needs of businesses

in the U.S., and also providing its students with the knowledge and experience they'll need in finding rewarding jobs when they graduate and for the rest of their careers.

Last year, cybersecurity and data breaches continued to be one of the highest risks facing all industries. Preparing young professionals to combat these risks will provide them with an exciting career, and businesses with much-needed expertise.

My pitch here is that higher education should be responding to the needs of industry, as RWU Law is doing -- but we also need to actively recruit women to the fields of IT and cybersecurity. And we need to collectively have the goal of ensuring gender equality in these male-dominated fields.

National statistics show that, although women make up 57% of the workforce, only 25% of the technology sector is comprised of women. Even more depressing is that only 20% of Chief Information Officers at Fortune 250 companies are women. Research also shows that the pipeline of women in IT executive jobs is dismal.

Why? I am convinced it is because the word "cybersecurity" conjures up images of computer science, cryptography, encryption and coding, and these terms are inherently intimidating to girls and women. We have to figure out a way to make these fields more enticing to women. I try to encourage women into these fields, but a collective effort would be much more effective.

Another obstacle may be that women are not being paid equally in these fields. Although IT and cybersecurity continue to grow as industries, and salaries are increasing in these sectors, a recent HIMSS survey shows that the gender pay gap in IT salaries is widening.

How can this be in 2016? According to the HIMSS study, in 2015, women in IT made only 78% of what their male colleagues made. It further states that "...where men's salaries increased at a compound annual growth rate of 1.16 percent, women's salaries only grew by a CAGR of 0.79 percent." This pay gap actually *widens* at the executive level, with women in senior or executive management roles only making 85.5 percent of what their male colleagues earn.

This must stop. How will we be able to recruit women to IT and cybersecurity if they aren't paid equally as their male counterparts? How will we be able to maintain a diverse working population in these sectors if there is gender based pay discrepancies even wider than in other fields? We have been battling these issues for decades and the battle must continue.

As we did in the past with getting more and more girls and women involved in the fields of engineering, math and STEM, we must now band together as educators to get ahead of the needs of businesses and recruit and retain women in the fields of IT and Cybersecurity. And we must ensure that women are paid on par with their male counterparts, and have the same opportunities to work in these very exciting fields.

The security of our nation literally depends on us getting it right -- because right now, hackers from other countries are stealing companies' intellectual property, individuals' personal information, and governmental secrets.

We need a diverse and effective workforce in IT and cybersecurity to protect these interests, and RWU Law is leading the way.