**South Texas College**

January 2019 News Center

***Ahead of the Game:* STC Cybersecurity Success Story Thomas Plummer**

High school graduation wasn’t exactly *boring* for Thomas Plummer … just a bit *anticlimactic*.

By the time he walked across the stage to accept his diploma, the Mercedes High School student had already graduated *college* — earning an associate degree in computer science through a dual enrollment program at South Texas College.

“I wish more people would give credit to a 2-year degree. I think a place like South Texas College is a great environment for being able to pursue that,” says Plummer, who has gone on to earn his bachelor’s degree from the University of Texas-San Antonio just two years after his graduation from STC.

Plummer’s passion for programming started early, and he’s been ahead of the game ever since. As a 10-year-old, he discovered an online game creation platform called *Roblox*, where his creativity and tech-savviness quickly found a constructive outlet. Soon, he was building levels, contributing code to group projects, and even designing his own video games.

“I’ve been programming for about a decade now — I’m 20,” says Plummer. “I’m really enjoying this area, I don’t feel limited.”

As a South Texas College student, Plummer’s professional interests have shifted from virtual game worlds to an expanding universe of opportunity in cybersecurity. The college’s program recently received prestigious designation as a Center of Academic Excellence in Cyber Security Two-Year Education (CAE2Y), and Plummer’s professors often talk of world-changing opportunities in the field.

“There’s a lot of demand for it,” says Nicolas Hinojosa, an instructor in the Computer Science department. “Many organizations use information technology in everyday operations.”

“A job in this field is always going to be out there,” agrees STC Cybersecurity instructor Nicolas Gutierrez.

Information security analysts earn an average of $100,490 in Texas, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, while high-paying positions for security engineers, risk managers, and other related occupations continue to expand. Plummer’s goal is to become a “pen tester” — short for “penetration tester” — a sort of “white-hat” hacker paid to expose vulnerabilities within public and private security systems.

“There’s a whole unrealized front of digital warfare,” he says. “Part of the US power grid has been hacked before … a lot of places are less secure than they seem.”

In an increasingly digital world, cybersecurity experts are the first — and often *only* — line of defense against cybercriminals: thieves, spies, and sometimes *worse*. While most web users understand the importance of keeping their passwords safe and secure, Plummer says that’s just the tip of the iceberg.

“What they really misunderstand is how much it matters,” Plummer warns. “You realize how much data is actually on your phone.

“Cybersecurity is not just making sure your bank account is secure. It's making sure your *life* is secure.”

With its workforce-driven programs, South Texas College has adapted to a critical shortage of IT professionals in the region, particularly in the rapidly expanding field of cybersecurity. In February, STC will host its ninth annual Information Technology Expo, an event that Hinojosa hopes will continue to educate people on the “revolutionary” IT pathways available through the department.

“We have a competency-based program for Computer Information Systems students who have experience in the workforce,” he says. “[We’re] trying not to be a gatekeeper.”

For a prodigious student like Plummer, a computer career seems to have *always* been in the cards. But according to one South Texas College instructor, it’s not always a “head-start” mentality that characterizes students in his dual enrollment classes.

“Usually it’s procrastinators,” admits Gutierrez. “The majority enjoy video games.”

In fact, according to Gutierrez, video games are a common gateway to information science careers. And with virtually all computer-related careers growing at a faster-than-average rate, he expects this pathway to pay off.

“Someone like Thomas [has a] lot of potential, in a field where we really need people with potential to go all the way,” says Gutierrez, who identified Plummer early on as a future game-changer in the field. “It feels good knowing that you observe them doing their best, and you know they're going to make it big.”

Plummer credits South Texas College for providing a hands-on, career-focused foundation that he says not only prepares students for the nationally ranked cybersecurity program at UTSA, but in some ways outclasses it.

“I really love STC,” he says. “I feel they really care about their students there. Dr. Reed is the kind of person who could be running late to a meeting, see a student lost, and stop to help.”

“That reflects the entire college.”

Between the fundamental skills he picked up at STC and the business-administration-focused education he received at UTSA, Plummer’s future as a cybersecurity professional is bright. But for now, he feels he’s earned a little break. For a few months, *at last*, his life will not be pre-programmed.

“My next plan is to take a few months off,” says Plummer. “I went through school a lot faster than usual so I’m tired.”

*[BREAKOUT BOX]:*

***STC’s Information Technology programs open doors!***

Information Security Analyst: **$100,490** avg. salary in TX

Logistics Analyst: **$70,630**

Computer Network Support Specialist: **$69,190**

Computer Network Architect: **$120,820**

Computer Systems Engineer/Architect: **$88,460**