Eric Garay wants to keep your computer safe.

Highline student Garay is graduating with honors and his bachelor’s degree in cybersecurity and forensics after winning a Highline College Student Achievement Award 2015-2016.

He received the award for developing real-world simulations for the Annual Pacific Rim Collegiate Cyber Defense Competition, as well as helping to run it.

The Annual Pacific Rim Collegiate Cyber Defense Competition brings students from around the Pacific Northwest to practice thwarting hackers in real-life simulations at Highline.

After the school that was supposed to design the program dropped out only four months before the competition, Garay took the initiative and helped design the program after having participated in the event the year before.

Taking the initiative is an important skill to have in this field. You see something that has to be done, and you do it. It is also a great skill for life in general, said Garay.

The people who worked to make the program the year before had five to eight months to develop the program, plenty of time.

“We did it in just under four months,” Garay said.

“We came up with the story line and built the network off of that,” Garay said, “leaving holes and backdoors to simulate a real world experience.”

The Blue teams were groups of students from different schools trying to defend against the Red team, who acted as the hackers, while also completing injection tasks.

Injections are tasks that might happen in a real world situation. These include researching, adding user accounts, answering phone calls, stopping active attacks, and working through the challenges with other people.

The students on the Blue teams had to complete these tasks when they were delivered to them, while at the same time defending against the over 30 hackers from the Red team.

“It’s one thing to talk about when a hacker breaks in, but it is another thing to actually kick them out,” Garay said.

During the competition, Garay led the White team. The White team had many jobs, including giving the Blue teams injections on an exact schedule, score the injections and create the documentation while also helping with the network.

The White team can be chaotic because they are not just defending networks, but also dealing with a dozen other things at the same time, he said.

Working on a team has its difficulties, Garay said.

“There are a lot of different perspectives, ideas, and options, but the cool thing is one of them is going to be the right idea,” he said.

“You can’t take things personally,” in this field, Garay said.

Garay’s favorite part of working on the White team was watching all the teams interact.

“In just those two days, you see the students grow more than a whole quarter or even a whole year,” Garay said.

Some of Garay’s friends, who worked for Intel and a video corporation, influenced his decision to get a degree in cyber defense.

“They were always doing something cool with computers,” Garay said.

“I have worked with computers since the early 2000s. I thought it might be nice to learn how to keep people out of them,” he said.

Born in Florida, he came to Washington after joining the Army in 1989.

“It’s a lot cooler here,” he said about the weather.

As an older student, he wanted to come back to school to improve his life.

“There are a lot of folks in their 30s and 40s who want to go to school, that can and should,” he said.

After graduation he wants to get more certifications and get to work.

“I don’t think I have a dream job,” he said. “As long as I get to do cybersecurity, I will be happy.”