

How Instructor Jose Gaspar gets students from the classroom to the real world with **ACI Skill Labs**

In cybersecurity, knowing the theory isn't enough. Students who can't navigate the tools, don't get hired — no matter how strong their GPA. **José Gaspar** knows this better than most. A working cyber threat intelligence analyst who teaches cybersecurity across two universities and a leading boot camp, he's spent years watching students graduate with strong academic credentials while building hands-on skills that land them the job.



The Challenge:

Removing setup friction from hands-on learning

Teaching cybersecurity tools like Splunk, Wireshark, or group policy management requires more than slides and readings. Students need time in real environments. But getting there has always been the hard part.

Building labs isn't necessary. Most don't have the time, infrastructure, resources to make it work. What they need is an environment that's already there — ready to learn from the moment they log in.



Between just setting it up, the firewall permissions, ingesting the logs and the data — a week later they're like, 'I give up,'” he says. “And I'm like, no — in a real cyber job, you're not going to set up Splunk on your own. The point is to learn the tool.



The Solution:

Labs that are ready when students are



Don't be afraid. You don't break anything. You just restart it, go back to square one, and start over.



That's where ACI Skill Labs come in. “The VMs are there, they're all set up and ready for you,” he says. **“You're not wasting any time — you're just immediately learning something pretty valuable.”**

The labs he finds most valuable with his students are the ones hardest to replicate independently: user access and control, group policies, firewalls. Topics where the environment itself is part of the lesson.

He also emphasizes the psychological safety of the format. Students can make mistakes, break things, and reset — which is how real learning happens.



Results:

Concepts that stick because students have lived them

Students who engage consistently with the labs don't just score better — they interview better. José coaches his students to treat lab completions as real experience. Running Splunk dashboards, configuring firewalls, working through incident response scenarios: that's not coursework, it's a portfolio.

"You gotta have the three fundamentals: **certifications, experience, and education,**" he says. "**And how do you get experience? Just do labs.** The more you play with them, they become second nature — you can get these jobs, you can talk about them in interviews."

The proof is in his students' outcomes. His most memorable example: a boot camp student with no technical background, no prior IT experience.

He did every lab. He took the course seriously. Six months later, he landed a paid cybersecurity internship. Three months after that, a full-time offer as a security analyst at 22 years old.

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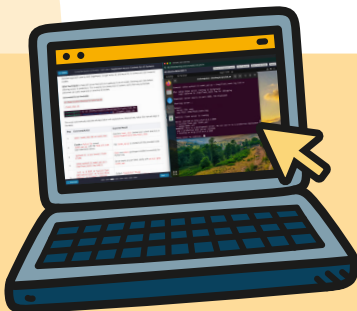
That's when I realized: yeah, you actually teach students the basics, you show them the labs, they go through the process — and suddenly they have a job. And that's awesome.

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Looking Ahead

For Gaspar, the case for hands-on labs isn't complicated. The cybersecurity talent gap is real. The tools students learn in Skill Labs are the tools they'll use on day one of a real job. And students who can say they've used them — who can walk through what they built in an interview — have a tangible edge. **"You can talk about them in interviews. You're not going to get that unless you spend the time in the labs."**



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