

Personal Narrative Essay

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Exiting high school felt like a blessing and a curse simultaneously with where I had stood the moment I stepped foot out of the graduation ceremony. Having earned an associate's degree before the end of my senior year had helped me feel a sense of accomplishment in myself, but I still felt lost. I feel as if I had focused too much on trying to balance my community college courses, my part time job, and class presidency that I fell behind in my checklist to find out what I wanted to be in the future, and where I would start pursuing it. It took a significantly long journey from then to now and it certainly was nowhere near easy. Throughout the summertime and small gap semester I took before deciding to pursue an undergraduate degree, I slowly had to piece together my realizations through figuring out what exactly I am passionate about without trying to turn a hobby into an obligation, and doing so took a lot of self-patience. My young-adult years have been a very challenging experience as I am nearing the completion of my bachelor's degree in cybersecurity, but getting here today was the most rewarding experience.

As a young child, I always seemed to have had a passion for architecture, or mainly just creatively piecing things together. From drawing houses to many hours building dream cities in Minecraft, I always felt that being an architect was something I would end up being when I grew older. Although, I then realized architecture is something that requires a lot of math which was never in the works for me because I always had struggled with math in all 13 years of schooling, from kindergarten to senior year. Deciphering this as a degree choice for university led me to just keep it as a hobby to myself instead, which means I had to move on to something else. Although now I had very limited options for myself and my ideas ran blank, so I was left to try and figure it out from scratch when I decided that time would come. Apart of my lack of ideas and motivation was due to the pandemic lockdowns, where I fell into depression and completely lost all motivation and self-worth which even lasted months after I graduated in May of 2022. At this

time, I had started work at the DAV Thrift Store working full time which ended up giving me a daily goal to look forward to, but I eventually knew I needed to have bigger goals in mind. With the help of my parents, we went through months of figuring out what I wanted to do for a career on top of figuring out where to go for college. I went from wanting to pursue dental hygiene, to nursing, to psychology, to even fashion design, but I finally had settled with pursuing cybersecurity. First discovering this, I had to ask myself “What even is cybersecurity?” I had absolutely no idea what it was at the time, which was surprising because I also had a knack for being tech-savvy. I had to learn the entire concept of computer security which gradually made me grow interested in it the more I did research. I also had learned that quite a bit of my family members was in the field of information technology, and talking to them about it made me settle on pursuing it.

The next step was deciding on which university to attend for my cybersecurity degree. Since I graduated from College of the Albemarle, a community college in North Carolina during my senior year, I was very limited in which universities would accept all 60 of my credits. I would apply to different universities here and there, mostly online, but they ended up just not being fit for me when it came to their program. It took a lot of researching universities before I had remembered that my sister attended Old Dominion University for an amount of time back in 2016, and shortly after that my hygienist even recommended it as well. Looking into the cybersecurity program here, I was drawn to ODU’s consistent upgrades and initiative to have a robust cybersecurity program here, so I decided to apply right away as an online student. I immediately was accepted into the program just weeks before the spring 2023 semester started, and I eventually moved over to living on campus for my college years. Thankful for my dad’s post-9/11 GI Bill benefits, I was able to experience the opportunity of living on campus while

having my tuition fully paid for. Old Dominion University was a convenient choice for me due to its proximity to my home in Moyock, NC, its familiar city in which it resides, and their program opportunities. Tour day came around and I fell in love with ODU's mid-century architecture, metropolitan vibe, and greenery filled campus.

My first semester had eventually started here at Old Dominion University, and since I was considered a transfer student here, I was immediately thrown into intermediate courses such as CYSE270, 250, and 201S. These courses were not introductory level whatsoever, so everything was almost completely new and unfamiliar to me causing this semester to be extremely rocky at first. I struggled significantly in my programming and coding class (CYSE 250) and my Linux Systems class, giving me a distaste for the program already. These discrepancies were already having me questioning my degree choice at this time, but I decided to continue on knowing that there were more cybersecurity focused classes coming my way. I would eventually move forward through each semester, excelling in most of my classes such as IDS300, CYSE426, CYSE280, and even making dean's list for fall 2023. Moving through these courses grew my love for cybersecurity overall and I always composed myself to the best of my ability in my classes.

Eventually, the concept of needing an internship as a requirement snuck up on me pretty fast. Since I only had an estimated timeline of around two years here, I didn't have much time to search for one at a steady pace, so finding one has grown to be a struggle for me. I am thankful that there are other alternatives to fulfilling this requirement, such as the entrepreneurship class, which I might end up pursuing for this coming summer to finalize my requirements for my bachelors. Not finding an internship has given me quite a setback for graduating on time here but I am going to be grateful no matter what time I finish, because it shows that I will never give up

when I get ambitious about certain things. This is a very different characteristic of myself compared to before I started attending college here at Old Dominion University, showing that working hard gives me great rewarding motivation to strive for what I feel is best for my future and it took independence to discover that.

The journey to becoming where I am today has been quite a time-crunching process, but feeling like I have a limited amount of time has not been such a bad thing as for now on my last semester before obtaining my bachelor's degree in cybersecurity. With just barely being here for two years, I have quite a few months left on my GI Bill benefits and I plan to have three college degrees before the age of 22 by returning to ODU for a second program. I can honestly say I am extremely proud of where I am in my journey and how much growth I have experienced over the past couple years, completely reversing myself mentally into believing "I will" instead of "I can't".