

Personal Narrative Essay: My Journey into Cybersecurity

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Abstract

This narrative essay examines my personal and professional journey into the field of cybersecurity. Beginning in 2016, when I received my first Secret security clearance while working for the Department of Homeland Security and supporting the United States Coast Guard, the essay explores the key experiences that shaped my career path. After earning a Top-Secret clearance in 2019 and transitioning to the Department of the Navy as an Information Systems Security Officer (ISSO), I discovered that obtaining a college degree was essential for future career growth. This realization motivated me to return to school and pursue a degree in cybersecurity, first at Northern Virginia Community College and later at Old Dominion University. The essay also reflects on how becoming a father in 2022 and my wife's educational accomplishments inspired me to lead by example and complete my bachelor's degree. This essay demonstrates how professional experiences, family responsibilities, and educational goals combined to shape my identity and future aspirations in cybersecurity.

Keywords: cybersecurity, narrative identity, higher education, government service, career development, family, leadership

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From Homeland Security to Cybersecurity

If someone had told me ten years ago that I would be finishing a bachelor's degree in cybersecurity while working for the federal government, I probably would not have believed them. My journey into cybersecurity was not something I planned from the beginning. Instead, it was shaped by my career experiences, my family, and my desire to continue growing both personally and professionally.

Beginning My Career in Government

In 2016, I began working for the Department of Homeland Security, supporting the United States Coast Guard. That same year, I received my first Secret security clearance. At the time, I viewed the clearance simply as a requirement for my job, not realizing the opportunities it would eventually create. As I gained experience and moved into positions with greater responsibility, I became increasingly interested in information security and the role technology plays in protecting our nation's critical infrastructure.

Over the next several years, I continued to advance professionally. In 2019, I was granted a Top-Secret clearance, a milestone that opened doors I never imagined would be possible. Looking back, that clearance represented much more than access to classified information represented trust, responsibility, and the possibility of building a long-term career in cybersecurity.

(McAdams, 2001) describes how people often identify specific moments that become turning points in their life stories. Earning my Top-Secret clearance was one of those moments for me because it changed the direction of my professional life and expanded my vision of what was possible.

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A Career Turning Point

After receiving my Top-Secret clearance, I transferred to the Department of the Navy, where I began working as an Information Systems Security Officer (ISSO) in cybersecurity. My responsibilities included helping protect government systems, ensuring compliance with security requirements, and supporting the overall cybersecurity mission.

Although I enjoyed my work and appreciated the opportunities the position provided, I quickly learned that there was a limit to how far I could advance without a college degree. One conversation, in particular, changed my perspective. I was told that regardless of my experience or certifications, there would be limitations on my income and career growth because I did not possess a bachelor's degree.

Hearing those words was difficult, but they motivated me to take action. Rather than accepting those limitations, I decided to invest in myself and return to school.

Returning to the Classroom

My educational journey restarted at Northern Virginia Community College in Woodbridge, Virginia, where I began studying cybersecurity. Returning to school as a working professional presented challenges that many traditional students do not face. I had to balance a full-time government career, family responsibilities, and coursework while learning new technical concepts.

Initially, I questioned whether I was making the right decision. After being out of school for years, I wondered if I could still succeed in a college environment. However, each completed assignment and each passing semester strengthened my confidence.

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As I progressed through my studies, I realized that cybersecurity extends far beyond simply protecting computers. Cybersecurity professionals protect financial institutions, government agencies, hospitals, transportation systems, and critical infrastructure that millions of Americans rely on every day.

My education at Northern Virginia Community College provided me with the foundation I needed to continue pursuing my goals.

Becoming a Mother and Leading by Example

In October 2022, my life changed forever when my first daughter was born. Becoming a mother gave me a new perspective on responsibility, leadership, and the example I wanted to set for my family.

My wife had already earned her master's degree, and seeing her dedication inspired me to continue pursuing my own educational goals. I wanted my daughter to grow up to understand the importance of education, perseverance, and lifelong learning. I knew that if I expected my children to value education, I needed to demonstrate that commitment myself.

Although I had already built a successful career, I set a personal goal to earn at least a bachelor's degree. That decision ultimately led me to enroll at Old Dominion University (ODU) and pursue a Bachelor of Science in Cybersecurity.

Starting over at a new university while balancing work and family life was not easy. There were late nights spent studying after work, weekends dedicated to assignments, and moments when exhaustion made me question whether I could continue. However, every challenge reinforced my commitment to my family and my future.

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Growing Through Old Dominion University

My experience at Old Dominion University transformed my understanding of cybersecurity.

Before enrolling, I had already earned several professional certifications, including Security+, AWS certifications, and the Certified Information Systems Security Professional (CISSP) certification.

Although these certifications provided valuable technical knowledge, my coursework at ODU expanded my understanding in ways I never expected.

Throughout the cybersecurity program, I developed skills in:

- Network security
- Risk management
- Vulnerability assessment
- Security policies and compliance
- Incident response
- Cloud security
- Ethical hacking principles
- Cybersecurity strategy

The program challenged me to think critically about cybersecurity problems and approach them from both technical and strategic perspectives. I learned that effective cybersecurity requires

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more than technical expertise, it also requires communication, leadership, collaboration, and the ability to adapt to constantly changing threats.

Many of my classes forced me to step outside my comfort zone and apply concepts to real-world situations. Through projects, labs, and research assignments, I gained a deeper appreciation for the complexity of securing modern technology systems.

The Importance of Narrative Identity

According to (McAdams, 2001), people develop a narrative identity by creating stories that connect their experiences, values, and goals into a meaningful life journey. Looking back on my own experiences, I can clearly see how different events shaped my identity and career path.

My first security clearance introduced me to government service. My Top-Secret clearance opened new professional opportunities. My transition to the Department of the Navy challenged me to pursue higher education. The birth of my daughter strengthened my determination to lead by example.

Each experience built upon the previous one, creating the story that defines who I am today.

(Nguyen, 2013) explains that personal narratives allow individuals to connect important experiences, values, and goals, helping them understand how past events have shaped their identity and future aspirations. As I prepare to graduate, I recognize that my journey has been about much more than earning a degree. It has been about perseverance, sacrifice, and becoming the person I aspire to be.

Looking Toward the Future

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Today, I am in my final semester at Old Dominion University and currently completing my last four classes before graduation. Earning my bachelor's degree represents the fulfillment of a promise I made to myself and my family several years ago.

As I look toward the future, I plan to continue serving in the cybersecurity field while applying the knowledge and skills I have gained throughout my education and professional career.

Technology will continue to evolve, and cybersecurity professionals will remain essential to protecting our nation's infrastructure and information systems.

More importantly, I hope my journey demonstrates to my daughter and others that success is not determined by where you start but by your willingness to continue learning and growing.

Completing this degree is not the end of my story, it is simply the beginning of the next chapter.

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