

FBI HONORS INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE

Federal Bureau of Investigations

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Cybersecurity Internship (CYSE 368)

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Since I was a child, I've shown interest in spy movies and books. I would spend hours upon hours in front of the television watching spy movies and T.V shows such as 'Spy Kids' and 'The Spy Next Door'. As I got older, I realized that I wanted to take my interest and turn it into a career. I started making connections with government agencies such as the FBI and CIA to achieve this goal. The first part of this goal began in high school where I developed the skills and interest in working with computers. This led me to apply to Old Dominion University (ODU) to study Cybersecurity as their program was highly ranked in the nation at the time. ODU's cybersecurity program and its professionals helped open my eyes to the exact career I would like to pursue in the future. Compared to most cybersecurity students, who fall in the IT, networking or coding aspect of the field, I had found my calling to be in undercover or covert operations. I wanted to communicate with the cyber criminals, using social science skills learned in college to determine their motives. This interest in the social sciences of cybersecurity grew as I took the Cybersecurity & Social Science (201S) course at ODU during my freshman year. Throughout the course, I was given the opportunity to view the cybersecurity field on a less technical level and more so on the focus of human behaviors. For example, the course went into great detail about why cyber criminals target certain individuals and what happened in their life that led them to commit said crimes. I hit a breakthrough during my sophomore year of college.

Before sophomore year began, I found myself in student training for my new on-campus position as a Resident Assistant (RA) in Owens House. During that time, I became close with the other RAs in my building but hit the jackpot with one person in particular. My floor partner had opened up to me about numerous things and her internship was one of them. She explained some of the things she had done, the skills learned, etc. At the time, I had no idea what internship she had but I soon found out that she was interning with my dream agency. She said she was an FBI Honors Intern and I admit, I was shocked. I became ecstatic and asked her how to apply for the Honors Intern Program. From August to September, she helped me get the items needed to apply along with taking me through the application step by step to ensure I had everything. And after months of waiting, interviews and an especially hard Polygraph—I was in! She wasn't the reason I applied for the internship, but her talking about it with me opened up a new set of doors I could not have ever imagined opening. The main reason I applied to this internship was to gain hands-on experience regarding the FBI's mission statement, wanting to see if the FBI had anything to offer me. And I feel like it has offered me a lot based on this summer alone.

Throughout the summer session, I've found that as a full-time intern the experience the FBI has given me is a blessing. My supervisors have been amazing in providing me with exercises, shadowing those within my division, and other opportunities to further my knowledge of the FBI and its various departments. For example, one exercise I was given involved a phishing attack. In the simulation, I had to locate the IP address, domain, and location of the individual behind the attack. To complete this, I had to research the correct tools that I could load into my terminal to find the answers to the task above. These exercises led me to being more interested in network security and in choosing a certification, which ultimately is the CompTIA Network+ certification. Another opportunity that allowed me to communicate with members of my division was being allowed to sit-in during meetings. I was able to weigh my opinion on an issue or case, even on what knowledge I wanted to learn more about. This led to me networking and making connections with other employees in the FBI, which I greatly appreciated as it led to me learning about other career goals within the FBI.

In learning about the different careers offered within the FBI, it led me to understand the mission of the FBI in its totality. Tasked with protecting the American people while also

upholding the United States constitution, I found that the mission statement was short but the impact of its words were long lasting. Each position in the FBI is well-respected as every employee has a job where its responsibilities lead to upholding the mission. Individuals in the FBI share one common goal, which is to uphold the mission but use their varying talents to reach said goal. To me, the trust FBI employees are given is large as each task needs to be handled with care.

One thing I learned from being a full-time intern is understanding what the FBI does, outside of law enforcement duties, and its mission. Tasked with protecting the American people and upholding the United States Constitution in doing so, it is a short mission statement. But the impact of the statement resonates with me as I now know the jobs and responsibilities for this statement to ring true is huge. In the FBI, there is no one way for an individual to complete the mission. FBI employees are a group of individuals from all backgrounds and walks of life, who have undergone a process that gives them access to classified information that will allow them to complete their goals in the best possible manner. That being said, I can say with confidence that the FBI does have the type of job I am looking for. The FBI is one of the rare places where there is a position for everyone no matter their degree or interests. These degrees and interests are all related to the FBI mission, as anyone can apply to work for the FBI. Going on the FBI Jobs site provides a variety of positions in different locations, divisions and departments for those interested. From athletes to retired math teachers, there is a position for everyone. The best thing about this too is that the jobs will provide as much detail regarding the duties, responsibilities and pay for the position. This information can be further found on the OPM site that lists the GS-pay scale and how that pay relates to the FBI.

Looking back at the beginning of my internship, I would argue that it has been a wonderful experience. From the application I completed in September and the process leading to the final offer, it is a long process that requires patience. I learned that working for the government, FBI in this manner is a long process because there are a variety of interviews and tests an applicant must go through, including the background investigation and the polygraph. In my opinion, I found that the background investigation scared me the most because you need to be so careful that you don't miss anything and during the investigation, you don't do anything to jeopardize it. And a background investigation can take 6 - 8 months. So from September until April, I was going through the preliminary steps and the background investigation until I received my final offer in May. I'm going to be honest, this entire process challenged me mentally and emotionally because I could not do anything to make it go faster. All I could do was trust the process, that I was as honest as I could be and hope I came out victorious. Which I did since I'm writing this paper!

The Federal Bureau of Investigation's mission is to "protect the American people and uphold the Constitution of the United States" (add citation here) and I have found that to be true in all aspects throughout the course of this internship. Diving into a small history lesson, the FBI was founded by Attorney General Charles J. Bonaparte on July 26, 1908 and began with a small group of individuals. As time progressed, the FBI became well-known due to its first Director—J. Edgar Hoover in 1924 (FBI, 2024). From 1924–1972, Director Hoover was responsible for expanding the efforts of the FBI into something more. After his death in 1972, the FBI continued to grow into an agency that was representative of the background of the United States. Women and POC women began to apply for Special Agent positions and other careers—an opportunity that was denied to them under Director Hoover. Based on that

knowledge alone, I think it is clear to see that the FBI has not just grown in power but in representation too.

Located in Washington, D.C., FBI Headquarters is responsible for providing information and direction to their employees in its 56 field offices in the United States and its territories, along with 63 legal attachments (legats) that provide coverage to over 180 countries overseas. Each aspect of the FBI leads to upholding its mission statement. In this instance, the division I was assigned to intern at this summer was the FBI's Cyber Division. Founded in 2002, Cyber Division or CyD, was made to "combat cyber-based terrorism, hostile foreign intelligence operations conducted over the Internet, and cyber crime by applying the highest level of technical capability and investigative expertise" (Archives FBI, 2024). CyD is tasked with keeping itself up-to-date on the newest technologies, as technology continues to advance with each passing day. To combat these new technologies, CyD is further responsible for finding new methods of defensive and offensive cyber maneuvers. The individuals I met under Cyber Division have the biggest role within the FBI, as their mission is to keep the United States and our employees overseas safe.

Under CyD and the FBI as a whole, I can argue that management positions are interesting as you need to know who your direct POC is. With several divisions and offices, along with departments within said divisions, it can get difficult to know how to stay in contact with. During the first two weeks as an intern, I had no idea who my supervisor was and it led to some troubles. However, once I found out who my supervisor was it made communicating with them easier and navigating CyD. Because the FBI works as a team, supervisors in each division and unit will do their best to assist you in anything you need. I found that this made the internship great because I knew I could speak with any other unit in CyD and talk to the head of the unit, getting the opportunity to speak with them as they shared knowledge, advice, etc. on a task or question I had. Regarding my direct supervisor, I found that he was there for me personally to help or introduce me to other divisions/units I had interest in. For example, when I wanted to learn a new skill related to network security such as SSH on a server, he showed me step by step on how to do it.

In experiencing that, I believe it is safe to state that the overall work environment of the FBI is family-oriented. It is common knowledge that it is difficult to secure a full-time position with the agency as one must go through a series of preliminary processing and a background investigation before the final offer is made. I think this process brings employees together because in sharing that knowledge, I have found that everyone I've met during this internship has been excited and interested in knowing how I landed the internship. In a way, it allows connections and future job opportunities to feel more natural if seeking for these in the FBI or other government agencies. Another reason I'd say the FBI is family oriented is because most of the individuals I have met in the FBI are those who began as interns or other entry level positions, meaning that they understand the first-time nerves the best. These individuals want to see me succeed and reach the highest level of a career in the FBI. FBI employees want you, they do not want to see interns or others not succeed in meeting their goals.

One of the tasks I was given as an intern was to learn a new skill. At the beginning of the internship, my supervisor and I had a discussion about my current skills, what I'd like to learn and hopes for the future. I shared with my supervisor that I am interested in the social sciences aspect of cybersecurity. For context, the social sciences aspect of this field involves learning the motives behind a cyber criminals attack and why they targeted who/what they did. Majority of the classes for my major have involved the social sciences and I find myself taking criminal

justice courses too. After sharing this with him, my supervisor challenged me to find a new skill as having more than one skill in this field is important. For me this was networking. He went on to explain how this skill would be helpful, as if I get placed in a position where I would need to find the cyber criminal through a server, networking would help me achieve that. To access the server, I would need to be familiar with using a terminal and its commands. I took this advice and honed my skills, allowing me to have a better understanding of using the terminal. At the same time, this has made me want to get the CompTIA Network+ certification rather than the CompTIA Security+ certification.

My supervisor did his best to ensure I was involved in other ways too. For example, he would take me into his meetings. I never felt left out, I always had a seat at the table. Most interns would be placed in the back, just listening to their supervisors and other FBI employees talk. Not my supervisor. Not only did he make sure I had a seat at the table, he also made it so I had a voice. During meetings, a variety of topics would be discussed and he made sure that I shared my opinion on each topic and the situation behind it. It might seem small, but this action speaks for itself as this demonstrates to me that he is mindful of others. He knows that my generation is the next generation to work within the FBI, even after the internship. It's not about the skills related to the field, but the soft skills needed to thrive in the workplace. After all, the management, environment and actions of this organization is what makes the job appealing.

Coming into the internship program, my knowledge skills and knowledge of cybersecurity was limited. I would rank it about average due to the curriculum taught at ODU for its cyber program and personal interest. My skills ranged from knowing little about networking to social sciences and the depth of cyber attacks. I knew out of those skills that networking was what I had the least knowledge, experience and hands-on moments with. I knew how to access the terminal, connect and check the internet connection, even naming networking and writing tools used. When accessing the terminal, I could see how an individual utilizes it to strip information from the computer such as the IP address. In checking for internet connection, I knew I needed to go into the settings and find information that determined if the terminal was connected or why it wasn't. Finally, when looking at what I knew about networking in its totality I knew about sending and receiving. Knowing what a packet is, firewalls, anti malware/virus software, and how to run a performance check on a computer or the internet. My knowledge ended in remembering the wiring used to set up a network, such as the ethernet cable and switch. However, all hope is not lost.

Cyber Division took advantage of my current knowledge of cybersecurity and expanded it with various exercises throughout the internship. Next to ensuring I had a voice and was involved in the division's happenings, the number one goal of CyD was to make sure I got the full experience an intern could receive and that the information shared with me allowed me to feel comfortable with myself in answering questions. One example of this is when my team expanded my knowledge in checking connections. In the beginning, I knew how to check the internet connection on a laptop and now I know how to check the connection from a desktop to a server. I learned how to do this through advice from my team but was never told the exact process on how to do it. Instead, I had to research how to do it so I could do it myself. Through repeated exercises, I can state that I know how to do it myself in the future as it is now muscle memory. I believe that if I had been told how to instead of being forced to research it, it would ruin the chance of me appreciating the process behind networking. Another example of this was understanding the wiring and how it affected the IP address. Under ODU's curriculum, I knew what an IP address was—the address that identifies the device on a network or server—but had

never been shown how to change it or find the server the IP address has access to. Learning how to do these tasks in the internship, leads me to see how useful it can be for the job and outside it if I need to change the IP address on my personal computer. The final example of this is how important ports are in wiring devices. My team showed me which ports to use and the uses behind each port, as each port is used to connect to the internet in some form. A change in ports can compromise devices, network security and has the potential to change the computer IP address every time you log on a computer. Some of these issues do not raise a huge concern in other cybersecurity roles but under CyD, I have found that even the simplest of issues can lead to a risk in national security. No matter how big or small it is, someone will always find a way to make it bigger than it has to be.

Under CyD, I have found that the hands-on experience I had has changed the understanding and meaning of cybersecurity for me. Having the opportunity to be involved in a real-world cyber role was a blessing in disguise because it demonstrated to me the various assets and skills needed for this field. It is vast and leaves options for several positions, but it also means that one needs to hone their skills for what they'd like to do and keep themselves updated with current cyber trends. Having one skill set for this field is not enough to further my career in cybersecurity. My supervisor and other team members who took the time to teach me how to network properly has allowed me to master multitasking in the workplace. And as mentioned earlier, having more than one skill in cybersecurity can lead to different job opportunities, higher paying jobs, etc.

Taking a look at the ODU curriculum to prepare me for my internship is difficult as there are so many different factors that play into it. ODU curriculum is very broad and has many different pathways within the Schools of Cybersecurity. The School of Cybersecurity allows this lets students from all different backgrounds choose what they want to learn or possibly do in the cyber field. Doing this is a double edged sword because it can allow you to believe you can truly just do what you learned in that area of cybersecurity with obtaining any other skills or having a background knowledge of other skills such as coding, networking, or software development. Only having one skill can truly be the difference between you getting hired by the company you work for. For example, if I was applying for a job and on my resume it showed the only knowledge I knew about cybersecurity was the social science aspect vs another applicant that resume shows that they have a background in coding, networking, routing, and social science it would be smarter for that company to pick the other person rather than me. As if I only knew the social science aspect, I'm limited in what I can do for the company. While the other applicant is able to help the company in numerous ways.

That being said, the ODU curriculum did prepare me to have a knowledge of the vocabulary and terms of cybersecurity tools. As the School of Cybersecurity does require classes that are heavy focus on knowing the name of the cybersecurity tools. While the only downside you aren't really shown what that cybersecurity tool looks like. For example, Basic Cybersecurity Programming and Networking (CYSE 250) went over lots of tools and how to connect networks to switches using switches in labs. These labs did a good representation of how it works. That being said, seeing a small icon of a switch and putting icons of wires connecting to a icon of a computer isn't the same as the real thing. As when I was given an actual switch to connect wires to receive signals to my computer to display on my screen it made it quite difficult in identifying what was what at first. While also leaving me to feel a little embarrassed and unintelligent to my peers. As I do believe ODU curriculum is good and has lots of aspects but needs more hands-on activities with actual networking devices to avoid instances like that.

Following that, doing this internship has also led me to new experiences, concepts, and techniques that I have yet learned in school. For example, when it comes to using Linux. I won't take Linux until this upcoming semester but now know how to use it since part of getting the experience of working with the Cyber Division was learning Linux. The way he taught me how to use Linux is by having and watching how the Divisions use it. After doing so he assigned me exercises using Linux. Such as learning basic commands and uploading and downloading tools into the Linux program I was using which was Ubuntu. Doing so allowed me at first to know the concept of what Linux is. After knowing what Linux is he started assigning me tasks to do in Ubuntu. For example, I had to create a server and then figure out how to SSH from the desktop to the server. Doing this allowed me to connect to the Server while on the desktop.

As the internship comes to an end I can say with confidence that I have completed most of the goals. One of the goals I had set was getting hands-on experience. Hands-on experience was really important to me because as I stated in this essay I didn't have any before the internship or so far through my ODU experience. When it comes to the type of hands-on experience it varies. I have stated previously that I dealt with many different types of exercises such as finding information about a phishing attack and learning how to use commands in the terminal. Another hands-on experience I had was being able to shadow a computer scientist. Shadowing a computer scientist made me realize the difference within majors at ODU. For example, many people believe in cybersecurity majors at ODU code and do lots of technological stuff. Which is false, as the computer scientist showed me how different our majors were when I watched them make cyber tools with code. While people in position or my major rather take the code and deploy them when needed in missions. Some more hands-on experience I had was being able to go around to people and learn about their job/role in the FBI.

Following that, when looking at if I executed my goal understanding what the FBI does and their mission I would say yes to an extent. When it comes to understanding the FBI roles in the United States it gets difficult to completely understand due to the amount of roles and within the FBI. Which is also made for security reasons as having many many roles for one objective can make it hard for enemies to pin-point an attack FBI. So yes I can say I understand the role of the Cyber Division in the FBI but I couldn't say I completely understand the role of all the divisions in the FBI. Following that, when it comes to the FBI mission I understand it completely. And I also align with it myself as every employee does.

Furthermore, after doing this internship and viewing if the FBI has the type of job I want I would also say yes. The job I would like to have would be using social science over the internet to communicate and catch cyber criminals. Having a job that evolves that would very much be a dream job for me. As I always have wanted to make an impact on the world by serving justice. I would say like alot other companies and agencies it's hard to come straight out of college with just internships under your belt to gain your dream job. That being said, an employee of the FBI has realized that they have told me many steps and ways I should take to achieve my dream job. Which also ties into the aspect I stated in this essay about the FBI is family oriented and how they want the best for you no matter what. With this being said, yes this internship has let me achieve and fulfill most of my goals.

This leads me into sharing the positives and negatives of the internship program. In an earlier discussion, I mentioned that this internship is competitive and not everyone makes it through the entire process. The FBI Honors Internship Program is one of the most competitive and hardest internships to get into in the United States, with several thousand applicants applying each year and the number of applicants who are selected get smaller. The friend I mentioned

earlier who introduced this internship to me? Her internship class had 10,689 applicants and 680 were chosen. In my case, the FBI had over 12,000 applicants for the Summer 2024 intern class. Out of those applicants 350 had been selected and made it through the entire process. Applicants had a 3.4% chance of being selected. Being given those numbers put things into perspective and how blessed I had been to be one of the 350. This knowledge motivates me to keep striving to make a change in my life and how I was raised, the end goal being to leave an impact on the world. I come from a low-income family, seeing struggle and hardship in all its forms throughout my childhood. But instead of letting that define me, I chose to be something better than what I had been exposed to. I am the first to graduate high school in my family, a first generation college student and the first to work for a competitive government internship. It's a lot of firsts and in accomplishing these firsts, I am continued to be motivated and now be where I started in life as I continue living. This motivation has led to the most exciting part of the internship, which was being accepted, meeting new people and hearing their stories. Getting the "Congratulations from the FBI!" was so exciting and I felt relieved knowing I had made it. I knew that I had always wanted to work for the FBI and becoming an intern is a step in the right direction to achieving that full-time employment status with them. Meeting new people and hearing their stories has been completed as I did not think I would have the option to travel to different divisions and field offices. I was under the impression I could not do that as an intern but seeing as I could, I was able to network with those in different divisions who are more than willing to point me in the right direction.

As I have disclosed the positives and negatives of internship, I think the most discouraging aspect of this experience was the preliminary process and background investigation. I have stated throughout this paper that the process is long, no matter if you have the most boring background or the most interesting background. Everyone is given the same waiting period and I think that makes it more daunting. I learned that throughout the process and background investigation, I would not receive updates as it made its way through the different divisions in the FBI that are tasked with the hiring process. There were months where I had no idea if I had gotten the internship or not, it was radio silence. I had to focus on college and other activities to avoid going crazy at the lack of communication throughout this process. However, as I made it through parts of the process I was given contact information for the intern coordinator at my division if I needed to ask a question. In being accepted into the internship, I also learned that there is a team dedicated to answering intern questions and that has helped immensely. Another discouraging part about this internship is knowing that I am unable to do everything that I had hoped to do. Being an intern doesn't mean we are the bottom of the barrel but it does mean that we are not granted the same opportunities as everyone else. Being there for a short time in the summer sessions means less time to be given different options. There is the chance that the task you'd like to do is a security risk and your division would rather not take the fall of an intern messing things up. The final discouraging thing—that might seem funny but I am so serious—is that the FBI is not what is shown in movies or T.V shows. It is a simple discouraging aspect but still so interesting to watch FBI focused media and see that most of it is incorrect or heavily exaggerated.

This leads into some of the challenges that I faced during the internship. The biggest challenge I faced throughout the internship was staying busy and focused. Sometimes there is nothing for an intern to be given or if you don't understand the tasks assigned to you, that takes time to navigate the challenges presented with that. If my supervisor was busy or out of office, it also meant I had nothing to do. It made me frustrated when this happened because it felt that all I

could say in the future was that I was an intern with the FBI but not what I had done with them. It made me feel that I was incomplete and I do not like that at all. One challenge that has proved to be difficult is not disclosing where I work to friends and family. I understand because it is a security risk and based on the political or social climate of the United States at any given time, it is better to stay silent than risk putting a personal target on my back. Government agencies are targets in the first place and I'd rather not take it to a personal level if it can be helped. You might believe that you trust the friend or family you shared this information with but you don't know 100%. I'd rather be too careful than careless. The final two challenges I had dealt with were the interns themselves. For starters, it was difficult for me to interact with individuals and knowing they had come from a different background than mine. Some of the interns did not know how to act in a professional environment, not knowing when it was appropriate to joke and when it wasn't. Interns are easy to spot but these interns made it much more noticeable based on their behavior. The other challenge is that some of the interns in my division had never had a job or interacted with others on a professional level so there were conversations they had that should never be brought up in a work setting. It led to uncomfortable conversations and moments because some of the views were downright rude and disrespectful, bordering on offensive. If you don't have something nice to say, don't say it all. We learn this as children and it is interesting to see how that rule doesn't seem to apply in the real world.

As someone who is nearing the end of their first internship and summer session with the FBI, I believe that it has prepared me to be ready for anything. I recognize that I could have been declined from the internship program based on competitiveness or if my division did not have space for me, I could have been placed elsewhere and it could change the trajectory of my career. Those of us who were fortunate enough to be accepted into the internship program need to not take it for granted and instead acknowledge that this is a rare opportunity that can lead to a life changing experience if you let it. Understand that there is the risk of us ending in a division or field office that was not a preference but that in advocating for yourself, taking that initiative throughout the internship to further your knowledge demonstrates that you care about this opportunity given to you. At the same time, the FBI will have events that interns are able to attend that discuss different careers, tours of certain divisions, etc. I would also mention to take advantage of every full-time employee you meet. Some of these individuals haven't been with the FBI for long and some have but it never takes away from what I learned. Make those connections to understand every term and acronym, make those connections to learn a new skill or interest. Under this internship program, the worst a division can say is no but you will never know unless you ask. These experiences are not limited to a degree or those seeking degrees, as in college there is only so much that can be shared. That being said, do not be afraid to ask questions! If you aren't asking questions then what are you doing in this program? You will never get the full experience or at the least what you want out of this internship if you aren't asking questions. Divisions understand the interns are nervous and need guidance in navigating this new space, but don't let that drive you down. Take this internship to hone soft skills and get out of your comfort zone—get comfortable with the uncomfortable. And don't be surprised if work isn't given to you immediately. It is going to take time as we are interns and due to the time we are there during the summer, there is only so much that can be given to us that won't disrupt an investigation if we aren't done with the tasks.

Ending on a positive note, the FBI Honors Intern Program will remain memorable as long as I live. It had been the most interesting, confusing and rewarding 10 weeks. Being an FBI intern is a privilege, a privilege that is one of a kind and I would not trade it for another

internship. Learning about cybersecurity in a law enforcement setting is something that has opened my eyes and has made me extremely grateful in knowing that I will be able to use these skills in the future. The internship kept me on my toes as no one day was the same, I never knew what was going to happen next and that made it much more exciting than it should've been. I know that this internship will translate to the remainder of my ODU career as I take classes focused on Linux and other programming aspects of cybersecurity. Instead of going in blind, I have the introductory knowledge for it. I will also be able to navigate the rest of my college career in choosing courses that are focused on what career I'd like to pursue with the FBI. On a professional level, I understand how to navigate the workplace and utilize it as an intern to get the full experience. The FBI is a law enforcement agency but there is so much more behind closed doors. It has led me to a possible career in cybersecurity but I know that if I find something else to do that is more interesting, I can pursue it as a full-time employee after I graduate. This is the beginning of something wonderful and I cannot wait to see where it takes me next.

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