

Personal Narrative Essay

Daniel Akpovi

School of Cybersecurity, Old Dominion University

IDS 493: Electronic Portfolio Project

Dr. Sherron Gordon-Phan

April 13, 2026

Abstract

My path into cybersecurity was formed through my education, work, and personal growth. My story begins with my experiences as a student from a French-speaking country, adjusting to college life in the United States, and the confidence that I built for myself during this time. During my time at Tidewater Community College (TCC), I earned my associate degree in cybersecurity and developed an interest in problem solving and information security. After transferring to Old Dominion University (ODU), I further focused on my degree and my career goals. My current job, which is also my internship for my degree, allowed me to use the information that I learned in my education to solve security components problems related to it. Each of these phases of my education and employment have played a major role in my decision to pursue cybersecurity as my area of study and career path.

Personal Narrative Essay

When people look at a degree or a job title, they usually see the result of the person who has that degree or title. They do not typically see the difficult steps that were taken to earn that. My path into cybersecurity did not begin with one big moment. It began in school, work, language struggle, and life experience. As someone who grew up in a French-speaking country, college in the United States was unfamiliar to me from the very beginning. I had to adjust to the system, the pace and even how to speak in class. Basically, even the simplest thing felt heavy. It took time to adjust to these differences, as I had to learn how to listen more carefully, how to read at a faster pace, and even how to control myself when I face frustration in front of topics or situations I do not understand. Each of these steps built my confidence in my education and allowed me to take further steps into my career.

Starting at Tidewater Community College (TCC) was one of the important parts of my journey. It was at this school that I completed my associates degree in Cybersecurity. I can say that this is where my experiences began. Prior to my time at TCC, Cybersecurity was something that I knew I liked, however it remained abstract. I knew I liked technology, and I knew I liked solving problems, but I had not made a connection of these interests to a career path. During my time at TCC, I began to discover an interest in cybersecurity that grew stronger with each passing semester. In my classes I learned about computer networking, system security, and the reasoning behind building systems and protecting them. As each semester progressed, I became even more interested. I did not like superficial or obvious answers. I wanted to know what caused a particular behavior in a network; why certain settings were important; and how a particular vulnerable area could cause an entire environment to fail. I kept that desire to learn with me.

Learning by Doing

One of the biggest things that I learned early was that I learn best by doing things myself. While I know that lectures and course materials are helpful, they are never enough for me on their own. I need to test the knowledge that I have learned to retain it for long periods of time, as that helps me to understand the concept behind it. I needed to build something, break something, and figure out how to fix it. Such a habit has become one of the main parts of my academic life. Should I not understand a certain topic in class, I will often do my personal research about the topic outside of my classroom, and if it is a technical topic that can be tested in a lab, I will build such a lab to help me better understand the topic. This type of self-directed and self-sufficient educational tactic has helped me to transform from a student who simply sits back and takes in the information to one who takes the initiative to act as if they are responsible for learning that material.

That kind of transformation made a difference because I knew college would not be an easy journey for me. As a student from a French-speaking background, I had to prove myself on a regular basis. While my grades were good most of the time, which made me proud of myself, the best satisfaction that I saw came from the work that I did behind the scenes. I began to feel good about myself when I finally understood a concept that I had once struggled with. I began to trust myself in the process that I followed, I learned that I did not have to know everything all of a sudden, but instead I simply needed to continue to remain interested in what I was doing, never stop working, and allow growth to occur over a period of time.

Transferring to Old Dominion University

Transferring from TCC to Old Dominion University (ODU) was another important stage in my journey. This process was both exciting for me, yet it also carried with it a great deal of seriousness. As I transitioned from an associate's program to a bachelor's program, I understood

that the expectations would be high. Also, I knew that I did not want just a degree, I wanted to grow into a person who could handle the technical work in the field and continue to grow in that career over time.

At Old Dominion University, I began to think more critically about how everything I was learning connected to my future. While I was still drawn to the technical side of cybersecurity, I began to pay more attention to classes that would allow me to focus on communication, reflection and growth within the field. School was no longer a series of classes and requirements that I had to complete to graduate. Instead, it began to feel connected. That connection became even clearer to me due to the fact that I was already working while I was finishing my schooling. Finding a balance between my education and my work was not easy. Occasionally, there was too much to do. On other occasions, there was too much of a rush to get to everything that needed to be done. Would these difficult periods affect me negatively? Of course not. They have given me important lessons, such as how to manage my time better. I have learned how to push through fatigue. I have also learned the importance of consistency.

Turning Work into Experience

My current job has become one of the most meaningful parts of my education because it has also become my internship. This was the best decision for me because it involves being in a technical environment where I can apply my classroom knowledge. My specific job duties include managing a network infrastructure and access controls, and ensuring that every network component is functioning correctly in our organization. However, my mindset changed with the internship. Where I used to view my tasks as checklists to be completed, I began to view them from a security perspective. I started seeing each of the concepts, such as administrator access, firewall rules, segmentation, monitoring tools, and documentation, as security responsibilities

more than only technical tasks. A small change in one area of the network could create problems in another area of the network. A missed detail could have an effect on the organization later on. Working at that level of responsibility instilled in me a sense of slowing my pace and considering all aspects of a decision before moving forward with it.

I also learned a lot from the limited access that I have to the infrastructure at my job. In a workplace, you are not always going to have the freedom to test things the way you want. Access to certain systems may be controlled. Mistakes in production environment have consequences. But to work around that, I have created my own home lab. This lab allows me to play with the different tools and aspects of the network without having to worry about making mistakes or disrupting the network at my job. This has become one of the best learning tools that I have. While I gain context at my job, my home lab allows me to gain repetition in my learning. Together, they are the best learning tools that I have available to me.

What This Path Taught Me

The biggest lesson that I learned from this journey was that cybersecurity was the right field for me because of the way that I think. I enjoy solving problems. I like to find the root cause of issues that I face. I like a field in which details matter and in which there is always something new to learn. So that fit was not found immediately for me, but through every day's experience from school and work.

My education also changed me on a personal level. I became more patient with myself. I became more comfortable with the idea of effort. I stopped feeling bad about not knowing something right away, instead, I started to see it as part of the growth process. Also, the fact that I grew up in a French-speaking country made me become more aware of the need to adapt and

persist in the face of challenges, something that I had to do to succeed in my education. While not easy at the time, it made me stronger overall.

Looking Ahead

I do not view my future as having all the steps defined; however, I do have a direction I wish to pursue. I would like to continue growing in cybersecurity. I would like to continually develop my technical judgment. I would like to establish a reputation as an individual who performs thorough, reliable work. I wish to progress further into positions where security, networking, and problem solving are utilized as part of daily activities. I will continue to learn and grow beyond the classroom and workplace, since the continuous development of skills in this area of study does not cease at graduation.

In addition to everything else, I hope to be viewed by others as being trustworthy. Trust is important when performing technical-based tasks. Teams require individuals who are detail-oriented, capable of communicating effectively and accountable for their actions. This is the type of professional I am continuing to strive toward becoming. While my pathway has not been perfect, it has been genuine. Every step along the way, from community college to university and to my internship, has brought me closer to a career that matches my abilities and mentality.