

Writing Assignment Two: Personal Narrative Essay

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Abstract

When entering college, it's considered to be a significant transition from being a student to entering the professional world. When going through this journey, one may stumble upon unexpected challenges and experiences that contribute to both personal and professional growth. New experiences come with new skills and memories that stick with someone for the rest of their life. Through these experiences, one may begin to discover their strengths, weaknesses, and ultimately their goals for the future.

Introduction

In my senior year of high school, I didn't have a clear path on what I wanted to do after I graduated. I definitely did plan on going to college, however I was unsure on which career path I wanted to pursue. I did have an interest in working in a field that involved computers, which is why I decided to pursue computer science when I started community college after high school. Even then, I felt like I wasn't completely satisfied with the path I was taking, and I felt like computer science didn't completely align with my interests and long-term goals. However, over time I eventually discovered that cybersecurity was the path I wanted to pursue.

How I Decided on Cybersecurity

What initially sparked my interest in computers was my dad's career as an IT security analyst. I always thought his work was interesting and it inspired me to do something similar. I also loved to play around with computers ever since I was a child, and it grew my curiosity on how they operated and what allowed them to function the way they did. This led me to decide on pursuing computer science as my major when I entered community college. While I did enjoy my classes and the concepts I've learned, I felt like it didn't really suit me as much as I thought it did. I enjoyed programming and I loved being creative when making programs, but I felt like I wanted a career that's more meaningful and impactful. When I explored different career options that's related to computers, I happened to stumble on cybersecurity. This immediately piqued my interest, mainly because I feel like cybersecurity is such an important and relevant topic in today's times, where so much of our personal data is stored digitally and protecting it is critical. This doesn't diminish the work I've put into computer science, I enjoyed programming and I felt like everything I've learned was valuable to my education. But with cybersecurity, I found motivation to develop skills that can have a meaningful impact on protecting data and systems.

While deciding on a university to transfer to after community college, I discovered that Old Dominion University offered a cybersecurity program. I eagerly applied and was excited to begin this new chapter in my academic journey.

Building My Cybersecurity Foundation

When I first started taking cybersecurity classes at ODU, I quickly realized how much I enjoyed learning both the technical and theoretical aspects of the field. I developed a strong foundation in cybersecurity through my classes that covered risk management, incident response, threat analysis, and network security fundamentals. The hands-on labs were highly engaging and it felt like I was actively building skills that will be valuable in my future career. Each of these classes was informative in its own way, and I was able to learn something new in every one of them, from ethical hacking to Linux systems to Windows management. Some of these courses also included projects that helped me develop new and interesting skills, one of which was socket programming that applied both my programming and cybersecurity knowledge. These classes overall ultimately built the foundation of my understanding of cybersecurity, which I have been able to apply successfully in my internships.

My First Internship Experience

The biggest growth that I had in my academic journey was when I secured my first internship as an IT and Mission Systems Intern with a defense contractor. This was a major milestone for me personally, as obtaining an internship was both a requirement for my degree and a competitive process. A lot of internship positions that I applied for had a lot of competition and were difficult to obtain, so being able to have this opportunity was especially meaningful for me.

During this experience, I had the opportunity to learn to work with a wide range of new tools and processes, which included vulnerability scanning, conducting compliance assessments, and deploying software updates and patches. Learning all of this, however, was challenging. Almost everything was unfamiliar, and it was pretty demanding to absorb so much information at once. One of my mentors told me that the first few weeks of the internship would be like “drinking from a fire hose” because of the amount of information I would need to learn. This didn’t apply only to the technical skills I had to learn but also how the entire organization operated. Fortunately, I was lucky enough to have a very supportive and encouraging team with me. What made this internship so memorable for me personally, was the relationships I built with my team. Everyone in the team, including my supervisor, were always willing to help and answer any questions I had. Their openness and support created a comfortable and encouraging environment where I didn’t feel afraid to ask questions.

I also worked on obtaining my CompTIA Security+ certificate during my time there, and I received support from my team and mentors throughout the process. They were willing to help me teach a few concepts that will be on the exam, and what to expect when I took it. Their advice helped me feel more confident about the test, and I was able to pass on my first try. This experience overall has helped me grow professionally and personally. I was able to become more confident in a professional environment, and I learned new skills that will be valuable in my career.

My Second Internship Experience

I also had an amazing opportunity to gain another internship with the Cybersecurity Clinic that’s affiliated with ODU and COVA CCI. For this internship, I had the opportunity to support a small, local business that needed cybersecurity support, and I got the chance to work

with the Norfolk Botanical Garden. For this internship, I worked with a group of two other students, and we would work together to perform cybersecurity assessments for the organization and come up with recommendations on what they could improve on. We met with a member of the IT team during our meetings, and she was very welcoming and open to answering our questions. After our meetings, my team and I then compiled a report and delivered a presentation that summarized our findings. What made this internship especially meaningful for me was that I was actively making an impact for a real organization using the knowledge and skills I have developed throughout my academic career.

Conclusion

Overall, my academic journey has transformed from a period of uncertainty into one with a clear sense of purpose and a defined career path. From the moment I initially settled in computer science to eventually focusing on cybersecurity, each experience has helped shape my interests and strengthen my skills. Through my coursework and internships, I have gained both technical knowledge and practical experience that have reinforced my passion for the field. Although it wasn't a complete linear path, every challenge and experience I faced contributed to my growth and helped shape the person I am today. Moving forward, I am confident in my decision to pursue a career in cybersecurity and look forward to continuing to grow and contribute in this field.