

Personal Narrative Essay

Amari Browne Johnson

Old Dominion University

IDS493

Dr. Phan

August 3, 2025

### Abstract

This personal narrative essay chronicles my academic and professional journey, from starting college in the uncertain aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic to my senior year at Old Dominion University (ODU) majoring in cybersecurity. It explores the transitions I made from nursing to exercise science, computer science, and finally cybersecurity, while emphasizing the personal, academic, and work-related challenges I've overcome. Using insights from Nguyen, McAdams, and Smith's perspectives on narrative identity, I reflect on how these experiences shaped my identity and future aspirations in cybersecurity.

## **Introduction: Starting in the Unknown**

When I started college at Old Dominion University in 2021, the world was still reeling from the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. My high school graduation was not a typical ceremony, and like many others, I entered college without the closure or preparation I had imagined. Coming back to in-person classes after so much isolation felt surreal, almost like learning how to be around people all over again. I remember my first semester feeling like a daze: crowded hallways, masked faces, and professors who were just as uncertain as we were. But even in that fog, I knew I was chasing something bigger than myself. What I didn't know was that I would change my major three times before finding the one that truly felt like home.

## **The Shifting Path: Nursing to Cybersecurity**

Like many first-year students, I began my journey with a major that sounded safe and respectable, nursing. My mother always told me it was a secure job, one that “you could take anywhere.” But as the semester unfolded, I realized my passion for science and helping people didn't necessarily translate into a love for hospital procedures, medical terminology, or anatomy labs. The coursework was intense, and more importantly, I didn't feel like I belonged.

So, I shifted to exercise science. I've always been into fitness and health, so this seemed like a logical next step. And while I enjoyed learning about the body, it still didn't ignite a sense of purpose in me. I wanted something that excited my curiosity, something that challenged me mentally, not just physically. That's when I gave computer science a try.

Computer science finally made me feel like I was using my brain in a way that connected with who I was. I was solving problems, thinking logically, and diving into the kind of digital puzzles I had always enjoyed. However, after a few semesters, I realized I was less interested in

programming and more interested in the systems behind it all; how networks worked, how data was protected, and how attacks were prevented. That's when I found cybersecurity.

Cybersecurity felt like everything I'd been missing. It merged logic, strategy, defense, and purpose. It was a field where I could protect others, solve real-world problems, and be on the frontlines of digital warfare. According to McAdams, our narrative identity is built from our remembered past, perceived present, and imagined future. Cybersecurity gave me a vision of the future I wanted—and a story I could be proud to write.

### **The Working Student: Balancing Survival and Success**

One thing that's been consistent through every major change is my responsibility to provide for myself. Since day one at ODU, I've been working. Whether it was retail, warehouse, or internship work, my days and nights were filled with shifts, assignments, and deadlines. There were nights when I barely slept, using vending machines as dinner and noise-canceling headphones as a substitute for peace and quiet. I didn't have the luxury to "just be a student." I had to be everything at once: student, worker, adult.

There were times I considered giving up. Watching classmates who didn't have to work multiple jobs while I struggled to stay awake in class was disheartening. But as Smith writes in "The Stories We Tell About Ourselves," hardship often becomes the plot twist that gives meaning to our journey. My struggle wasn't something to be ashamed of, it was the very thing that showed how determined I was to reach the finish line.

### **Community, Campus Life, and Belonging**

Even though my schedule was full, I made sure to immerse myself in campus life whenever I could. I attended football, basketball, and baseball games at ODU. Not just because I

love sports, but because I needed those moments of normalcy and joy. Sitting in the stands, surrounded by energy and excitement, reminded me that I was still a college student and not just a survivor.

I also joined Blacks in Cybersecurity, a club that gave me more than just technical knowledge. It gave me community. It gave me representation. It gave me mentors who looked like me and understood my journey. Through BIC and other cybersecurity groups, I found a sense of belonging I hadn't felt in other majors. It was more than just learning to code or configure networks. It was about becoming part of a movement to make cybersecurity more diverse and inclusive.

### **Internship Experience: Bridging the Classroom and the Real World**

One of the turning points in my academic journey was securing a cybersecurity internship. It felt like validation that all my hard work, sleepless nights, and sacrifices were finally paying off. During the internship, I got hands-on experience with vulnerability assessments, network monitoring, and security compliance. But more than that, I learned how to collaborate in a fast-paced, professional environment.

Working alongside experienced professionals showed me just how crucial cybersecurity is in protecting not only companies but entire communities from harm. I remember the rush I felt the first time I helped flag a real threat. It was like everything I had studied suddenly came to life. That internship wasn't just a job, it was a defining chapter in my story, one that reassured me that I was on the right path.

### **Lessons Beyond the Classroom**

ODU will give me more than just a degree. It gave me growth. It taught me resilience. I

learned how to fail and recover, how to change direction without giving up, and how to carve out space in a field that doesn't always welcome people like me. Each major I left behind gave me skills that I still carry today, nursing gave me empathy, exercise science gave me discipline, computer science gave me logic, and cybersecurity gave me direction.

I also learned the importance of storytelling, how we define ourselves by the way we choose to frame our past. My narrative isn't about indecisiveness, it's about adaptability. It's not about struggling, it's about persevering. It's not about changing my mind, it's about finding my purpose.

### **Looking Ahead: Life After Graduation**

As I prepare to graduate this fall, the excitement is hard to put into words. I'll be the first in my family to earn a degree. But beyond the title and the tassel, I'm proud of the journey it took to get here. I'm entering a field where I can make a real impact. I plan to pursue certifications like CompTIA Security+ and eventually work in threat intelligence or digital forensics.

I also want to give back. One of my long-term goals is to mentor students who are just like I was, unsure of their path, trying to make ends meet, and figuring it all out as they go. I want to be the voice that tells them it's okay to change directions, that struggle is part of the process, and that they're not alone.

### **Conclusion: Owning My Narrative**

My time at Old Dominion University has been far from easy, but every twist in the road led me to a place where I feel confident and fulfilled. From uncertain beginnings and a pandemic-altered start to academic transformation and real-world success, my story is one of growth, resilience,

and discovery. As McAdams emphasizes, narrative identity is not fixed, it's a living, evolving story shaped by our experiences. Today, my story is one of a young Black cybersecurity student, prepared to protect digital spaces, empower others, and continue learning. I am no longer just surviving, I'm thriving, and my story is still being written.

## ***References***

- McAdams, D. P. (2008). *The psychological self as storyteller*. *Psychological Inquiry*, 19(3-4), 207–217. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10478400802608433>
- Nguyen, T. (2019). *The power of personal narrative in shaping identity*. *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 49(2), 235–251.