Here I Am Now: A Personal Narrative Essay

Heliene Ella Lee Jimenez Macaraeg

Old Dominion University

IDS493: Electronic Portfolio Project

Professor Andrews

January 13, 2025

Abstract

I have always been a person who could never focus on one thing at a time. I switched sports all the time, jumping from swimming to soccer, gymnastics, track, and so on. I switched instruments from piano to saxophone to ukulele to guitar and beyond. With my dad in the army, I switched schools constantly and lived in eight states total: North Carolina, Virginia, Kansas, Missouri, Colorado, California, Hawaii, and now Tennessee. This constant change felt invigorating, and because of it I always need new adventures and variety. This has always been me since the beginning of my existence. While this gave me a diverse set of experiences, it also made me crave purpose and direction. So how exactly did I end up here pursuing a degree in Cybersecurity? This essay will explore the journey that led me to this field and showcase my growth and newfound purpose.

Here I Am Now: A Personal Narrative Essay

Like McAdams' concept of *narrative identity,* my life has been a series of chapters shaped by growth and resilience. Narrative identity is the story we create about ourselves to make sense of who we are (McAdams, 2001). For me, the early chapter of my life held so much potential but lacked direction and purpose. Straight out of high school, I had no idea what I wanted to do in life. I was a straight-A student, a part of the National Honor Society, member of many student organizations, and had many AP classes under my belt. This lack of purpose was not due to my stats; the options were limitless, and I simply could not narrow it down.

My Missteps

As a fellow Filipino American, we have the stereotype of becoming nurses and so this is what I pursued during my freshman year of college. I even applied for the early-application program and was accepted to the nursing program prematurely. This meant that I could skip taking the HESI test and not have to worry about getting experience. However, my advisor encouraged me to become a CNA to get a feel of what nursing life is like and I am thankful to her every day for her advice. Needless to say, that is why I am no longer in nursing: I watched the nurse prick a patient's finger to test their blood glucose, and I passed out. That moment helped me realize that nursing was not my story to tell.

The next major I chose was computer science. I only chose this major because I knew someone who made six figures straight out of college and was working at the Pentagon. However, I realized after a year that I hated coding and that was what my life consisted of all day, every day. I met several friends in computer science who had this very same feeling, and the next thing I knew, they were no longer in my classes. They made the switch to Cybersecurity.

This was a newer major in my college, and I did not know anything about it. After conducting research, it felt like I found the missing piece of my story.

Cybersecurity: The Missing Piece of the Puzzle

Cybersecurity has everything I want in a major, and the career opportunities hooked me. The idea of being an ethical hacker/penetration tester sold it for me. With this job, I would be ethically breaking into systems in order to find the vulnerabilities. This way, the systems' owners will be aware of the vulnerabilities and be able to bolster their cybersecurity posture. This work resonated with me because it combined problem-solving with technical skills and was constantly evolving as the digital landscape changed. It offers endless opportunities to learn and grow, which aligns with what I value.

Progressing Through the Journey

By the time I realized what I wanted to do, I was already a junior in college. I had no certifications, no internships, and no experience. All I had was straight classroom knowledge. It was time to grind, and this newfound passion of mine was my transfixion. I applied to over fifty internships in a month and faced rejection after rejection because of my empty resume. I approached this with determination and viewed each challenge as an opportunity to grow. This mindset aligns with what Smith describes as a *redemptive story* which is a way of looking at past setbacks not as failures but as steppingstones toward something better (Smith, 2017). For me, the rejection emails and lack of experience were not just obstacles. Instead, they were moments that pushed me to work harder and learn more.

At last, I was finally accepted into an internship. This internship was hosted by the CoVA CCI, running a Cyber Clinic for small businesses. This was a transformative experience for me. Working with a small business, I helped improve their cybersecurity posture while gaining

valuable skills in communication, teamwork, and design thinking. After the internship ended, I knew I needed to enhance my qualifications further.

I decided to pursue some certifications to strengthen my resume. In about two months, I had three certifications to add to my name. This included the CompTIA Security+, Certified in Cybersecurity, and Google Cybersecurity Certificate. This drive in me is what Smith talks about when she mentions *agency.* This is about taking charge of your life and making decisions that move you toward your goals (Smith, 2017). For me, getting these certifications was my way of taking the wheel for my future and proving to myself that I could gain the skills needed to succeed in this field.

I later interned for G2 Ops as a Systems Engineer. This company helped me to gain hands-on Cybersecurity experience with Navy ships and submarines in the Navy. It also gave me into how companies operate, and the different roles within an organization. This internship taught me about problem-solving in real-world contexts.

With that experience over, I was now a senior in college. During this semester, I wanted more leadership experience and took on two jobs. My first job was as an IT Help Desk Student Technician. In this role, I helped students and faculty with account and computer issues. All I can say is that it was a learning experience. I learned how to communicate effectively, how to manage stress, and how to adapt during unfamiliar circumstances. My second job was as a Teaching Assistant for my first internship. It was a full circle experience because I used to be the intern helping businesses and now, I was helping to run the program. This role deepened my understanding of leadership and professionalism and allowed me to give back to a program that started off my journey.

Here I Am Now

Right now, I am in my last semester and am preparing to graduate. I am taking all online courses as I moved to Tennessee a week ago for an internship with Oak Ridge National Laboratory for the Department of Energy. In this project, I am working on building an Intrusion Detection System for vehicular network systems. We may not realize it, but vehicles, especially these newer self-driving cars, are hackable. Hackers can take control of essential systems such as the steering wheel, brakes, and accelerator. My job is to help the cars recognize hackers' movements and to block them out. This work connects to Nguyen's concept of *mimesis*. This describes how we make sense of our lives by linking the past, present, and future into a cohesive story (Nguyen, 2013, p. 136). My past experiences, including my classroom knowledge, internship experiences, and earned certifications, have all come together for this current project. It is shaping the work that I am doing now. Similarly, this current project will shape the work that I will do in the future by giving me the skills and experience needed to achieve my goal of becoming an ethical hacker.

Conclusion

My story is still unfolding in front of me, and I am still the person that I once was. I cannot sit still and must seize every opportunity thrown my way. My journey has taught me that there are many paths to take, and only I can decide which way to go. Each chapter of my life has been defined by my commitment to growth. As I prepare to graduate and pursue my dream of becoming an ethical hacker, I will continue to write my story and take charge of shaping my life with passion and resilience.

References

McAdams, D.P. (2001). The psychology of life stories. Review of General Psychology, 5(2),

100-122. https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.5.2.100

Nguyen, C.F. (2013). The ePortfolio as a living portal: A medium for student learning, identity,

and assessment. International Journal of ePortfolio, 3(2), 135-148.

Smith, E.E. (2017, January 12). The two kind of stories we tell about ourselves. TED

Conferences. https://ideas.ted.com/the-two-kinds-of-stories-we-tell-about-ourselves/