

Final Internship Reflection Paper

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Discover Your Dominion

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Introduction

When I began my internship as a Peer Mentor for the Discover Your Dominion (DYD) program at Old Dominion University, I had the intention of leaving the experience with a few key takeaways. First, I wanted to gain real-world work experience in a real work environment. I also wanted to take on the responsibility of being responsible for and supporting others in a professional setting, specifically with helping the students navigate through their academic and personal journeys. Lastly, I hoped to use my own knowledge and experiences to guide and assist my mentees in meaningful ways.

I am happy to say that I believe that throughout my time working at this internship, I was able to accomplish all three of these goals. I was able to learn what it means to be a resource for others, how to communicate effectively across different student needs, and got a deeper understanding of what taking initiative in a leadership role looks like. This paper offers a reflection on my overall experience by examining the DYD program, outlining my specific duties as a mentor, and sharing the professional and personal growth I achieved through this opportunity.

2. Organization Overview

Discover Your Dominion (DYD) is a student success initiative here at ODU that focuses on improving the academic experience and graduation outcomes for male, Pell-eligible students. The program is designed to help students overcome a variety of barriers to graduation by providing them with comprehensive support through financial literacy education, family involvement, and the promotion of a strong sense of belonging within the ODU community.

DYD represents ODU's larger commitment to student development and equity. The program offers students a wide variety of resources that they can utilize to aid their collegiate experience like personalized financial aid counseling and mentorship-based coaching. When all of these elements work together they help to increase the social, cultural, and academic well-being of the students in the program.

As part of the program, DYD hires upperclassmen, such as myself, to serve as peer mentors with the purpose of being another resource at the student's disposal. Peer mentors play a key role by forming relationships with the mentees, conducting regular check-ins, and providing guidance and encouragement. The position is a leadership role that embodies the program's core values of accountability, communication, and connection. Under the leadership of Craig Rollins, the program provides routine outreach to mentees, organizes academic events, and connects the mentees with career development and networking opportunities.

3. Orientation and Initial Impressions

At the beginning of my internship, I received standard orientation and onboarding that you'd expect at a new job that outlined the goals and expectations of the program. During this time, I met the other peer mentors as well as the other staff and student workers, participated in a training session that highlighted more goals and how the department runs things, and received my list of mentees. I felt like the program was a professionally run and well-organized support system that I felt truly did aim to empower students. I also recognized that building trust early on and having consistent communication with my mentees would be a key to becoming an asset to them.

4. Management Environment

The management environment in the program was structured yet flexible as my supervisor, Craig Rollins, ensured that the expectations of what we were there to do were clear but also allowed us to develop our own communication methods with our mentees.

Craig practiced a more hands-off supervision style trusting us to do our due diligence for the well-being of our mentees, but he still remained readily available to provide guidance. We had weekly check-ins on mentor and mentee status, team meetings, and program updates, such as tabling, establishing structure, while the flexibility allowed us to personally design our engagement styles. The leadership style encouraged autonomy and creativity, which helped me feel both supported and trusted.

I got a deeper understanding of the management philosophy through my interview with Craig, where he highlighted the importance of developing and utilizing interpersonal skills, time management, and adaptability and those sentiments were displayed throughout the internship

5. Major Duties and Responsibilities

As part of my role, I was responsible for conducting and maintaining consistent communication with my mentees by notifying them about upcoming events, deadlines, opportunities, and workshops. This included providing outreach for cybersecurity-specific resources such as internship openings and networking events that are tailored to their academic and career interests in the field. I was also tasked with promoting campus engagement by regularly informing them about workshops and career fairs, including the 2025 Spring Career Fair as well as fun campus and DYD events, such as Late Night Activity Hours, and SGA/SAC events. I also participated in program events, such as tabling during activity hours, where I spoke to and promoted the Discover Your Dominion program. Additionally, I helped organize and participate in study sessions where the students would be able to come to a quiet, focused environment to complete their work, eat food, and relax. One of the most important responsibilities I had was to provide encouragement and ensure that my mentees always knew that I was a resource for them to use as

needed to try and make sure that they felt seen and even when they weren't actively reaching out. All of these responsibilities are directly from DYD's mission and gave me invaluable experience of professional communication, mentorship, and leadership in a real-work environment.

6. Application of Cybersecurity Knowledge and Skills

Although the internship was not technical work, my background in cybersecurity still shaped my approach in my role in several ways. It helped me identify and share opportunities, such as internships, networking opportunities, certification resources, for my mentees and myself. I also drew from my academic experience to offer advice on where to find help with technical coursework. With our majors being the same that also allowed me to connect more with the students since they can see that we are pursuing similar goals. In addition to these, I also strengthened other skills as well:

Field-Tailored Resource Sharing: I strategically directed my mentees toward cyber opportunities, including career fairs and cyber workshops to help them build connections and explore the wide range of cybersecurity career paths.

Preparing Industry Needs: I assisted them by helping them see how the current cybersecurity coursework they were dealing with connects to real-world applications. I also encouraged them to pursue certifications and continuously be on the lookout for cyber-related opportunities to take advantage of.

Improving Digital Communication: I used tools like Microsoft Outlook and GroupMe in order to efficiently manage communication with my mentees. I also was tasked with organizing and managing resources and flyers digitally in order to ensure that I can give my mentees accurate information, whether for a professional event or campus event.

Though this internship didn't necessarily teach me any new technical skills, I gained a much stronger understanding of how soft skills and professional communication are just as vital in the cybersecurity field as technical prowess.

7. Connection to ODU Curriculum

The ODU cybersecurity curriculum equipped me well for this position in a variety of ways like:

Professionalism and Communication: Over the course of the internship, I developed the ability to adapt my communication style to different situations and people, whether I was providing updates to my supervisor and other staff or offering guidance to my mentees, which improved my confidence in professional settings.

Understanding the Career Pipeline: Through ODU's courses and resources, I was given prior insight into the cybersecurity job landscape, allowing me to recommend relevant events and internships to my mentees.

Awareness of Academic Resources: My time at ODU helped me learn about all the hidden academic support systems and resources on campus. Finding out about this allowed me to better point the mentees to tutoring help, advising, or résumé services they might not have known about.

One area where I lacked experience was in managing student engagement through the lens of peer leadership and mentorship. While my academic background provided technical knowledge and general communication skills, it had not taken into account the nuanced task of motivating and connecting with the students on an individual level the same way you'd have to do so within a work team. This internship gave me firsthand experience in being able to properly navigate those dynamics, learning how to build trust, consistently encourage participation, and adapt my styles and approaches to the different personalities I encountered. This opportunity has now better equipped me to lead and support others in both academic and professional settings.

8. Evaluation of Internship Objectives

1. Develop leadership and interpersonal communication skills

- I had to learn and hone in my ability to initiate conversations with people, follow up with both my mentees and the staff, and create a healthy balance between assertiveness and approachability.

2. Learn how to support and guide cybersecurity students

- My communication skills had to become more intentional to allow me to better effectively connect with my mentees on a deeper level. This position helped me gain a better understanding of the academic pressures that they face, the emotional stress and turmoil that can come with going through college, and the uncertainty that they may feel about their professional futures. This learned awareness helped me become a more empathetic and proactive mentor in the way to offer quality support tailored to better meet each mentee's individual needs.

3. Gain professional insight from university staff

- My interview with my supervisor, Craig Rollins, gave me insight into higher education careers as well as our ongoing interactions that showed me how campus programs are structured and led.

9. Motivating Experiences

The most exciting part of this internship was simply just seeing any moments of progress, such as when one of my mentees had reached out to me multiple times about an upcoming event, or asked a question regarding an event. It displayed that persistence matters and that the work I was doing wasn't going unnoticed. Another motivating experience was participating in tabling events and promoting the program to prospective students. Representing a program that I truly believed in and talking to students one-on-one made me feel proud of what I was doing and helped me feel like I was actually doing good work.

10. Discouraging Aspects

One of the most discouraging aspects early on was the lack of response from some mentees. I often felt like I was reaching out without being heard. Over time, though, I came to understand that even passive engagement matters, where many students were reading my messages even if they didn't actively respond to them.

Trying to balance the responsibilities of the internship alongside my own current coursework and personal obligations was also challenging at times, but it ultimately helped me strengthen my time management skills.

11. Challenges and Growth

A major challenge was figuring out how to connect with all of the different personalities and communicate in ways that worked for each individual mentee. What worked for one person didn't always work for another, so I had to adapt my style of approach, tone, and follow-up frequency accordingly to help everyone out effectively.

Another challenge was understanding that mentorship isn't always about immediate results. Not getting a lot of response or feedback from my mentees really made me feel like I was failing them, Craig, and the program. I had to learn to be patient and trust the process, which was a lesson that helped me mature personally and professionally.

12. Recommendations

Recommendations for Future Interns:

- Don't expect immediate engagement—stay consistent and patient.
- Get to know your supervisor early. They are a valuable resource.
- Learn how to manage group communication platforms effectively.
- Attend all events and training—they help you connect more with the program and your mentees.
- Brush up on basic Excel and Outlook skills. They will be useful.

Conclusion

This internship taught me that being a mentor is not about being perfect with all of the answers or solutions, but instead it's about being present, persistent, and open. I now feel more confident in my ability to lead, guide, and support others. The experience strengthened my soft skills, increased my professional awareness, and helped me gain clarity about my future path.

Influence on Remainder of College at ODU:

It made me more invested in giving back to the ODU community. I want to continue mentoring or assisting new students, even beyond this program.

Influence on Future Career:

This experience has made me consider roles in higher education or student success advising, alongside my future in cybersecurity. I now understand the value of communication and mentorship—skills that are important no matter where I go.