

My Personal Narrative

Kristina Gamache

Department of Cybersecurity

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Dr. Sherron Gordon-Phan

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Abstract

Over the duration of my life, for a sizable portion of it, academics have played a large role in the path I have navigated. The path has involved high school, 2 separate college experiences, and a balancing act with my personal and professional lives. There have been both good and bad moments, but all have been influential in the choices I have made and the ones in store for the future. Yet, up to this point, there are choices I am glad I have made because they have landed me exactly where I needed to be.

Introduction

My name is Kristina and this is a story about my academic journey, and the role it has dominated in my life. To preface, I am currently a 26 years old Old Dominion University Cybersecurity major, who is approximately two weeks away from graduating. This will be my second bachelor's degree, the first being in Kinesiology and Health Science from the College of William and Mary. While I have worked immensely hard for both of these degrees, they have vastly different experiences related to them, one being more rewarding than the other. But that being said, I feel as if school has been an ever present obligation for much of my life, and I am thrilled to have a much needed break, at least until further education is warranted. In this narrative, I will discuss a timeline of my academic journey, starting in high school and early college, progressing through to the present day, and ending with my aspirations for the future, while emphasizing the influence my educational career has played in my personal and professional life, and vice versa.

High School and College #1

For me, it has been nearly 10 years since I have graduated from high school. It doesn't seem nearly that long ago. During my high school years, I excelled through my academic career. Top 10 in my class of 250 students, countless Advance Placement (AP) and honors classes, and most of it felt relatively easy to accomplish because I rarely felt the need to study. I graduated high school in 2017 with both my high school diploma, and an associates degree. Though I excelled without needing to study, the years of immense pressure to push myself in my courseload and taking on a part time job had left me feeling burnt out at the end of it. But hey, I figured the scenery change was going to be enough to revitalize me when I started that August at the College of William and Mary. It didn't. When I started at the college, because I had

transferred in approximately 40+ credit hours, I was made to declare a major my first semester. I was working as a pharmacy technician at an independent pharmacy at the time, and had aspirations to be a pharmacist one day. So I decided to major in chemistry. I had done well with it in high school and figured it would be a good foundation for pharmacy school. I ended my second semester at William and Mary failing three of my five courses, and was placed on academic probation. This was a very tough time for me. I was trying to juggle school, a job, and a household for me and my partner at the time. I started my college career in a negative headspace, and everything I was trying to keep together fell right through the cracks.

At this point in my life, I decided that because I had already spent a sizable amount of money on attending college, I had to make the most of what I had. I switched my major to a more manageable one, kinesiology and health science. Under this course, I started to pull things together after facing the harsh possibility of failing out of college. I put more effort into my education, and less on the other obligations in my life. By my senior year of college, I had a much better forecast for my academic career. In my last semester at William and Mary, the global pandemic of 2020 occurred. Everything was shut down, classes transitioned to online instruction, and life was strange. At this point, I was working as a pharmacy technician in a hospital setting. I experienced what the healthcare system was enduring at this point in history, and it took a toll on everyone involved. This left me almost as nearly as burnout as I was after high school. I pushed through and graduated from William and Mary in the spring of 2020 with a miserable 2.5 GPA. But I graduated. I did it when I didn't think it was going to be possible for me.

After Graduation and College #2

From there, I have been working technician level roles in different healthcare settings. Every few months I would become greatly discouraged because of the lack of opportunities to

advance my current position without going back to school for another 3+ years, and I definitely wasn't getting into any graduate programs with my GPA. This is what led me to looking into technical careers. I always had a knack for working with technology, so I began looking into online programs where I could transfer in my credits. I had done extensive research regarding upward mobility of IT professionals, and how industry certificates and experience could lead to advancements. That is when I found Old Dominion's online program for cybersecurity. The program gave me the opportunity to continue to work full time, and complete it quickly with all the credits I had transferred in. Therefore I enrolled in the summer of 2024. From the moment I enrolled, I had a much more driven attitude towards my goal of graduating and pursuing a worthwhile career. This is what pushed me to put the needed effort into my courses and assign the appropriate attention to the different aspects in my life, including mental health and self-care. During this time, I came to love the things I was learning about in my courses, something I experienced with my first go-around with college. I also found different hobbies that I used to help reduce the stress and fatigue in my life. With all the credits I transferred in, I have been able to complete my education at ODU in 4 semesters with a GPA around 3.5. I have learned and experienced so many new and interesting things through the course of my cybersecurity academic career, and it has motivated me to continue learning as much as I can within the field.

Present Day

Life has been immensely different during my time at Old Dominion versus my time at William and Mary. While I currently have many different obligations (full time job, a child, etc.) this time around, I have a much better head space going in and for the duration of my program. I entered William and Mary with a negative and exhausted attitude, and I did not take care of the things that needed to be taken care of. While I am still proud of myself for graduating

nonetheless, it is an experience that is difficult to tell because I have always prided myself on my academic abilities, and it felt like a failure to me. But I used this experience as a teaching lesson for my next attempt at college. I managed my time more efficiently, I took care of myself, and pursued something that actually interested me. These changes have made a world of difference for me, and I couldn't be proud of where I am now.

Graduation is less than a month away. At the moment, I am still working in a technician based role within a physical therapy setting. Additionally, I have been interning with the City of Virginia Beach within their IT department. This opportunity has done wonders for building my confidence in an IT role. Unfortunately, it is set to end with my coming graduation. I have been actively pursuing careers with the Healthcare company I am with, the City of VB, and just about anywhere else that is offering an entry level IT position.

The Future

I have never been more excited about what is in store for me. I realize that I will be starting at the bottom again, just in a different field. But my outlook remains positive knowing that there are a multitude of opportunities and paths I can take to grow within this field. There are numerous opportunities for me to continue to grow my education and knowledge. These attributes give me motivation to push forward. While I am tired from balancing school and my personal and professional lives, I do not feel burnt out from this experience. Graduate programs remain a possibility for my future if my career warrants that level of education, and I feel relieved knowing that this time around I have a degree and corresponding GPA to make it into a decent program.

Conclusion

While I had a difficult time during my first experience with college, knowing what I know now, it is unlikely that I would go back and change my experience if I could. It may have seemed like my life was falling apart after being placed on academic probation, and it definitely felt like it was to me, but I wouldn't be where I am today without that experience. If I hadn't known what it felt like to crash after burnout, I never would have found the much healthier coping mechanisms I have incorporated into my life tonight. If I hadn't been urged into a different program and continued my experience at William and Mary, I probably would have given up on the idea of higher education altogether. I may not have found a field that truly interests me and inspires me to move forward. There are a lot of aspects in my personal and professional life that have stemmed from my academic career, some good, some bad, but all play a crucial role in my life. I am grateful for the path I have traveled and hopeful for the road ahead.