Personal Narrative Essay

Lexi Bowman

Old Dominion University

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Abstract

Ever since I was a kid, I've been fascinated by two things: technology and true crime. I'd mess around with my mom's computer, trying to figure out how everything worked, and I was hooked on crime stories. As I got older, I realized there was a career that could combine both: digital forensics. Now, as a student at Old Dominion University (ODU), I'm diving deeper into the field with courses like CYSE 425, Digital Forensic Evidence Standards, and CRJS 462, Criminal Law, plus an internship as a junior digital forensic investigator. I've had my fair share of challenges; some classes didn't give me enough hands-on experience, but I've learned to take things into my own hands and find ways to get that real-world experience. While my dream is to work with the FBI in digital forensics, I'm open to other cybersecurity jobs where I can use my skills. This essay is about how I've grown in the field and what I'm excited to do next.

Introduction: Why I'm Here

As a kid, I loved listening to true crime podcasts and exploring my mom's computer to see how it all worked. I didn't realize it then, but I was starting to build a connection between criminology and technology. When it came time to think about a career, I figured out that cybercrime was the perfect mix of both. Before I came to ODU, I started my education at Germanna Community College, and that's when I realized I could study something I was really passionate about. Through my classes, internship, and personal experiences, I've developed a deep interest in digital forensics. But the skills I'm picking up can also be applied to many different areas in cybersecurity.

Academic experiences

During high school, I was given the opportunity to take a variety of computer science courses, and that is where my interest really began to peak. I was involved in my high school cybersecurity club and our "crime-fighting" club. Not only did those clubs give me the chance to see what my future career opportunities were, but they also led me to start my outside research projects using Autopsy and CodeAcademy. For the first time in a long time, I started to truly love learning. When I enrolled in my local community college, I sought out classes and clubs that related to what I wanted to learn about, but unfortunately, there were not a lot of options. Around this time, I learned that ODU was a partner college to Germanna. I switched my goal from simply wanting to expand my knowledge to getting accepted into the ODU Cybersecurity program.

One of the most impactful courses I took was CYSE 425, Digital Forensic Evidence Standards, because it gave me insight into how digital evidence is collected, preserved, and used in legal settings. I learned about real-life scenarios involving real crimes and how I would go

about using the evidence in court. One of the projects that I did in this class made a huge impact on me. It was a real-life scenario about a student cheating, and it made me realize that digital evidence is everywhere. One of my fears is that the job market I am pursuing will fall, but that project made me understand that there is no way that could happen; there is too much weaponized digital crime for this field to fail. Another course that stands out is a class I'm currently enrolled in, CRJS 462, Criminal Law. I'm studying a variety of legal frameworks, criminal procedures, and case law. This class helped me make the connections between digital forensics and law, such as how to act in court. I am taking a study abroad trip for this class to study criminal law in London this summer and I hope to expand my work opportunities to outside the United States.

One of the best experiences I've ever had was the internship I took. I was a junior digital forensics investigator at the Virginia Beach police department, and I learned a lot. I took the knowledge from my digital forensics class and put it to use to help solve real-life crimes. My position focused more on the paperwork and sorting files, but when I got to help the team with cases, it was almost magical. I learned many skills, from how to present the evidence in front of a courtroom to securing evidence in static-free bags. Though I had a blast working there, I was only there a short time, so I couldn't fully immerse myself. However, I am excited to say I have another internship in the fall acting as a cybersecurity analyst. I'm hopeful that I will soon learn the full extent my degree has to offer in the future regarding different career paths.

My Challenges

I've shared some of the great experiences I've had, but I can't ignore the challenges that have come with all of this. One of the biggest struggles has been that many of my courses haven't offered much hands-on experience. It's been frustrating because I learn best by doing, not just

reading or listening to lectures. To make up for this, I've had to take the initiative and find ways to get that practical experience on my own. I've spent a lot of time watching YouTube tutorials, diving into Capture The Flag (CTF) challenges, and even reaching out to professors to ask for more real-world examples. I realized early on that the classroom sets the foundation, but applying what you've learned is on you. A moment that really pushed me was when I joined a CTF challenge with my local cybersecurity club. It was intense, but I was able to use what I'd learned in a real competition. This whole process has made me take charge of my learning and not rely solely on coursework. I know that to stay on top in this fast-moving field, I need to keep pushing myself and learning every day.

Everything I've learned in school, from cybersecurity to criminal law, has helped prepare me for a career where I can investigate cybercrimes, analyze digital evidence, and actually make a difference in the field. I have learned how law and technology are related in classes like CYSE 425 and CRJS 462, and I gained real-world experience from my internship as a junior digital forensic investigator. I understood during my internship how important it is to be involved with actual cases and how digital evidence is used in solving real-life crimes. Today, I am seeking a job in digital forensics or cybersecurity so that I can keep on learning. I also intend to obtain my certifications, such as the Certified Digital Forensics Examiner (CDFE) and Certified Ethical Hacker (CEH) certifications, to enhance my employment opportunities. In the future, I want to work with the FBI, using digital forensics to investigate and solve major cybercrimes. I want to be part of a team that investigates cybercrimes, whether it's hacking, fraud, or something even bigger. After studying criminal law and preparing for my study abroad experience in London, I've started thinking about how digital forensics works internationally, too. Maybe I'll end up working on cases that cross borders. No matter where I end up, I know one thing for sure: I want

to be in a job that challenges me, lets me use my skills to help people, and keeps me learning every day.

Conclusion

Looking back, my journey to digital forensics hasn't been a straight line, but every class, project, and experience has played a part in getting me where I am today. From my early love of true crime and technology to taking courses that tied cybersecurity to law, I've realized this is where I'm meant to be. ODU and my internship have taught me a lot about digital forensics and how it helps solve crimes. I know there will be challenges ahead, but that's what makes it interesting. Technology is always changing, and cybercrime is something we'll always have to deal with. Whether I end up at the FBI or in another cybersecurity role, I'm ready for whatever comes next.

References

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