

Personal Narrative Essay:

My Academic and Professional Journey

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Abstract

This essay tells the story of my academic journey. I will recount my experiences in narrative form while connecting them to concepts I learned at ODU. These past four years helped me better understand myself, my decisions, actions, and the reasons behind them. This paper will grant me the ability to reflect on my growth as a student and as an individual in pursuit of a successful career in Cyber. I will also explain how my motivations continued to shape my goals as I move forward into my career and future.

I did not choose cybersecurity all at once. I formed my own path through curiosity, responsibility, and the quiet pressure to build something meaningful for myself and my family. Growing up as a first generation Filipino, I learned early that stability matters. My family never had the luxury to find what they were truly passionate for. They were raised out of survival. From an early age, my parents instilled me with hard work and determination. I saw firsthand how hard they would push their bodies just to have food on the table. My immigrant parents came to this country to try and seek better opportunity. They came to America and sacrificed so much of their own lives so I could have a better one.

My early college mindset was to obtain something larger than myself. Personally, graduating college isn't just an achievement for myself, but for my family as well. As a first-generation college student, I understood the weight of that responsibility. I did not want to earn just any degree. I wanted to earn one that showed my interests, my discipline, and my willingness to challenge myself. At Old Dominion University, I entered cybersecurity not because it was easy, but because it challenged how I think. Cybersecurity forced me to approach problems with logic and patience. It taught me that every system has structure, every vulnerability has a cause, and every solution requires careful thought. I was drawn to the constant learning and the responsibility that came with protecting systems people rely on every day.

I have three reasons why I chose cybersecurity. Number one, it is stable. I wanted to choose a career path that will always be needed and that can continue to provide for me and the ones I care for. Number two, it is growing. I knew that this field will be very popular coming in, so I had to do things to try and stand out from my competitors. Lastly, I always had a knack for

technology and was always nerding out on how people rely on them every day. I would watch countless videos on my spare time on how computers work, systems change, and how the Internet is used. I chose this path because it gave me purpose, growth, and the chance to contribute to something larger than myself. One early piece of coursework that hinted I was on the right track would be my Penetration Test Lab for my CYSE 301 Cybersecurity Techniques and Operations class where we had to enumerate system vulnerabilities and launch attacks on different attack vectors.

Old Dominion University is a public research university in Norfolk, Virginia. It has strong programs in engineering, technology, and cybersecurity. What makes ODU different is how it approaches cybersecurity as both a technical and human problem. The program teaches how computer systems work, but it also teaches you how people, policies, and decisions affect security. This balance helped me see cybersecurity as more than just working with computers. It is about protecting the businesses and the people behind them.³

At ODU, cybersecurity focuses on three core areas: technical skills, risk management, and then governance. Technical skills would be learning about computer networking, TCP/IP, the OSI model, etc. Risk management is more about how organizations identify and assess risk, and often apply frameworks like the NIST Risk Management Framework (RMF). This showed me how security decisions connect to real operational impact. Lastly, would be Governance, which would be the study laws, ethics, and security policies. These courses explain why security exists and how it supports organizations and national security.

Many of my courses also emphasized writing and critical thinking. I wrote many research papers on cybersecurity policy, analyzed real-world security incidents, and learned how to communicate technical ideas clearly. This interdisciplinary approach helped me grow beyond technical skills. It taught me how to think like a cybersecurity professional, someone who understands technology, risk, and responsibility together.

One achievement I am especially proud of is earning my Security+ certification from CompTIA because it basically is a culmination of everything I have learned at ODU. After two attempts and nearly a year of studying, I finally passed this milestone certification. The exam covered core domains such as network security, malware, cryptography, and incident response. It tested my ability to understand how systems are secured, how vulnerabilities are identified, and how organizations protect sensitive information. Preparing for this certification required deep commitment to learning the fundamentals of cybersecurity.

By meeting the U.S. Department of Defense 8570 requirements, which are required for many cybersecurity positions supporting federal systems, earning the Security+ certification opened many doors for me professionally. It validated my knowledge and showed employers that I have a strong foundation in cybersecurity principles. More importantly, it proved to myself that I could overcome setbacks and stay committed to my goals. This experience strengthened my confidence and reinforced my dedication to pursuing a career in cybersecurity.

Rachel Montañez's article on personal branding shows the importance of sharing your story. She explains, "Communicating your personal brand through social media, especially on platforms like LinkedIn, can help you gain visibility among your colleagues, company

executives, and recruiters,” (2023). I strongly agree with this because in today’s world, it’s not about what you know, but who you know. Networking and building your presence can open doors that would otherwise remain closed.

For me, LinkedIn has been one of the most valuable tools for my personal brand. I invested a lot of time and effort into building my profile, so it accurately reflected my skills, experiences, and goals. That effort directly led to my internship with Leidos, a defense contractor that supports the United States Navy. This internship gave me firsthand experience with how military computer systems are monitored and protected. It allowed me to see how cybersecurity works in real operational environments, not just in the classroom I am also grateful that this opportunity allowed me to obtain a security clearance. Many of my coworkers explained that having a clearance creates strong career opportunities, especially in government and defense technology roles. This experience reinforced the value of building a strong personal brand and taking initiative in presenting yourself professionally.

Looking forward, I am excited about graduating and I have high hopes that my internship absorbs me back in for a full-time position. I have reached a good place academically, I am confident in my skills, and I have the work ethic to back me up if I lack knowledge in any gray areas. This narrative connects into my ePortfolio nicely because it shows my progress as a student with no knowledge in cyber to an upcoming graduate student who has the tools to succeed in the field. I believe that every step, no matter good or bad, was intended to happen. I am not afraid of failure; in fact, I embrace failure because it teaches me what not to do for next time. At first, I used to be a perfectionist. I was scared to mess up because I was raised to get it

right the first time. However, as I grow up, I learnt that failure is inevitable and that it is important to take every opportunity as a learning opportunity.

Reference

Montañez, R. (2023, September 4). How to define, develop, and communicate your personal brand. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2023/09/how-to-define-develop-and-communicate-your-personal-brand>

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