

**Personal Narrative Essay**

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IDS493: Electronic Portfolio Project

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September 13, 2025

## **Abstract**

My name is Owin Ifill, and I am a senior at Old Dominion University. Studying Cybersecurity with a minor in Criminal Justice. This essay will talk about how I came to the decision to study what I am here at Old Dominion and the path I took to get here. Reflecting on who I am, and the things that I've learned in my studies and internship.

## **Background History**

Growing up like many kids my age, I enjoyed playing video games. Especially on Nintendo DS and 3DS. The game Pokémon was one of my favorites and one day I wanted to try and hack the game to get rare Pokémon that couldn't be caught in the game and give myself items to make the game a bit easier for my elementary school self. I watched a ton of YouTube videos on how to do it correctly, and with enough trial and error I was able to break the game to get the Pokémon and items I wanted. That was the first time I hacked a game, and it wouldn't be later on until I would try again. Now looking back, I realize this was a turning point in my journey. Emily Esfahani Smith (2017) explains in "The Two Kinds of Stories We Tell About ourselves", people often highlight events that give them a sense of growth. This first hack was my first realization that I could take control of a system and change the outcome. Throughout grade school I was leaning towards engineering. In middle school and high school, I took more robotics classes than programming classes, though I took some here and there. When I arrived at Old Dominion I was studying mechanical engineering in my first year. We had a bunch of engineering speakers come in and talk about their jobs and what they do on a daily basis. From the sounds of it most of them just sat at a desk all day crunching numbers into programs, and that

didn't sound like much fun to me. I started looking at other things to study. Going into my Sophomore year I changed my major into cybersecurity. Sure, people in cybersecurity sit all day at a computer too, but it felt more interactive. In some cases, you are actively trying to prevent hackers from infiltrating into a system. Or for the example of the job of penetration testing, companies are paying you to try and hack into their system to see if there are any vulnerabilities. That sounded fun to me, and I haven't looked back since. This was the year I've gotten back into hacking my video games. I with one device I had called a PSP when I was a senior in high school but that didn't work out too well. Using some of the things I've learned I was able to install custom firmware to play games that won't normally be played on there. And I done that with multiple other devices. When I decided to leave mechanical engineering for cybersecurity, it felt like I was rewriting my own story. Smith (2017) talks about that our narrative identity comes from how we interpret our past and use it to imagine our future. For me being pushed more towards engineering as a kid by family members, taking control of what I wanted to do felt freeing. I started looking at my experiments with hacking not as a random hobby but as the starting point of my curiosity towards cybersecurity.

Into my junior year is when I added Criminal Justice to my minor. I started thinking about it in my sophomore year because we had to take an introduction class to criminology. Which I really found interesting and enjoyed learning about. In my Junior year I had a professor that worked for the FBI and another professor that work for the pentagon and that sealed the deal with me. Both teaching classes related to cybersecurity and sharing their personal stories made me somewhat look more into how cybersecurity works with agencies revolving around crime. Especially now with the rise of advanced technology these tactics are still somewhat new and studying the relationship with foreign attacks in cyberspace, it's too complex and there is no

simple answer to solve the issue. That is why I loved that I chose to study cybersecurity. It is an interdisciplinary study, which means there are so many areas to study that connect to cybersecurity. There seems to be an infinite number of paths you can walk down, especially with the rise and reliance on technology we have today.

### **Today In my Cybersecurity Journey**

I have an internship with Old Dominion, to help promote different stem programs at the University. What I do is go to events with elementary school and middle school students and show them and let them participate in this coding software exercise. We use these things called Sphero. Where there is this app that we use to program a robot sphere to move. And the kids have different challenges they can complete. For example, some challenges are to build a boat around the Sphero and trying to make it operate correctly.

I would eventually like an internship where I can practice more of my skills and put them to use, I also enjoy help showing the youth how exciting it can be to study in a stem related field. Working with them reignites the passion I had when I was younger and hopefully, I fuel their fire for learning more too.

### **Reflection**

Reflecting back on the experience of my studies, some of the skills that I learned that I have is that I am very observant, resilient, and curious to keep on learning. I would say these are my stronger traits, but I have skills in teaching and leadership that I am still trying to grow upon. I would say being observant is very useful, especially in the field of cybersecurity. Being able to look for things that stand out and changes made in the system. So that you can act before it becomes a problem. I love having a problem to solve and finding different solutions for the best

possible outcome. I think having resilience is also an important trait to have too because it's very possible that things won't work the first try. Instead of giving up or getting discouraged, I know it will take trial and error until a task is successfully completed. It's all a part of the process and multiple failures do not affect me, especially if there is a task at hand. My love for solving problems plays into my resilience. My trait for the curiosity to keep learning is very critical to the field of cybersecurity because the field is forever evolving. Changes and new policies are being talked about and implemented as you read this essay. The skills I'm working on like leadership is relevant because most likely working in cybersecurity, I will be working on a team, communication and holding one another responsible for completing the task at hand will make working with one another easier, knowing each other roles and holding respect for our teammates.

## **Conclusion**

My journey to studying cybersecurity with a minor of criminal Justice at Old Dominion University has been shaped by my curiosity, persistence and passion for problem solving. From my adolescence to hacking video games and realizing engineering was not the right path for me, shifting into cybersecurity allowed me to explore the field in both a technological way and a way that is also very human, learning about why some people choose to commit these crimes. Recognizing the patterns they find in vulnerabilities and finding ways to prevent them. Studying Criminal Justice gave me a greater appreciation for how cybersecurity goes beyond just computers into national security, law enforcement and global cooperation. Through internships, I've also developed a strong appreciation for teaching and inspiring others. Watching them discover the same sense of excitement I once had reminds me why I chose this path in the first place. Looking forward, I plan to continue strengthening my technical abilities while also

growing my leadership and teamwork skills. Cybersecurity is a forever changing field, and I know my resilience, curiosity, and determination will keep me ready for every new challenge that comes my way.

## References:

Smith, E. E.(2017, January 12). *The two kinds of stories we tell about ourselves*. ideas.ted.com.

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