

Personal Narrative Essay

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Abstract

This essay presents a personal narrative of my educational journey from my country of origin to the United States. It begins by exploring my early experiences, including my academic background, work history, and the personal challenges I faced along the way. The essay then explores my transition to a new country, where I encountered new opportunities and began rebuilding my path, starting as a GED student at a community college before transferring to a four-year institution. Throughout this journey, I have experienced both setbacks and achievements, including internships, job experiences, and multiple relocations across states. Ultimately, I found stability in Norfolk, Virginia, where I discovered Old Dominion University and developed a strong passion for cybersecurity. This journey not only captures my growth from past to present but also reflects my aspirations and expectations for the future.

Introduction

Up to now, my educational journey is nothing but a rollercoaster of challenges, resilience, and growth. As a non-traditional student, I encountered several obstacles that often tested my limits, yet each struggle became a stepping stone rather than a setback. There were moments of doubt and uncertainty, but I chose to keep moving forward. These experiences have not only shaped my academic path but have also shaped me into a person I am today.

Now, as I stand near the finish line, I feel an overwhelming sense of pride in myself for not giving up and deep gratitude towards my friends, family, peers, and professors who supported me along the way. My journey began in India, my country of origin, where the roots of this story were first planted.

Before Moving to the United States

Growing up in a poor family in India, I didn't get many opportunities, but my parents always valued education and did their best to send me and my siblings to school. In my elementary and middle schools, I consistently performed well, especially in Science and Mathematics classes. However, my grades declined significantly during my final year of high school. Despite this, I somehow managed to graduate from high school and began pursuing college education. Unfortunately, it didn't last long, as I had to reluctantly quit due to growing financial pressure and eventually began working at a call center for minimum wage just to support my family. Nevertheless, my life took a major turn when I met my husband, and after my marriage I moved to the United States, where I discovered countless new opportunities. It was here that I began a new chapter in my educational journey.

A New Beginning

I was both excited and nervous to start a new life in a totally different country. In the beginning, I was not sure about my career path and even doubted my abilities to continue my college education after a long gap. And, in the meanwhile, I landed my first job as a Starbucks barista, where I made friends and developed valuable professional skills such as teamwork and customer service. Although I enjoyed my job, it didn't take me long to consider going back to the education route and finish my college education. With some research and support from my husband, I got to know about Pierce College, a nearby community college. And that's where I started encountering real academic and personal challenges.

From GED Student to a Regular College Student

As I began my educational journey at Pierce College, one of the first challenges I faced was verifying my high school education, specifically transferring my high school transcript directly to the college. I found this process quite difficult mainly due to differences in educational systems and the long gap since I had completed high school. Additionally, many schools in India, including mine, were not equipped with advanced record-keeping systems, making it nearly impossible to obtain official transcripts directly. In the end, I realized that earning a high school diploma would be far easier than navigating this process. Luckily, I found a wonderful program at Pierce College designed specifically for adult learners like myself, offering affordable classes that prepare students to earn their high school diplomas. I truly enjoyed all my courses, and Math quickly became my favorite subject. After several months of preparation, I earned my General Educational Development (GED) diploma in January 2020, achieving the highest score in Mathematics. In addition, I was awarded a scholarship that

allowed me to transition from the adult learning program into traditional college-level courses. That moment marked the true beginning of my college educational journey.

My Achievements and Challenges at Pierce College

As I began my college journey at Pierce College, Covid pandemic hit, and all classes transitioned to online learning. It was frustrating at times, as I had been looking forward to experiencing in-person college life in this country. Nevertheless, I continue my learning through online platforms. Science and Math classes quickly became my favorite. Although they were challenging at times, I put my best effort into it and learned everything from scratch.

My biggest challenge was writing classes. As English is not my first language and I had little prior experience with college-level writing, I often struggled a lot. However, I didn't give up. With the guidance of supportive professors and access to helpful campus resources, I steadily improved over time. Looking back, I can clearly see how much my writing skills have grown.

Throughout the first year, I maintained a good GPA. My academic performance eventually led to an opportunity to work as a Math tutor at Pierce College. By that time, I was balancing two jobs, as I continued working at Starbucks. For several months, I managed my work, tutoring, and coursework simultaneously. This gave me the opportunity to improve my time management skills.

Despite these challenges, I successfully earned my Associate degree in March 2022 and transferred to a four-year college, the University of Washington, Seattle campus. It was there that I began to more seriously evaluate my career options, ultimately gaining clarity about the path that best aligned with my goals and interests.

Beginning of Another Chapter at the University of Washington, Seattle

I applied to several universities, including Columbia University, an Ivy League school, and to my surprise, I got accepted. However, due to several factors, I couldn't take that offer. Instead, I chose to attend the University of Washington, where I initially pursued a major in Mathematics. At the time, I was still uncertain about my long-term career path, but my strong interest in math encouraged me to follow that direction.

A Turning Point: Changing My Major

I performed well during my first quarter. However, by the end of my second quarter, I began to realize that this path was not the right fit for me. I wanted to pursue something more meaningful and engaging—something beyond simply proving mathematical theorems. Over time, I developed a strong interest in cybersecurity, a field that challenges and excites me every day. This growing passion ultimately led me to change my major to Cybersecurity.

Finding My Path at Old Dominion University (ODU)

I truly enjoyed my time at the University of Washington, Seattle campus. However, I was unable to complete my degree there because I had to relocate due to my husband's new job opportunity in Norfolk, Virginia. Before moving to Virginia, we also spent time in Boise, Idaho, for another position that ultimately did not work out. This period of uncertainty resulted in a two-year gap in my educational journey.

Nevertheless, the experience proved to be worthwhile, as it eventually led me to discover my passion for cybersecurity at Old Dominion University (ODU). I chose ODU because of its

strong cybersecurity program and the wide range of opportunities it offers, including the Cyber Clinic internship and research experiences.

Additionally, most of my college-level credits transferred, allowing me to complete only two years' worth of coursework, primarily related to the cybersecurity major. At ODU, I also secured my first professional IT role as a Desktop Support student worker, along with a valuable internship as a Cyber Risk Management Specialist through the Cyber Clinic program.

Almost There: Nearing the Finish Line

Now, as I reflect on my journey during my final semester—standing near the finish line—I feel a deep sense of gratitude for the opportunities ODU has provided me. Over the past two years, I have gained valuable hands-on experience through lab work, internships, and my role in desktop support. I have especially enjoyed working on technical projects that challenged and strengthened my skills.

One of the most rewarding experiences was my internship as a Cyber Risk Management Specialist, where I collaborated with my team and the City of Suffolk IT department to identify and analyze cybersecurity risks. As I look ahead, I am excited to graduate with a Bachelor of Science in Cybersecurity and take the next step in my professional journey.

Where I Go From Here: Goals and Aspirations

After completing my degree, I plan to work in the cybersecurity field, and help organizations protect their networks and systems from evolving cyber threats. I am open to opportunities in both the private sector and federal agencies. Furthermore, as I work toward

earning my CompTIA Security+ certification, I am confident it will open doors to even greater opportunities.

In the short term, my goal is to gain valuable experience through professional roles and internships, building a strong foundation in the field. Over time, I hope to continue growing, advancing in my career, and taking on greater responsibilities in cybersecurity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my journey has been filled with challenges, transitions, and moments of uncertainty, but each experience has played an important role in shaping who I am today. From starting a new life in a different country to overcoming academic barriers and ultimately discovering my passion for cybersecurity, I have learned the importance of self-belief, adaptability, resilience, and perseverance.

Now, as I approach graduation, I carry with me not only academic knowledge and technical skills, but also a deeper sense of determination and gratitude for the opportunities that have guided me here. This journey has been more than just an educational experience; it has been a transformative experience of personal and professional growth. I am now ready and excited to take the next step forward and contribute meaningfully to the field of cybersecurity.

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