

**Finding My Path: A Personal Narrative**

Samantha F. Riggs

Old Dominion University

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Professor Carin Andrews

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## **Before Old Dominion University**

For most of my high school career, I believed I had my future career goals completely figured out. I was confident, organized, and motivated, with a clear goal: I was going to become a medical doctor. I built my academic plan carefully around that goal, taking challenging courses, staying near the top ten of my class, and participating in a dual-enrollment program that allowed me to graduate high school with both my diploma and an associate degree. At the time, everything felt purposeful and linear. Each step I planned out was preparing me for the next. I thrived in structured environments where expectations were clear, and success felt measurable through grades, rankings, and completed milestones. Having a defined plan gave me a sense of security, and I rarely questioned whether I might want something different.

When it came time to choose a university for my undergraduate degree, I selected a school that was around two and a half hours away from home. It felt like the perfect balance of being both far enough to gain independence but also close enough to return home for holidays and breaks if I wanted. I went into college as a biology major, which felt like a natural continuation of my long-term interest in science and medicine. Thanks to my associate degree, I was able to bypass many of the general education courses and move directly into upper-level science classes.

That advantage, however, came with an unexpected challenge. For the first time in my academic life, I struggled. The transition from the structured environment of high school to the fast pace and independence of college-level science courses was overwhelming. During that same first semester, I also came to the important realization that medical school was no longer

the best path for me. However, this decision did not feel as devastating as I expected it to. Sure, it changed career paths, but I would still be in the same field of biology sciences. I was able to remind myself that a biology degree could still open the door to many different careers.

The following semester proved to be a turning point. As my motivation for biology continued to fade, a combination of academic pressure and personal factors caused me to disengage from my coursework. I struggled to maintain the same level of discipline and enthusiasm that once came so naturally to me. I neglected several classes and ultimately received non-passing grades. When the semester ended, I admittedly felt embarrassed and defeated. I had always been known as the student who was ahead, the one my family proudly talked about. Now, despite my early academic success and preparation, my GPA reflected one of the most difficult periods of my life.

Retaking those failed courses the following semester required both humility and perseverance. While I was able to pass them, the experience forced me to confront an uncomfortable truth. Pushing forward simply because I was close to finishing the degree was not enough. Although I still loved learning about nature, natural ecosystems, and conducting experiments in lab settings, I could no longer envision myself building a career in biology. For the first time, I allowed myself to slow down and reflect honestly on what I wanted my future to look like, rather than what I felt obligated to pursue simply because it had always been the plan.

### **Discovering Cybersecurity and Finding the Right Fit**

Changing my major was not an easy decision. I had grown comfortable with certainty, with always knowing exactly what came next when it came to my academics. Letting go of a plan I had spent years constructing felt like a failure. However, I began to realize that computers,

technology, and coding (all interests I had always treated as secondary to the natural sciences), were areas where I felt genuinely curious as to what they could hold for me concerning my career. To explore this further, I decided to switch my major to computing for a trial semester.

That decision marked a major shift in my academic journey. I immediately felt re-engaged. I enjoyed my classes, performed well academically, and, for the first time in a while, felt confident in which direction I was going. During that semester, I discovered a particular interest in cybersecurity and ethical hacking. The idea of protecting systems, solving complex problems, and understanding how technology could be both exploited and defended deeply resonated with me.

Despite this renewed motivation, practical challenges remained. The cost of living near my university became increasingly difficult to manage, and I began to feel that the computing program lacked coursework specifically focused on cybersecurity. After much consideration, I made the decision to move back home with my family and explore online degree programs that better aligned with my goals.

Through my research, I discovered Old Dominion University (ODU), a public research university in Norfolk, Virginia, known for its strong online programs. ODU offered a cybersecurity program that directly aligned with my interests and career aspirations. Enrolling at ODU felt like I had found the final piece of the puzzle that had been my academic journey.

From my first year at ODU, I could tell I had made the right choice. Rather than focusing solely on theory, my courses encouraged experimentation, problem-solving, and critical thinking. I gained hands-on experience with technical skills such as configuring firewalls, managing

system administrator privileges, and working within virtual machine environments that simulated real-world systems.

These experiences helped me understand not only how systems function, but also how they can be protected against misuse and vulnerabilities. Learning in this way made the material feel more relevant and purposeful. I found that I learned best when I could actively engage with the tools and technologies being discussed, rather than a classroom setting alone. This approach strengthened my confidence and reaffirmed that cybersecurity was the right field for me. Each project and lab reinforced the idea that I was building skills that would directly translate into my future career, making the material both challenging and rewarding.

### **Looking Forward to the Future**

Looking back, one of the most important lessons I have learned throughout my college experience is the value of adaptability. I once believed that success meant sticking rigidly to a single plan that, at least at the time, appeared foolproof. Now, I understand that growth often requires change. Changing my major was not a sign of giving up, but rather a conscious decision to realign my path with my values, interests, and strengths.

As I near the completion of my undergraduate degree, I am grateful for the setbacks as much as the successes. The challenges I encountered forced me to reassess my goals, develop resilience, and become more self-aware. What once felt like failures are now experiences that I value, as they guided me toward a path that aligns more closely with my strengths and interests. My journey has taught me that progress does not always follow a straight line, and that meaningful growth often comes from moments of uncertainty and change. Each experience shaped my academic journey and helped me discover a career path that truly fits who I am.

