

Experience, Responsibility, and the Development of a Cybersecurity Career

Sean M. Shreve

Old Dominion University

IDS-493: Electronic Portfolio Project

Professor Carin Andrews

February 07, 2026

Abstract

I am a non-traditional college student who attends Old Dominion University and has had a long educational journey to where I am today. I am currently in my senior year and will be graduating next year with a Bachelor of Science in Cybersecurity. This paper will retell the decisions I have made and why I continue to pursue my educational and professional interests. It will be in a narrative format and will serve not only as an opportunity for retrospection but also as a commitment to lifelong learning and professional development in the United States Military and beyond.

Experience, Responsibility, and the Development of a Cybersecurity Career

The main factor that makes me a non-traditional student is my age. At 35 years old and in my senior year of college, my educational path falls outside the typical undergraduate timeline. The decisions that I made in my early life were those of uncertainty, especially at the beginning of my college experience. Over time, however, a combination of personal choices and necessary sacrifices caused my goals and values to shift. I could not have guessed I would be on this career path if you asked me years ago, but if I was to do it over again, I would not have changed a thing. I value the lessons I have learned along the way that make me the man I am today. To move forward with a purpose that is of my own merit rather than unfortunate necessity or circumstance, I do not take it for granted.

Early Academic Uncertainty and Exploration

I attended community college after graduating high school, but I had no clear path or guidance. I gravitated towards what I liked at the time, computers and computer science. However, as I progressed through my coursework, I realized that I lacked both the focus and readiness required to succeed in that field at that stage of my life. I focused on my general education coursework and decided to pursue pre-med in hopes of going into pharmacy school. To provide a more competitive edge for admissions and financial support, I turned to the military, specifically the United States Navy. Although I did not fully understand the intricacies of military life at the time, I recognized the opportunity for meaningful change. I possessed a strong desire for self-improvement, but more importantly, I needed the structure and discipline that military service could provide.

Military Service and Professional Growth

Upon looking back on my service, I once took it for granted how impactful it was on my growth and future. I completed a four-year enlistment as a Cryptologic Technician Maintainer (CTM). Before this, I was a pharmacy clerk working at a Rite-Aid so this was my first job with serious responsibilities that included a much larger team. Maintaining and troubleshooting complex systems was also new territory to explore. My work ethic improved dramatically during this period, and I also witnessed firsthand the value of hard work and career focused decision making. My decision to separate from the Navy was not driven by the need to leave, but more so to proceed towards returning to my education. At the time, I intended to pursue pharmacy school in San Diego, and although this meant leaving behind a stable and familiar environment, I was motivated by a genuine desire to continue learning, which would become central to my identity.

Transition to Civilian Life and Reassessment of Goals

Following my separation from the Navy, I began the transition back into civilian life and resumed my education. Returning to school after military service required a different level of adjustment than my earlier college experience, as my priorities and responsibilities had changed significantly. I also met my wife through mutual professional acquaintances that I met through my service. She is also active-duty military, and my role changed from active-duty service member to military spouse which introduced new responsibilities. This came with duty station changes, which slowed my overall pace of completing my degree. However, this did increase my academic exposure by studying in different locations. For example, studying in Hawaii allowed me to take coursework shaped by regional and historical context. Although unconventional, these experiences shaped my approach to education to more of a long-term type of commitment rather than a fixed timeline.

Academic Reengagement and the Path to Cybersecurity

My education continued across multiple institutions, including additional community colleges and coursework at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. I was still on the premed track at this time, but with the inconsistencies of duty stations changing, I began to have doubts about the chosen career path. During this period, my family was also growing. By the time we were living in Hawaii, we had two children, and upon returning to Virginia, that number grew to four. These changes significantly influenced how I approached both education and career decisions. I decided that the rigid commitment to a four-year medical school would be insufficient for our family planning. These circumstances forced me to reassess my priorities and reconsider how I understood my own path. As Smith (2017) explains, individuals often frame their lives through the stories they tell about themselves, either as narratives shaped by circumstance or as stories of growth and redemption. There will always be changes to the plan you establish and I am no exception, but I took these changes not as setbacks, but as new opportunities.

Purposeful reflection in the past year (including writing this paper) has led me to a better understanding of myself and what it means to me in my pursuits. I find an important part of my identity is with the military now and returning to that will help bring back some accomplishment and satisfaction to my life. I believe that is a coherent narrative that links my past experiences, present learnings and future goals (Nguyen, 2013, pp. 135-136). Over time, my interests consistently returned to technology, my military experience and government related issues in the cyber community. I also decided I wanted to return to the Navy as a naval officer, which ultimately led me to pursue a Bachelor of Science in Cybersecurity. I found that this discipline aligned not only with my skills and interests but was also recommended by my peers who are in the industry themselves or from my time in the military.

Reflection and Conclusion

This past year has been big on self-reflection, specifically on educational and professional goals. I now recognize that what once felt like a series of disconnected decisions forms now a focused plan with purpose. As McAdams (2001) explains, individuals develop narrative identities by integrating past experiences, present understanding, and future aspirations into a coherent life story. Being relatively half-way through my life, those words have never been truer. My journey contributed to skills, values, and perspectives that influenced my current direction, but I must say I didn't plan for this to happen starting out. If I had to choose the most important decision I have made was joining the Navy, and since then my life has been influenced by that decision. Military service provided structure, family life introduced responsibility, and returning to higher education reinforced discipline and long-term planning. Choosing cybersecurity as my major is a logical next step as I pursue my goal of becoming a commissioned officer, with potential civilian work in that job sector to follow. I intend to increase my commitment to this professional ambition, but also a dedication to lifelong learning, leadership, and providing stability and opportunity for my family.

References

- McAdams, D.P. (2001). The psychology of life stories. *Review of General Psychology*, 5(2), 100-122. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.5.2.100>
- Nguyen, C.F. (2013). The ePortfolio as a living portal: A medium for student learning, identity, and assessment. *International Journal of ePortfolio*, 3(2), 135-148.
- Smith, E.E. (2017, January 12). *The two kinds of stories we tell about ourselves* [Video]. TED Conferences. <https://ideas.ted.com/the-two-kinds-of-stories-we-tell-about-ourselves/>