

Personal Narrative Essay

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Abstract

This essay reflects on my academic, work, and personal experiences that led me to choose my major in cybersecurity and pursue a career securing critical infrastructure. My story begins with hands-on work experience as a fiber optic technician, which sparked my passion for understanding and protecting the networks that power modern life. I detail my journey starting at Old Dominion University, the interdisciplinary coursework that shaped my academic identity, and the pivotal moments that helped clarify my career direction. Through course readings on narrative identity, I explore how my experiences helped define who I am today. I discuss the life events that strengthened my resolve to succeed and how embracing an interdisciplinary approach allowed me to find a career path that is both practical and meaningful. By reflecting on my story, I gained a deeper understanding of my narrative identity and how it continues to guide my professional journey.

Personal Narrative Essay: My Journey into Cybersecurity

Introduction

Looking back at my experiences at Old Dominion University (ODU) and beyond, I realize how many unexpected turns led me to where I am today. If someone had asked me a few years ago where I saw myself, I don't think I would have described working in cybersecurity or protecting critical infrastructure. Yet the entire time the life experiences were building up, leading towards this path.

Telling this story gives me a chance to reflect on how much growth has come from both my academic studies and my real-world experiences. As Smith (2017) explains, narrative identity is the internal story we create to make sense of our lives. In telling my story, I can see how the experiences that once felt random or even discouraging were actually building something stronger in me. My background in fiber optic network engineering, combined with my coursework in cybersecurity theory and interdisciplinary research, built the foundation for my future.

When I first began working with fiber optics, I didn't realize how much those experiences would shape my career goals. Over time, though, the pieces slowly came together: a love of building networks, a growing concern for protecting them, and a deep respect for the people who keep society's critical systems running. This essay shares that journey, from the ground up, and how I came to find not just a career path, but a real sense of direction in a world where you can be anything.

How I Became a Cybersecurity Major

When I first started my college journey, cybersecurity wasn't even on my radar. After graduating from high school, I wasn't completely sure what I wanted to do, but I knew I liked working with technology and solving problems. I originally thought about a more traditional IT path, but it wasn't until I started hands-on work with fiber optic networks that everything began to fall into place.

My real start came when I began working at Genesis Fiber Optic Splicing Inc. I started off doing basic cable installation, but as I advanced to network specialist and technician, I realized how vulnerable our infrastructure could be. Every day, I worked directly with the systems that carry critical communications, and it opened my eyes to how much trust society places in unseen technology. I saw firsthand how a single weak point in a network could cause massive disruptions.

The more experience I gained in the field, the more I wanted to understand not just how to build networks, but how to protect them. That's when I made the decision to major in Cybersecurity at Old Dominion University. It felt like the natural next step, the missing piece of the puzzle.

Once I started taking my core cybersecurity courses at ODU, I knew I made the right decision. Courses like CYSE 425W, where I developed a National Cybersecurity Strategy for protecting critical infrastructure, made me realize that cybersecurity wasn't just about firewalls and coding. It was about strategy, policy, and protecting systems that millions of people rely on every day. That broader view excited me in a way that no other major ever had.

Interdisciplinary courses like IDS 300W (Interdisciplinary Theory and Concepts) and PHIL 355E (Ethics) also played a huge role. In IDS 300W, I had the chance to research how cybersecurity, political science, and economics intersect to defend against cyber-terrorism. In PHIL 355E, I dug into ethical questions about technology and responsibility. Those classes made me realize that cybersecurity wasn't just technical, it was human, strategic, and deeply interconnected with society.

If I had stuck with a general IT path, I don't think I would have found the same passion or sense of purpose. It took real-world experience, self-reflection, and interdisciplinary learning to realize that cybersecurity, especially protecting critical infrastructure, was where I truly belonged.

Growth

Before I ever set foot at Old Dominion University, real-world experiences were already shaping the way I thought about my future. One of the biggest lessons I learned came from working full-time while still figuring out what I wanted to do with my life. Balancing a demanding fiber optic technician job with college coursework wasn't easy. There were long days out in the field, troubleshooting network failures under tough conditions, and then late nights trying to finish cybersecurity assignments. But somehow, those challenges made me stronger instead of pushing me away from my goals, which I tried not to overwhelm myself with.

In a lot of ways, working in fiber optics showed me what perseverance really looks like. It's one thing to study troubleshooting methods in a textbook, it's another thing entirely to be standing outside in the middle of summer, trying to diagnose a signal loss on a tight deadline, knowing that an entire apartment complex is counting on you to restore service. Those kinds of

moments taught me to stay calm under pressure and to think critically even when the stakes were high. Those lessons have carried over into my academic work and will continue to be part of who I am in my professional career.

Another life experience that pushed me forward was the realization that growth doesn't happen inside your comfort zone. When I first began my studies, I was nervous about the interdisciplinary nature of the cybersecurity program. Having to take courses that crossed into ethics, communications, and even policy initially felt intimidating. But pushing through that discomfort helped me realize how important it is to see cybersecurity not just as a technical field, but as one that touches every part of society.

Nguyen (2013) talks about how narrative identity is shaped when we construct meaning from our experiences, not just live through them passively. When I reflect on these moments struggling through complex splicing projects, pulling late nights to finish research papers, stepping into unfamiliar academic territory, I can see how they weren't setbacks. They were steps forward, pieces of a larger story where persistence, curiosity, and resilience became central themes.

I also owe a lot of my growth to the support system I had along the way. Family, mentors, and most of all my dear wife. Success, I learned, isn't a solo act. It's built on the small ways we show up for ourselves and for others, even when things get hard.

How I Decided a Career in Cybersecurity Was for Me

There wasn't a single lightbulb moment when I knew cybersecurity was the right career for me. It was more like a series of moments, small realizations that built up over time until the path felt undeniable.

Working with fiber optics gave me my first real sense of responsibility. Every time I sealed an enclosure or completed a network build, I was protecting the invisible systems that people rely on every day without even realizing it. At first, it was just about doing a good job and trying not to break everything. But gradually, I started thinking about the bigger picture, about what would happen if those systems were attacked or failed. That curiosity eventually evolved into a need to be part of the team that defends those systems, not just builds them.

The coursework at Old Dominion University sealed that decision for me. Writing the National Cybersecurity Strategy in CYSE 425W opened my eyes to how critical infrastructure is protected at a national level. I wasn't just thinking about fiber cables anymore, I was thinking about energy grids, water systems, transportation networks. All of it connected, all of it vulnerable. That realization made cybersecurity feel not only like a career path but a responsibility I wanted to take on.

Research projects, like my IDS 300W paper on cyber-terrorism and my CYSE 495 analysis on medical device security, showed me just how interdisciplinary the field really is. Every project pulled from different areas, politics, healthcare, engineering, and forced me to think across boundaries. That ability to connect dots and find solutions across different fields made the work more exciting and meaningful.

McAdams (1993) wrote that our narrative identities often revolve around themes of agency, meaning, and growth. Looking back, I can see how every experience from repairing broken fiber lines to researching national security threats fit into those themes. I wasn't just building a career. I was building a story where I had agency, where my work meant something, and where I was growing into the professional I wanted to become.

In the end, deciding on cybersecurity wasn't about chasing a trend or picking a "safe" major. It was about following the thread of what excited me, challenged me, and gave me a sense of purpose towards the future.

Conclusion

Looking back on everything, the long workdays in the field, the late nights studying cybersecurity frameworks, the countless moments of doubt and discovery, I can see how every experience shaped the person and professional I am becoming through it all. None of it was a wasted effort. Even the challenges that once felt overwhelming now feel like important chapters in a larger story.

Old Dominion University gave me the academic tools I needed to take my career to the next level, but it was the combination of real-world experience and interdisciplinary learning that truly set me on the right path. Without the hands-on work in fiber optics, I might never have appreciated how fragile and vital our networks really are. Without courses like CYSE 425W, IDS 300W, and PHIL 355E, I might not have understood how interconnected technology, policy, and ethics have become.

Smith (2017) reminds us that the stories we tell ourselves give our lives meaning, and Nguyen (2013) emphasizes how constructing those stories actively shapes who we are. If I've learned anything through this process, it's that growth comes not from having a perfect plan, but from embracing the unexpected, staying curious, and being willing to connect experiences that seem unrelated at first glance. Opportunities lie in wait.

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