

Finding My Path in Cybersecurity: A Journey of Growth and Purpose

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Abstract

Everyone's educational and career journey follows a different path, and mine has been shaped by military service, career changes, personal challenges, and a determination to fulfill a promise I made to myself years ago. I originally planned to study computer engineering after high school but instead joined the United States Navy and later worked as a machinist. Years later, I returned to college and began pursuing a degree in cybersecurity at Old Dominion University. A freshman assignment about becoming a security engineer helped me recognize cybersecurity as the career I wanted to pursue. Since then, balancing full-time work with college, recovering from a total knee replacement, and struggling through challenging coursework, including Ethical Hacking, have tested my commitment to the field. These experiences have also helped shape my professional identity and led me to focus on digital forensics and incident response. Through the concepts of narrative identity and e-Portfolios, I have learned to view my past experiences not as separate events or detours, but as connected parts of my personal and professional development. This narrative reflects how those experiences have shaped who I am as a cybersecurity student and the professional I hope to become.

The Assignment That Changed Everything

When I first entered the cybersecurity program, I knew that cybersecurity involved protecting computers and networks, but I did not know which area of the field interested me most. That changed during my freshman year when I was assigned to research a cybersecurity career and write a paper about it.

I chose to research becoming a security engineer because the career sounded interesting. One evening after work, I sat at my desk still wearing my work clothes from the machine shop and began reading about what security engineers do. The more I researched, the more interested I became in how they design secure systems, identify vulnerabilities, and protect organizations from constantly changing cyber threats.

For the first time since leaving the Navy, I could clearly picture myself in a career that challenged me mentally while allowing me to solve meaningful problems. When I finished the paper, it no longer felt like just another assignment. It felt like I had discovered the direction I wanted my life to take. Looking back, that freshman paper became one of the defining moments of my educational journey and helped establish the career goals I still have today.

Balancing Work, School, and Personal Challenges

Discovering my interest in cybersecurity was exciting, but earning the degree has been much more difficult than I expected. Throughout college, I worked full time as a machinist, often working approximately fifty hours a week while attending school full time. My days often started before sunrise and ended late at night. After spending hours working around machinery and standing on concrete floors, I would return home physically exhausted and still have labs, papers, or exams to complete.

There were many times when I questioned whether I could continue balancing everything. Weekends often became study sessions, and vacation days were sometimes used to complete assignments or prepare for exams. Although this experience was exhausting, it taught me time management, discipline, and perseverance. Every completed course represented another step toward the future I had imagined when writing my freshman security engineer paper.

My junior year became the most difficult part of my academic journey. At the same time I was taking some of the most challenging cybersecurity courses, I underwent a total knee replacement. Recovering from surgery while working and attending school full time pushed me further than I had ever been pushed.

Ethical Hacking was particularly difficult. The course required me to think differently, understand how attackers exploit systems, identify vulnerabilities, and work with unfamiliar tools in controlled environments. Some assignments took much longer than expected, and there were nights when I wondered whether I had made a mistake choosing cybersecurity. I remember sitting in front of my computer late at night, staring at an assignment that I could not figure out and wondering if I had made the wrong choice. For the first time, I seriously considered changing my major. Because I was dealing with surgery, work responsibilities, and difficult coursework, I even explored switching to Health Sciences.

After reflecting on why I started this journey, I remembered my original goal and how strongly I felt after writing my freshman security engineer paper. Instead of changing majors, I chose to keep moving forward. That decision taught me that struggling does not always mean that I am on the wrong path. Sometimes it means that I am challenged to grow.

Understanding My Story

This realization connects with McAdams's (2001) concept of narrative identity. In *The Psychology of Life Stories*, McAdams explains how people develop identity by creating and interpreting life stories that connect important experiences across time. When I look at my own life this way, the different chapters of my journey begin to make sense.

When I look back, my plan to study computer engineering, my years in the Navy, my work as a machinist, and my eventual return to college once seemed like separate chapters. Now I see how each one led me toward cybersecurity and became part of the same story. Each experience developed qualities that I now bring into cybersecurity, including discipline, resilience, patience, problem-solving, and attention to detail.

Smith's (2017) discussion of the stories people tell about themselves also helped me think differently about difficult experiences. People can tell stories that focus on suffering and negative events, or they can find meaning in those experiences and explain how they contributed to personal growth. I could have viewed my surgery, difficult coursework, and doubts about my major only as obstacles. Instead, I now see them as experiences that tested my commitment and helped me understand why I wanted to continue pursuing cybersecurity. The difficult moments did not disappear, but their meaning changed.

Nguyen's (2013) discussion of the e-Portfolio as a living portal also connects with my experience. An e-Portfolio is more than a place to store completed assignments. It can document a student's learning, development, and changing identity over time. My own e-Portfolio gives me an opportunity to bring together the different parts of my educational journey and show how my skills and goals have developed. The projects and experiences I include are evidence of where I

started, what I have learned, and where I want to go next. When I look through the work I have included in my e-Portfolio, I can see how my interests have developed from simply learning about cybersecurity to becoming more interested in digital forensics and incident response. The e-Portfolio allows me to show that growth through actual examples of my work rather than simply telling someone what I have learned.

Discovering Digital Forensics

As I progressed through the cybersecurity program, my interests became more focused on digital forensics. The field combines technology, investigation, problem-solving, and attention to detail. Digital forensics requires investigators to look beyond what initially appears on the surface and determine what actually happened. That process reminds me of the troubleshooting I learned in the Navy and the precision I developed as a machinist.

My digital forensics coursework helped me recognize that my previous experiences were not something I needed to leave behind. Instead, they became part of my foundation. The Navy taught me how to work under pressure and follow procedures. Being a machinist taught me precision and how to recognize when something is not operating correctly. My cybersecurity education has given me a way to apply those abilities to technology and digital investigations.

I have also learned that cybersecurity depends on more than technology. My courses have shown me the importance of ethics, communication, law, policy, and human behavior. Protecting information involves protecting people's privacy, maintaining trust, and making responsible decisions. This broader understanding has helped me develop a more complete identity as a future cybersecurity professional.

My coursework has also shown me that cybersecurity is an interdisciplinary field. Classes involving cyber law, ethics, criminal justice, and digital forensics helped me understand that cybersecurity is not only about computers and technology. For example, learning about cyber law helped me understand the legal responsibilities involved in handling digital evidence, while cybersecurity ethics showed me the importance of making responsible decisions when dealing with people's information and privacy. These courses helped me see how technology connects with law, ethics, and human behavior.

Looking Toward the Future

My immediate goal is to complete my bachelor's degree in cybersecurity and gain practical professional experience. Because I have not yet completed a cybersecurity internship, gaining hands-on experience is an important next step. I want to apply what I have learned in the classroom to real-world cybersecurity problems while continuing to develop my technical abilities.

My long-term goal is to establish a career in digital forensics and incident response. I want to help investigate security incidents, analyze digital evidence, and determine how cyber incidents occur. I also plan to pursue a master's degree in cybersecurity because technology constantly changes and cybersecurity professionals must continue learning throughout their careers.

When I look back at where I started, my journey does not look like the path I originally imagined. I once planned to study computer engineering, but instead I joined the Navy, became a Machinery Repairman, worked as a machinist, and eventually returned to college to pursue

cybersecurity. Along the way, I faced difficult coursework, worked full time, recovered from surgery, and questioned whether I had chosen the right major.

Today, I no longer see those experiences as detours. They are part of my story.

The promise I made to myself after high school simply took longer to fulfill than I expected. My journey has taught me that success is not always about following the original plan. Sometimes the path changes, becomes difficult, or takes longer than expected. What matters is continuing to move forward and learning from each experience.

My cybersecurity journey is not finished. I still have more skills to develop, more knowledge to gain, and challenges ahead. However, I no longer wonder whether I belong in this field. The challenges I have overcome have shown me that I can continue moving forward even when the path becomes difficult. I may not have taken the traditional route into cybersecurity, but the experiences that brought me here are what make my story unique. I am proud of how far I have come, and I am ready for the next chapter.

References

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