

Narrative Identity and My Path to Cybersecurity

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Abstract

This narrative essay explores my journey toward pursuing a career in cybersecurity, shaped by cultural expectations, academic struggles, and transformative experiences in the military. Early on, I was steered toward the medical field by my family; however, through struggle and self-growth, I eventually changed course. While I was performing poorly academically in my early years at Old Dominion University, I discovered my true calling after enlisting in the Navy as an Information Technology (IT) Specialist. Being in the Navy provided me discipline, responsibility, and a clear purpose. Ultimately, it led me to return to school and pursue cybersecurity as a career path. This essay reflects on how my identity developed through key life events and how those experiences continue to shape my future.

Introduction

If someone asked me what I wanted to be growing up, the answer was never really mine. I come from a Filipino background, where there is a strong expectation for children to pursue careers in the medical field, especially as doctors or nurses. My own mother was a nurse, and like many Filipino families, my parents and grandparents encouraged me to follow a similar path. McAdams (2001) explains that life stories are shaped not only by personal experiences but also by cultural values and expectations, which influence how individuals understand their roles and future paths. At a young age, I accepted that idea without fully understanding what it meant. It felt less like a personal goal and more like an expectation I was supposed to fulfill.

When I reflect upon my earlier years, I realized that my early history was being written by others rather than by myself. The values of stability and success that the medical field represented did not entirely fit with who I was developing into. Eventually, my experiences encouraged me to take ownership of my own narrative, a process McAdams (2001) describes as individuals actively constructing their life stories to create meaning and direction. My transition from a medical-related career path to cybersecurity was influenced by my background, difficulties, and individual development and has enabled me to choose a career that includes problem-solving and assisting others.

Early Interests and Influence of the Medical Field

As I entered my teenage years, my interest in the medical field became more personal. During high school, I wanted to become a physical therapist. This wasn't just because of my family's influence, it was something I genuinely connected with. I was active in sports like basketball and skateboarding, and I often found myself dealing with injuries, especially to my lower body.

Instead of simply accepting these injuries, I became curious about them. I wanted to understand why they happened and how the body recovered. More importantly, I wanted to help others recover as well. Physical therapy appealed to me because it combined problem-solving with helping people directly. Even though I didn't fully realize it at the time, this curiosity about identifying problems and finding solutions would later play a major role in shaping my future.

Struggles at Old Dominion University

Following graduation from high school, I enrolled at Old Dominion University. Upon enrollment, I chose Health Service Administrations as my major. Later, I declared Exercise Science as my major which still aligned with my prior interest in the medical field. During the first five years that I spent at ODU, I struggled greatly. The reason for this struggle was due to lack of commitment. At that point in time, I was not sure what type of career I wanted, therefore I did not take school seriously. Consequently, my GPA suffered and over time, I began to feel unproductive.

An additional factor that made this period even harder was seeing students that I graduated high school with moving ahead while I felt stagnant. I watched them graduate on-time and then go off into their careers and achieve accomplishments that I felt I should have achieved by the same time frame. Instead of letting this motivate me to perform better academically, I used this against me. Lack of motivation, loss of confidence, and lack of direction impacted my mindset.

At that time in my academic history, this was one of the worst periods in my academic history. I lacked discipline and direction, and for a prolonged amount of time, I refused to accept full accountability for where I was at. At that point in time, it felt like failure. However, today, I realize this as a critical moment. That critical moment compelled me to acknowledge that

something in my life had to change. That acknowledgment ultimately led to making possibly one of the best decisions of my life, enrolling into the United States Navy.

The Navy: A Turning Point

In 2021, I enlisted into the United States Navy as an Information Technology (IT) Specialist. Enlisting into the Navy was a major turning point in my life. The structured nature of military life coupled with discipline and responsibility were vastly different than anything I had previously experienced. For the first time in my life, I was put into an environment where daily performance was measured and accounted for.

I had to learn quickly, adapt to new technologies and systems, and assume total responsibility for my actions. Through working in IT, I gained experience with network administration, system administration and troubleshooting. Unlike using technology for entertainment purposes, I was responsible for ensuring systems continued to function properly and resolving technical issues when they failed. Working in IT provided me with experience working under extreme pressures and developing critical thinking skills. Most importantly, working in IT showed me that I actually liked working in a technical capacity.

Outside of professional growth and accomplishment, being in the Navy also shifted my perspective on responsibility and independence. Throughout most of my earlier college years, I had no idea how expensive education was until my mother took on that expense for me. Once I matured, that burden weighed heavily on me. At that point in time, I did not want to continue down a path where I wasted time and money on education, especially since so many sacrifices had been made for me by my family. Being in the Navy gave me an opportunity to demonstrate accountability for my educational expenses. Through benefits such as the GI Bill, I was able to continue my education without placing another financial burden on my mother. This had value

for me, both financially and personally. If I was going to return to school at some point in the future; I was determined that it would be with complete accountability for any further educational costs.

Experiencing military life dramatically altered how I viewed myself. I developed greater levels of discipline and confidence in addition to a more positive attitude towards hard work. What had previously felt uncertain had transformed into certainty. For the first time in my life, I felt like I was creating a road map that was uniquely mine.

Returning to School with Purpose

In 2023, while still serving in the Navy, I made the decision to return to Old Dominion University and pursue a degree in cybersecurity. This time, my approach was completely different. Unlike my earlier college years, I now had a clear purpose. I wasn't just attending classes because I was supposed to, I was there because I understood how it connected to my career and future.

Although I originally explored the medical field, technology had always been a part of my life. Growing up, I was naturally drawn to computers and enjoyed learning how to fix technical problems. I found satisfaction in troubleshooting issues and understanding how systems worked. Looking back, this interest had always been there, even if I didn't initially recognize it as a career path.

What stood out to me most was how cybersecurity connected to my earlier interest in physical therapy. In physical therapy, the goal is to identify the root cause of an injury and help someone recover. In cybersecurity, the goal is similar, you analyze systems, identify vulnerabilities or attacks, and work to fix and prevent them. This realization helped me connect my past with my present. Nguyen (2013) explains that constructing a personal narrative allows

individuals to connect their past, present, and future into a coherent story, which helped me better understand how my earlier interests aligned with my current path. I was still solving problems and helping others, just in a different context. The difference now was that I had the discipline and clarity needed to fully commit to this path.

Conclusion

Today, I see myself as someone who has grown through experience, failure, and change. My journey to cybersecurity was not straightforward, but it has been meaningful. I am projected to graduate from Old Dominion University in May 2026, and I now have a clear vision for my future. My goal is to build a career where I can protect systems, solve complex problems, and contribute to something larger than myself.

Looking back, it has taken me nearly ten years to reach this point from when I first started college. At one time, that timeline felt discouraging, especially when I compared myself to others who finished much sooner. However, I have come to understand that everyone's path is different, and my journey required time to shape who I am today.

My story is not finished, it is still being written. Now, I feel confident in the direction I am heading and the purpose behind it. What once felt like uncertainty has turned into clarity, and for the first time, I feel like the story I am telling is truly my own. As I move forward, I carry a mindset shaped by everything I have learned along the way: it doesn't matter how you start, it's about how you finish.

References

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