

A Personal Narrative Covering My Work, Academic, and Internship Experiences

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Abstract

This reflective narrative traces the academic and professional evolution of my time at Old Dominion University, beginning with a personal catalyst and culminating in the transition to an entry-level career. Driven by a familial experience with a phishing scam, the narrative explores the journey through the lenses of narrative identity and experiential learning. The narrative utilizes Emily Esfahani Smith's concept of the "redemption story" to illustrate how early challenges in a high-intensity summer job fostered essential skills in hyper-focus and hyper fixation. These skills proved pivotal during a "nuclear episode" (McAdams, 2001) in a difficult Python programming course, where I transitioned academic struggle to self-taught mastery.

The reflection further examines the "fusion of horizons" (Nguyen, 2013) experienced during a Cybersecurity Analyst internship with the City of Virginia Beach. This professional milestone challenged initial expectations of mentorship and general resources, forcing a reconciliation with the reality of lean, self-reliant Security Operations Center (SOC) environments. By combining these diverse experiences, ranging from labor-intensive manual work to technical network monitoring, I demonstrate a prepared readiness to enter the digital workforce, committed to the proactive defense of users against an always-evolving, threat landscape.

Introduction

The date is April 11, 2026. I'll be graduating college five weeks from today. In about six weeks I'll be starting my entry level career job. Right now, I sit on my couch in my bedroom cooling off from the heat outdoors typing away, with the TV on, just to add some background noise. I've been through four long years of school studying Cybersecurity at Old Dominion University (ODU), in Norfolk, Virginia, and in between that, four long years of ups and downs in work and through internships. Despite being as busy as ever in my life that never seems to slow down, between work, school and job hunting, which thankfully recently concluded, I still sit and reflect on my academic, work, and internship experiences that brought me to where I am at today which I want to share, as a means to express my reflection of these experiences and to showcase what I've learned.

Beginnings

I admittedly experienced much trouble when determining what I would study when attending ODU. I had thoughts of cybersecurity, but I wasn't sold on it. That all changed when my grandmother was scammed and had a sum of money from her bank account stolen. She was scammed by a phishing email posing as her bank, and the email said that her account had been compromised and she needed to click a link to sign in and change her password. In reality, she just gave away her credentials to the scammers, who were able to log into her account and steal her money. That event made me decide to study cybersecurity because I want to help people and prevent events such as this one from happening, and my journey began there.

Work

Going back even before I was accepted into ODU, or applying for college for that matter, I have to mention my summer job when I was 17 I ended up working at past that summer and almost my entire colligate career. I applied to work at a local golf course the summer before my senior year of high school, so I had something to do and some money to spend. The job itself was pretty simple on paper, clean the golf carts with a garden hose, plug them in so they're recharged for the next customer, repeat. I did a little bit more than just that, like filling up water coolers on the course and picking golf balls off the driving range with the cart, but that was about it other than that. So, I thought I was signing up for something pretty simple and hassle free, because nobody plays golf, right? Turns out I was wrong, and lots of people play golf actually, so I ended up cleaning about 100 carts per shift that first summer, even though we only had about 78 in total. We were so busy we would put carts used earlier in the day back out because we had none left available. Carts would pile in the front and be covered in muck, filth, and grime and I was usually the only one to clean it all up. It was initially very difficult for me to perform the duties of my job, because I had not worked in such a high-paced high-intensity environment like that before. I consider this era in my life as a bit of a redemption story. The redemption story is a concept discussed by Emily Esfahani Smith, in her article "The two kinds of stories we tell about ourselves". The redemption story centers around taking low points in academic, work, or internship experiences, and reframing them as high points, where you learned something or recognized you gained a new skill (Smith, 2017). At work, I had to learn how to hyperfocus and work quickly to clean everything up and get everything in order. These high-paced, high-intensity moments of hyperfocus or hyper fixation translated into my academic career, whereas

before I wasn't able to complete schoolwork as diligently or in single, continuous, or perhaps intense manner.

Academics

Completing assignments in college and in high school are two completely different phenoms. High school feels very forgiving to me now, in the sense that mistakes felt less punishing and they could be corrected easily with assistance or guidance. In college, a lot of the learning comes from your end, and you have to teach yourself the concepts, subjects, and skills with little assistance from the instructor. I remember specifically in my sophomore year I was struggling for the first few weeks of my Python class, to the point where I considered switching majors because I just couldn't figure it out. Python is a programming language used by IT professionals to write code. I am not a coder at heart, which made the class difficult, but the concept of teaching the majority of the content to myself was extremely difficult to overcome. Our instructor would post videos on how to do the first few concepts, but then we would have several other concepts to practice and learn that we were completely on our own for with no assistance. Eventually I had my "Nuclear Episode" which is defined by McAdams as consequential scenes in the life story such as high points, low points, and turning points (McAdams, 2001, p. 108). For me, my nuclear episode was the low point of having a failing grade in my python class around mid-semester. I decided at that point that switching majors wasn't an option and I had to lock in, and hyper fixate on the issue of my failing grade, and hyper focus on the content and teaching myself the content to pass. I ended up completely turning that class around and passing with an A. My outstanding work and dedication had rewarded me, and I felt a great sense of satisfaction upon passing. I had become pretty good at

teaching myself by the end of it, which would be important in the next phase of my academic career.

Internship

In “The ePortfolio as a Living Portal: A Medium for Student Learning, Identity, and Assessment” by Celeste Fowles Nguyen, the concept of the “Fusion of Horizons” is discussed, which happens when a previous understanding of a person, place, or event meets a new reality (Nguyen, 2013, p. 137). I can say with certainty that I experienced this phenomenon when completing my internship. I did an internship with the City of Virginia Beach, the governing body of Virginia Beach, Virginia that encompasses the police, fire department, the courts, etc. My role with the city was “Cybersecurity Analyst” and I performed general cybersecurity tasks, such as monitoring network traffic, analyzing reported emails, configuring firewalls, etc. I had several expectations going into the internship, with the biggest being that I would have some sort of training and mentoring as I worked alongside everybody, but that wasn’t the case at all. I slowly was met with the new reality that much of the internship would be working by myself and teaching myself a majority of the programs I utilized during my time there. Learning how to teach myself definitely came in handy for that whole ordeal, but another reality I was met with was the size of the department I worked with. I worked with the Security Operations Center (SOC) team, and in cybersecurity, the SOC team does a lot of technical work, including constant monitoring of the network, threat detecting, and responding to various cyber threats. My expectation was that a team of people with that big of a responsibility would have a large number of resources and people. But it was a team of six people, including me. I guess I should have seen the lack of mentoring coming when I saw the size of the team on my first day.

Conclusion

Looking back, my journey from cleaning golf carts to analyzing network threats feels surprisingly linear. Initially, high-paced and high-intensity work environments were a challenge for me, but I experienced a moment of redemption as I continued to work and gained the skills of hyper fixation and hyperfocus. These two skills became essential when completing my course covering the Python programming language, where I had to utilize these newfound skills to the fullest extent when I had to teach myself so I could pull myself out of failure, or my “Nuclear episode”. My time with the City of Virginia Beach, and the SOC team, provided my “Fusion of Horizons”, which stripped away my expectations of a large, guided environment and instead a lean, self-reliant team. I am no longer somebody who is unsure of their path in life, I am a soon-to-be graduate driven by the memory of my grandmother’s experience and equipped with the knowledge and skills to face a rapidly evolving digital landscape. As I prepare to start my career in six weeks, I understand that while the environment has changed the mission stays the same: lock in, stay focused, and do the work necessary to keep others safe.

References

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