

## **How Success, Second Thoughts and A Love for Science Brought Me to Today**

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## **How Success, Second Thoughts and A Love for Science Brought Me to Today**

It is well past the midnight deadline, yet my C++ program spits out another output that does not quite match the assignment. Here at nearly two in the morning, with a 7:00 a.m. work shift looming, exhausted, and feeling completely burnt out, I realized I was no longer satisfied with my current degree program. The following day, after some reflection, a long chat with my mom, and a meeting with my advisor, I set out on a new academic path that has led me to today. That night, desperately trying to fix my program, was not the only significant moment that led to me today by no means. It has been twenty-two and some change of years of life experience that have built my walkway of life brick by brick. Ultimately, the narrative of my life has been propelled through moments of success and failure and how those moments have impacted me.

### **Background**

I grew up in a small rural county of northern Virginia nestled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains from a modest family. So rural, there are no chain restaurants, big-box stores, or even any traffic lights to be found in the county's borders. Those living in the county were supported by agriculture, the trades, or tourism from the weekend crowd traveling down from Washington, D.C. to see the leaves in the fall or try out the latest winery. My family was no different, as they were largely auto mechanics by trade. From an early age, I was encouraged to study hard to one day have a career that would not grind down my back and knees as manual labor had done to so many relatives before me. I can recall at a young age helping load firewood with my father and older brother in the winter, cold enough to see my breath float in the air, and being told the plan was for me to do good in school, go to the community college the county over, and then my family would somehow figure out how to pay for the rest of my degree.

## **The Early Impact of Science and Technology**

I was always on board with this plan since the trades or manual labor always had little appeal to me. Though from an early age, I was enamored with science and technology which was often encouraged by my family. As common with kids, my fascination at the time would often change, but at their core, they almost always revolved around science and technology. Before I was old enough to attend school, my grandmother would watch me during the day, and part of my daily routine was coming inside to watch this dinosaur docuseries that would come on in the afternoon. On rainy days I would be playing computer games such as Wizard 101 or Club Penguin. One of my favorite toys as a small child was this black and white remote-controlled humanoid robot. Around kindergarten, my fixation was with space and space travel, so I had space-themed bedsheets, a matching bookbag, model rockets on my nightstand, and glow-in-the-dark stars that hang on the ceiling of my bedroom to this day. If asked what I wanted to be when I grew up as a child my answer would constantly change, ranging from being a doctor to an astronaut, video game developer, paleontologist, or wildlife biologist, among countless others. So even if I was not settled on the exact direction I wanted to take in life I did know that I wanted to chase a life of science or technology.

## **Primary and Secondary Education**

Despite this early flair for discovery, starting elementary school took some adjustment. I suddenly found myself attending a large building every day, surrounded by adults I barely knew and kids I did not know at all. While learning to read, write, count, and grasp all the other basics of education was important, these subjects did not initially appeal to me. It was not until around second grade that I started to enjoy learning again as the curriculum began to incorporate more

science and history. Overall, I performed well in school, but I was always the most enthusiastic about science, regardless of the topic, and I excelled in those courses.

In seventh grade, my science fair project, which compared the soil health impact of two different agricultural techniques, was ranked high enough that I was invited to a regional science fair hosted at John Paul Jones Arena at the University of Virginia. While my project did not progress any further, I still felt incredibly proud to have my work honored in such a way. As a twelve-year-old and a massive fan of the Virginia men's basketball team growing up, it felt amazing that my love for science had granted me the opportunity to stand in the middle of that arena.

In high school, I experienced greater success in my science courses, as my biology teacher recognized me in an end-of-year assembly. Around this time, I began leaning toward majoring in biology after high school, hoping to become a wildlife biologist. High school was also when I reignited my interest in technology and computers through elective courses. In my junior and senior years, I had the opportunity to participate in the dual enrollment program, allowing me to complete college courses through a community college while finishing my high school degree. The combination of coursework and the pandemic proved quite challenging, keeping me busy during those two years but also preparing me for what to expect once I entered college fully. In 2021, I walked across the stage in my cap, gown, and matching dark blue face mask to receive my diploma.

### **Community College**

The following fall I would follow the plan laid out while splitting firewood with my father and brother by enrolling at Laurel Ridge Community College. By this point, I was a bit uncertain about the job market with a degree in biology, so I chose to work towards an associate

degree in general studies to keep my options open. Additionally, as much as I had loved biology in high school taking the college-level course just did not provide that same spark. Just like in high school, I kept turning toward computer courses to fill electives. A year out of high school I completed my associate's degree and started to explore my transfer options.

### **Entering the Workforce**

As my time at community college was ending, I began looking for a summer job to save money for tuition in the fall. My only previous work experience was assisting at my father's mechanic shop during the summer, where I learned that the trades were not for me. With some scholarships and graduation card money, obtaining my degree from community college cost me quite little out of pocket; however, I knew the expenses would increase significantly once I transferred for my bachelor's degree. My aunt informed me that her employer, an early childhood education center, was seeking summer help. This position was outside my comfort zone, which turned out to be a positive experience. Working with young children required developing soft skills to complement the technical skills I would gain through college. What started as just a summer job has turned into a position I have held for roughly three years at this point and supported me throughout my college journey.

### **Old Dominion University**

Deciding on where I wanted to transfer to and what I wanted to major in are probably some of the biggest decisions I have had to make in my life. By the end of community college, I was leaning toward studying computer science. My computer-related electives were what I had enjoyed most at Laurel Ridge, so I wanted to explore that world more.

Due to COVID-19, I had grown comfortable with the idea of taking courses online asynchronously. I was also interested in avoiding the financial burden of on-campus living, so I

began discussing my online degree transfer options with my community college advisor. During these talks, Old Dominion and a couple of other universities were brought up as options. I soon scheduled meetings with advisors from those institutions to see where I wanted to transfer to. I was initially most excited by ODU, but my meeting with them left me discouraged as finishing my bachelor's degree would take three years due to how my credits transferred over so I initially ruled ODU out. My credits would have transferred over better than the other options, and it was tempting to finish my degree a year earlier. After giving the choice some more time I concluded that I felt better about the education I would receive at ODU and got back in touch with my contact there on the final day to transfer.

I entered ODU as a computer science major with a minor in cybersecurity, which seemed insignificant at the time because I only chose to have a minor since it would not change the number of courses I needed to graduate. My first year at ODU was a bit of a mixed bag. I enjoyed the programming of computer science, but with having to juggle multiple courses of coding at once it quickly became overwhelming. I found myself having to stay up later and later to make deadlines since I was still working at the daycare for part of the day.

Then there were the math course requirements I also had to meet. Math has never been a strong suit of mine having to withdraw from calculus to avoid failing the course was probably the low point for me in college. Between the multiple coding courses and the math, I simply felt as if I was drowning. I would finish one group of assignments just to have to turn around to get started on the work for the next week. It was like reaching the surface of the water, and taking a big gasp of air because I knew the next wave was going to crash over me. My minor courses in cybersecurity felt like my only relief because I found them so interesting that it almost did not

feel like work at all. This is what led to the night I decided I was no longer happy with the path that I was on and that something needed to change.

Now that minor that felt insignificant at the time is going to be my new major and computer science is my minor. The summer after my first year, I retook calculus and thankfully passed it, feeling excited about the new degree path I was embarking on. From there the rest of my collegiate time has gone fairly smoothly, which is not to say that it has been easy, but I have rarely, if ever, experienced that drowning feeling again.

### **Today**

Looking back, I have certainly carved out my own path to get here today. I was blind to this until I started working on my portfolio, it was only once I started looking back that I could appreciate the journey I have traveled as proposed by Nguyen (2013). Now I am in the final weeks of my degree, still working at the early childhood education center, and nervously excited about what the future might hold. I feel that some might look at my choices and disagree with them. Getting a degree online is far from glamorous, and at times I do regret missing the “college experience” of football and dorm life. I think some might also see that I stayed at a job completely unrelated to my degree instead of seeking out an internship or a position that would provide relevant work experience, but making these choices allowed me to save up and pay my tuition throughout college without acquiring student loan debt and without placing that financial burden on my family, which is something I take great pride in. My identity “takes the form of a story” and has been molded by my personal narrative (McAdams, 2001, p. 101). I have reached this point by following the love and success that science and technology have long since granted me, and by being unafraid to reflect and change course when I needed to.

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