

Reflective Essay on My Bridgewater College Experience

When I arrived at Bridgewater College in 2022, it felt familiar but also had a great deal of uncertainty. I grew up hearing stories about Bridgewater from my parents, who both graduated from this institution in the 1990's. In many ways, Bridgewater already felt like a piece of my family history. In addition, I knew several people who were already enrolled, which gave me the comforting sense that I wouldn't be completely alone as I transitioned into on campus life. Still, despite these familiar ties, stepping onto campus as a new student was both exciting and overwhelming as I had spent the previous two years living at home and attending Blue Ridge Community College and my last two years in high school were altered by COVID. I entered college as a general education major without a clear sense of direction or what I wanted my future to look like. Looking back now, the overarching theme of my Bridgewater experience has been growth through adaptation and discovery. My time here has reshaped my identity, strengthened my skills, and helped me understand not only who I am, but also who I want to become.

Academically, my journey changed a great deal within my first year. I started out without a major because I wasn't entirely sure what field I wanted to pursue. My dad was a Computer Science & Mathematics major, and my mom was Early Childhood Education. While I didn't want to completely take the same path as either of them, I did really enjoy building my own gaming PC with my dad. The general education classes were enjoyable but lacked a sense of purpose or passion. After taking a chance on becoming a Computer Science major, my Cybersecurity classes with Professor Ahmed began to change my focus. His ability to explain complex concepts with clarity and real-world applications opened my eyes to the importance of cybersecurity in a world that was becoming more digital. For the first time, I found myself deeply engaged in coursework—not because I needed to pass a test, but because I was genuinely

interested in the material. His classes helped me realize that technology was not just something I found interesting but was something I could build a career around. In our Networking courses, I learned very crucial skills that would help me later at my current job. Before learning my cybersecurity specialty, I first needed the basics in computer science to succeed. I had many programming classes with Dr. McGregor, where I was forced to learn and adapt. Learning a new programming language can be very difficult. With the knowledge I acquired through these classes, I was able to excel in my programming abilities. One of my more advanced programs involved asking a user to enter two numbers and it would find their common denominator, asked the user to enter a series of numbers and then displayed the reverse of those numbers as typed, and then asked the user to enter any number and the system would take the number and display it in binary form. This project allowed me to not only think about the problem differently, but also think of how I was going about my solution, putting that into words and then eventually in programming code. This showed me a new way to think logically about problems and how they can be solved.

When I first arrived at Bridgewater College, my first class was FILA 350. I originally thought this class was just going to be a run of the mill class that I am just going to pass by without putting as much effort into it as some of my harder, more time consuming classes. But as the semester progressed I was able to make friends in the class and actually be able to engage in the diverse dialogue that was happening. This class took us back in time to look at some famous philosophers and their works such as Plato and Socrates. Taking the FILA 350 course gave me the opportunity to engage more deeply with philosophical ideas, especially when I wrote an essay on Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*. As I analyzed the text, I began to see how the allegory represents the struggle to move from ignorance to understanding, and how difficult it can be to question the "shadows" we accept as truth. This analysis made me reflect on the nature of humans and how something that was so influential from the past can be just as important in our

modern age. This shows how no matter how much we progress as a society, there will always be a part of us that is connected to our ancestors and the people that came before us.

One of the most significant academic experiences of my college years was my Software Engineering project. In this project, my team designed an application intended to help high school football players connect with college coaches and improve their chances of being recruited. This assignment was more than just a grade, it was the first time I had the opportunity to translate my ideas into a fully developed, functional concept. I was able to apply programming skills, collaborate with teammates, and think creatively about how technology could solve real-life problems. Seeing the app come to life reinforced my confidence and gave me a glimpse of what it would feel like to work on a project that might make a difference to someone. It also connected back to my personal interests and background in sports, making the project even more meaningful. That experience was the moment I realized I had chosen the right major. I could finally see a future for myself in technology, cybersecurity, and software development.

Exploring a different culture through my Spanish course has been an eye-opening experience that pushed me to think beyond my usual perspectives and explore something that isn't familiar to me. Learning about traditions, geography, and food in another part of the world helped me recognize how diverse yet interconnected people truly are. Instead of just memorizing vocabulary or grammar rules, this project encouraged me to interact with more of the cultural side of the language, the people and the histories that brought them to who they are today. It reminded me that studying a language is not only about speaking the language, but also about understanding where it comes from and what makes it unique compared to other places. In this project I was tasked with researching the Panamanian cuisine and what it had to offer. Taking this time to research this showed me that though we all may eat different foods, it is shared that as people we all join in community under food even though that food may be different in all parts of the world. My exposure to the Spanish language in high school and at Bridgewater has

inspired me to travel to Mexico several times over the last couple of years to experience its culture and cuisine. This shows that even though we are all from different places, we share the fact that we are all human no matter the location. I can say that prior to my exposure to the diverse student population at Bridgewater and the viewpoint of my Spanish class, I would not have had the interest in travelling there.

One class that was certainly interesting to me as I began a journey into the world of computers, was web design. This class was a challenge to me at first as I didn't know the process of building a website or how much it could be customized. As I progressed through the course I began to enjoy it more and more. With the help of Professor Alabanza and his teaching style, I was able to get comfortable with doing web design using webflow. For our final project, we were given the task of creating a website that would advertise a Yamaha Ninja bike, which allowed me to use my design skills that I had learned in the course. This project took me out of my comfort zone as I had to think less like a programmer and more like a customer. It challenged me to consider real-world elements like branding, user experience, product presentation, and the overall message the website conveys. When designing this site I had to think of what I would want to see if I was going to make a serious purchase such as a motorcycle. This class not only allowed me to further my knowledge in computers and how they operate, but also allowed me to think from a perspective that I would not have normally consider.

Attending Bridgewater College has been an experience that has led me to think about different cultures and perspectives and how they differ from my own. Ever since I was young, I have always known about the country of Japan, but my vision was definitely skewed. I only knew about things like Nintendo and the games I used to play. Later in middle and high school, things from Japanese culture intrigued me such as Anime and the history of the country itself. But while attending Bridgewater I was able to take a class about Japanese culture that really opened my eyes. Learning about how things differ from here in America such as the work

culture and transportation methods really shows how culture can shape the way people think, act, and live. I was tasked with writing a reflective essay on the culture of Japan and how it differs from the culture here in America. As I wrote my essay, I realized how deeply concepts like harmony, respect, and collective responsibility influence everyday interactions in Japan, often contrasting with the more individualistic mindset I'm used to in the United States. This reflection taught me to look at things how they are and then consider why that may be and how it got this way. This reflection helped me appreciate both cultures more fully and reminded me of the importance of understanding perspectives beyond my own.

While academics played a significant role in shaping my time at Bridgewater, the personal growth I experienced was just as important. Transitioning to campus life was a major challenge for me. Living away from home for the first time forced me out of my comfort zone and into situations that required independence, maturity, and adaptability. I struggled at first with this concept. Being in a new environment, sharing a living space, surrounded by unfamiliar faces, and adjusting to college responsibilities all at once took a toll on my mental health. There were times when the combination of academic pressure and personal uncertainty felt overwhelming.

However, this period of discomfort ultimately became one of the most transformative parts of my college experience. Over time, I learned how to take care of myself in ways that I hadn't needed to before. I developed better time management skills, grew more confident approaching others, and learned how to balance school, social life, and personal well-being. One of the biggest changes I noticed was in my communication skills. Over the COVID period and even at Blue Ridge Community College, most of my interactions with others were digital. In person conversations were very limited and I found myself lacking when I arrived on campus. As time went on, I became more comfortable initiating conversations, meeting new people, and expressing myself in both personal and professional settings. These interpersonal skills have shaped who I am today, and I know they will continue to benefit me long after graduation.

Another aspect of campus life that helped my growth was the rules and responsibilities of living in a dormitory. A lapse in judgement on my part caused a rules infraction that led me to meeting with the Student Affairs team. They helped me understand that despite my age, personal lifestyle, or influences, I was not only responsible to myself, but also responsible to those around me who may be influenced by my actions. This gave me a sense that the well-being of the community was more important than myself. That community and its influence also played a key role in my growth. I was involved in both the Esports team and the Golf team during my time at Bridgewater, which helped me meet people with similar interests and provided a sense of belonging. My roommate became one of my closest friends, and my friend Skylar from the softball team consistently supported me throughout the difficulties of college life. My advisor, Dr. McGregor, was also a significant mentor. His guidance not only helped me navigate academic decisions but also provided reassurance during moments when I doubted myself or felt unsure about my direction. Having people like them in my corner helped me feel grounded, even when life on campus was challenging.

Bridgewater's campus culture played a quiet but significant role in shaping my experience. Compared to larger universities, BC has a calm, focused environment that emphasizes academics, respect, and community. This atmosphere allowed me to build strong relationships and find my place without feeling lost in a crowd. I remember my dad telling me stories of what college was like at Virginia Tech compared to his time at Bridgewater College. The close-knit nature of the campus made it easier to make friends and form connections with professors and peers. The emphasis on inclusion and community helped me feel supported even when I was dealing with personal challenges.

Of all the challenges I faced, my mental health was the toughest obstacle. Adjusting to a completely new environment, managing academic expectations, and learning how to live independently created moments of stress and self-doubt. What helped me most was the support

system that was inherently easy to build at Bridgewater such as friends, teammates, mentors, and even casual acquaintances who reminded me that it was okay to struggle and that I wasn't alone. Their encouragement helped me develop resilience, and through that process, I learned to trust myself more. I realized that challenges don't define failure but create opportunities for growth.

In terms of professional preparation, Bridgewater provided me with the foundation I needed for life after college. The digital world is changing so rapidly that most of the content taught to me in the classroom would not be relevant in the real world for very long. However, through my coursework, I developed strong technical skills in areas such as computer networking, cybersecurity principles, and problem-solving strategies that would help me embark on a career that always incorporated learning. Through campus involvement and firsthand experiences, I also built effective communication and teamwork skills which are essential abilities in today's workplace. These strengths helped me secure a job at Augusta Health in the IT department, a position I will begin after graduation. Knowing that I am already taking a solid step toward my career gives me confidence and excitement for the future.

Looking back on my entire college experience, I see just how much Bridgewater College has shaped me academically, personally, and professionally. What began as a step into the unknown became a journey of finding my passions, building meaningful relationships, and learning how to overcome challenges. My college years taught me resilience, adaptability, confidence, and the importance of community which are qualities that I will carry with me long after I leave campus. As I move forward into the next chapter of my life, I feel prepared not only to start my career in IT but also to continue growing, learning, and striving to excel. Bridgewater College didn't just give me an education, it helped me become the person I am today, and I am grateful for every moment that contributed to that transformation.

