

Leadership Essay

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In September 2024, the International Student Office of UVA awarded me the International Student Citizen Leaders Fellowship for a project I designed to demystify cybersecurity for international students. This initiative stemmed from a challenge I had firsthand observed: international students, despite their strong technical backgrounds, struggled to set realistic expectations for the American cybersecurity landscape. The United States' threat models, regulatory frameworks, compliance norms, and disclosure practices differed significantly from those they had encountered at home, creating a gap that impacted their work and, more importantly, their lives.

To close this gap, I designed a series of structured interviews drawing on survey data and my own field experience, providing international students with practical insight into state and federal cyber laws, how the U.S. government operates in the digital domain, the attack vectors most relevant to the American context, and the policy expectations that shape professional practice here. The goal was not to train specialists but to ensure that students were contextually prepared for life in American cyberspace.

This work grew naturally from my role as Graduate Student Representative in the Computer Science department, a position I have held for two consecutive terms. Through governance channels and with a dedicated team, I held informal meetings with the student body to mediate concerns regarding workload, life, and communication gaps. I effectively translated student frustrations into concrete solutions that addressed the issues rather than allowing them to stagnate, building lasting bonds in the process.

As a TA for two courses in my domain for four consecutive semesters, I focused on fostering curiosity and helping them find 'their' solutions rather than providing them with 'my' answers. During my undergraduate years in India, I established and led the first cybersecurity R&D group at my university and conducted security workshops for high school students and local faculty, making technical knowledge accessible to those encountering it for the first time.

Throughout these experiences, I've realized that leadership is about recognizing where individuals lack a clear path they need and helping them build that path. It's less about how 'I' lead and more about what 'we' achieve together.