

## YEAR IN REVIEW

*Fall 2024, Third Semester at University of Cincinnati*

*26 Aug'24 – 14 Dec'24*

### **The Arena of Real Academics: Juggling Roles and Chasing Dreams**

"The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams." - Eleanor Roosevelt

This semester felt like stepping into the main arena. It was time to truly taste what life as a Computer Science and Statistics double major would entail, understanding the roles and opportunities I would be expected to fill. With another demanding 18-credit load, the mission was clear: maintain that perfect GPA while diving deeper than ever before. Courses like Data Science, Regression Analysis, Data Structures, Computer Systems, Python Programming, and Undergraduate Research were not just line items on a schedule; they were the proving grounds.

### **Forging a Dual Edge: The Rigors of CS and Statistic**

Data Structures and Computer Systems were the tough hurdles to clear. Concepts like graphs, red-black trees, linked lists, and sorting algorithms in Data Structures demanded a new level of precision. Simultaneously, Computer Systems threw me into an entirely different challenge: reverse engineering assembly code and debugging using GDB in a Linux environment. We were literally "cracking the code," trying to decipher sequences that would prevent our virtual "bombs" (as the assignments called them) from exploding. It was a fascinating descent into how bits and software operate at their most fundamental level. Data Structures also hammered home the importance of efficient IDE use, maintaining organized files, writing readable code for teammates, and selecting the optimal data structures for any given objective. A key realization post-course: I should have been grinding LeetCode problems concurrently. That consistent practice with various structures and logical algorithms would have been invaluable for developing critical thinking and sharpening my algorithm development skills.

Meanwhile, Data Science and Regression Analysis were where I felt a spark. After an initial struggle in the first few weeks and the midterm for Data Science (navigating R Tidyverse, Quarto Documentation, and Python's Pandas, Matplotlib, etc.), something clicked. I performed exceptionally well in the final examination, and it became clear: this is what I am good at, this is what I want to pursue. The idea of a dream surrounded by numbers, deciphering patterns, and drawing insights felt incredibly compelling.

My Undergraduate Research experience was a different kind of education, teaching me to appreciate the intricate process behind developing something new. I delved into concepts like engineering ideologies, effective question design, qualitative and quantitative analysis, survey development, and coding qualitative data. This semester-long endeavor was designed to help me discover my interests and contribute to a project analyzing the impact of generative AI on engineering courses and student thinking—a truly cutting-edge exploration.

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### **Beyond the Classroom: The RA Mantle and Community Building**

I still vividly remember the moment I received an unexpected email offer to be a Resident Advisor (RA) at CRC and Dabney Hall, mentoring 700 students. I had applied back in my first semester, interviewed in Spring 2024, and landed in the eligibility pool. After patiently waiting and reiterating my passion to Community Coordinators, I was overjoyed to accept the offer while on a trek with poor connectivity. I recall the mix of emotions I felt - excitement, nervousness, and a sense of responsibility - but I knew that this was an opportunity I couldn't miss.

My experience as an RA began with a transformative 14-day training program that prepared me for a significant commitment to supporting and leading my fellow students. The training covered key topics, including emergency preparedness, incident reporting, and response protocols. I was impressed by the thoroughness of the program and the emphasis on creating a safe and inclusive community. As an RA, I was responsible for weekly on-call duties, including two to three weekend shifts per month, during which I would conduct rounds of the residence hall with my co-RA, ensuring the building was safe and secure.

One of the most rewarding aspects of my role was conducting one-on-one conversations, known as "Bearcat Chats," with my residents. These conversations provided a safe space for students to share their concerns, struggles, and successes, and I was humbled by the trust they placed in me. I learned the importance of active listening and empathy in building strong relationships and creating a welcoming environment. I also had the opportunity to lead floor meetings and organize community events, which helped me develop my leadership and communication skills.

Overall, my experience as an RA was life-changing, teaching me the value of hard work, teamwork, and empathy. I developed strong relationships with my residents, many of whom I still keep in touch with today. I am grateful for the lessons I learned, the relationships I formed, and the memories I created, and I am proud to say that being an RA made me feel truly at home at the University of Cincinnati.

### **Sharing Knowledge, Sharpening Skills: The Peer Career Coach Experience**

The Peer Career Coach (PCC) position in the Bearcat Career Studio, which I had accepted in Spring, began this Fall. It was exciting, though I was initially unaware of how it would intertwine with academics and my co-op search. Being a PCC allows me to practice and fulfill a passion for teaching at a professional level.

Thanks to an excellent team, the role never felt like a burden; instead, its subjective and creative nature fostered my growth. I have always believed that teaching is a powerful way to learn and re-learn. I was constantly revisiting industry expectations for resumes, interviewing techniques, cover letters, follow-up emails, and elevator pitches. I also unlocked the true potential of LinkedIn—its filters, the nuances of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd-degree connections, and crafting effective outreach messages.

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### **The Co-op Odyssey: Navigating the Quest for Experience**

"Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." – Samuel Beckett

As a student in a co-op program, I was consistently applying to a multitude of opportunities that aligned with my interests and skills. It is only when you start applying that you realize just how much more there is to learn and implement; you encounter people who have achieved amazing innovations. Initially, applications felt like a piece of cake. However, the silence that follows submissions can be incredibly frustrating. I soon realized that personalized resumes, tailored cover letters, and referrals were crucial for getting leads and landing interviews. With no local support system, cracking this was a significant hurdle. LinkedIn became my go-to app, constantly checking for leads and connections.

My interviewing journey began with the University Research CO-OP Fellowship (URCF) program. Having already served as a research assistant, I felt this should be an easy win. I met with four professors about different CS-related projects. To my shock, I was not accepted for any. The informational meetings had been so promising that I had not prepared a backup plan. The rejection was harsh. From that day, I ramped up my applications, not just in the US but also in Spain, France, India, and Germany, hoping for an internship. Hearing about the hundreds of applications my peers were submitting, I got caught up in a numbers game, neglecting the quality of my own submissions. This reality hit hard, and I shifted my focus to quality.

Consistent, targeted, and curated applications finally yielded a screening from Possip, a Tennessee-based startup focused on data-driven feedback solutions for community engagement. Around this time, I was also interviewing with Cintas for a summer mobile application development intern position and another data analyst role. I was incredibly excited and went above and beyond in my preparation, reaching out to UC alums working there to understand their business fundamentals and how I could be an impactful candidate. Despite all the efforts, I never heard back from Cintas. This was heartbreaking.

As rejections piled up, I was also discussing a potential semester deferral with my advisors to postpone my coop. Unfortunately, they dismissed this possibility outright. This left me with two unappealing options: secure a coveted experiential learning opportunity in the USA or return to India, both of which felt like a step backward. The prospect of returning home empty-handed was particularly daunting, filled with a sense of personal disappointment.

It is my tendency to face reality and grow from it. What good is resentment if you are not ready to accept and move forward? Sometimes, it is not just effort but also compatibility that matters. Following a brief follow-up email on my Possip screening submission, I was pleased to receive an interview invitation for the Data Specialist Intern position. With Winter break looming and Spring hiring nearing its close, this opportunity felt like my last chance for the semester. I was genuinely drawn to Possip's mission and values, which made the interview process even more engaging. After our conversation, a former Possip intern kindly submitted a referral on my behalf, further bolstering my hopes. The waiting period that ensued was marked by anticipation,

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with my self-imposed two-week deadline ticking closer. Then, on a Monday, 13 days post-interview, the email I had been eagerly awaiting arrived at 1:20 PM: an offer letter from Possip. I felt an undeniable surge of joy and a significant boost in confidence. I quickly shared the news with my family, thrilled to have secured a role that not only aligned with my interests but also promised flexibility and growth opportunities.

Throughout this entire co-op search, I truly learned to trust the process and believe that sometimes, all you can do is focus on the present problem, give your best, and let the rest unfold. I learned to be compassionate and respectful. I now have a diary filled with interview questions and my reflections. One thing is certain: with every interview, I have become more self-aware. The nervousness that was once a hurdle has transformed into a weapon, enabling me to present myself flawlessly and articulately. Interviewing is not about portraying a perfect version of yourself according to a job description; it is about offering your best self-reflection so they can understand you within that brief 30–45 minute timeframe.

### **Advice to Past-Self for Present and Future Success**

- **Co-op Campaign Craftsmanship:** Remember that quality trumps sheer quantity in applications. Personalized resumes and cover letters, coupled with strategic networking and referrals, are your most potent tools. Rejection is part of the process; resilience and a proactive follow-up strategy can turn tides. Do not let initial setbacks derail your focus or lead to neglecting your well-crafted plan.
- **Embrace the Power of Proactive Patience:** The RA offer came after persistent, polite follow-up. The Possip offer came after diligent work and waiting. While it is vital to be proactive, there are times when, after doing all you can, you must patiently trust the process. Channel nervous energy into productive tasks rather than worry.

### **Reflecting back**

Fall 2024 was a semester of profound immersion – into the depths of my chosen majors, into the responsibilities of leadership and mentorship as an RA, into the practical world of career coaching as a PCC, and most intensely, into the often-turbulent waters of the co-op search. It was a period of juggling demanding commitments, facing significant anxieties, and ultimately, achieving a crucial victory that boosted not just my resume, but my self-belief. Each challenge, from deciphering assembly code to navigating interview rejections, forged a stronger, more resilient, and more self-aware individual. I learned that with focused effort, a willingness to adapt, and a belief in one's path, even daunting obstacles can be overcome. This semester was not just about learning; it was about becoming.