

A Reflective Journey: Navigating Your Cumulative Experience at Iowa State University

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Nowadays, looking back at my experience as a student from Colombia living in the United States, I can say it has not been easy. Every day I have to face the challenge of speaking a second language, adjusting to a culture that is very different from the one I grew up in, and learning how to succeed in a new educational system. At the beginning, it felt like almost everything in my daily life was different: the social dynamics, the schoolwork, and even the way people interacted. But over time, I discovered that these challenges became opportunities, and that my journey at Iowa State University has transformed me both as a student and as a person.

One of the most critical areas where I grew was through my on-campus jobs. Working as a Facility Supervisor at Rec Services was not just about managing a building; it was about learning to lead. I had to make decisions in real time, handle different stressful situations from emergencies that required calling EMS to dealing with aggressive patrons, to support others when they needed me. It made me realize that leadership is not only about giving instructions, but also about listening and adapting. Taking LDST 3220 showed me how to be a better leader and what it actually means to be a leader. As an international student, it was not always easy to gain the trust of people who came from different backgrounds, but little by little, I learned how to communicate better and become more confident in that role.

At the same time, my job with Biology IT gave me a different kind of challenge. I had to set up complex equipment, troubleshoot machines such as qPCR systems, and help faculty and staff with their technology needs. At first, I worried about making mistakes in English while explaining things, but I quickly saw that clarity, patience, and professionalism mattered more than speaking ideally. This experience taught me how much technical knowledge and communication skills complement each other.

In the classroom, I faced some of my toughest academic challenges. In CPR E 310 and in my VHDL processor projects, I learned what it meant to debug and design at a deep level. I still remember struggling with the barrel shifter implementation in the ALU; it felt impossible at first, but it taught me perseverance. In COM S 309, building an Android app with Spring Boot and WebSockets showed me how complicated teamwork and integration can be, but also how rewarding it is to see a complete system working. And in EE 2320, I realized how important it is to think beyond the technical. That class helped me understand the ethical side of engineering, reminding me that our work affects society, the environment, and even people's privacy.

Other courses also shaped my perspective. In CPR E 4300/5300, I learned about cybersecurity risks that do not stop at borders but impact global infrastructures. When we studied cases like Cambridge Analytica, it made me think seriously about how much responsibility engineers have when it comes to protecting data and people's trust. For me, this was a turning point because it helped me see that engineering is not just about efficiency; it is about integrity.

Outside of formal classes, I also challenged myself with independent work. One of my proudest moments was my Raspberry Pi trash-collecting robot project, where I used YOLO, Coral AI, and path-planning algorithms, a project where I had to think outside the box, learn on my own, do research and long hours to meet deadlines. It showed me that with creativity and persistence, I could bring an idea to life, even if it required long nights of research and trial and error. As someone who came from another country, projects like this were also a way for me to prove that I could belong here and that I could turn ideas into reality; it showed that I have the skills and perseverance to be here.

Finally, I cannot forget the role of leadership in my journey. My coursework in *Engaging in the Leadership Process* made me think deeply about identity and capacity. John Wooden's

definition of success—“ Success is peace of mind, which is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you did your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming.”—is something I carry with me (Wooden, 2001). From being a soccer team captain in high school to supervising staff at Rec Services, I learned that leadership requires empathy, adaptability, and responsibility.

Now, when I look back, Iowa State has been more than just a university. It was the place where I grew into who I am today. Coming from Colombia made things more complicated, but it also gave me a unique perspective that I will carry for life; my experience here has been nothing but amazing, it has definitely shaped my personality and the type of person I am, the type of engineer and professional I will be. I learned that leadership comes with responsibility, that ethics must always guide technical skills, and that continuous learning is the only way to keep growing. What started as a search for an education became a journey of personal and professional transformation that I will always value.

References:

- john r wooden. <https://www.victorbilson.com/tag/john-r-wooden/>