Digital Tech College & Career Readiness Series
Day in the Life of a Digital Tech Major

Tasha Washington
Welcome everyone, to our digital tech credential career readiness series. My name is Tasha Washington and I work for the Capital CoLab at the Greater Washington Partnership. I'm joined here by a wonderful speaker here today Ashley Spangler, who is a graduating senior at Virginia Tech. Today our panel is, "A Day in the Life of a Tech Student" and Ashley is going to talk to us about being a Tech student at Virginia Tech, so let's get started.

Ashley Spangler
My name is Ashley, I am a current senior at Virginia Tech finishing off my last semester, which is a little crazy for me even to think about. My major is revolving around tech, so I'm a systems biology major with a minor in data and decision, so we do a lot of data analysis within that minor, and then I'm also a digital tech student so I'm completing the Digital Tech CoLab Credential as well.

Tasha Washington
Awesome. Thanks so much, Ashley. One of the questions that I just have for you is why did you choose Virginia Tech?

Ashley Spangler
Yeah, so I mainly chose Virginia Tech because I knew I wanted to do something revolving around stem. I know that they have a really good STEM program, whether it's engineering, science, the school is known for that. So that was one reason right off the bat I wanted to make sure that I was getting a good education wherever I went, and then also just when I toured Virginia Tech. I fell in love with the campus. I fell in love with the drillfield just, everyone around felt like a family, always supporting each other, always had the school spirit that I was looking for. So I'd say once I came to campus and toured that's what really secured my decision.

Tasha Washington
Perfect, so right after touring you knew that it was the place for you.

Ashley Spangler
Right. Yep, I did. I toured other schools and I just wasn't getting that same feeling as I was at Tech, and you know for any high schoolers out there looking for a college to attend, I feel when you visit it in person or just even do a virtual tour, because I know there's a lot of those right now, you'll get that feeling that it feels like home, that it feels like somewhere that you want to be all the time that you're comfortable in that location. So, definitely keep that in mind.

Tasha Washington
Awesome, thanks Ashley, that's a good point with virtual tours, which I think is a big thing for us right now. So, I want to know a little bit more about how you chose your major. I know myself

when I entered college I had no idea what I wanted to study, so kind of walk us through that process and how you chose this major.

Ashley Spangler
Yeah, absolutely. So, a little fun fact, I actually did not come into college as a systems biology major, I was majoring in just general biological sciences, because I thought I either wanted to go to vet school and become a veterinarian or work in a lab of some sort. So right around my fall semester of my sophomore year I started realizing, yeah I have an interest in biology, but something just wasn't being fulfilled and I wasn't really sure what it was, whether or not I was just totally not feeling the Life Science classes anymore or, you know, if I just kind of needed something a little different. So I actually went to the Career Center here at Virginia Tech and was helped to try to figure out my interests, my skill set, and what I want to do after college. I took some personality tests to try to figure out how all that meshes. And that's where I really found systems biology. The key difference between the two majors is that systems biology deals with more computer science statistics and math to analyze biological systems. So that's when I kind of figured out that the problem solving aspect of more of a technology focus major and the coding and the math was what I was missing from just a biology degree. So that's why I switched to systems biology, I just wanted that challenge, I'm a data analytical mindset person,so this major definitely complements that along with my minor in data decisions. That's how I figured out my major. I'd say, a little advice, it's okay to switch your major, you might go into college thinking like me, you want to go to med school or you know want to be a doctor, and then realize halfway through that it's just not for you. So changing your major is completely fine, not knowing what major you want to go into is also totally fine. If you're in that position I recommend going in as undecided "university studies," so that you can take a bunch of classes in different subjects to figure out what subjects you want to major in.

Tasha Washington
Perfect Ashley, and I think you are spot on with changing your major. It's certainly okay. I didn't know this Ashley, but I came in as a bio pre med major, too, and then completely changed subjects and studied history, so the complete opposite. I think it's really cool to go ahead and switch your majors if it's not working out for you, it's certainly okay to do.I had a question for you about the career exploration. Were you exposed to this very early on, or how, what were your thoughts on that? Like, why is it really important for students to do a little of that?

Ashley Spangler
Yeah, absolutely. I think that's probably one of the biggest regrets I have coming into college is not really looking at what goes beyond your major. I feel like it's very high focus Wwat you should study but not specifically on how what you're studying will turn into when you graduate, what type of job you might get with that major. My parents have always been very supportive, they want me to study and pursue what I love, as well as make sure I'm financially stable and independent when I graduate college. So I'd say, thinking about what you want to do after college with your degree is very important. Granted, your degree doesn't specifically mean you can only, you know, go to this type of job or work in this type of field. You know, so I would just

say, that's one thing I have advice wise for anyone coming into college is make sure that you are studying something you enjoy, but make sure that that's going to lead to a job that you want to do, like look at how the two connect. I just think there wasn't enough at least when I came into college, about that, it wasn't really how your major would turn into what you want to do with your life, it was just like what do you want to study and then you'll figure out the rest. I think the two go hand in hand and need to be looked at together.

Tasha Washington
Absolutely agree. Again myself didn't know what I was going to do with the history degree I just knew that I loved studying and researching and turning that into your own sort of profession as you said like it's not going to pigeonhole you into a certain career you can really do all types of things with different degrees. I love to really hear that. Ashley, I know that we have worked together in the past and you talked about your involvement on campus. Tell us, tell the students about that and any opportunity about what you do on campus and your involvement.

Ashley Spangler
Yeah, so I'd say besides you know my academics, my major involvement here at Virginia Tech, I'm actually a part of a social sorority here Virginia Tech. It's called Alpha Sigma Kappa and it's for women in STEM technical studies. So, fun fact, the chapter that I'm a part of, it's called the Omicron chapter of Alpha Sigma Kappa, actually did not exist when I was a freshman. So a group of girls and I that share the common interest and passion of STEM wanted some sort of organization, in a sense, that would bring us all together and allow us to become better friends and just, a group of girls that share that common interest. We weren't really getting that with some of the other Panhellenic sororities here at Virginia Tech. Granted, we are a social sorority, but one of our key pillars or key focuses is academics in addition to sisterhood, so we just kind of wanted something that would bring the two together because, as a stem major your top priority is your academics and that takes a lot of time. So we built the chapter here at Virginia Tech and it's been an amazing experience. Besides that I was also the Vice President for the past year. So I dealt with a lot of just the day to day things like keeping tabs on risk management for the chapter, you know attendance for events. So I really got more involved than just being a member of the sorority but I was on the executive board for a few semesters as well.

Tasha Washington
Thanks, Ashley. Yeah, it's great that you saw a need on campus for individuals like yourself and you were able to work together and form this bond as you said, and sisterhood, and it's focused around STEM and academics and you've had that support, which is really awesome and most colleges allow you to do that, right, like create your own clubs and organizations, where you see a need and you can fit in, so it's really awesome, actually, I'm glad that it's such a huge success, right now, too. I know that students right now are in this virtual space and doing virtual learning and yourself, as well. Tell us a little bit more about that experience and what it has been like for you.

Ashley Spangler

Yeah, so when everything kind of shifted to virtual learning, I was in my junior year, it was spring semester about a year ago in March. I'd say that was definitely a little bit of a hard transition just because of how abrupt it was. We went home for spring break and then it was like, Yeah, you're not coming back to Tech. So I definitely learned something trying to adjust that quickly going from, you know, a fully in-person to a fully-online environment. I'd say the biggest adjustment is just time management, you don't have that structure of, okay, I have this class at this time that it needs to attend in person from Monday Wednesday Friday. Granted, some of my classes did kind of stay in that synchronous format where we just met via Zoom during our normal class time but some of them also switched to where the professor would just upload lecture videos and it was up to you to go and watch them. So, I'd say that was a big learning curve, it's just time management, even for those classes where the lectures were just posted and you had to watch them on your own time keeping still a strict schedule of when you're going to watch those lecture videos, was a big thing for me I kind of made sure that I had a plan for every day and I kept on top of those videos and kept on top of my assignments. So I'd say one tip I guess going from, you know that in person to a virtual environment is to still keep a schedule for yourself every day like get up around the same time, get dressed. I know I had to add my pajamas all day. I was at home so why not. Now I definitely say like you know getting dressed for the day, making a to do list or whether you do that or you time block. just holding yourself accountable like you normally would with a person, kind of my biggest tip would be nonsense. I know if I don't do that I kind of fall behind for those classes where I might not have a lecture to attend it's like, oh, I can just watch this, you know, later on, for instance, I can watch it the next day the next day and then the next day turns into like three weeks and I went through a class, so.

Tasha Washington
Yeah, and I think that's spot on, Ashley about sort of maintaining and keeping your schedule, and it allows a little bit of normalcy and accountability, as you said, going into your courses knowing that I have this view at this time or you to watch this this time and following that strict schedule. I think it's been really helpful for a lot of our students to do in higher ed, and I'm sure for our students to K through 12. Awesome, thanks Ashley. So I guess I want to talk a little bit more about your plans after graduation. I know that we've had a few conversations but talk to us about that as I know that you're kind of wondering I was, what happens after graduation in this now, lonely world.

Ashley Spangler
Yeah, for sure. So, I do have a plan. I'm very fortunate that I do, so I will be working and starting in June for Freddie Mac as a single family analyst and their college cohort, so that will be in Tyson's Corner, Virginia. I believe we will probably start virtually just, you know, with everything going on. I'd say the process was definitely different between trying to find a job after college, you know, pre COVID versus COVID because everything is virtual. All the career fairs that I had to go to, all my interviews were done virtually. So, for all of that I would just say, when it comes to you know any type of virtual interview or if you're going to any type of, say, or even like some sort of, I know some colleges do work to do interviews, which I'm sure will be virtual treat it as if it's an in-person interview, so do the same amount of prep work you know prep for the interview look into whatever you need to look into XYZ. For me it was looking into the company looking

into the condition that I applied for and just being prepared. And also, dressing the way for a regular interview. I know it's so hard to just, oh well I'll look nice from like the top. I found it actually very helpful to get fully dressed like I even figured out the shoes I wouldn't say go with the shoes. I wore I wore the pants I wore you know the blouse and everything and just treat it as a regular interview even though you're sitting in your room, and you're doing it. I would say the one, kind of, I guess pro to virtual interviewing is that, you know, you might be able to have that little cheat sheet with you like right next to the corner of your computer or we have like kind of a shared screen or split screen going on. You can have a few notes on the side but for the most part, I'd say prepare as you would for an in person interview even though it is virtual.

Tasha Washington
Great Ashley and that's a great point. I don't think we have talked about how to interview, at least for the students here and how to interview with a virtual world and having that cheat sheet that's a really good idea actually. Yeah. Here in the partnership too, we get dressed up from the top up as well but it's like you look the part as you said, and so I think that's really important and doing your research on the companies as you would a normal interview and treating it as such is spot on. Ashley, I guess I also want to know a little bit more about what you like to do for fun, and sort of your mental health right now with everything going on.

Ashley Spangler
Yeah, absolutely. So I'd say it's a little different from what I would do if you know all of my classes were in person and one tip I do have and the reason that my stuff is a little different, is that we're staring at a screen all day, you know with the verb like the virtual life right now all my classes are online. science are literally sitting at my desk from nine to five staring at a computer screen. So I'd say one kind of tip I have for any students that are also doing virtual, you know, high school learning or whatever it may be, get out and go for a walk or read a book do something where you're not staring at a screen. I used to, one of my things for fun is I would go and surf the internet or watch TV, watching movies with friends, but with this whole virtual environment I do try to also do some stuff that's off screen like go on a walk. I like to bake. You know, do some exercise outside. I like to do yoga videos, I've gotten into that over this past year. Just some very, very basic things, but that is one tip I definitely have, if you've been staring at a screen all day just get outside go on a walk or take class outside if you can. I know my friends we've been doing that we'll go to Virginia Tech sit on the drillfield, you know, socially distance, and we'll just take our classes kind of together outside.

Tasha Washington
That's awesome. I love that idea. I sometimes take my meetings outside as well, just to break up the day to write as you started and go for walks to clear my mind by getting out and doing something very active, instead of just staring at my screen all day. I love that you also have a bit of normalcy and you go into campus and do your classes there so that's super fun.

Ashley Spangler
Yeah, for sure I do miss campus so it's nice to just like go on occasion, go for a walk, meet a few friends and have a picnic outside. Especially with the weather starting to slowly get nicer.

Tasha Washington

We were as well here outside enjoying the beautiful weather and as you said it's breaking and it's gonna be fun to do this. Now, in this virtual virtual space. Awesome, well Ashley, do you have any final advice that you can offer for students in this space about anything at all or anything you want to say to the students right now.

Ashley Spangler

Yeah, I mean, I know it's kind of hard with everything virtual right now, but you know eventually the hope is, you know everything will be back in person. I'd say for now just kind of do the best you can. Don't get too down on yourself if something doesn't work out, because of the virtual environment I have some friends and know some of my fellow classmates that struggle a little bit with the whole virtual environment and stuff. So, one thing is just don't be too hard on yourself, this is a hard time for everyone. And if you're interested in also, pivoting to another point, in STEM, or in the tech field, do some research I'd say, talk to some people that have maybe studied what you want to study in college or, you know, interview some people that are just have a conversation with them about their days working in the tech world to see if it's a fit for you. So I'd say just keep your options open. Explore your interests. Don't feel you have to settle on something when you go into college for instance like I was major. I applied for it you know I got accepted like you can change your mind you can change your major. Yeah, pretty much and just enjoy, enjoy the outside.

Tasha Washington

That's really good advice, Ashley, to our students and I think it really want to stress upon this idea of exploring all the careers, like there's so many things that you can do right now in the tech world. I know for myself, I wish that a proven system like the capital colab digital tech credential when I was in school, you know, sort of studying history and then getting something adjacent and tech would have been really awesome so you can explore so many things I'm in college so we are very thankful that you joined and decided to talk with us about your day in the life of a tech student, and thanks everyone for watching, and the day.

Ashley Spangler

Thank you. Yeah, it was. It was great being able to do that again so yeah everyone, have a good day.

Tasha Washington

Thank you for listening. On behalf of the Capital CoLab, thank you for joining the Digital Tech College and Career Readiness Series, feel free to visit capitalcolab.com