

Geofrey Nyakairu

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Winter 2026 International Student Experience Scholarship

Embracing Diversity: An essay discussing the cultural experience as an international student in America.

Being of mixed blood in my country was always met with predatory eyes. On one hand people around me expected me to be of a wealthy background and I would be treated like some sort of foreigner and on the other bitter eyes perceiving me as a child born to elevate my family's status. In a sense, even from my own place of birth I didn't feel like I belonged. "The heavens thought it would be better if the world was occupied with many kinds of people", A quote from my beloved mother, that got me through instances when I felt unwanted or shunned and at the same time lighting in me a flame of compassion for those who felt different. Said flame burns brightly even now as I traverse the beauty that is the United States of America.

Nothing prepares you for Michigan in winter. No photograph, no warning, no amount of layering prepares you for stepping out of an airport and having the warmth ripped from your hands in a single second. It was not a gradual chill. It was immediate and total and absolutely merciless. I stood there shivering, watching snow drift past the headlights of passing cars, and I laughed out loud. I laughed because I was freezing and overwhelmed and more alive than I had ever felt in my life. I had made it. I was here. Eager to learn and interact with as many people as possible.

Orientation day for international students arrived wrapped in childlike wonder. I walked into that room and saw students from every corner of the earth filing in, each carrying their own invisible weight of newness. I wanted to speak to every single one of them. That evening at a

social dinner I met Mahara Rikuto, a geology student from Japan also looking for his first friend. We started with a simple hello and within minutes we were deep in conversation, swapping stories about home, about family, about what we left behind. He showed me pictures of his hometown and walked me through Japanese etiquette with the pride of someone who genuinely loves where they come from. I showed him my home town and talked a lot about our food and the scenic beauty that is Kenya. By the end of the night, we had bought tickets to an ice hockey game. Neither of us had ever seen the sport. On the day of the game, we met and headed downtown to watch the game. We got lost. We ate hotdogs. We almost got a T-shirt. We celebrated scores. We took pictures and later on had some great food.

Roommate culture was something I had never experienced at all and when classes were close to starting, I was anxious as to who my roommates would be and if I would be able to vibe with them. I was anxious. I was scared, but I was also hopeful and intrigued that I may make a friend whom I may be close to as a distant sibling. When they came, we vibed. We talked about the cultural differences and identified similarities among us and as a token of gratitude I decided to make a homemade meal which I could share with them. I cooked ugali, the staple of my home in Kenya, one of them looked at it with the polite hesitation of someone who did not want to be rude. I did not push and accepted it might be too unfamiliar. Instead, I started smaller. Rice and chicken stew, made exactly the way it is made at home, nothing adjusted, nothing softened for a foreign palate. They ate it. Then they went back for more. Then they asked about the leftovers with the kind of enthusiasm that is the highest compliment a cook can receive. Later I made donuts and they were gone before I had time to think about it. That kitchen became a place of exchange in both directions. What I brought to the table they received without hesitation and what they shared with me I took in the same spirit. We talked late into the night about our

cultures, our families, our languages. I taught them words from home. Watching them wrestle with sounds their mouths had never made before, the laughter when they got it wrong and the genuine delight when they got it right, is one of the small joys I will carry from this year.

Exchange with my roommates was not always about food or language. Sometimes it was a chair. Back home most products arrive already assembled. You order something, it comes ready, you use it. So when a flat pack box showed up at the apartment with a diagram inside that looked like it was designed to humble you, I sat with it for a long time. My roommate Jacob sat down next to me and we spread the pieces across the floor and worked through it together, bolt by bolt, piece by piece, late into the night. At some point it stopped being about the chair entirely. We were just two people figuring something out together, laughing at the instructions, celebrating each piece that clicked into place. When we finally sat in it we were unreasonably proud of ourselves. That chair taught me something the kitchen never could. Building a life somewhere new is not so different from building furniture you have never seen before. You need patience, the right instructions, and someone willing to sit on the floor with you until it is done.

Church culture opened a door I did not expect. A Korean leader welcomed me into her community with warmth that crossed every language barrier. She walked me through her mission, her dream of building a space where international students from every background could gather and share faith together. She fed me my first home cooked Korean meal that evening and I had no words for how it felt to be fed so generously by someone whose world was entirely new to me. It was also at church where I ended up on one side of a ping pong table facing a group of children who wanted to play. I obliged. I kept the ball low, attacked the angles, controlled the pace the way you learn to after two or three years of competitive play. One of them stopped and asked if I had played before. I told them I had played professionally through to

regionals and nationals back home. The looks on their faces were worth everything. What followed was less of a game and more of a lesson, and I gave it with everything I had. Teaching something you love to someone who is just discovering it is one of the purest forms of sharing there is.

Work culture is a lot more welcoming than what I had experienced but I give credit to my supervisors and coworkers who made it a lot easier to learn and be part of the system. My supervisors and coworkers were curious about where I came from and I found myself sharing more than I planned. We talked about Kenya, about how marriage works differently across tribes, about bride price and the traditions that surround it. I told them about engagements where the groom must identify his bride from a crowd of women, a test of knowledge and love all at once. I told them about families who receive cows as dowry, about the weight and meaning behind the gesture. They listened with wide eyes and genuine wonder. Those conversations were not lectures. They were windows, opened from both sides. One phrase became a legend in the office. Furahi-day. I built it by folding Friday into “Furahi”, the Swahili word for happy. In a sense meaning happy day. They loved it immediately and it became a weekly ritual.

I came to America anxious about fitting in and fearful at the thought of rejection. What I found here was not a resolution to that complexity. It was a community that welcomed and embraced me. Every international student I have met carries their own version of the in-between. And in that shared experience I have found the most genuine belonging I have ever known. The world is indeed richer because it is made of many kinds of people. I know that now not as a belief but as something lived, tasted, laughed over, and carried home in both hands. Every friendship, every meal, every mispronounced word, every Furahi-day that made a long week feel like a celebration.

To those arriving at GVSU wondering whether you will find your people here, you will. They may not look like you or speak like you or eat what you eat. But they are out there at orientation dinners and ice hockey games and Chinese New Year celebrations, waiting for someone to walk over and say hello. The world is waiting to meet you.