

International Student Experience Scholarship – Winter 2026

Grand Valley State University

Volunteerism & Leadership

The first time I stood in front of a room full of new international students during orientation, my hands were shaking. It wasn't because I was unprepared. It wasn't even because I was afraid of public speaking. I was afraid of being someone's first impression.

As an Orientation Leader for two years, I quickly realized that I was often one of the first faces international students saw when they arrived in the United States. For many of them, I was not just introducing campus resources, I was representing belonging, safety, and possibility. That responsibility felt heavy.

Talking to new people did not come naturally to me at first. I remember being the quiet student when I first arrived, unsure how to start conversations, worried about my accent, and constantly questioning whether I truly fit in. Now, I was the one expected to make others feel comfortable. I had to learn how to step out of my own insecurities and focus on theirs. I practiced listening more intentionally. I learned to read nervous body language. I reminded myself that sometimes leadership is simply offering reassurance with a smile.

The hardest part was understanding that first impressions matter deeply. A single interaction could shape how someone viewed their entire experience at Grand Valley. I asked myself constantly: Am I creating warmth? Am I creating safety? Am I showing them that they belong here?

One moment changed how I viewed leadership entirely.

Months after orientation ended, a student came to me on campus. She came as a J-1 international student, and I recognized her face immediately. She told me she had been overwhelmed when she first arrived, confused about how to find a job, how to navigate campus, how to build connections. She said our conversations during orientation changed her perspective and gave her confidence. She took my number, and we stayed in touch. Even though she has returned home, we continue to talk.

At that moment, I understood something powerful: leadership is not measured in titles. It is measured in impact.

Her words meant more to me than any position I have held. Knowing that I had helped shape someone's experience, that I had made her transition smoother and less lonely, reminded me why I chose to serve in the first place.

My involvement at Grand Valley expanded from that realization. As an International Student Representative for the Student Senate, I worked to ensure international voices were included in technical spaces where they are often underrepresented. As Vice President of the Indian Student Association, I helped create events where culture was celebrated rather than hidden. Through Women in Computing and Women in Cybersecurity, I supported spaces where women in technology could feel empowered instead of intimidated. For two years as an IT Worker and Promotions Office Worker, I learned to balance professionalism with approachability, understanding that service, whether technical or social, always centers people.

What has been unique about my experience as an international student is that I did not simply adapt to my environment, I helped shape it while still learning myself. I was growing alongside the very students I was guiding. I learned that leadership does not require perfection. It requires presence. It requires empathy. It requires courage to speak even when your voice once felt small.

Future international students can expect moments of uncertainty. They will feel overwhelmed at times. They will question whether they belong. But they can also expect opportunity, opportunities to lead, to build community, and to transform fear into confidence. If they reach out, they will find support. If they step forward, they will find growth.

Serving others has reshaped who I am. I no longer see myself as the nervous student worried about fitting in. I see myself as someone capable of building spaces where others feel safe enough to grow. Leadership taught me that belonging is not something we wait for, it is something we create for each other.

I arrived at Grand Valley searching for guidance. Today, I will help provide it. And in doing so, I found the strongest version of myself.