

The Voice I Almost Did Not Use

Category 2: Academic Experience

It happened in STA 610. We were discussing regression assumptions, and I was staring at a residual plot on the screen when something caught my attention. The variance did not look quite right across the fitted values. I was confident about it. Students around me were talking fast, building on each other's points, and I kept waiting for the right moment to speak. It never came. By the time I found the courage, the class had already moved on.

I closed my notebook and sat with that. Not exactly embarrassing, but more like a quiet frustration. I had something real to say, and I let the fear of my accent, of being misunderstood, of simply sounding wrong in a room full of confident voices take it from me. That feeling stayed with me the whole walk home.

People who have not lived my journey might not fully understand what it meant to be sitting in that classroom in the first place. Back in Accra, I was studying at the University of Ghana while teaching at a school two hours away. I woke up before most of the city, taught all day, and came home at night to study. My aunt helped with money when she could, and knowing that made me even more determined not to waste the opportunity. I was not just studying for myself. I gave up sleep, weekends, and comfort because I genuinely believed that education could open doors that nothing else in my circumstances could. That belief is what brought me to Michigan. And on that evening after STA 610, it is what made my silence feel unacceptable.

That night I went back to the data. I rebuilt the model in R and pulled up the residual plots again. My instinct had been right. The variance pattern was a real issue, something worth raising. I sat there for a moment just looking at the screen, and then I made myself a quiet promise: I would not let that happen again. Not because I suddenly had no doubts, but because I decided my voice was worth the risk of being wrong. From that point, I began contributing more in class. Slowly, yes, but consistently, I learned how graduate-level discussions flow, and somewhere along the way I stopped seeing my careful, methodical way of thinking as a weakness. It was simply a different kind of precision.

That shift became even more meaningful through my graduate assistantship in the General Education office. For the first time, my statistical work had real stake. I was cleaning and analyzing institutional datasets, running models, and producing reports that actual administrators would use to make decisions about academic programs. My supervisor, Dr. C. Griffin, said something early on that I have not forgotten: "Numbers are powerful, but the real skill is being able to explain what those numbers mean to people who do not live inside statistics." That one sentence changed how I think about my work. When a colleague later told me that a dashboard I built had made the data finally feel usable, I understood what she meant. I was not on the outside of this academic world anymore. I was contributing something that mattered inside it.

There was a moment during my first semester, after a particularly long day, when I walked out of the building and just stopped. I stood in the cold and let myself feel how far I had come. I remember thinking: after everything it took to get here, I am doing this. Studying statistics in the United States. It sounds simple, but standing there, it felt enormous.

If there is one thing I would tell another international student arriving at GVSU, it is this: the hesitation you feel at the beginning is not a sign that you do not belong. It is part of the process. You may take longer to speak, and you may need more time to process before you respond. That is not a weakness; it is what happens when you are doing something genuinely difficult. Over time, if you keep showing up, that hesitation turns into something else. It turns into judgment, precision, and eventually, confidence.

I came to Grand Valley to study statistics. I did not expect that learning to trust my own voice would be the part that changed me most. But it was. Every early morning in Accra, every sacrifice my aunt made, every moment I almost stayed quiet but chose to speak instead, all of it added up to something.

It was the foundation of everything I had to offer.