

2026 ESSAY CONTEST

Essay Topic:

Defining Success Abroad:

As an international student,
how do you define success at MSU,
and what experiences have shaped
that definition?

Winners:

Best Overall Essay

Anmol Gill, *Pages 1-2*

Best Graduate Essay

Mahesha Withanalage, *Pages 3-4*

Best Undergraduate Essay

Navya Malik, *Pages 5-6*



Office for International
Students and Scholars
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Redefining Success at MSU

I still remember my first day at MSU last winter. I left early for a 9 AM meeting in the engineering building. Instead, I was swallowed by Abbott Road traffic, pedestrians crossing on green lights and full parking lots. Finally, I rushed inside only to discover something unexpected. Three rooms with the same room number in the engineering building maze, and none of them seemed right. When someone kindly pointed me in the right direction, I was forty minutes late. That morning, success was no longer about making a good first impression. It was about finding the right room and not walking away. As internationals, moments like these become familiar. Getting lost despite GPS, slipping on icy sidewalks, taking vitamin D because the sun feels distant, eating the same simple meals because time is always running out. These small, ordinary struggles may seem insignificant, but together they shape a quiet resilience that slowly redefines what success truly means.

Before coming to MSU, I believed success meant good grades, making my parents proud and standing out from the crowd. Growing up in India, success often felt measurable in terms of tangible outcomes. I carried on that mindset and felt intense pressure to prove myself, not only for my own dreams but also to honor the sacrifices my family made for me to be here. But over time my definition of success slowly changed in ways I never anticipated. I realized there is an invisible component of success that makes you proud of who you are and helps you grow confident. One of the hardest decisions I made during my PhD was switching my field slightly. I stepped out of my comfort zone by doing microbiology as an engineering student. Sitting in undergraduate classes as a graduate student was humbling and at times embarrassing. I often rehearsed my questions in my head before speaking afraid of sounding “too dumb” for a PhD. During those early months, success was not about excelling. It was about finding the courage to raise my hand and ask questions. I did, I survived and more importantly, I grew.

Today, I see success as something holistic. It is truly a blend of academics, personal growth, cultural adaptation, well-being and relationships. It is being able to jump-start your car at 7 AM on a freezing morning. It is building lifelong friendships with people from different countries. It is discovering how much you can manage beyond just academics. Last summer, at the age of 26 I learned how to swim. I can barely complete one lap, but I can survive in water. That was success to me. Not because I mastered a skill, but because I was satisfied with my effort. These moments may not appear on a resume, but they build confidence and independence. They teach you to see success not as perfection, but as fulfillment and happiness in what you have accomplished. And sometimes, success is simply being lucky enough to find an empty locker at IM West in the evenings or trying every ice cream flavor at the MSU Dairy Store.

MSU gave me spaces where I felt truly valued and included. Through Engineering Women Graduate lunches, COGS events, and the Global Festival, I met students from different backgrounds and realized that everyone (international or domestic) is carrying their own challenges. Each person defines and approaches success differently and that diversity is what makes our community unique. These experiences foster empathy and spark curiosity, reminding us how much we still must learn about ourselves and one another. Sometimes, a simple sense of belonging is enough to overcome homesickness and social isolation. When you feel seen and valued, you find motivation in other parts of your life as well. And along the journey of success, joy must have a place too. Moments like seeing tulips in Holland, biking around Mackinac Island, watching Fourth of July fireworks, walking along the Red Cedar River, paddleboarding at Lake Lansing may seem small, but they make the journey meaningful and joyful. It is through these experiences that I learned how to belong, contribute, appreciate, and persevere in an unfamiliar place.

As an international student, MSU has taught me that true success is not a single achievement. It is a continuous process of learning, adapting, and evolving. It is growing into someone who is confident not only in what they accomplish or stumble through, but in the person they are becoming along the way.

How MSU redefined success for me as an international student abroad

The first time I stood in front of a classroom at MSU as a graduate teaching assistant, my fingers were numb from the cold and my heart was louder than the heater behind me. Snow melted from my boots as I opened my slides, suddenly aware of my accent, my pauses, and the unfamiliar weight of being here. Just months earlier, I had been a lecturer in Sri Lanka confident, fluent, certain. Now, I was supporting classes in a new academic culture while learning how to begin again as an international PhD student.

I still remember my first day at MSU. People I had never met smiled and said, "Welcome home." In a country thousands of miles from where I was born, that word stayed with me. From that moment, MSU did not feel like a strange place. As an international student, that early sense of belonging even before achieving anything meant more than I understood then.

After sections, I often walked back across campus long after sunset, the Red Cedar quiet beside me, my mind replaying what I had said and what I had been too afraid to say. Nights in the library blurred into mornings as I worked through readings that challenged not only my thinking, but my confidence. I did not struggle because I lacked passion; I struggled because loving research and teaching does not protect you from doubt. In those hours, success no longer felt like something I had achieved. It felt like something I was learning to carry.

It was within this uncertainty that MSU began to reshape me. Through office hours, OISS Coffee Hours, and small conversations that quietly changed my days, I found a community that shifted how I saw myself. Sitting among students from all over the world, sharing stories over coffee, I realized my fears were not uniquely mine. When my PhD advisor once told me, "You are smarter than you think. You can achieve more," something softened inside me. His words did not erase my fear, but they gave it somewhere to rest. At MSU, I began to understand that success abroad was not a sprint of achievements. It was a marathon of courage, patience, and becoming.

Before MSU, success meant impact. As a student in Sri Lanka, I dreamed of becoming a lecturer not simply to teach textbooks, but to walk with students as they discovered who they could become. I later served as a young lecturer, and my proudest moments were never titles or awards, but quiet ones: when a student finally understood a difficult concept, or admitted they were afraid of the future. Before coming to MSU, success meant becoming the example my younger self was searching for.

I once believed success meant becoming the first PhD holder in Sri Lanka specializing in Digital Public Relations Research. I was bold enough to write that into my PhD application. But within months at MSU, that definition changed.

Through mentorship and scholarship, my understanding deepened. I no longer measure success by being “first.” I measure it by becoming impactful. Today, success means building knowledge that serves communities, advancing the future of Public Relations scholarship, and contributing work that reaches beyond myself.

Here, I was no longer “the lecturer.” I was learning how to speak again academically, culturally, and emotionally. Some days, imposter syndrome sat heavily in my chest. Yet MSU did not ask me to arrive certain. It invited me to arrive curious. Professors welcomed questions. Peers shared uncertainty. Mentors made space for growth. I realized that success at MSU was not measured only by performance, but by participation in a community committed to becoming.

Success also began to live in places no one applauds in journal articles I struggled to understand, paragraphs I rewrote again and again, and research ideas that failed before they slowly found shape. Beginning again felt like a mountain. Yet through reading, writing, revising, and trying again, something shifted. The mountain did not disappear but I grew stronger. And in that growth, I discovered a new kind of success: not the absence of difficulty, but the presence of confidence.

Today, success at MSU means the courage to rebuild myself. It means learning to speak without apologizing for my voice.

This shift has transformed how I support students. As a GTA, I try to build spaces where students feel seen, not measured. I lead with empathy instead of perfection and leave room for uncertainty and quiet voices.

Because of MSU, I am becoming someone who understands success as growth, not proof.

To other international students just beginning, I offer this: do not measure your success by how quickly you adapt or how confidently you speak. Measure it by your willingness to stay, to ask, to fail forward, and to keep becoming. Because success abroad is not built only in moments of achievement, but in the quiet courage of continuing.

Go Green.

I was two weeks into MSU when my mom asked me on a video call, "Have you found your people yet?" I hesitated for a second, but eventually lied and said yes.

The truth was messier. I'd been to three Indian Student Organization events, exchanged numbers with dozens of people, and felt lonelier each time. Everyone seemed to bond so easily, making inside jokes I didn't understand, planning dinners or trips to the arcade where I wasn't invited. I smiled through it all, then walked back to my dorm all alone wondering what was wrong with me. I kept repeating the same question in my head over and over again. Why couldn't I just fit in?

Back in my home country, making friends was like second nature to me. We grew up together, shared the same language, the same references, the same understanding of how the world worked. Here, every conversation felt like translating myself, and somewhere in that translation, I kept getting lost.

One night, I sat on the bank of the Red Cedar River, not only to admire its beauty, but because it was the only place I could cry without my roommate asking if I was okay. I finally asked myself the question I'd been avoiding: What if I never find "my people"? What if they didn't exist here? Or worse, what if I wasn't meant to find them at all?

Cold wind cut through my hoodie. I had no friends. Everything felt wrong. My phone sat beside me on the bench, silent. No texts. No missed calls. No one wondering where I'd disappeared to. I should have been devastated, but instead, something strange happened: I felt lighter. As if some invisible weight I'd been carrying since I arrived had finally been set down.

I thought about that morning, walking into my ISS lecture and asking the professor about postcolonial narratives, stumbling over the words, feeling my accent thick in my mouth. No friends sitting beside me for moral support. No one to exchange weird glances with afterward. Just me and my question.

That afternoon I'd spent three hours in the library, working on my first project for Introduction to Python, determined to impress the professor. I was so invested that I forgot to eat lunch. When I finally looked up, the sun had shifted across the windows, and I realized I hadn't checked my phone once. Hadn't felt lonely. Hadn't needed anyone to validate that the work mattered.

Even the video call itself, the lie. I'd said "yes" not because I'd found my people, but because I didn't want my mom to worry. Because despite feeling lost and lonely, I was handling it. Making decisions. Showing up to classes. Speaking up when needed. Navigating a foreign country, a massive campus, a completely different education system. Surviving. And maybe survival was its own kind of success.

Sitting by that river, I realized I'd been asking the wrong question the entire time.

It wasn't "Have I found my people yet?"

It was "Have I found myself yet?"

Because here's what no one tells you about leaving home. You don't just leave your people behind. You leave behind the version of yourself that only existed in relation to them. Daughter, friend, sister, the girl everyone expected you to be. Back home in India, I was always someone's something. My identity was a web of relationships, each thread connecting me to someone else's expectations, someone else's understanding of who I was. Here, for the first time, I was just me. Undefined. Unwitnessed. Standing there, not really sure who I was supposed to become yet. And maybe that wasn't failure. Maybe that was what I needed, even if I didn't like it. Maybe my parents hadn't sent me eight thousand miles away just to find a new version of home. Maybe they'd sent me to discover who I could be when I had to build myself from nothing.

I did find people eventually, but they felt different. I was choosing them, not clinging to fill a void. Last month, my mom asked again: "Have you found your people yet?" This time, I didn't lie. "I found myself first," I told her. "The rest followed."

Success at MSU isn't replicating the community I left behind. It's learning that I could be whole even when no one was watching. I still had bad days, but I stopped being afraid of it.