



GLOBAL INSIGHT 2026

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Building Partnerships.
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UNIVERSITY™

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE



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STORIES OF MSU'S **GLOBAL REACH** AND REAL-WORLD **IMPACT**





DIRECTOR LETTER

Dear Colleagues and Friends,

It is my distinct pleasure to welcome you to the 2026 edition of Global Insight, summarizing the activities and achievements of the International Institute at Mississippi State University. As Director, I am honored to share our ongoing commitment to fostering a vibrant, inclusive, and globally engaged campus community. This report reflects our collective dedication to supporting internationalization and advancing the university's mission of excellence in teaching, research, and outreach.

The International Institute serves as a central hub for global engagement at Mississippi State University. Our mission is to create opportunities for cross-cultural learning, collaboration, and innovation, while providing essential services and support to our diverse international and domestic stakeholders. We invite you to come by and visit our newly renovated offices located in 235 Walker Hall.

A primary function of our Institute is the provision of comprehensive immigration services and onboarding for new international students. Our dedicated team assists students as they navigate the complexities of immigration regulations, ensuring compliance and a smooth transition to campus life. Through targeted orientation programs and individualized support, we strive to make every student feel welcome and empowered to succeed from day one. We have new positions within the International Institute that are focused on the onboarding activities for our new students. These activities include airport pickups, assistance with opening bank accounts, support with Social Security Card applications, and orientations that help students understand what to expect in the classroom through our Insight Days orientation program. Our international programming demonstrates both its breadth and depth through the person first approach we bring to serving the entire MSU community. This past year, we hosted our first Graduation Brunch for International Students and their families to celebrate and honor the completion of their graduate program at Mississippi State University.

The management and expansion of study abroad programs remain a cornerstone of our global engagement efforts. Over the past five years, we have seen a 13% increase in study abroad participation. This year, we facilitated a range of international experiences, enabling students to broaden their academic and cultural horizons. Our study abroad initiatives continue to foster intercultural understanding, personal growth, and a deeper appreciation of global perspectives, enriching the educational journey of our students.

Our most exciting development includes a partnership with the Pontifical University Antonianum in Rome. We are thankful for Mike

and Laura McDaniel, of Houston, Texas, for their generous donation and seeing a vision across borders that will further MSU's strategic plan and provide invaluable, immersive learning opportunities for MSU students. Soon, study abroad students will have a home away from MSU while visiting the Eternal City. The International Institute is proud to continually expand our partnerships and provide hands-on, immersive learning opportunities for our young leaders, and we are thankful for the generosity of our alumni and MSU community for their contributions to make this happen.

Our English Language Institute plays a critical role in supporting language development for international students in the form of improving writing, reading, and speaking skills. Through a variety of classes and tailored programs, we help students build the linguistic skills necessary for academic success and effective communication. Activities and learning opportunities include cultural activities so our international visitors can learn more about the customs of the United States as well as Mississippi. The Institute's faculty and staff are committed to creating a supportive learning environment that encourages confidence and cross-cultural competence.

The International Research Development Team within the International Institute continues to advance scholarly inquiry and outreach through its support of research and extension activities. The team has facilitated interdisciplinary collaborations, secured funding opportunities, and promoted the dissemination of knowledge on a global scale. Their efforts have been instrumental in strengthening Mississippi State University's reputation as a leader in international research and innovation.

This past year was the busiest for our Passport Office, located in Walker Hall. We also saw an increase in faculty and research administrators pursuing external prestigious awards such as Fulbright, supported by our international research and development office. There have been many national changes this year, and we are honored by the trust you have given us in navigating these circumstances while still upholding our person-first, community-centered approach.

In closing, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to our students, faculty, staff, and partners for their unwavering support and engagement. The accomplishments highlighted in this report are a testament to your dedication and passion for international education. As we look forward to another year of progress and discovery, I invite you to join us in building a more connected and inclusive university community.

2026 is the year we celebrate our 15-year anniversary at the International Institute: 15 years of excellence; 15 years of service; 15 years of expanding our international programming; 15 years of maroon and white here and across the globe. We cannot wait for what is in store for 2026. Please continue to use our office to support your research and development and international programming efforts, and as always: Hail State!

Dr. Daniel B. Reynolds
Executive Director
International Institute



OUR OFFICES

SERVING THE UNIVERSITY AND BEYOND

English Language Institute

The English Language Institute (ELI) provides high-quality intensive English language instruction to international students, faculty, and community members. Credit courses are available for admitted undergraduate and graduate students. In addition to language classes, the ELI offers its American Language and Culture Program,

which is composed of short and long-term customized programs that bring international students to MSU for intensive English and American cultural studies. As part of its cross-cultural programming, ELI also coordinates the Conversation Partner Program to build a more globally aware campus.

International Research Development

The International Research Development Office (IRDO) facilitates and advances international research and development at MSU. IRDO is a source of institutional knowledge regarding international funding sources and university contacts. IRDO identifies funding opportunities, builds collaborative teams of MSU faculty (including faculty and staff at universities and organizations abroad), assists with the grant submission process, and administers and manages funded projects. In addition to

leading international research development efforts, IRDO provides budget and logistics assistance. IRDO manages Global Development Seed Grants, Global Engagement Funding, Fulbright faculty opportunities, and agreements and partnerships that promote research innovation for U.S. benefit with impact that reaches across the globe. Additionally, IRDO drives university policy refinement to reflect MSU's strategic plan and North Star vision of globalization and expansion of our international footprint.

International Services

The International Services Office (ISO) assists the international student and scholar community on campus with immigration counseling, document issuance, and campus-related services. Serving as the liaison between the university and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, ISO ensures compliance with federal regulations regarding international student/scholar immigration documents and responsibilities, including regular immigration orientation sessions, employment and status maintenance advising,

and government reporting. ISO advisors also host events throughout the year that give students opportunities to connect with the international and domestic student bodies as well as the larger Starkville community. International Education Week (IEW), held in November, is the university's primary celebration of international education. For IEW, ISO collaborates with campus and community partners to recognize all that international students bring to MSU.

Study Abroad

The Office of Study Abroad (OSA) is tasked with developing, promoting, and overseeing all aspects of student international experiences. Faculty-led, exchange, and provider company programs are available to students of all majors, in numerous locations, and for varying lengths of time. In addition to marketing programs, OSA assists faculty in developing short-term faculty-led study abroad programs and serves as the point of contact for students throughout the advising and pre-departure phases, as well

as while abroad. OSA also monitors the risks associated with students traveling internationally. Studying abroad offers students an invaluable opportunity to expand their horizons, gain new perspectives, and immerse themselves in different cultures. Through these experiences, students develop intercultural communication and problem-solving skills, enhance their adaptability, and strengthen their global awareness, enriching their academic journey and increasing their career prospects.



FROM AROUND CAMPUS TO ACROSS THE GLOBE

How MSU Interdisciplinary Faculty Foster International Relationships and Experiential Learning for MSU Students

By Masey Smith

Featuring Anastasia Elder, Erik Markin, Todd Mlsna, Aswathy Rai, and Rachel Woodward

What do fashion design, business and entrepreneurship, and biochemistry have in common? Erik Markin didn't always put these disciplines together until he entered the world of Study Abroad. Now, faculty with diverse interests advance the synergies between their coursework to provide an innovative approach to hands-on learning in a multi-cultural study abroad program called Global Game Changers, a two-week program that spans the geographies of Paris, Florence, and Rome.

The name highlights how students enter the international realm to sharpen their skills and, at times, alter and strengthen their career trajectories through the experience of applying theory to real-world scenarios. Students experience leather and olive oil shops, local cafes and eateries, and ultimately explore local businesses through the lens of the students' varied academic backgrounds.

"The conversations and dialogue are what really make the experience," Markin said. "You'll start out

with students who may not know each other and are from really different course backgrounds, and the next thing you know, the chatter of friendship begins. The questions the students ask each other are reflective of their growth over just a short period of time.”

For Markin, Aswathy Rai, and Rachel Woodward, the summer study abroad course across these majors is unique because it builds relationships across multidisciplinary faculty and students. The experience allows organic, reflective dialogue to emerge among students that prompts innovation and self-realization. Markin also teaches classes at MSU’s Idea Shop, which promotes student entrepreneurialism through pilot investment in novel ideas. Markin’s work at MSU’s Idea Shop makes startup business ventures a little less scary and a lot more real. The study abroad course is

“The conversations and dialogue are what really make the experience.”

~ Erik Markin

a continuation of how fostering a culture of learning across borders makes the idea of international business and international trade more tangible.

On a recent trip, a local olive oil maker asked the students if they knew of a local U.S. importer who would be interested in doing business.

“That interaction transformed the abstract concept of international business into something tangible. Students began asking practical questions like, ‘Is that really it? If we handle the paperwork and taxes, can we actually operate internationally?’ In that moment, something clicks, and it’s clear a broader realization has taken hold.” Markin said. “I love it. I feel blessed to be able to do this, and for me, this is it, enabling a global experience for students is why I am here.”

The same energy permeates student and faculty enthusiasm for the Alternative Energy in Iceland and Scandinavia program facilitated by Todd Mlsna and Anastasia Elder. In this three-week program, students enrolled in a chemistry course visit geothermal, hydroelectric, and wind power plants while exploring major Scandinavian cities to see alternative energy in action. The experience immerses students from various majors in the cultures of Iceland, Norway,

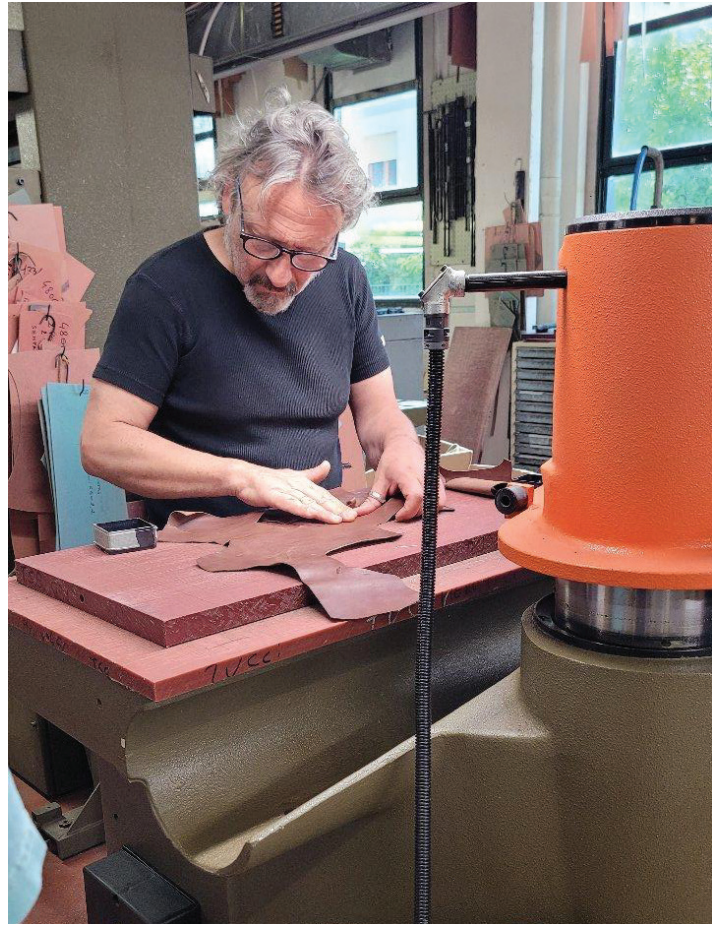
Sweden, and Denmark, where nearly all electricity is produced from renewable sources, offering real-world examples of how these nations address climate change, population growth, and fossil fuel depletion.

The program offers adventurous and academically curious students the chance to walk on black sand beaches and swim in hot springs near the Arctic Circle. They see geysers, waterfalls, fjords, and glaciers while exploring four of Europe’s most captivating capitals: Reykjavik, Iceland; Oslo, Norway; Stockholm, Sweden; and Copenhagen, Denmark. This dramatic natural setting frames a curriculum focused on renewable energy, including geothermal, hydroelectric, nuclear, and wind power. Guided tours allow students to explore how each country integrates alternative energy into daily life and national policy. Many participants apply this course toward a minor in chemistry, which is often used to strengthen pre-health applications.

“This is my favorite course to teach,” said Dr. Todd Mlsna, who has led the program for over a decade. “The program helps students move beyond textbooks by connecting directly with engineers and seeing real-world energy solutions in action.”

Learning extends far beyond the classroom. Mlsna and co-leader Dr. Anastasia Elder ensure that each site visit





becomes a chance for students to build relationships and immerse themselves in environments that are culturally and physically different from Mississippi and the U.S. The experience also promotes personal growth, helping students develop independence and confidence as they prepare for careers beyond college. A key part of this process is a reflective journal, a longstanding tradition in the program.

“At first, students often just record what they did,” said Elder. “But by the end, and even months later, the journal becomes a powerful reflection of their growth and the connections they formed.”

Overall, the goal is to help students see new possibilities, broaden their perspectives, and develop into globally minded leaders with an environmentally conscious outlook.



FROM ONE FACULTY MEMBER TO ANOTHER: *Jump on the study abroad train (or plane)*

There were 44 leaders who participated in 31 faculty-led study abroad programs during the 2024-25 academic year. The opportunities are endless.

“It shrinks the world for a lot of faculty and students who never even thought about study abroad before,” Markin said.

Faculty can be seasoned travelers or just have a passion for amplifying student engagement.

“Bringing a course to life in a real-world setting not only deepens student learning, it reinvigorates our own teaching and research,” Mlsna said.

For more information on study abroad, visit international.msstate.edu.



FAITH, FIELDWORK, AND THE FUTURE

Maddy's Academic Odyssey Abroad

By Hayley Pounds

In the five years since the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted international travel and in-person exchange, study abroad participation at Mississippi State University has rebounded impressively, more than quadrupling as students seek meaningful global experiences. Among this new wave of globally engaged students is Maddy Green, a first-generation college student from Russellville, Alabama, whose academic journey has taken her from the ruins of the ancient Near East to the scholarly halls of Oxford.

Green, who began her undergraduate studies as an anthropology major, first encountered the possibility of international fieldwork during a routine advising meeting with her mentor, Dr. David Hoffman.



“I kind of got chosen,” she recalled modestly.

That serendipitous meeting led to an introduction to Dr. James Hardin, who was leading a five-week Archaeological Travel and Participation program in Israel in 2023, the first MSU-affiliated excavation there since 2017.

“It was my first archaeological experience,” Green said of her decision to join the program. But once on-site, any hesitation quickly gave way to excitement. “I fell in love immediately. I have never had so much clarity about anything. From that moment onward, I knew Near East archaeology is where I need to be.”

The experience was transformative not only academically but also spiritually, Green said. She recounted a particularly moving moment standing within the ancient walls of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Old Jerusalem, surrounded by worshippers from across the Christian spectrum.

“It was a very spiritual moment,” she said. “Seeing a unity within the larger church was very beautiful. It’s also just the beauty in that we can all have our differences in a shared space with the same goals.”

Yet the experience was not without its challenges. As the youngest member of her excavation team and the only

following summer in the United Kingdom, where she studied archaeology and folklore through the Oxford Program offered by MSU’s Shackouls Honors College.

“When else am I going to get a chance to study at one of the most prestigious universities in the world?” she said.

Her time in England, marked by access to world-renowned libraries, historic sites, and interdisciplinary academic engagement, further honed her skills in research, communication, and cross-cultural collaboration. Alongside her academic pursuits, Green also immersed herself in cultural excursions across the UK. In addition to Oxford, she visited Stonehenge, Edinburgh, Belfast, and Dublin.

“I circumvented the UK almost,” she said with a smile.

These dual experiences abroad have profoundly shaped Green’s academic goals and professional ambitions.

“I plan to get my PhD. I’m also applying for the Rhodes,” she shared. Her ultimate aspiration? “To work at the Smithsonian, in their cultural heritage protection unit, doing conservation work in the Near East.”

When asked what advice she would offer to students considering study abroad, Green was unequivocal.



participant without prior field school experience, Green initially felt intimidated.

“All my cohort from Mississippi State were upperclassmen or graduate students. I was the only one without field experience. I definitely had moments of doubt.”

But over time, the supportive environment helped her gain confidence.

“No one was mad at me for not knowing things. There were people who wanted to help me. And it gave me clarity, not just that this is what I want to do, but that I can do it. I belong in this space.”

Building on the momentum of her Israeli experience, Green pursued a second study abroad program the

“Just do it. The funding is out there, and the sooner you start looking for it, the more likely you are to get it. If there’s a will, there’s a way. You don’t realize how much is out there until you get out there. You don’t realize how small your small town really is until you see just how big the world is.”

Green’s story is a compelling testament to the value of global education and to the critical role of mentorship, access, and opportunity in shaping the next generation of scholars and leaders. As Mississippi State continues to expand its international footprint, students like Green embody the transformative potential of study abroad, not just as academic enrichment, but as a catalyst for personal and professional vision.

SMALL CUPS, BIG IMPACT

A Pre-Vet Student's Lessons in Global Perspective

By Hayley Pounds

For Utah native Lillie Reid, the idea of traveling abroad was always part of her college aspirations. Yet, the notion of committing to a full semester overseas felt daunting. That hesitation quickly dissolved when an email arrived about a faculty-led opportunity: the Tropical Veterinary Medicine and One Health Study Abroad program in Uganda.

"It only lasted a month," Reid said. "Plus, it directly connected to veterinary medicine, both of which checked some important boxes for me."

out his cup, and rushed to fill it. He took a drink, gave us a huge thumbs up, and that encouraged the other children to follow," Reid recalled. "That moment showed me that one small thing can lead to another. Eventually, that builds into something big."

Reid credited the support and mentorship of MSU faculty for making these experiences not only possible but deeply impactful. In Guatemala, she was accompanied by Dr. Mandy Conrad, assistant clinical professor in the Department of Biochemistry,

"That moment showed me that one small thing can lead to another. Eventually, that builds into something big."

– Lillie Reid

What followed was an unforgettable experience. In Uganda, Reid immersed herself in both cultural and professional learning. Her group visited the source of the Nile River, trekked with mountain gorillas, and shared meals of goat curry, all while developing practical skills through hands-on work with local wildlife such as water buffalo. Alongside other veterinary students, she assisted with routine procedures and observed fieldwork in real-time.

Uganda was just the beginning. Reid's global learning continued in Guatemala and Morocco, where each destination offered its own unique lens into public health, art, architecture, and cultural exchange.

In Guatemala, Reid participated in community health education, particularly focusing on nutrition and water quality. One memory stands out as especially formative.

"The first time we installed a water filter in a school classroom, a little boy — we later called him 'the boy with the yellow cup' — ran to his backpack, pulled

Nutrition and Health Promotion, and Dr. Jessica Graves, an MSU alumna with extensive experience in the region.

"Dr. Graves has such a strong understanding of Guatemala. She shared information in a way that really allowed us to learn," Reid said. "And Dr. Conrad was also there and encouraged us to critically compare agricultural practices between Guatemala and the U.S. She showed us how to teach children about nutrition in way that would help them. It pushed us to think more deeply about how to communicate unfamiliar concepts."

Not all of Reid's experiences abroad were seamless. Her time in Morocco presented new challenges, particularly linguistic ones, as Arabic and French are commonly spoken, and she knew neither.

"I remember being at passport control, and the immigration officer didn't speak English. When I told him I didn't understand, he just kept repeating the same question in French, only louder," she reflected.

Homesickness was another reality to manage. As



a self-described homebody who thrives on routine, Reid had to learn to embrace constant change. She credits her faculty leaders for helping her feel prepared and supported.

“I surrounded myself with new and old friends, and I stayed engaged in daily activities,” she said. “Our professors made sure we knew what to expect.”

Reflecting on the breadth of her study abroad experiences, Reid is clear: the impact was both personal and professional.

“These programs were building blocks for my maturity and my career,” she said. “I gained real-world skills that I would not have gotten elsewhere.”

One faculty member who stood out to Reid for his mentorship was Dr. Stephen Reichley.

“He taught me the importance of going with the flow, especially when it does not go according to plan,” she said. “He also introduced me to fisheries

and aquaculture. He really led by example.”

In addition to the hands-on experience she gained, Reid developed confidence and a global sense of empathy.

“Studying abroad taught me that I can do hard things,” she reflected. “It pushed me out of my comfort zone and gave me the opportunity to connect with people in unexpected ways.”

For students still deciding whether studying abroad is the right path for them, Reid has one piece of advice. “Just do it! There’s something out there for everyone. You won’t find a better time in your life than right now.”

Thanks to the dedication of MSU’s faculty and the university’s commitment to global education, students like Reid are discovering firsthand how education, culture, and compassion intersect, one yellow cup at a time.

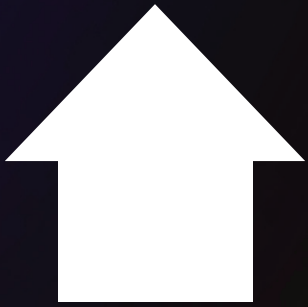
“Studying abroad taught me that I can do hard things.”
– Lillie Reid





Five years. **2,235 students.** Dozens of countries.

Over the past five years, more than 2,200 Mississippi State students have stepped outside the classroom and into the world through study abroad programs across Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Whether through short-term programs or semester-long experiences, students from across campus have studied in destinations such as Spain, Italy, Greece, the United Kingdom, and Scandinavia, gaining hands-on learning, global perspective, and experiences that shape their academic and professional futures.



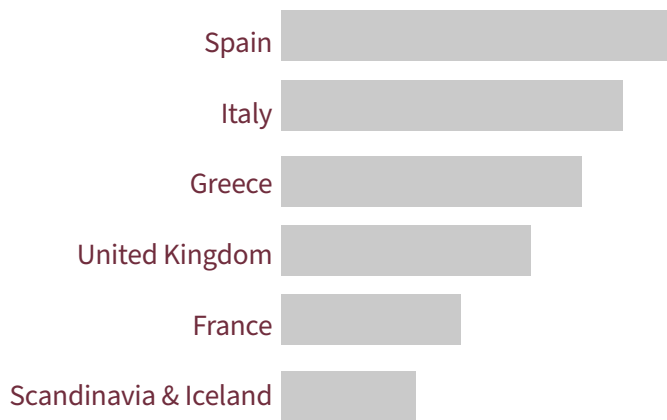
**13% increase
in participation**
since 2021–22





MSU's **Global** Footprint

Consistent Top Study Abroad Destinations



These destinations appear year after year as the most common locations for MSU study abroad programs.

A Broader World of Learning

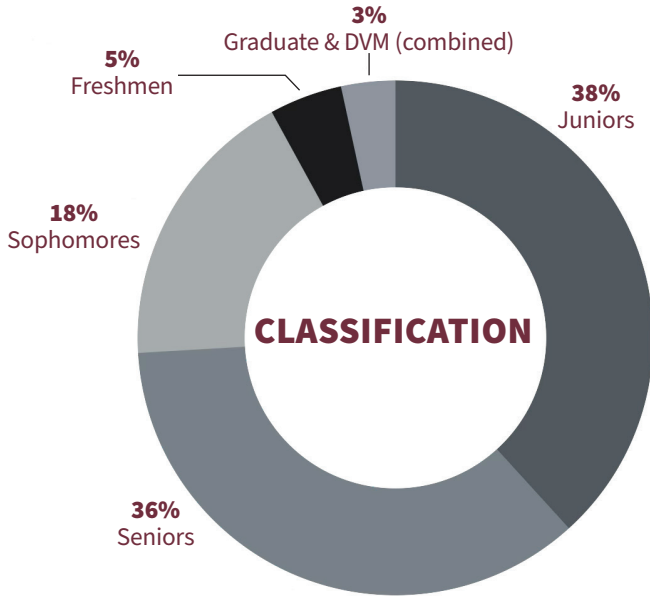
Uganda	South Korea
Guatemala	Morocco
Costa Rica	Tanzania
Cambodia	Argentina
Japan	Singapore

MSU students also participate in programs across Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Oceania.

More than **30 countries** worldwide

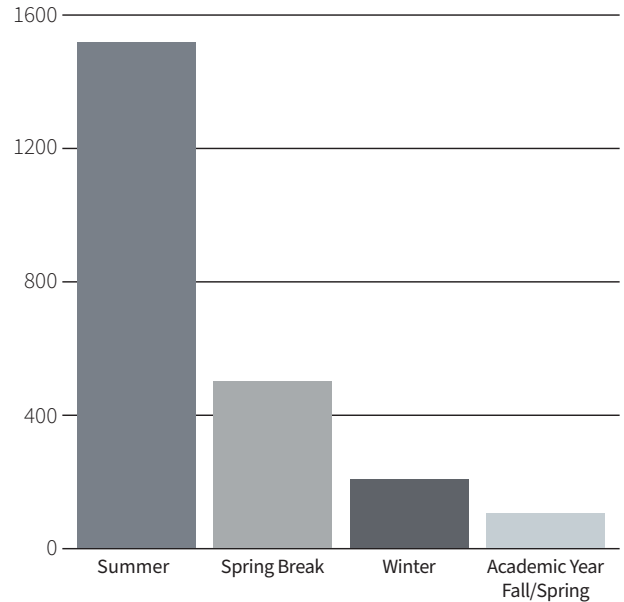
From short-term programs to semester experiences, MSU study abroad connects students to global classrooms across multiple continents.

Who Goes. What They Study. How They Experience It.



WHO PARTICIPATES

Most MSU students participate through summer and short-term programs that fit seamlessly into degree plans.



WHEN MSU STUDENTS STUDY ABROAD

Most MSU students participate through summer and short-term programs that fit seamlessly into degree plans.

WHAT THEY STUDY Top Fields Represented

- Business & Marketing
- Engineering
- Biological & Biomedical Sciences
- Education
- Psychology
- Kinesiology
- Animal & Veterinary Sciences
- Computer & Data Sciences
- Humanities & Social Sciences

Students from 100+ academic pathways participate in study abroad programs each year.

Global learning
that fits real
degree paths.

From engineering and business to science, education, and the arts, MSU study abroad programs are built to support academic progress, career development, and hands-on learning across disciplines.



DRIVING INNOVATION BETWEEN MISSISSIPPI AND LIBERIA

MSU collaborators co-create sustainable institutional infrastructure with Liberian counterparts

By Masey Smith

SUSTAINABLE INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

From 2021 to 2025, Mississippi State University (MSU) played a transformative role in the USAID-funded Transforming the Education System for Teachers and Students in Liberia (TESTS) project. In partnership with U.S. and Liberian collaborators, MSU co-created sustainable teacher education programming across six Liberian counties and eight higher education teacher training institutions (HETTIs).

The project's mission was clear: to build sustainable, high-quality teacher preparation programs and systems that elevate educational outcomes for generations of Liberian students. MSU's contributions spanned curriculum design, faculty development, coaching and mentoring systems, and international collaboration, all rooted in a commitment to long-term capacity building.

"This wasn't just about delivering content, it was about empowering Liberian educators to lead their own transformation," said Chance Carden, Project Manager in MSU's International Research Development Office (IRDO).

IRDO has worked with legal offices at MSU to make sure that final curriculum packets are handed off to Liberian counterparts despite the project's early end.

"Masey Smith and I have made sure that we are handing off this curriculum. We

have created a portal for the curriculum documents and worked with our Liberian counterparts to make sure what we've worked on is accessible for its intended audience."

BUILDING THE FOUNDATION FOR CHANGE

MSU's contributions to the TESTS Liberia project were both strategic and impactful, laying a durable foundation for educational reform in Liberia. Central to this effort was the development of two bachelor's and two associate's degree programs in Early Childhood and Primary Education. These programs, comprising a total of 35 newly designed courses, were tailored specifically to Liberia's educational context and needs.

To ensure effective implementation, MSU led eight in-person professional development trainings across Liberia, complemented by numerous virtual sessions. These trainings were designed to enhance faculty capacity, improve instructional quality, and establish robust coaching and mentoring systems. One of the most innovative aspects of MSU's approach was the introduction of Observation & Reflection Tools, which helped faculty and teacher aspirants critically assess and refine their classroom practices.

Beyond the classroom, MSU facilitated two international study tours to Ghana, enabling Liberian educators to engage



in cross-cultural learning and adopt best practices from neighboring contexts. MSU's efforts, led by the International Institute, also provided technical assistance in areas such as curriculum refinement, IT infrastructure, and institutional tracking systems, ensuring that the changes introduced were not only effective but also sustainable.

"We focused on building systems that could be owned and sustained by Liberians," said Eric Moyon, former assistant vice president for student success, who led Ghana Study Tours. "Our goal was to co-create and build lasting relationships that are sustainable and thriving."

A LASTING LEGACY OF EMPOWERMENT

The outcomes of MSU's involvement in the TESTS Liberia project are already evident across Liberia's teacher training institutions. Eight higher education institutions now possess the tools, curricula, and trained personnel needed to deliver high-quality teacher education. These institutions are not only implementing the new degree programs but are also fostering a culture of continuous professional development.

The ripple effects of this transformation are being felt all across Liberia, since the project serves as a model for national Liberian adoption. Future teachers are graduating with stronger pedagogical skills, better preparation, and a deeper understanding of student-centered learning. Faculty and administrators, empowered by MSU's coaching and mentoring model, are now leading their own training initiatives, ensuring that the momentum continues beyond the project's official end.

"This project exemplifies how international partnerships can drive local innovation," said Dr. Kristin Javorsky, associate professor and graduate coordinator in Elementary Education, who was a key faculty member co-creating the project's 35 curriculum courses. "To see our co-developed work echo across continents is a testament to MSU's global footprint."

"The layered coaching and mentoring system we introduced was put in action during our visits, and to see this in practice highlights how systems changes can drive impact across the globe," said Myra Pannell, associate director at MSU's Research and Curriculum Unit. "It's a scalable approach to faculty development."

MSU'S GLOBAL FOOTPRINT

MSU's involvement in the TESTS Liberia project reflects its broader mission to foster global partnerships that enrich both local and international communities. One standout example of this mission in action is the introduction of Liberia's first-ever StoryWalk, a literacy and wellness initiative adapted from MSU's own campus programming.

Originally launched in Starkville in 2021, the StoryWalk concept promotes early literacy and physical activity by displaying pages of children's books along walking paths. In Liberia, MSU implemented this model as part of the TESTS project as part of the curriculum, and then during a training in Liberia in 2023, demonstrating its adaptability to low-resource settings and its potential to engage communities in new ways.

During MSU's 2025 International Fiesta, more than 300 people visited an international student-developed, low- and no-cost StoryWalk featuring excerpts from "Bully Travels Around the Globe." Over 285 books were distributed, turning the event into a direct community literacy intervention. This translational approach, bringing global research into local practice, underscored MSU's commitment to building partnerships that drive innovation across various contexts and showcase MSU's research efforts to develop a global workforce and lasting partnerships.

"Our work in Liberia is a testament to MSU's commitment to global engagement and educational equity," added Dr. Rebecca Robichaux-Davis, assistant dean of the College of Education. "We're proud to have contributed to a project that aligns so closely with MSU's values."

"This was a team effort that brought together expertise from across MSU," said Cindy Ming, professional learning manager at the Research and Curriculum Unit. "It's been incredibly rewarding to see the impact unfold, to facilitate trainings in Liberia and see the first StoryWalk there, and to share conversations with our Liberian counterparts about how they have continued the work."

If you would like to be part of an international research development working group, seek out international research funding, or learn more about what MSU's International Research Development Office can do for you, visit international.msstate.edu.





PLANTING PARTNERSHIPS AND GROWING GLOBAL INNOVATION

Global Development Seed Grant Program invests in ideas with international impact

By Chance Carden

Since its launch in 2018, the International Institute's Global Development Seed Grant (GDSG) program has cultivated international partnerships that extend the university's research reach far beyond Starkville. Administered through the International Research Development Office (IRDO), the annual program awards up to \$5,000 in seed funding to Mississippi State University (MSU) faculty for globally focused projects with the potential for long-term impact.

To date, over \$130,000 has been awarded, supporting MSU researchers in more than 25 countries and representing faculty across 20 departments and all major colleges. The goal is simple but powerful: to generate meaningful collaborations that lead to external funding, research output, capacity building, and measurable social and environmental outcomes.

"The results of these seed grants underscore our faculty's ability to turn research opportunities into meaningful impact," said Dr. Daniel Reynolds, executive director of the International Institute. "I am proud of our university's global engagement and look forward to seeing it continue to grow as we launch new partnerships around the world."

SEED GRANTS IN ACTION

Spanning fields from engineering to public health to the arts, MSU's GDSG program continues to cultivate partnerships that matter. The 2024 cohort exemplified the program's interdisciplinary scope and international

momentum, with faculty forging collaborations across five continents.

Dr. Mohsen Azimi (Mechanical Engineering) advanced clean energy research by optimizing bladeless wind turbine technology, using numerical modeling and experimentation to push the boundaries of renewable energy design.

Dr. Zhiqian Chen (Computer Science and Engineering), in collaboration with the University of Auckland, transformed how researchers analyze spatial-temporal data. By integrating large language models into trajectory mining, his project redefined how movement is interpreted across time and space.

Dr. Joel Komakech (Biochemistry) and Jessica Graves (M4 Institute) led a maternal and child health initiative in Uganda's Busoga region. Their work combined Farm2Fork training with community-engaged learning to support long-term nutritional resilience.

Dr. Holley Muraco, with Mark Woodrey and Megan Chevis (Coastal Research and Extension Center), implemented Coastal One Health research in Peru. The team addressed ecological and human health together, using cross-disciplinary methods to support sustainable conservation practices.

Dr. Daniel Stevens, along with Amy Catron and Sophie Wang (Department of Music), launched Harmony Across Borders, a vibrant cultural exchange initiative that used collaborative music-making to foster global understanding through performance, education, and dialogue.

"At its core, the Global Development Seed Grant program is an investment in ideas."

— Masey Smith, deputy director, International Institute

“It gives you just enough of a startup that you can get that proof of concept and preliminary data for your larger project.”
— Dr. Joel Komakech, 2024 GDSG recipient



“The results of these seed grants underscore our faculty’s ability to turn research opportunities into meaningful impact.”
— Dr. Daniel Reynolds, executive director, International Institute

In 2025, the program funded a single project but one poised for meaningful international influence. Dr. Lourdes Cardozo-Gaibisso (English) is partnering with Universidad ORT Uruguay to lead BRIDGE TESOL, an initiative designed to address the shortage of in-service English language educators in both Mississippi and Uruguay. Through collaborative research and professional development, the project brings together 20 teachers across both regions to co-develop a globally adaptable model for ESOL instruction. The initiative blends virtual and in-person learning, a Community of Inquiry model, and culturally responsive pedagogy to create a scalable framework for teacher development worldwide.

Together, these projects represent the core mission of the GDSG program: seeding promising ideas, building meaningful partnerships, and growing MSU’s global research footprint.

SUSTAINED GROWTH, REAL RESULTS

Seed grants from previous years have already blossomed into major external grants, multi-institutional collaborations, and ongoing research initiatives.

In 2023, Dr. Esteban Galeano (Forestry) used his GDSG to develop non-transgenic tree genotypes with higher carbon capture potential. His partnership with institutions in Colombia led to student training programs and a \$300,000 grant from the USDA Forest Service. Dr. Padmanava Dash (Geosciences) applied his funding to study climate impacts on fisheries in India’s Chilika Lake, developing tools that integrate satellite data to model aquatic ecosystem changes under climate pressure. In a humanities-driven approach, Dr. Shawn Lambert

(Anthropology) connected archaeology in Mississippi to ethnographic research in Liberia, exploring the flow of culture, memory, and migration between continents.

A STRATEGIC INVESTMENT

The GDSG is designed not only to encourage global engagement but to align with MSU’s research priorities and foster pathways toward sustainable, externally funded research. Whether a faculty member is seeking new collaborators, launching a new line of inquiry, or laying the groundwork for a large-scale project, the GDSG program helps recipients take their critical first step.

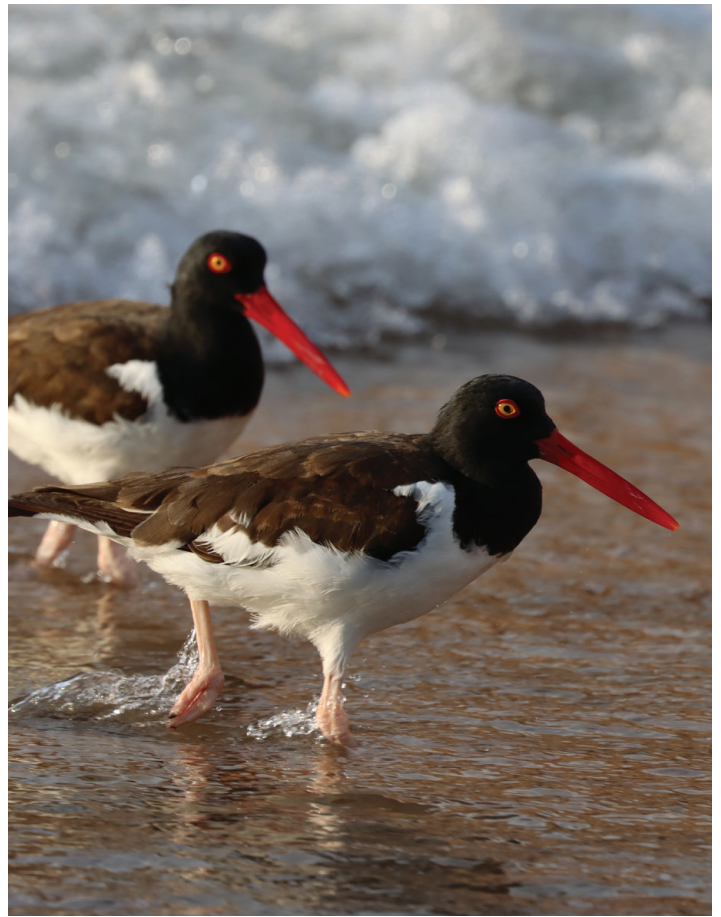
“As an early career faculty, you often need data that is going to push you toward a larger grant. The Global Development Seed Grant bridges that gap very well. It gives you just enough of a startup that you can get that proof of concept and preliminary data for your larger project,” said 2024 GDSG recipient, Dr. Joel Komakech.

Faculty interested in applying for future funding can expect support from the International Institute in idea development, partnership building, and proposal refinement.

“At its core, the Global Development Seed Grant program is an investment in ideas,” said Masey Smith, deputy director at the International Institute. “It’s about creating space for MSU faculty to think boldly, engage with a multitude of contexts, and lay the foundation for high-impact work that benefits communities at home and worldwide.”

As MSU continues to take care of what matters, the GDSG program ensures that what matters includes building a better world, one partnership at a time.





THE FULBRIGHT EFFECT

Faculty Journeys and Institutional Growth at MSU

By Masey Smith

WHY FULBRIGHT MATTERS FOR MSU FACULTY

Mississippi State University (MSU) empowers faculty and administrators to broaden their impact beyond borders. Through the International Research Development Office (IRDO), MSU supports global research and international fellowships, including Fulbright opportunities that connect our faculty to the world.

As leaders of the Mississippi Fulbright Alumni Chapter and the Mississippi Fulbright Association, IRDO champions global engagement and provides hands-on support for applicants seeking these prestigious awards.

Fulbright fellowships empower faculty to expand their teaching and research across global contexts, deepen

vastly different culture while in the classroom just makes you a better teacher and faculty member, she said.”

MEET MSU’S FULBRIGHT TRAILBLAZERS

Hopper was awarded a prestigious fellowship to teach and conduct research in the Kingdom of Bahrain. Her host institution is the University of Bahrain (UoB), where she is based within the Bahrain Teachers College (BTC). Hopper’s 10-month Fulbright, spanning from August 2024 to July 2025 aligns with the academic calendar at the UoB.

During her time in Bahrain, Hopper has facilitated group discussions, led professional development workshops for BTC faculty, taught undergraduate and graduate courses, participated in committee work, and collaborated on active research projects.

“We are citizens of the world. The diversity of perspectives only makes processes and products stronger.”
— Dr. Gina Rico Mendez, assistant professor,
Social Science Research Center

their subject-matter expertise, and build enduring international collaborations. These prestigious awards enhance academic visibility, create pathways to future research funding, and broaden MSU faculty’s professional networks worldwide.

The impact goes beyond professional accolades. Fulbright experiences often lead to collaborative grants, co-authored publications, and rich insights that help faculty contextualize their teaching and research to better serve diverse student populations. For tenure-track and tenured faculty alike, a Fulbright is often a defining milestone that demonstrates scholarly impact and global engagement.

“Going to a different country and participating in their educational system has a profound impact on your personal, academic, and professional development,” said Dr. Missy Hopper, MSU’s most recent Fulbright Scholar. “That extra adaptability from being exposed to different worldviews and learning how to navigate a

But her Fulbright journey didn’t begin with the application; it began decades ago. As a child, Hopper’s father, a career Air Force pilot, was offered an assignment as a flight instructor with the U.S. Air Force in Saudi Arabia. Had he accepted, Hopper would have attended school via a short plane flight at the American High School in Bahrain. Though her family ultimately stayed in the U.S., the idea of visiting Bahrain lingered in her mind as unfinished business.

Many years later, in 2024, Hopper received an email confirming her selection for the Fulbright Program in Bahrain.

“I was jumping up and down,” she recalled. “I screamed to my husband, George, ‘I did it! I’m finally going to Bahrain!’”

NAVIGATING THE APPLICATION PROCESS

Applying for a Fulbright can be an intensive and intimidating process, but the rewards are profound.



“Going to a different country and participating in their educational system has a profound impact on your personal, academic, and professional development.”

— Dr. Missy Hopper, Fulbright Scholar

The Fulbright U.S. Scholars Program offers flexible, collaborative opportunities for faculty and administrators to teach or conduct research abroad, ranging from semester-long to year-long placements.

For those interested in shorter engagements, the Fulbright Specialist Program provides 2–6 week opportunities for U.S. faculty and administrators to serve as consultants at international institutions, including public agencies, NGOs, and higher education institutions.

Hopper encourages interested faculty to start early and engage their departments in open dialogue about their plans.

“You have to be flexible,” she said, reflecting on her own shift from a 6-month proposal to a 10-month placement. “Apply to the program that best suits your skills and interests and to a place you are willing to live and work.”

She also emphasized that the investment of time and effort pays off, not only in professional growth but in unexpected, meaningful ways.

FROM FULBRIGHT STUDENT TO MSU FACULTY: DR. GINA RICO MENDEZ

That’s certainly true for Dr. Gina Rico Mendez, who came to MSU in 2012 as a Fulbright student scholar from Colombia. During her time in MSU’s Public Policy and Administration Department, Rico Mendez discovered her academic passion for food security, global policy, and the intersections of research and social justice. In deep admiration of public policy scholar Elanor Ostrom, Rico Mendez found support and mentorship by Dr. Brian Shoup, current PSPA Department Head, who had collaborated with Ostrom as a student.

“I never imagined I would end up in Starkville, Mississippi,” Rico Mendez said. “But I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to learn abroad and grow as a scholar.”

One defining moment came when a coworker invited her to visit the Social Science Research Center. Where she later became a Graduate Research Assistant and later a Postdoctoral Associate.

“As a post-doc, I started taking on leadership roles in grant development and the implementation side of things, and I made partnerships across campus

and abroad,” she recalled. Rico Mendez, now a faculty member at MSU, continues to integrate her international experience into her research and mentorship. Her Fulbright journey not only launched her career, but it also made MSU home.

APPLYING TO FULBRIGHT: LET MSU SUPPORT

Although Rico Mendez first came to MSU as a Fulbright student, she now serves as a faculty member, extending her impact across departments and international collaborations. She is deeply involved with research associates and graduate students at MSU’s SSRC and has been called a “liaison” of the world by her student mentees.

When asked how faculty and administrators should engage with Fulbright opportunities, Rico Mendez emphasized the importance of internationalization at MSU. Rico Mendez tells faculty who are interested in Fulbright to be ready because it is going to change your life.

“Fulbright’s experience is critical for faculty to continuously learn and grow,” she said. “We are citizens of the world. The diversity of perspectives only makes processes and products stronger. Fulbright builds partnerships that help elevate your career and its impact.”

Both Hopper and Rico Mendez acknowledge the time and effort required to pursue a Fulbright. But they also agree it’s more than worth it.

“It’s an opportunity you have to take,” said Hopper. “It’s irreplaceable. If you don’t do it, you’ll always wonder what could have been. Take the time, for yourself and for MSU, and just apply.”

FROM GLOBAL TO LOCAL: FULBRIGHT’S INSTITUTIONAL IMPACT ON MSU

The impact of Fulbright fellowships at MSU extends well beyond individual achievement. It strengthens the university’s global research network and academic reputation. Hopper, for example, has already applied for a grant in collaboration with colleagues she met through her Fulbright experience in Bahrain. She has also been a contributing author to several publications with her



“MSU’s values of research, service, and learning are all expressed and expanded through Fulbright opportunities.”
 — Chance Carden, project manager



University of Bahrain faculty partners, enhancing MSU’s visibility and influence in international academic circles.

Since her time as a Fulbright student, Rico Mendez has become an assistant professor at MSU’s SSRC, where she has led applied research and evaluation of domestic and international programs. Her ongoing international collaborations continue to advance MSU’s research mission and deepen its global engagement.

“MSU’s values of research, service, and learning are all expressed and expanded through Fulbright opportunities,” said Chance Carden, project manager, who contributes to Deputy Director Smith’s Fulbright engagement and outreach efforts across MSU. “Our office is here to guide faculty and administrators through the application process and help them find opportunities that align with their goals.”

To learn more about how the International Research Development Office can support your Fulbright aspirations, visit international.msstate.edu.





THE FELLOWSHIP BLUEPRINT

ADVANCING U.S. AGRICULTURAL
LEADERSHIP THROUGH GLOBAL
COLLABORATION

With USDA funding and IRDO leadership, these fellowships are more than exchanges, they're a force for aligned policy, stronger systems, and global partnership.

By Chance Carden

Mississippi State University's (MSU) Office of International Research Development (IRDO) continues to make its mark on the global stage through a portfolio of high-impact fellowship programs that bridge expertise across continents and advance strategic U.S. and international goals. Most recently, IRDO successfully led two USDA Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) Scientific Exchanges Program (SEP) Fellowships, each focused on equipping African scientists and policymakers with the tools, networks, and research capacity to strengthen agricultural systems, boost trade, and promote sustainable development.

Both fellowships were more than technical training programs, they were strategic platforms for science diplomacy, global regulatory alignment, and workforce development. They positioned MSU and the U.S. as key players in addressing the intertwined challenges of food security, agricultural productivity, and market access in Africa and beyond.

2023 FELLOWSHIP: HARMONIZING SPS SYSTEMS ACROSS AFRICA

From August to November 2023, IRDO hosted 11 fellows from eight African countries for a 12-week program

centered on Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) regulatory harmonization. Designed in close collaboration with the African Union (AU) and USDA-FAS, the program focused on aligning food safety, plant health, and animal health systems across Africa's Regional Economic Communities (RECs).

Through a rigorous mix of classroom sessions, site visits, and applied research, fellows developed country- and region-specific implementation strategies aligned with the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). They participated in meetings with USDA leadership in Washington, D.C., trained with 11 MSU faculty mentors, and presented proposals to AU and REC stakeholders.

Fellows also attended the World Food Prize Borlaug Dialogue in Iowa and a continent-wide workshop in Botswana in May 2024, cementing the fellowship's reach and reinforcing U.S. engagement in the world's agricultural future.

“We’re not just hosting fellowships—we’re building the future of U.S.-global collaboration.”
— Dr. Daniel Reynolds, executive director, International Institute

2024 FELLOWSHIP: INNOVATION IN ANIMAL FEED AND FERTILIZER

In fall 2024, IRDO launched a second SEP Fellowship, this time focused on animal feed and fertilizer innovation. Four fellows from Nigeria, Ghana, Mozambique, and Niger worked closely with MSU researchers to explore agronomic trials, stakeholder engagement, and leadership development.

The program blended technical exchange with strategic communication training, drawing from U.S. Extension Service models. Fellows conducted field trials, including chick feeding and NDVI-based fertilizer assessments, and collaborated on policy-driven action plans for implementation in their home countries.

From grant writing and agricultural economics to community engagement and data analysis, the fellowship reinforced the role of science in shaping smart, scalable solutions to global agricultural challenges, with clear benefits to U.S. trade, innovation, and global leadership.

A FELLOWSHIP MODEL THAT WORKS

IRDO's capacity to lead such programs is built on a foundation of academic excellence, logistical expertise, and international collaboration. Each fellowship is custom-designed to reflect U.S. agency priorities and partner country needs, whether through short-term residencies, virtual collaboration, or long-term capacity building.

“Our model is scalable and strategic,” says Masey Smith, deputy director of IRDO. “We work closely with U.S. agencies, MSU faculty, and international stakeholders to ensure that every program advances shared values, scientific integrity, food security, economic resilience and leads to tangible results.”

By connecting MSU's land-grant strengths with global development agendas, IRDO helps shape a future where science, trade, and diplomacy intersect for mutual benefit.

LOOKING AHEAD

As international partnerships become increasingly important to U.S. agricultural, economic, and security interests, IRDO stands ready to scale its efforts. Whether leading complex multi-country fellowships, supporting technical exchanges, or strengthening research-to-policy pipelines, IRDO remains committed to delivering programs that are scalable, sustainable, and strategically aligned with global and domestic priorities.

“Every program we lead is an opportunity to invest in people, partnerships, and progress,” says Dr. Daniel Reynolds, executive director of the International Institute. “We’re not just hosting fellowships—we’re building the future of U.S.-global collaboration.”



MSU INTERNATIONAL SERVICES OFFICE (ISO) EXPANDS STUDENT SUPPORT FOR A PERSON-FIRST APPROACH

By Masey Smith

Mississippi State University (MSU) is enhancing its commitment to supporting international students through expanded programming and services. The team has strategically planned to bring new energy and strategic focus to the office's mission of making MSU a welcoming and resource-rich environment for its growing international student population.

Lauren Wright, director of the International Services Office, shared more about the programming vision.

"Our office is here to go beyond immigration enforcement," Wright explained. "We are meeting students' needs more directly and creating an open space for dialogue and expression of the challenges that they face."

This person-first approach positions the ISO to offer a more personal and comprehensive transition experience for incoming international students. From the moment students receive their immigration documents to the time they arrive on campus, ISO offers a variety of onboarding initiatives. These include pre-departure orientations, airport pickup, and International Student Insight Day, a critical touchpoint designed to orient students to MSU's academic and cultural life.

ENHANCING SERVICES THROUGH STRATEGIC EXPANSION

Traditionally focused on immigration compliance, the ISO now incorporates holistic support for student well-being and success. ISO's annual programming calendar includes cultural and career development events such as Meet the Advisors, resume workshops, ice cream socials, tailgates, and visits to local institutions like the Oktibbeha County Heritage Museum. New programming, such as football game tailgating and engaging in a traditional American experience, helps students feel included and connected to MSU, Starkville, and the broader community. The Fall 2025 Football Tailgate welcomed over 100 students and participants, marking its importance to cultural and social immersion fostered by the ISO.

ADAPTING TO EVOLVING STUDENT NEEDS

The global pandemic and shifting geopolitical climates have dramatically altered the international student experience, and ISO has responded by becoming more accessible and transparent. Instead of requiring students

to search for information online, ISO has adopted a walk-in model that fosters daily student engagement.

"We are the people who pick our students up from the airport," Wright noted. "From the time students apply to school here from another country to when they arrive at GTR Airport to their time throughout their stay, we are here every step of the way."

This student-centered philosophy has led to popular initiatives such as the International Connections Group, which pairs new students with experienced peers who assist with check-in requirements and transition support. ISO has also embraced platforms like WhatsApp to keep communication easy and consistent from pre-arrival through students' first academic year.



EVENTS THAT LEAVE A LASTING IMPACT

Among the many successful events ISO has hosted, the International Student Graduation Brunch stands out. The event recognizes the difficulty international students face in celebrating critical moments when family members and friends are oceans away. During its inauguration in spring 2025, the event celebrated 90 graduating international students across 35 disciplines, offering them a chance to feel seen and honored with correctly pronounced names, lapel pins, and meaningful recognition among peers and university leadership.

The ISO supports other campus events such as Worldwide Dawgs, an MSU athletics event, and visits to unique MSU landmarks like the High Voltage Lab in Simrall Hall as key opportunities for students to connect both socially and academically. Other events are coordinated in close partnership with MSU's International Student Advisory Board (ISAB), which promotes international student voices and helps international students gain leadership and advocacy skills.

To ensure faculty and staff are well-informed about the ways they can support the international community, ISO organizes outreach events such as the annual Ins and Outs information session. This event raises awareness for ISO's work and resources while educating faculty and staff on international student regulations and cultural considerations, creating a well-connected body of support for students at MSU.

ISO's recent involvement in the delivery of a First-Year Experience course allows the ISO staff to connect with undergraduate students in the classroom setting early in their journeys. Other events, such as the nationally celebrated International Education Week occurring in November of each year, offer opportunities for international students to be celebrated and to learn more about international research and development, engagement opportunities, and ways that international work and student engagement bolster multilateral benefits.

LISTENING AND ADAPTING BASED ON FEEDBACK

In 2025, ISO implemented an end-of-year feedback survey to gather input on student experiences and needs. This feedback will directly shape future programming. Specific feedback included more access to grocery stores and markets such as the Indian grocery store in Memphis. This type of feedback has been incorporated into upcoming programming and ongoing work to continuously incorporate feedback into ISO programmatic efforts.

Other plans include more local field trips, transportation to off-campus mixers (like those with the Mississippi University for Women), and potential new partnerships with university departments like the Center for Modern Languages and Linguistics (CMLL) to host language tables and cultural exchanges.

LOOKING AHEAD

With almost 15 years at the International Institute, Wright only sees an upward path for international student experience.

"International students add value to our classrooms, and we are honored to have them here and continue to find new ways to support all students," Wright said.

With ISO's expansion of events and services, MSU is poised to become not only a destination for international study but a true home for students from around the globe. New initiatives are focused on housing support, local transportation, and integrating ISO more deeply into student support services.

As the ISO continues to evolve, one thing is clear: Mississippi State University is investing in a future that is as globally connected as it is locally supportive.





FROM STUDENT TO MENTOR

Fabian Muhammad Reaz's Journey at MSU's International Institute

By Hayley Pounds

For nearly two years, Fabian Muhammad Reaz has been an invaluable presence at Mississippi State University's International Institute. Originally from Bangladesh and raised in Malaysia, Reaz began his academic journey at MSU in fall 2022, where he pursued a double major in finance and supply chain logistics.

When describing his choice of field, Reaz explained how his studies are shaping his future.

"I wanted to be in something dynamic and spontaneous, and finance combines both of these elements," Reaz said. "In finance, you're predicting future events and analyzing outcomes, which aligns well with my strengths and goals."

Reaz's initial connection to MSU's International Institute came through its website.

"I remember browsing the webpage, and everything was

so clearly outlined. It had all the information I was looking for, which was very reassuring as an international student."

Beyond the website, Reaz was drawn to MSU's alumni network, the positive feedback from past international students, and the university's unique blend of large-scale resources with a small-town atmosphere.

"It's definitely a big school, but it has a small-town feel," he reflected.

THE START OF A CAREER WITH THE INTERNATIONAL OFFICE

Reaz's journey with MSU's International Office began with a key first impression. As is standard for incoming international students, he was prompted to complete orientation procedures.

"I received an email asking me to stop by the office and

pick up my cowbell. It was a small gesture, but it really reassured me that I was on the right track.”

This positive experience stuck with Reaz, and by his sophomore year, he was actively seeking employment with MSU. When he saw a student worker position open in the International Office, he jumped at the opportunity.

“I knew I wanted to work there because I knew the office was where I could help students like me feel comfortable,” he said. “I had already experienced firsthand the role they play in supporting international students outside of their families and friends.”

PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

During his time at the International Office, Reaz has not only gained professional skills but has also experienced significant personal growth.

“The office has supported me, both professionally and personally. They’ve accommodated my work schedule alongside my academic schedule, and whenever I ran into issues, they were always there to offer resources.”

In his role, Reaz has interacted with MSU faculty, staff, and students, all of whom have contributed to his development.

“The most important things I’ve gained are effective communication and problem-solving skills. I’ve learned how kindness and empathy can make a huge difference, especially when navigating difficult situations.”

LEADERSHIP IN INTERNATIONAL CONNECTIONS

One of the most defining experiences of Reaz’s career at MSU was his leadership role in a new initiative called International Connections, developed by Dr. Malia Schimminger, the office’s new assistant director. International Connections is a peer-mentoring program where international students act as guides for incoming students, helping them acclimate to both the MSU community and the Starkville area.

“When I first heard about the project, I thought, ‘This is really going to be helpful.’ It felt like a way for me to give back to the office that had supported me so much,” Reaz shared.

He credited Dr. Schimminger for her thoughtful approach in developing the program.

“She did extensive research and was open to my feedback. Cheyenne Norman [International Student Advisor] and I worked together to develop additional resources to ensure the program’s success,” Reaz recalled.

Reaz’s leadership role involved coordinating with 14 fellow mentors, a diverse group of students from around the globe, including South Asia and Africa.

“It was such a big group of friendly, charismatic people. We were able to learn from each other’s experiences while helping others navigate life at MSU.”

MENTORING NEW STUDENTS AND BUILDING CONFIDENCE

As a lead mentor, Reaz helped answer common questions from new international students, ranging from how to register for classes, to housing issues, transportation around Starkville, and even advice on the best places to eat. He described how he learned to break down complex information for others, improving his communication and organizational skills.

“It also developed my ability to adapt to new situations. And if there was ever a question I couldn’t answer, I knew I could reach out to one of the advisors in the office for help,” he added with a smile.

Reaz also offered advice to international students who may be hesitant to ask for help: “You have something to lose if you don’t ask, and you have nothing to lose if you do. Taking little steps, like reaching out, can help build confidence.”

THE ROLE OF MSU FACULTY IN SUPPORTING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Looking beyond his own experiences, Reaz said he believes that MSU faculty also have a critical role to play in the success of international students.

“It would really help if faculty attended events hosted by the International Office, like International Connections. Building relationships with international students can go a long way in helping them feel at home and supported.”

LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

As Reaz nears the completion of his second internship with Cencora, a major pharmaceutical distributor, he reflected on the profound impact the International Institute has had on his life.

“I’m really grateful for everyone in that office. They’ve been so helpful and supportive, and they’re more than just coworkers to me. They’re actual friends.”

After completing his internship, Reaz plans to pursue his CFA certification and eventually an MBA, with the goal of building a successful career in finance.

Reaz’s story exemplifies the profound impact that university departments, like the International Office, can have when they prioritize the growth, academic success, and professional development of their students.





MSU AND UIR PARTNERSHIP

MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY AND MOROCCO: A FLOURISHING PARTNERSHIP CULTIVATING TOMORROW'S LEADERS

Mississippi State University's (MSU) collaboration with Morocco's Université Internationale de Rabat (UIR) has evolved into a dynamic and multifaceted partnership, offering students unparalleled opportunities for academic and cultural enrichment. Recognized as a model in international education, this partnership underscores a shared commitment to developing future leaders through multidisciplinary exchanges and collaborative research.

EXPANDING HORIZONS: MULTIDISCIPLINARY EXCHANGE PROGRAMS

The partnership's cornerstone is the dual-degree program in automotive and aerospace engineering, initiated in 2015. This innovative program allows Moroccan students to complete their undergraduate studies at UIR and then spend a year at MSU, earning both a bachelor's and master's degree. Since its inception, Morocco has become one of the top five countries sending students to MSU, fostering a vibrant cultural exchange.

Building on this success, MSU has expanded the collaboration to multi-disciplinary collaborators across campus. A notable initiative is the archaeological fieldwork in Morocco, where MSU students engage in excavations at Jebel Irhoud, site of the world's oldest known homo sapien remains. These programs provide students with hands-on experience in global contexts, enhancing their

academic and professional development. Each spring, the UIR partnership enables 30-40 new Moroccan students to experience all that MSU has to offer. The growing cohort allows for resilience and thriving of the Moroccan student population because of strong social ties with peer groups.

A STRATEGIC COMMITMENT TO FUTURE LEADERSHIP

The partnership reflects a strategic alignment between MSU and Morocco, aiming to cultivate a new generation of leaders equipped to address global challenges. In 2024, the two institutions signed a memorandum of understanding to further strengthen their collaboration in scientific research and education. This agreement emphasizes the importance of technology transfer and socio-economic development, emphasizing bilateral support of academic and research initiatives.

The MSU-Morocco partnership exemplifies the power of international collaboration in shaping the leaders of tomorrow. By offering students access to diverse academic disciplines, immersive cultural experiences, and cutting-edge research opportunities, the partnership not only enriches individual academic journeys but also contributes to the global exchange of knowledge and innovation. As both institutions continue to expand their cooperation, they set a precedent for how MSU can play a pivotal role in fostering international understanding and leadership.

If you or your department is interested in formalizing international partnerships, contact the International Institute.

FROM NEPAL TO NIGERIA — MSU IS WHERE GLOBAL SCHOLARS SHAPE THEIR FUTURE

International students from around the world choose Mississippi State for advanced research, technical innovation, and life-changing academic opportunities.



TOP 10 COUNTRIES SENDING STUDENTS TO MSU

- Nepal
- India
- Bangladesh
- Nigeria
- Ghana
- Morocco
- China
- Iran
- Sri Lanka
- Colombia

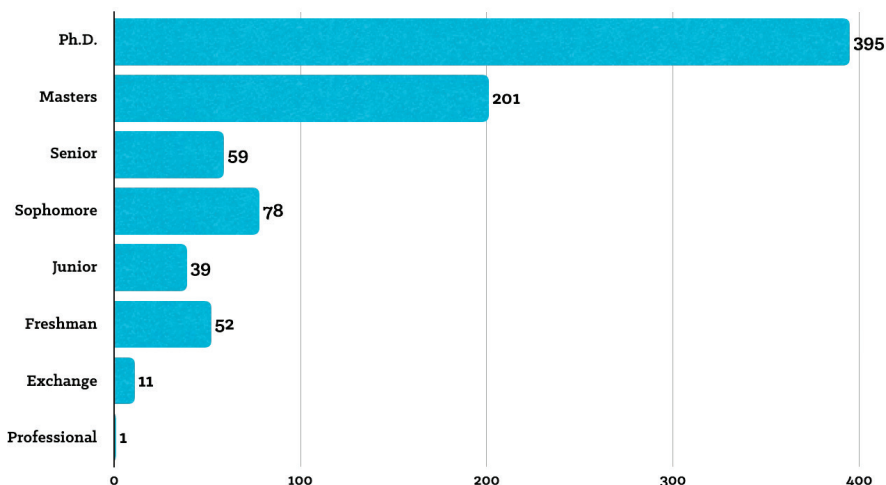
The countries shown reflect MSU’s most represented international student populations.

TOP MAJORS AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

- COMPUTER SCIENCE
- MECHANICAL ENGINEERING
- FOREST RESOURCES
- PHYSICS
- AEROSPACE ENGINEERING
- CHEMISTRY
- ENGINEERING
- ELECTRICAL & COMPUTER ENG
- PLANT & SOIL SCIENCES
- BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES

ACADEMIC LEVEL DISTRIBUTION

Graduate students make up the majority of MSU’s international population — highlighting Mississippi State’s strength as a global research institution.



BRIDGING CULTURES THROUGH CONVERSATION PARTNERS

By Masey Smith

MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY'S ELI CONVERSATION PARTNERS PROGRAM BUILDS LASTING CONNECTIONS

At Mississippi State University (MSU), language learning is more than grammar exercises and vocabulary lists. Through the English Language Institute's (ELI) Conversation Partners Program, international students are matched with volunteer staff, faculty, and community members for weekly informal English practice. But, as many participants quickly discover, these pairings often evolve into something far more impactful: mutual learning, lasting friendship, and genuine cross-cultural understanding.

"I am an open book, so I told my partners that they could ask whatever they wanted," said Victoria Houston, Study Abroad coordinator at the International Institute. "And that is something Conversation Partners Program does: allows you to fill out a form at the beginning to identify parameters of when you can meet, what your interests are, what you enjoy talking about, and that information "matches" you with a conversation partner."

And that is the role Jesse Ivy, instructor and coordinator in the English Language Institute, strives to do.

"We are responsive to the Quality Enhancement Plan of Mississippi State University and how our office provides services and support to all students," Ivy said. "With Conversation Partners, each student is paired with

"With Conversation Partners, each student is paired... to grow their learning through rich cultural exchange by providing international students authentic English practice."

— Jesse Ivy

NOT JUST LANGUAGE—IT'S CONNECTION

While the program is designed to give international students an opportunity to practice English in a casual setting, most participants agree that language becomes just the starting point.

"We never exclusively focused on grammar or correcting English," said Bobbie Jo Bensaid, project manager in the Department of Psychology. "It was just good conversation about life, culture, family, and everything in between."

From weekly chats over coffee to sharing meals, decorating for holidays, or even sitting down to paint together, partners often found themselves exploring topics that mattered: identity, traditions, values, and aspirations. Many international students used the time to ask questions they didn't feel comfortable raising in class, questions about idioms, local customs, or even U.S. elections and holidays. Volunteers found these honest exchanges deeply enriching.

another student, staff, or faculty member to enrich their support system and grow their learning through rich cultural exchange by providing international students authentic English practice."

PAINTING THE FUTURE - CONNECTION IN THE DETAILS

Painting under the Mississippi sky became an unexpected bridge between cultures for Katie Baker and her conversation partner. On a sunny afternoon at the picnic tables outside Lee Hall, the two bonded over art, Baker experimenting with paints while her partner, from Mexico, created vivid traditional designs. What started as a casual meeting became a quiet yet powerful moment of connection, blending creativity with cultural expression.

These moments of cultural exchange often unfolded organically, not from structured lessons but from genuine curiosity and shared interests. Houston recalled a Friendsgiving where her Japanese partner brought



sushi to complement the traditional Thanksgiving spread, while Bensaid asked her Vietnamese partner to map out a dream travel itinerary in Vietnam, an exchange that sparked hours of storytelling and laughter.

“It was an MSU moment where we sat outside near the Drill Field and made memories,” recalled Baker. “And that is what this is about.”

AUTHENTICITY, RELATABILITY, AND CONNECTION

For Bobbie Jo Bensaid, a staff volunteer, the relationships she built were deeply grounded in her authenticity. As a wife and mother, she found these aspects of her identity weren’t barriers but bridges.

“I didn’t let being a married, working mom stop me. In fact, it gave some realness in our connection because I bring the baby, we go on walks, we have coffee and tea, and our conversations blossom into friendships,” said Bensaid. “Some of my partners, especially those away from their families, needed to see someone real. It made the connection more personal, they saw someone living life, juggling family, and still choosing to show up for them.”

This authenticity resonated with students who were not only adjusting to academic life but also coping with loneliness, homesickness, or cultural disconnection. Inviting students to break fast during Ramadan, or simply chatting about daily routines, became an act of community-building.

GROWTH ON BOTH SIDES

Conversation partner volunteers often began the program thinking they were there to help, but many walked away transformed. “I was surprised how much I got out of it,” said Baker. “It’s inspiring to see someone pursue their education in a second language. It made me reflect on how brave and capable they are.”

Houston shared that participating in the program pushed her to complete her ESL certification, years after leaving it unfinished in college. “It reminded me how much I love this work. It reignited something in me.”

Baker, Bensaid, and Houston all agreed that the experience is something that impacted their career trajectory. All three started as student volunteers. Now, Baker and Houston work at the International Institute, and Bensaid continues her work as a Conversation Partner while maintaining active involvement in international efforts across campus.

More International Bulldogs Means More Opportunity to Get Involved

For anyone considering joining the program, the advice is simple: show up, be open, and be consistent.

“This is part of MSU’s efforts to promote research, service, and learning,” Ivy said. “If you can dedicate one hour a week and be genuinely interested in someone’s story, you can make a difference.”

“It’s about people. It’s about friendship. And that’s what makes it so powerful,” said Bensaid.

COFFEE & CULTURAL EXCHANGE

How Former Exchange Student Finds Friendship through Conversation

By Hayley Pounds

When rising senior Amelia McMahan received a campus email about the English Language Institute's Conversation Partners program, she didn't hesitate. As a Cybersecurity & Operations major with a desire for cultural exchange, the opportunity to connect with international students through weekly conversations immediately resonated.

"I've always been interested in learning more outside my own culture and customs," McMahan said. "I thought it was a way I could help others and make new friends along the way."

With personal experience as a former exchange student herself, McMahan understood the complexity of navigating a new country, language, and academic system. After completing a brief intake form indicating her academic background and interests, she was paired with students from Morocco, Vietnam, and Bangladesh. The goal was to support English language development, but McMahan approached the experience with an open mind and a flexible strategy.

"I never had a lesson plan," she explained. "I told my partner 'Let's just talk. If words or phrases come up that you don't know, we'll address them as they come.'"

This casual, student-centered approach enabled genuine connection. Recognizing that conversation is often most meaningful outside a formal setting, Amelia invited her partners to meet at local coffee shops or explore nearby destinations like the Noxubee Wildlife Refuge. These relaxed encounters opened the door for deeper conversation. Topics evolved naturally from class schedules and study tips to stories of home, family, and the emotional realities of living far from one's country.

"By the end of the semester," McMahan recalled, "it felt less like a meeting with a student partner and more like I was just catching up with a friend over coffee."

While the program's initial focus was on helping international students practice English, McMahan found herself learning just as much in return. Her partners introduced her to their cultures, explaining everything from political systems and religious practices to national dishes and family traditions.

"My Moroccan partner even brought me some snacks from his home country," McMahan said. "They were delicious, and I really appreciated the gesture."

Through these interactions, McMahan's global awareness expanded in ways that challenged



“It’s a great way to check in on international students and give them another contact in the U.S., someone outside of the classroom.”

— Amelia McMahan

preconceptions. For example, her conversations with a partner from Vietnam opened her eyes to the country’s diverse geography and ecosystems. Religious exchange was another area of unexpected depth.

“Two of my partners were Muslim, and I didn’t know much about Islam at the time,” McMahan said. “Even then, there were differences between my Moroccan and Bangladeshi partners in how they practiced. That was interesting.”

Under the leadership of Director Amy Harrison, the English Language Institute’s Conversation Partners program continues to serve as a vital bridge between international and domestic students, faculty, and staff. McMahan observed the important role the program plays in the broader university community.

“It’s a great way to check in on international students and give them another contact in the U.S., someone outside of the classroom.”

Reflecting on her multi-semester involvement, McMahan underscored the value of the program, not just for language learning, but for broadening students’ global perspectives.

“The world is a lot bigger than one country, or even one college in Mississippi. That can be intimidating, but at the same time, the world doesn’t revolve around us. The cultural exchange aspect is phenomenal.”

In an increasingly interconnected world, programs like Conversation Partners foster empathy, global literacy, and community, all vital elements in preparing students, and the campus itself, for the future.

REIMAGINING LANGUAGE LEARNING

From TESOL to Teamwork

By Hayley Pounds

Final semesters are often a whirlwind for college students, packed with final papers, graduation planning, and post-graduation decisions. But for political science major Alijah Jones, that didn't stop him from taking on one more meaningful commitment during his final semester at Mississippi State University: participating in the English Language Institute's Conversation Partners program.

With a strong background in foreign languages, linguistics, and a TESOL certification, Jones already had many of the tools of a seasoned educator.

"I had worked as a TESOL tutor while at Overstreet Elementary and as an online intern helping students build their knowledge base in English language and customs," Jones explained.

His partner, not only older but also balancing the demands of graduate study, often had limited availability, making it difficult for their conversations to develop naturally.

"The meetings following our first were still baseline," Jones acknowledged. "But I remember how that changed when I decided to go to a Latin Student Association meeting where my partner was performing." Watching his partner sing at the event and reconnecting afterward shifted something.

"It was our first time seeing each other outside of 'partner mode,'" Jones said with a smile. "He was just another Mississippi State student, and we could go to the same events. I feel like this moment helped us to get over that hump."



"It took me outside of this American bubble."
— Alijah Jones

Still, it wasn't until later in his academic journey that Jones crossed paths with Amy Harrison, director of the English Language Institute, who encouraged him to join Conversation Partners, a program designed to pair international students with faculty, staff, or domestic students for weekly, one-on-one English practice and cultural exchange.

"We were in class together, and then I saw her tabling inside the Colvard Student Union," Jones recalled. "She said, 'No, you would be great for this program!'" With that encouragement, he decided to fill out the interest form.

Soon after, Jones was matched with a graduate student from Colombia. As with all new partnerships in the program, their first meeting took place at the English Language Institute, formerly housed in Memorial Hall, to establish expectations and scheduling logistics. Yet in the following weeks, Jones noticed a kind of distance lingering in their conversations.

From that point on, their interactions changed for the better. Jones found himself trading in the role of instructor for that of a peer and collaborator.

"I feel like I was able to lean more into our conversations because now I could take off that responsibility of completing a 'checklist' of lessons. Things became more natural."

As their relationship evolved, so did the topics of their conversations.

"One of the first things we connected over was a love for languages," Jones said. "Like me, he spoke Italian, but also Portuguese and Spanish."

That shared interest turned into a dynamic, multilingual experience where the two would practice speaking across several languages.

"It made my brain hurt," he laughed, "but it actually ended up being a bit fun!"

They also discussed the nuances of the American

accent, regional slang, and the idea that language mastery isn't just about vocabulary breadth, it's about how well someone is understood.

"I didn't want him to worry about speaking like a robot," Jones explained. "You can command the room just by speaking like everyone else in the room."

For Jones, creating a space where conversation could flow naturally, without pressure or performance, was a cornerstone of their connection.

When asked how the Conversation Partners program broadened his global perspective, Jones reflected thoughtfully.

"It took me outside of this American bubble and introduced me to someone who, like me, had these big linguistic interests. I was able to combine my academic interests with real-world cultural learning outside of the classroom.

"Furthermore," he added, "it allowed me to step outside of being the teacher or the instructor and step into someone who is just having a conversation, learning alongside, and learning with, another person. I'm happy

to have had the opportunity."

He also emphasized the importance of the program for international students.

"This program allows international students to have that one-on-one interaction they might not normally get. These are people, and, as native speakers, we can allow ourselves to speak with them and, like them, learn along the way."

Following his graduation in spring 2025, Jones was accepted into a year-long Fulbright program in Italy, beginning in October. He plans to later pursue a master's in international affairs and ultimately hopes to join the foreign service.

Jones' experience is a testament to the power of conversation of how one university program can open the door to mutual understanding, personal growth, and community connection. In a world that increasingly demands cultural agility and empathy, programs like Conversation Partners are more than extracurricular activities, they are vital tools in preparing globally minded citizens, both at home and abroad.





BENEFITING TOGETHER

The Win-Win of MSU's Conversation Partners

By Hayley Pounds

Katie Grisham, a recent Mississippi State grad, was initially drawn to the Conversation Partners program by the opportunity to practice her Spanish-speaking skills. The program, introduced by the university's English Language Institute, facilitates one-on-one weekly meetings between international students and any faculty, staff, or students interested in helping with English language development. While a specific partner isn't always guaranteed, the program fosters a rewarding cultural exchange and language learning experience.

Grisham was paired with a graduate student from Colombia who had just arrived on campus in fall 2024. Although Katie had never worked with international

students before, she quickly found herself comfortable in this new role.

"I remember her being so eager," Grisham recalled fondly about her partner. "It was a great thing and the most fulfilling thing for me during our meetings."

Grisham chose a more structured approach for their weekly sessions. She encouraged her partner to write down any language-related concepts or pronunciation difficulties she encountered. When they met, they would tackle those questions together.

In addition to Grisham's proactive approach, her partner took the initiative to incorporate her own academic work into their meetings. "My partner worked as a teaching

“The most enjoyable part of our meetings was watching her grow. I’m so glad I got to witness it.”

— Katie Grisham

assistant on campus,” Grisham explained, “and she would come and practice her upcoming projects with me to make sure that she sounded good. She was way better than she thought she was!”

For Grisham, the role of guide and cheerleader was key. She focused on building her partner’s confidence and supporting her through challenges. “The best way I could help was by encouraging her as much as possible,” Grisham said..

However, not all moments were smooth sailing. As a student of fashion, Grisham found some of the more technical aspects of English language acquisition outside her realm of expertise.

“I’m not a teacher, and there were times when learning got trickier, especially with pronunciation,” Grisham said. But she had an unexpected resource at her disposal—her mother, who had teaching experience. Her mom offered helpful tips and advice on best practices for supporting her partner’s language growth.

Over the course of their sessions, Grisham and her partner delved into discussions about cultural practices, favorite dishes, hobbies, and traditions. As their connection deepened, so did the scope of their conversations.

“One time she had gotten sick,” Grisham recalled. “And she ended up FaceTiming me to practice what she

wanted to say to her doctor before her appointment. So, in this way, she was applying what we were learning during our conversations to the real world.”

The informal setting of their meetings also played an important role in forging bonds of trust.

“We often sat outside. It was always a really casual setup,” Grisham said, highlighting how the relaxed environment encouraged open dialogue.

This blend of structured goals and a comfortable atmosphere helped to nurture their partnership throughout the semester. Reflecting on the overall experience, Grisham said she considers their time together deeply rewarding.

“The most enjoyable part of our meetings was watching her grow. I’m so glad I got to witness it,” she said.

When asked about the broader impact of the Conversation Partners program, Grisham highlighted the importance of peer-to-peer interaction and how it promotes a welcoming environment for all involved.

“If I could describe the program overall, I’d say it was a very beneficial experience for both parties. I would definitely recommend it to anyone who has the opportunity.”

Through the efforts of the English Language Institute and the Conversation Partners initiative, MSU continues to bring students from different backgrounds together in meaningful ways. Unlikely friendships form, cultural knowledge is shared, and confidence is cultivated, bridging the gap between cultures and enhancing the learning experience for all.



“We often sat outside. It was always a really casual setup.”

— Katie Grisham

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TAKING CARE OF **WHAT MATTERS**

At Mississippi State, global programs create real-world learning experiences that build cultural understanding, community and lifelong impact.



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