

# From Alone to Belonging: How I Built My Own Community

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Hi, I'm Caroline, an international student at Seneca.

Everyone has a story, and so does every community. Have you ever felt completely alone on campus, in a new country, surrounded by people, yet still felt lost, out of place, and unseen? This is the story of how I built a community and found a sense of belonging along the way.

## A New Beginning

Like many others, I came to Canada with one suitcase, one backpack, and a heart full of hope. It was winter. The snow was unfamiliar and so was everything else: the language, the food, the culture. Seneca felt huge. And I felt very small. I didn't know anyone. I hoped to make friends, but it didn't happen. Everyone seemed busy. Some rushed out after class; others didn't show up at all.

## Searching for Connection

People come and go on campus. Most connections faded after just a few conversations. I wasn't looking for small talk — I was searching for a sense of belonging.

Then one day, something happened. I passed out during an event and woke up in an ambulance. I had lost consciousness and for a while, even the ability to speak. I was discharged quickly, with no real explanation, just a referral to a neurologist. That moment shook me. I felt invisible, not just as a patient, but as a person. I missed home. Not just the physical place, but the feeling of being seen, heard, and understood.

So, I started searching for someone who shared even a small piece of my culture. Not necessarily the same language — just something familiar.

## The Spark

Taiwan: a small, beautiful island with warm, welcoming people. You might not know much about it, but if you've ever had bubble tea — that's us.

In my first year, I met only one other Taiwanese student. She later became a close friend,

and it made me wonder: how many others like us were here scattered, disconnected, and unseen?

So, I decided to try something bold. Maybe I could find others like me at orientation. At the next new student orientation, I stayed until the very end and nervously asked the host if I could borrow the mic. I took a deep breath and said, “Is anyone here from Taiwan?”

At first, there was silence. Then... a few hands slowly went up. That was the moment everything changed. That was the spark.

## **Building from Scratch**

Honestly, I had no idea how to start a cultural student group. I wasn’t even sure I could represent the Taiwanese community. I only carry part of the heritage, don’t speak Taiwanese, and I’m not a native Mandarin speaker. But I felt a deep connection and a strong desire to do something meaningful for this underrepresented group.

There was hesitation and doubt. I didn’t know if anyone would trust me or want to join.

Still, I took a leap. I sent a message to the general inquiry email listed on the Taiwan Embassy’s website in Canada officially known as the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office (TECO)—not expecting a reply, just hoping for a bit of guidance.

To my surprise, an officer called me a few days later. “That’s a brilliant idea,” she said. “We’d love for Seneca to join our Taiwanese student network in Eastern Canada. You’d be the first college, joining schools like the University of Toronto, York, McGill, and Waterloo.”

That gave me hope.

Soon after, I submitted a proposal and officially launched the Taiwanese Student Association, the first of its kind in Seneca’s history.

## **From One to Many**

In the beginning, I organized small events on my own, traveling across campuses: Newnham, York, Markham, and even King. (Peterborough was a bit too far—no shuttle!) Often, no one showed up. It was discouraging.

Still, I kept going. I shared tips and updates on Reddit, WhatsApp, Instagram, and LINE: class reminders, campus news, event info, and glimpses of my student life. I even joined off-campus tours waving a small Taiwanese flag, hoping someone might notice—and know they weren’t alone.

One message at a time. One outing at a time. Little by little, people began to connect.

## **Our First Big Moment**

By our second semester, we had nearly 100 members—mostly Taiwanese and I finally had helping hands. We organized our first big meetup. We expected maybe 10 students. But then 5 came... then 10... 20... 30... 40. The room overflowed.

That night, we played games, shared stories, and laughed together. It felt like a big family reunion—like coming home.

## **A Thriving Community**

In under a year, we grew to nearly 200 members—not just Taiwanese students, but also others who love our culture. We've collaborated with clubs, departments, and even local businesses and community organizations.

What started as a simple idea became a thriving network of support—a place of connection, culture, and community.

## **If You're Still Searching...**

If you're still searching for a place to belong, I see you. I hear you.

There are many ways to connect at Seneca: join a support group or cultural club, try the peer mentoring program, attend events, go on off-campus tours, or volunteer your time to meet others.

And what if the community you're looking for doesn't exist yet? Maybe—just maybe—you can be the one to create it, like I did.

You don't need to be an extrovert. You don't need to have everything figured out. You just need the heart to begin.

**Want to connect or share your story? Looking to join—or build—a community? Let's find your place, together.**

**Find your place at Seneca with these resources:**

**Follow:**

@senecastudentlife

@senecassf

**Join:**SSF Clubs

**Attend:**Student Support Groups

**Get Active:**Athletics and Recreation

**In the Community:**North York Community House

(Written by Caroline Cheng)

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