Lost, Found, and Thriving: My First Month as an International Student

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I remember my arrival in Canada like it was yesterday. I flew into the country at the chilled close of 2023, snow crunching beneath sturdy boots I had been urged to buy months before my journey and breath curling into the air in soft spirals. Winter had made itself at home in Toronto, and my job was to follow suit. The only catch? I was thousands of miles away from family, friends, and every other tether in my life that had once grounded me.

As an international student stepping into Seneca Polytechnic for the first time, I felt both frozen and free. Everything was new: the rhythm of the city, the freezing cold (and riptide winds!), the unfamiliar, yet welcoming faces. I had come chasing opportunity, but in those first few days, I was mostly chasing warmth in every sense of the word.

What I didn't expect was how quickly I'd find it; not just in heated buildings, but in the hearts of my peers and new support systems I'd get to build.

Winter Blues and a Jacket that felt like Armour

The first weeks were predictably a blur of icy sidewalks and emotional thawing. I spent most days getting over my gnarly jetlag and feeling homesick for the sun, the scent of home-cooked meals, and the comfort of knowing where I belonged. Orientation was helpful, but I still felt like I had a lot ahead of me and no buoy to keep me afloat.

One night, curled up in bed with a cup of instant noodles and scrolling through Instagram, I found Seneca Pride, the 2SLGBTQ+ Student Support group at Seneca. A community built not just around identity, but also shared experiences and providing a safe space for queer/questioning students. Even so, a familiar hesitation crept in. I wondered if my shyness would hold me back. Would I be brave enough to show up, *and* open up?

Steeling my nerves, I joined an in-person hangout the next week at Newnham, my thick winter jacket wrapped tightly around me as a shield between me and the unfamiliarity. I hovered near the doorway, unsure where to begin, until a peer facilitator waved me over with a smile that melted the frost. We sat in a loose circle and I remember listening more than I spoke that evening. One student shared how they found a chosen family here; another spoke of navigating identity in a new country; yet another around fears about starting over.

With each added experience, something was shifting within me. I felt… seen. I left with cheeks flushed from connection and the quiet thrill of being added to a Discord group that felt like familiar ground. It was more than just a group chat, it was a thread tying me to something real. The first inklings of belonging had begun to take root.

Getting Lost to Be Found

Three weeks in, classes began to demand more of me. The pressure mounted, but so did my resilience. I attended a time management workshop and resume-building session through Seneca Works. Each one felt like a stepping stone across a river I wasn't sure I could cross.

One morning, rushing to make an 8 AM class, I boarded the wrong bus (half-awake, half-hopeful) and found myself in a neighborhood I didn't recognize. Panic swiftly crept in, and hands shaking, I texted a friend I'd made during a workshop. Within minutes, she replied, calming my nerves and guiding me back. We chatted the whole ride about classes, winter hacks, and finding footing in a new country (and the TTC). That gentle detour served as a reminder that sometimes, getting lost is how we find what matters.

Giving Back

By the fourth week, each new experience had begun to stitch itself into the fabric of my journey. I no longer felt like a visitor; I was becoming a participant. I volunteered to create artwork for an event run by the Seneca Student Federation (SSF), joined karaoke and open-mic events at the Hive, and stepped into community with a surefootedness that was surprising even to me. Amid the stress of balancing academics and life abroad, these moments became anchors. Reminders that joy, creativity, and belonging could coexist.

If you had told the version of me who stepped off that flight terrified of new beginnings that one day I'd feel at home here, I wouldn't have believed you. Back then, everything felt foreign. Now, those once-unfamiliar streets carry echoes of belonging.

To any new student reading this: don't wait. Reach out. Join a support group. Go to that SSF event. Ask for help.

You'll be amazed at how quickly strangers become friends, and how a campus can start to feel a little more like a home away from home.

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

Counselling Services and 24/7 Support and Resources

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