

My Journey

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My name is Sergio, and I work in the International Student Support at Seneca. I want to share my journey: from being an international student to work at Seneca supporting international students. I hope you find valuable insights that can help you on your own path.

I was an international student thirty years ago. My experience was shaped by small groups, often consisting of a tight-knit cohort facing significant cultural and language barriers, along with limited support. Back then, studying abroad felt like being on the other side of the world. I had to be patient and navigate a deep sense of uncertainty that is hard to imagine in today's hyperconnected environment. In the early 1990s, little information was available. I discovered Seneca through a brochure at the Canadian embassy, without the help of technology. Finding information required creativity. I relied heavily on libraries, spending hours searching through card catalogues, encyclopedias, and reference books to locate useful materials. Before leaving my home country, the entire process was quite demanding; applications had to be handwritten or typed, documents were mailed across borders, and responses often took weeks or even months to arrive. Sometimes, you could send your application by fax, but there were no online portals to track progress or instant emails for clarification. A single mistake could delay plans for an entire year. Obtaining visas involved enduring long queues at embassies, often filled with anxiety and uncertainty about acceptance, finances, and the accommodation process. When I arrived in Toronto, it was both exciting and intimidating. I landed with only a paper map, a few phone numbers, and vague directions to my school, Seneca. There were no smart phones to translate languages, no ride-hailing apps, and no instant messaging to connect with family back home. Public phone booths became my lifelines, and long-distance calls were both expensive and brief. I resorted to writing letters instead, waiting weeks for replies and learning to cope with the absence of news from home and the feelings of homesickness.

My cultural adjustment was a significant challenge, as an international student, I was expected to adapt quickly, often with little institutional support. Orientation programs were limited, and counselling services were not widely advertised. The variety of accents, unfamiliar teaching styles, and different social norms made classrooms intimidating. Asking questions required courage, especially when my confidence in my language skills was fragile. Loneliness was common, yet it was seldom discussed openly. Managing finances required careful planning, managing money without online banking or instant transfers, tracking budgets by hand and accessing emergency funds was difficult. While part-time job

opportunities existed, finding them meant scanning notice boards or relying on word of mouth.

Being an international student thirty years ago fostered remarkable independence. I learned problem-solving out of necessity and built deep friendships with people from diverse backgrounds. Without the constant distractions of digital devices, conversations were longer, relationships were more intentional, and experiences were more immersive. Studying abroad during that time profoundly shaped my character, teaching me valuable lessons in patience, adaptability, and self-reliance. Nowadays, it is essential to connect with student services right from the start to take full advantage of all available resources.

If you are an international student reading this at the very beginning of your journey, I want you to know that it's completely normal to feel excited, uncertain, and even overwhelmed at the same time. I have stood where you are now, and I understand how far from home this path can sometimes feel. You do not have to navigate it alone. Through this blog series, I hope to share lessons I've learned over the past thirty years, both as a student and as someone who now supports international students every day. My hope is that my experiences will encourage you, help you feel more confident asking for support, and remind you that each step you take is part of a meaningful journey. I look forward to continuing to share my story and walking alongside you as you begin yours.



(Written by Sergio Vazquez)

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