



# FINGERPRINT

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## The Change of a Lifetime: A Student's Perspective on Academic and Cultural Immersion at S-C by Sam Mendonca '17

I was forwarded a document written by recent graduate Alex Gorobets '19 titled simply "Forrest Gump", a piece created with the intent of showcasing the plight of a mature immigrant student integrating himself into Canadian culture, specifically in the context of the S-C program. It outlines Alex's main challenges during the program, things he found to be helpful, aspects he would change and some ways he feels the school can help accommodate students in a similar position. As both someone who came to Canada from the Middle East, and as a student who enrolled in the S-C Bridge program a little later in life, I felt the piece resonate with some of my own sentiments about enmeshing myself into new and unfamiliar worlds. I decided to reach out to Alex with the hope of learning more about his S-C experience.

Before arriving at our school, Alex worked as an OBGYN surgeon in Kiev, Ukraine. He practiced medicine for 13 years before deciding to leave the profession and work in medical research and marketing for a pharmaceutical company. A career opportunity for his wife in Canada prompted his family's move here. Alex knew that he wanted to stay within the healthcare realm, and wanted to use his hands as tools, and so after some research into massage therapy as a profession and a conversation with a graduate, he found himself at S-C.



Alex and his family.

### Why did you put this document "Forrest Gump" together?

I wanted to help someone who might be in a similar position, as well as provide the school with an understanding of where I was coming from. As a mature student with a medical background, and as an immigrant, there was quite a difference between me and other given students in the program, and adjustments were needed in order to foster an encouraging environment, both on my part and the school's.

I did not meet my own expectations, especially during the Bridge portion. I had a certain expectation about the program. I imagined it would be easily doable for me, based on my previous experience. I was disappointed in myself when I realized this was not the case, and wanted to outline the obstacles I faced.

### **Why was it so different from your expectations?**

As I mentioned, I hoped my medical background would give me a big advantage, especially in terms of anatomy, physiology and neurology. However, I had learned these subjects 30 years ago, under a different education system in another language. Here, my ability to remember old information, as well as my capacity to absorb new information, had changed dramatically. In addition, the language barrier played a role in my ability to integrate, not just academically but on a social level as well.

### **What kind of an impact did these obstacles have on your experience?**

Initially, this impact was negative, because I felt that I couldn't interact and couldn't participate with everyone. I didn't know how to contribute my knowledge or find my place within all of it. I don't think I did that well initially, because when information I thought I knew did not align with the material I was learning, I caused some misunderstandings amongst my classmates and teachers. I came in with the attitude that I was so knowledgeable and that I had the right to correct, or to intrude in someone's lectures. I came to realize that this was not appropriate.

### **Did your experience change for the better?**

Yes. Towards the end of the Bridge program, I started to realize that I needed to change my outlook. My classmates, in traditionally polite Canadian fashion, did not say much to me about my behaviour. However, another mature student who had also recently immigrated to Canada from Europe did approach me – he told me that I needed to stop being a teacher, because I was, in fact, a student like everyone else. I do not consider myself an arrogant person, but I expected my experience to be valuable academically. On a social level, I was used to having many friends, to being the centre of a conversation – I had a bright sense of humour and people were always attracted to that. Being here, I lost myself. I couldn't be that person, I couldn't communicate or explain things the way I would because of the language barrier, and I could easily feel anxious in a simple situation. The more I encountered this side of myself, the more I wanted to change. In Term 3, I met some other mature students who are parents like I am – we had many things in common, and I was able to find my place socially.

### **All in all, would you say you were happy with your S-C experience?**

The S-C community experience was a challenge, but it made me change for the better. I not only feel more comfortable with my peers, but with people around me in my community. One thing I learned from my instructors and classmates was how to explain things simply. Back home, we were taught with a different philosophy, one where our explanations were expected to be lengthy and complicated. My goal in coming to Canada was to become genuinely Canadian as I feel it is a huge privilege to be here. If I hadn't enrolled in this program, it would have taken me years to reframe my way of thinking. Now I can explain things, or have conversations in more simple terms while still thinking critically. I am grateful to the S-C community for that. I also felt a lot of support from everyone around me, not just on an academic level, but also emotionally. Instructors always smile, or maybe say a word or two that is seemingly unremarkable, but can help ground someone who is nervous, uncertain or who is undergoing changes and feeling down. Every instructor has a different strategy, but the end goal is always about delivering quality education to each student – for the first time in all of my academic history, I cannot pick out an instructor that I did not like.

## Do you have any advice for a student in your position?

I feel like much of my issue was due to my own personality, but I will say that if your knowledge is not that current, or if you have a language barrier, take the full-length program, as you do need time to adjust to a new way of reasoning and performing. If you feel like you are alone/falling behind, talk to someone and seek some help. Take advantage of the lunch hour sessions – don't let yourself fall. I didn't realize the effects of not doing anything about falling behind. I thought I should tough it out and manage it on my own – I was a medical doctor during wartime and revolution back home, so I thought I could handle it. But I kept sliding – some nights after school I just wanted to cry because I thought myself incompetent. This was disruptive and I should have just asked for assistance sooner – so be proactive. Once I began putting my all into my studies, I started to succeed – I learned to just ask if I needed something. If you are a medical professional, you may feel a loss of self-esteem if you don't immediately grasp the material. It has nothing to do with who you are; this is a different way of learning and approaching concepts. Be aware of that and take the steps you need to ensure that you stay on track.

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I didn't expect to have the conversation that I did with Alex. As an instructor, I was not aware of his medical background, nor was I aware of his anxiety. It can be so easy to formulate an opinion of a student who may challenge me or seem interruptive, but as with Alex, there is so much more to someone than we know. Speaking to him really did open my eyes to some of the more uncommon internal challenges students may face, particularly those with medical backgrounds who may be expected to "know it all" by themselves, their peers and maybe even their instructors. I am glad that Alex was able to turn his experience around but I also recognize that this may not be the case for everyone. I truly believe that the S-C community fosters an environment of growth and success, and would encourage anyone in Alex's position to ask for help if they need it. I think that as individuals, instructors, peers and as a school, we can all do our part to make students from all walks of life feel at home here.

To truly empathize with an immigrant's perspective, I leave you with words from the award-winning bestseller about neuroplasticity, *The Brain that Changes Itself*, by psychiatrist Norman Doidge:

*Immigration is usually an unending, brutal workout for the adult brain, requiring a massive rewiring of vast amounts of our cortical real estate. It is a far more difficult matter than simply learning new things, because the new culture is in plastic competition with neural networks that had their critical development in the native land...for most, culture shock is brain shock.*

### Lunch Hour Help Sessions

Cirque de Science and Practice Clinic are both no-charge lunch-time tutoring services accessible to all students. Instructors are available for the hour, and students can bring the gamut of needs to be addressed.

Cirque is focused on helping students with academics. Instruction style is usually one-on-one, although groups are welcome. Students are asked to email their specific questions or areas of challenge ahead of time so the instructors can prepare as needed.

In Practice Clinic the spotlight is on help with hands-on proficiency, clinical skills or treatment challenges, practical subject tutoring and O/P taking issues.