

Getting Used to American Idiosyncrasies

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When you come to study in the USA, you join a new culture that is dynamic, enriching, and sometimes bewildering. In your own country you know the social customs, both subtle and stated. In a new country, though, the rules are not always obvious. Despite your good intentions and determination to understand your U.S. colleagues, you will sometimes be surprised by their behavior. Eventually, you will get accustomed to these idiosyncrasies – things they do that seem quite odd to you. So what can you do in the meantime? First, smile and relax. Then watch and listen. And most of all, keep a sense of humor about the cultural differences you are discovering.

Timeliness Equals Respect

U.S. professionals take promptness seriously, and the quickest way to lose their respect is to show up late. If you are even five minutes late for an admissions or job interview, you may hurt your chances as a candidate. It does not matter if your car broke down, you were taking an exam, or you were jetlagged and overslept, the perception will be that you consider your own time more valuable than that of the interviewer. This idea carries over into the classroom: missing the first day of class, or even an assignment due date, is considered disrespectful. If you remember only one thing, it is this: if you have an appointment, be there on time, or even early. If you cannot avoid being late, always apologize.

Geographic Isolationism

Don't be surprised if your U.S. acquaintances think that Koreans speak Chinese and Colombia is a city in Mexico. Maybe it's because the U.S. is such a big place, but some of its residents have little knowledge of the rest of the world. If you're from Latin America, you will also notice that people in the U.S. refer to themselves as "Americans" and everyone from the southern continent as "South Americans." Your best response is a pleasant smile and willingness to share a little good-natured information about your own country and your international point of view.

Physical Contact

Whenever you cross cultures, one of the biggest differences is in physical contact. In the U.S. professional environment, a handshake is the appropriate greeting whether you are male or female, old or young. Contact is much more variable among friends. In general, U.S. women tend to touch more than men, and you may see close female friends greeting each other with embraces or cheek kisses. Sometimes a woman will greet a close male friend in the same way. Between two men, physical contact is less common, and walking hand-in-hand or with arms around each other's shoulders is rare. A man and woman who are dating or married may hold hands while walking in public and occasionally exchange quick light kisses on parting. Strangers usually try to avoid touching each other, even in a crowd - if you accidentally brush against a stranger always say "Excuse Me" or "Sorry," even if the other person was responsible.

Personal Space

Most Americans automatically keep a distance of about three feet from strangers and colleagues, even during conversation or when standing in line. When you enter this space, they become uncomfortable. If you find someone backing away from you, just stop moving closer. He'll adjust to the distance that is most comfortable, and you'll be the only one who knows what happened.

Any time you can't decide how to behave, watch the people around you. And if you think there's been a cultural misunderstanding, just laugh and ask what's wrong. Chances are good

that your colleague, classmate, or acquaintance will be happy to explain, and you will have learned one more thing about U.S. idiosyncrasies.

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Cultural Adjustments

By Lisa Krieg, Director, Office of International Education at Carnegie Mellon University

New students typically have a host of concerns when they arrive in the U.S. Academic issues often top the list, but students also worry about making friends, finding a place to live or worship, and what to eat. From our experience with thousands of new international students, we know that the ability to adapt *culturally* leads to better successes in: academic, social, and personal health arenas. New students should *expect* a cultural adjustment process by anticipating small and large changes in the perception of others, interactions in academic and social settings, and reactions to unexpected situations. This process can be challenging, but awareness and some tips can help!

Cultural Adaptation

Even if you are adept in new situations, you will need to adapt at many levels of your life as a student in the U.S: academic, social, cultural, and emotional.

For example, in the American classroom, students are expected to “participate” by asking questions and giving opinions. Your active participation indicates that you are paying attention, engaging in the learning process, and interested. If you come from a country where “the teachers talk, and the students listen,” then this will require some modification. Our point is: the things that have defined your academic success in your home culture may or may not ensure your success in the U.S. So, watch your American classmates, and mirror their general behavior. Speak with your professor about his/her expectations.

This is just one example of the *many* adaptations you may make. The good news is that many students find a good balance and like their new home!

Adjustment Curve

Most students experience a U-shaped curve as they move through the cultural adjustment process. You will likely move from high expectations and excitement to some dissatisfaction, or frustration. You may then feel uncertain or depressed; however, you’ll soon experience an increasing understanding of the new culture and your fit within it. Eventually, you’ll achieve balance between your own needs and cultural norms with U.S. culture. We liken this normal adjustment process to the letter “U” – up, down, then up again! Each person experiences this adjustment curve in a unique way, but you are certain to have some of these feelings as you move through the stages of adaptation.

Tips

Here are some tips that we share with new students to ease their adjustment to the U.S. college and university experience:

- Anticipate that you will experience cultural adaptations, even if you are good in new situations.
- Bring items such as photos, posters, music, or artwork from home to remind you of family and friends.
- Identify students from your country or region or *any new student* who may be experiencing the same issues. Talk with them about your feelings.

- Ask your Foreign Student Advisor for advice and campus resources.
- Get involved in a campus activity: athletics, a club or student group, or campus job. Make a new group of acquaintances right away.
- If someone asks you to lunch, say “yes!” Otherwise, you’ve lost an opportunity. If no one asks, then *you* can take the first step by asking “would you like to get a quick bite to eat sometime this week?”
- Watch for signs of depression – sleeplessness, lethargy, lack of appetite – and consult a trusted friend and/or your campus health or counseling center for help.
- Plan some quick conversation starters with new American friends – the weather, sports, American holidays, family members. Consult an ESL teacher for tips on starting, having, and ending casual conversations.

Successful adaptation to a new culture is wonderful! When you have arrived on the upside of the adjustment curve, you will have achieved a new area of expertise. Your familiarity with a different culture will serve you well for the rest of your life. So, enjoy the process while learning about yourself and others. And, don’t forget to share your successes with the next round of new international students arriving on your campus.

Immigration Issues

While most programs have personnel (Foreign Student Advisors) in their student services unit to assist non-U.S. students with visa concerns, it is the personal responsibility of each student to be in compliance with U.S. Immigration Policies, both general and specific, relevant to their country of citizenship.

Before schools can issue the travel documents necessary for entrance to the U.S. for educational purposes, admitted students must provide solid evidence that they have the financial resources necessary to pay for education and living expenses for the time spent in school. Each school will specify the amount to be certified and what documentation is necessary as evidence. Usually this information is not necessary for admission purposes.

International students must maintain legal status while in the U.S. To do this, you must:

- Have a valid passport.
- Attend the school you are authorized to attend.
- Be enrolled full time each term.
- File an extension before you run out of time.
- Obtain proper authorization to work on or off campus.
- Report address changes.
- Follow procedures for school and/or program transfer.

Students should be aware that their ability to travel out of the country and re-enter and to continue their studies will be negatively affected if they do not maintain status.

The international student must be knowledgeable about all U.S. immigration regulations that apply to their situation and be responsible for abiding by them. While these guidelines may seem difficult to follow, you’ll gain a learning experience that will help you to develop new skills, expand your circle of personal friends and professional contacts, and provide you with a sophisticated and expert view from which to make sound business decisions.