

Cultural Differences

You may experience some cultural differences due to differences in customs and values. Here are some common issues students face.

Social Space

Some cultures tend to have a much closer conversational and "personal space" distance than the United States. Americans generally keep their distance; they avoid physical contact with others.

Informality

The emphasis on individual identity, responsibility, and tolerance produces a considerable degree of informality in dress, relationships between people, and methods of communication. A great deal of flexibility to express oneself is permitted **as long as it does not infringe on the rights and comforts of others**. The attire worn is usually informal, unless people are specifically told to wear formal clothing. It is not necessary to wear Western-style clothing. Clothing brought from home is acceptable.

Use of Names

First names are more readily used in the United States than in other countries. It is all right to use the first name of someone of approximately your same age and status or someone younger.

A woman or man older than yourself, including a professor, is often addressed as Dr., Ms., Mrs., Miss, or Mr. with the last name, until people ask you to use their first name. Ms. (pronounced "miz") is used for both single and married women.

Americans are informal. Some professors, staff, and administrators may invite you to address them by their first name. If you feel awkward doing that, please don't feel uncomfortable stating that fact; **no one will be insulted!**

The relationship between student and professor is usually open and informal. Most professors want their students to talk directly to them about any questions they have, in order to resolve concerns quickly.

Invitations

Invitations are usually informal and most often verbal, but specify time and place. It is important that you keep the appointment and be punctual.

If you receive a written invitation that says "RSVP," you should respond by letter, email, or phone, telling your host whether or not you plan to attend.

Casual conversation between Americans can be confusing. "How are you?" does not necessarily mean the person wants to know how you are feeling. Rather, the person may simply mean, "Good morning," or "Hello." In response, you may simply smile, nod and say "Fine, thank you. How are you?"

"See you later," "Drop by sometime," or "Let's get together sometime" are often meant as a friendly goodbye rather than an actual invitation. When in doubt, do not be too shy to clarify whether it's an invitation or not.

Handshaking and Hugging

Men usually shake hands at the time of their first meeting. Men and women also often shake hands. Women often don't shake hands with each other.

Good friends often hug each other at meeting and parting times; this is mostly a custom among women.

Walking on the Correct Side of the Street

For safety reasons, when walking on a street without a sidewalk, pedestrians are expected to walk facing traffic, on the left side of the street.

Concept of Time

North Americans are usually time-conscious, and being on time is very important. Life in the United States may seem hectic because of this. The phrase "time is money" is common. You will be expected to be on time to events that have specific starting times such as class, dinner arrangements, appointments, etc.

Responding to Questions

Americans generally are not well versed in geography. Some of the questions you will be asked may appear ridiculous, uninformed, and elementary, but try to be patient in answering them. Many students are sincerely interested but will probably have very little understanding of your home culture.

Friendship

Friendship between United States and international students may be

confusing, as definitions and expectations of friendships differ from one culture to another.

Most people you will come in contact with will be friendly. They will talk about current events, politics, hobbies, and sports. However, they often do not speak about personal matters such as financial or family problems

In the United States, friendships may seem to develop more quickly and seem more casual than in many other cultures. International students are sometimes struck by how warm and friendly people seem from the start. However, soon they observe that while Americans seem warm at a first meeting, they later may seem remote.

"Superficial" is the word sometimes used by visitors to describe Americans' relationships.

It is important to remember that these are generalizations and that there are many exceptions to them.

Romantic and Non-Romantic Relationships

Relationships between students are complex and difficult to describe in a few paragraphs.

Much social life centers on campus life and events. Though it is common for men and women to do things together in non-dating relationships, it can sometimes be difficult to determine what constitutes a dating relationship.

Terminology and extent of physical contact varies greatly. "Going out" may or may not involve a romantic intention; "involved" or "seeing someone" signifies romantic involvement.

In this culture, the greatest amount of public touching occurs between men and women. It is not uncommon to see students **who do not have an intimate relationship** hugging or holding hands.

In the United States, people's attitudes toward sexual relationships are quite open. The decision whether or not to establish a sexual relationship rests with the individuals involved. Students often feel free to talk about sex-related subjects and engage in sexual relationships.

Students who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender are generally accepted and respected on campus.