

Cultural Adjustment

All new students' first days are ones of adjustment. However, for international students this is even truer. You will be experiencing many different changes in coming to a new country. There are usually four phases that you may experience.

Honeymoon: Everything is great, nothing is wrong; you're having a wonderful time.

Shock: There are so many differences in this country that you don't know how to deal with them. You didn't think things would be like this.

Negotiation: You learn to deal with the problems set before you and try to integrate them with your own beliefs.

Acceptance: You are able to live well in the environment with the differences you are experiencing.

Americans

Culture obviously reflects one's values and international students sometimes may face with conflicting values with their American counterparts. Americans are goal, action (stress on what you are doing) oriented and individualistic. Whereas, people from some other cultures tend to be process, "being" (stress on who you are) and group oriented. To some Americans, being friendly is a goal or action of an individual. However, international students may be looking for someone to "befriend" and develop a long-term relationship with. Friendship is taken as more superficial in some cultures than in others. A simple "how are you?" is only a greeting, which does not text-ly to a conversation to find out how somebody is feeling. It can be surprising to see international students actually stop and prepare to respond how they feel, only to find that the greeter is already 10 feet away, walking towards another destination.

International students will also become aware that the real America is so different than what has been portrayed by the media and pop culture. Hollywood movies, celebrities, TV programs, fast food, and other chain stores "are not necessarily good representations of a very complicated U.S.A."

The American Classroom

International students also find rapport with professors and dynamics in the classroom interesting. Depending on undergraduate, graduate, large lecture, or text-sm discussion classes, the classroom culture can be quite different from home. Some of the common observations include: calling the professor by his/her first name, informal/ casual dress and behavior in class, students eating, reading, and sleeping in large classes, particular roles of teaching assistants and departmental secretaries, direct communication styles: speak up, speak fast, challenge the professor, the seriousness of plagiarism, expectations of independent work from students, or professor's admission of learning from students. In addition, students may not be accustomed to the professor openly criticizing and complimenting them. One student said she is "not used to having people telling us when we did something bad. Or when people in our group don't like what we've done in our project. On the other hand, we are also not used to having our professors and colleagues give us compliments when we do something good". Some of these can be regarded as differences in communication styles and values, expectations of professors and students, teaching and learning, or simply culture.

Some main cultural differences you may experience due to change in customs are:

- **Friendship:** Most people you will come in contact with will be friendly. They will talk about current events, politics, hobbies, and sports. However, personal matters are often not spoken about such as financial or family problems.
- **Dress:** The attire worn is usually informal, unless otherwise told to wear formal clothing. It is not necessary to wear Western-style clothing. Clothing you have brought from home is acceptable.
- **Greetings:** When Americans greet each other, whether male or female, a handshake is generally the custom. Spatial distance is a very important aspect of nonverbal communication. Most Americans stand 3 feet apart when talking.
- **Schedules:** Americans place a high priority on being punctual. The phrase "time is money" is very common. You will be expected to be on time to events that have specific starting times, such as class, dinner arrangements, appointments, etc.

Symptoms of Culture Shock

1. Feeling very angry over minor inconveniences
2. Irritability
3. Withdrawal from people who are different from you
4. Extreme homesickness
5. Sudden intense feeling of loyalty to own culture
6. Overeating or loss of appetite
7. Boredom
8. A need for excessive sleep
9. Headaches
10. Upset stomach
11. Small pains really hurt
12. Depression
13. Loss of ability to work or study effectively
14. Unexplainable crying
15. Marital or relationship stress
16. Exaggerated cleanliness
17. Feeling sick much of the time

In order to have culture shock, you need not have every symptom on the list.

It is possible that only a few may apply to you. These symptoms may also appear at any given time. However, those such as headache and upset stomach should be checked by a physician before you decide it's only culture shock.

Solutions for Culture Shock

Even though some people may not be able to eliminate culture shock, there are ways to ease the stress. Some of these activities are listed below:

- **Keep Active.** By getting out of your room or outside of your apartment, you are able to experience first-hand what Americans are doing. If you visit public places, such as a shopping mall or sporting events, you will be able to watch and learn how American customs are practiced. Eat, sleep and exercise to stay healthy both physically and mentally.
- **Make American Friends.** By having friends you can talk to, you are able to ask them questions about what you do not understand.
- **Read.** Accessing the Internet for websites that describe or represent the US culture can be helpful in understanding the culture better. For example, reading the opinion pages of major US newspapers can give you a glimpse into current cultural issues. All students have free access to the Internet on campus.
- **Exercise.** By finding an activity that you can enjoy, you will be able to reduce stress and depression. Americans like to run and walk on paths. They also like organized games. There are many organized physical activities through the Campus Student Recreation Center and local businesses.
- **Community Activities.** Talk with your host family, Resident Assistant, Center for International Education staff or other Americans about community activities, religious services, or volunteer opportunities to help you become a member of the community while you are here.
- **Work on Your English.** This is an extremely important concept. It is much easier to understand a culture when you can understand the language being used. Ask about any slang terms that you do not understand.
- **Introduce Yourself to Other International Students.** Other international students may be experiencing the same problems that you are. By talking to them, you may be able to find out ways they are coping with problems.
- **If you are overwhelmed.** Talk to people! You can always come to the Center for International Education and we will be glad to assist you with any issue that we can. We also have a Counseling Center on campus available to help you work through issues.
- **Homesickness.** Students recommend buying international phone cards as a 'must-have' because talking to loved ones can really strengthen you through hard times. Also, bringing some memorabilia, photos, posters, music, or

artwork from your country can make the transition as smooth as possible. The more you can imitate the feeling of home in your room, the better you will be able to cope with homesickness. You can also keep yourself occupied with studies, work, by hanging out with friends, or volunteering in student or community organizations. The busier you are, the less you will think of home.

- **Ask questions.** Ask for help when you need it. Asking for assistance or an explanation does not have to be considered a sign of weakness. Understanding others and making yourself understood in a new language (or context) requires lots of rephrasing, repeating and clarification. It may be helpful to ask questions like "as I understand it you are saying... Is that correct?"
- **BE PATIENT.** It takes time to "use" a new language, "slang", or to get used to the food, customs, and "live in a culture". Don't hesitate to ask questions. Americans are always friendly and willing to offer help. Those who are ashamed to ask will eventually lose their way. Don't be afraid to talk to people. Try to initiate a conversation at appropriate times.

Lastly, remember that you come to study in the States not only for grades and degrees, but also for a social life and community, and learning the culture. Allow yourself to be integrated into an on and off campus community, and participate in departmental and student activities, registered student clubs, and other volunteer organizations. If resources are available, take advantage of the time you are in the States, go travel and see different parts of the United States. This will enable you to enjoy your experience!