

Getting to Know Americans

This section is an adaptation of Appendix 5 of NAFSA's International Student Handbook: A Guide to University Study in the U.S.A. Published by AT&TTM; and also of the Yale University OISS Handbook for International Students and Scholars.

In adjusting to any new culture, it is helpful to have some knowledge of that culture. Even though the U.S. population is made up of many different ethnic groups, and that fact is one of the defining characteristics of the United States, it is still possible to talk about some shared "mainstream" values. The following explanation of these values may help you to know who Americans are. It may help you to tell whether puzzling American behavior is due to cultural conflict or individual differences. A discussion of cultural values is not about being right or wrong; it is about different ways of doing things. Remember that these are generalizations; sometimes they will be relevant, sometimes they will not.

Individualism and Privacy

Perhaps the most important thing to understand about Americans is their devotion to individualism. From an early age children are trained to be independent and responsible for their own futures. Such training may sometimes lead to a seeming lack of respect for parents in particular and older people in general. Along with valuing individualism is a need for privacy, for time alone. Privacy often begins at an early age, with children sleeping in separate rooms from their parents and even giving each child a separate bedroom (if parents can afford it). Although Americans are a welcoming people, most expect even friends to phone first before dropping in at their homes. Casual unannounced visits are less common than in some other cultures.

Informality

The idea of equality leads Americans to be fairly informal in their behavior and in their relationships with others. You will see such informality in dress, language (particularly in use of first names and slang), posture, and classroom activities like eating in class, asking many questions and making comments, etc. Invitations may be very casual and often are not written.

Time

You may have heard the expression "Time is money." Strange as it sounds, that is how Americans view time, as a limited resource to be saved or spent for useful purposes. Americans may get impatient with lines that move slowly in supermarkets, banks, etc. particularly if the checkout person or bank teller is taking time to chat with a customer. In practical terms, this means that Americans will usually be on time for meetings and engagements and will keep a schedule of their activities and expect others to do the same. You should arrive on time for meals and appointments with professors, doctors, and other professionals. You can arrive anytime between the hours specified for informal parties, and receptions. If you are unable to keep an appointment, you should call the person to say that you will be late or unable to get there. In

meetings and professional encounters being organized is highly valued, whereas "wasting time" in "idle" conversation is not.

Achievement, Action, Work and Materialism

By definition, achievers whose lives are mainly concerned with accomplishment that can be measured, are admired by Americans. Doing something is very important; even in leisure pursuits. Americans are very active in contrast to others who enjoy sitting and talking. The ideals of action and accomplishment prevail. Because of this, Americans tend to be identified by their work. When meeting new acquaintances, the first question you may be asked is likely to be: "What do you do?" instead of any questions about your family or your background.

Directness and Assertiveness

Americans generally consider themselves to be very frank and direct in their dealings with others. When talking to someone about something they don't like about a person's behavior, they may call it "constructive" criticism. Most Americans do not think it is necessary to disguise their feelings; even if their words are not open, facial expressions may be revealing. Being honest is often seen to be more important than preserving harmony in interpersonal relationships. Being assertive in expressing opinions or making requests is considered acceptable, and even necessary (remember the importance of individualism), but being too "pushy" or aggressive is not. Distinguishing the fine line between the two is difficult even for Americans.