CULTURE ADJUSTMENT

The following tips have been compiled from a variety of sources, including NAFSA conference materials, *American Ways, A Guide for Foreigners in the U.S.* (2003) and *The Handbook of Foreign Student Advising* (1995), both by Gary Althen. Also adapted from University of Arizona materials.

**CONVERSATION Etiquette in the U.S.**

Discussion about yours or the other person’s personal lives is considered unacceptable until you have formed a close friendship. To lead up to a closer friendship, it is more common to start with “small talk”. You can talk about the weather, sports, general information about school, your job, etc. The deeper philosophical discussions on significant topics such as religion, politics, sex or sexual orientation are not typically discussed until later. Touching people may make them uncomfortable. People expect others to be at least an arm’s length away from them. If you get closer than this, people will move away from you; they do not dislike you; you are “in their space. No matter where you are, give people plenty of space.

Men usually shake right hands when they first meet. Men do not usually shake hands with a woman unless she offers her hand first. Shake hands the first time you meet someone, but not the second.

Although equality is ignored in some parts of life, it is followed closely in others. For example, people treat one another very informally, even in the presence of great differences in age or social status. This is not a "lack of respect," this is the custom in the United States.

**NAMES AND TITLES**

Most people in the United States have three names: a given name, a middle name, and a last (family or surname) name. In conversation and in writing, the given name usually comes first. For example, “Hello, my name is John Smith.” Most official forms ask you to write your family name first, followed by a comma, then your first name: “Smith, John.” Read carefully before filling out any form so you fill it out correctly. A comma shows that the last name is written first.

People often use first names. Do not assume from the use of given names that there is no respect for status or age. There are many non-verbal habits that show respect. Young people generally talk less in the presence of their elders and are less assertive. Young people and people of lower status are less likely to use slang or profanity around their "superiors”.

**USE OF NAMES**

- It is all right to use the first name of someone your same age and status, or someone younger. If you are unsure, you should ask if the person prefers to be called by his or her first name.
- A woman or man older than yourself is often addressed as Ms., Miss, Mrs., or Mr. until the individual requests that you use his or her first name or until you get to know the individual better.
- Men and women will be confused if you use Ms., Miss, Mrs., or Mr. with a first name, as is the custom in some countries. Ordinarily Ms., Miss, Mrs., or Mr. is used only with the family name.
- Some women in the US prefer Ms. (pronounced "Miz"). Ms. is used for both single or married women and replaces Miss and Mrs. You can use Ms. if you do not know if a woman is single or married.

**INDIVIDUALISM & EQUALITY**

Most people in the US believe that the ideal person is independent and self-reliant, and most people think of themselves this way. People in the US do not think of themselves as representatives of their families, communities, or social class. Some international students see this attitude as "selfish". You can see examples of individualism in the classroom as well. Teachers expect students to be independent and individualistic, to work alone, and to produce original work.

The Declaration of Independence states that "all men are created equal". In many ways people believe this; you can see equality in such common practices as "waiting in line". When you go to the bank, to the post office, or to any public office where you are
requesting a service, you will be expected to wait your turn. Regardless of how important or trivial your need is, you will be treated like everyone else; first come, first served. You can also see equality in the classroom. All students are the same in the eyes of professors, and many professors view students (particularly graduate students) as their equals. Professors may ask students to call them by their first names.

**PUNCTUALITY**

Many people in the US are very punctual and organize their activities around schedules. Being late is rude. If you cannot be on time, tell the people who are waiting for you. For business appointments, you should arrive a few minutes early. For social appointments, you should arrive 10-15 minutes after the appointed time. It is not a good idea to arrive early for social invitations.

**RELIGION**

Religion does not play the same role in the United States as in many countries. There is no government-supported religion or established church of state. The government is based on "separation of church and state," and people believe this. In general, people are quite private about their religious views. Do not talk about religion until you know someone better.

This does not mean that people are not religious, and that religion is not a political issue or an important part of people's lives. Most people in the United States believe in God, and the majority of people are Christians. Christianity is divided into Catholicism and Protestantism. Protestantism is also divided into many churches: Baptist, Methodist, Mormon, Christian Scientist, to name a few. Many believers reject evolution in favor of creation and some believe any form of birth control is a sin. You should be aware of different views when discussing religion. Christianity has many different faiths, and the United States has many different religions.

All major world religions are represented on campus or in the Lowell and Boston area. Someone may telephone you or come to your house to talk about their religion with you. These people are salespersons for their beliefs. They often invite new international students to a "dinner" or "party" in order to tell the students about their beliefs. Most people are friendly and want to learn more about you and your country. However, be cautious in the beginning. If you are not interested in discussing religion with them, simply thank them for their time and excuse yourself. If they ignore your requests and continue to pressure you, you do not have to be polite. Here is a link to the various UMass Lowell Ministries, [https://www.uml.edu/student-services/Campus-Ministries/](https://www.uml.edu/student-services/Campus-Ministries/)

**HYGIENE**

Television commercials for soap, perfume, cologne, deodorant, anti-perspirant, toothpaste, mouthwash, breath mints, etc., show people's obsession with smelling good. People consider bad breath and natural body odor offensive in the United States, and the topic of these odors is so offensive that most people will not tell another person he or she has bad breath or body odor. You do not have to cover yourself with perfumes and chew gum constantly. However, a regular daily shower, clean/neat clothes, and good dental care is very important. This could make the difference in getting selected for an on or off-campus job. First impressions make a difference and hygiene plays a big role in those impressions in the US.

*The following article makes fun of hygiene in the US, but it also illustrates its importance.*

**RELATIONSHIPS**

As expected close friendships do develop as a result of repeated interactions and shared interest between individuals. Romantic relationships are difficult between members of the same cultures; men and women often view romance quite differently. These problems increase in cross-cultural romances. In the United States, relationships between members of the opposite sex are generally less structured than in other countries. "Platonic" relationships (non-romantic friendships between members of the opposite sex) are very common and virtually everyone has platonic friends of the opposite sex.

Like most rules governing relationships in the United States, those which govern romance are informal and vague. Generally, however, when a couple makes a "date" they will do something: go to a movie, have dinner, go dancing, etc. They will not simply sit and talk. A man or a woman can ask for a date. The person who asks will probably pay.

Asking someone on a date, or accepting a date, does not obligate you to become romantically involved. If, for some reason, you do not wish to date the person a second time, simply do not ask them out again, or if they ask you out a second time, you may refuse politely. Many first dates turn out to be last dates, which is perfectly acceptable in the United States.

When you meet someone who interests you, it is wise to get to know the person before pursuing a romantic relationship. If the person becomes inattentive or seems to be avoiding you, generally that means he/she is not interested. Do not pursue the
relationship. If, however, the person is attentive and seems in no hurry to end conversations with you, that usually means he/she is interested in you as well. When this happens, ask this person if he/she would like to have dinner, or go to a movie or a play or theater, and set a specific time and place to meet. Traditionally, the male paid for everything on a date. Nowadays, people on dates often pay their own way. If your partner pays for everything, offer to return the favor on a later date.

The most awkward part of dating in the United States, as in many societies, revolves around sexual involvement. Like everything else in the United States, there are very few guidelines; attitudes vary tremendously from person to person and from relationship to relationship. There are, however, two rules which most people accept. It is not expected that you become intimate with someone until if and when you are ready to do so and on your terms. Regardless of what you have seen in US movies or on television, that is not how dating works in the US. You are in charge of your own destiny and your own body and you always have the power to consent or not consent. It is best to stay in public places until you get to know someone better or to double date with other people.

SOCIAL GATHERINGS

Social gatherings are quite informal in the US. Most people do not use parties to show wealth or taste. Parties are opportunities for people to gather, converse, and relax. As a result, the host-guest relationship, which is quite formal in many cultures, is very informal. Your host wants you to “feel at home.” You may be greeted at the door with “Make yourself at home.” This means you may have to serve yourself.

Invitations are usually informal and often oral, but tell the time and place: A formal, written invitation requires a response and often a written response.

- If the invitation says "RSVP," you must call the host and tell him whether or not you will be there. If you cannot attend or do not plan to attend, say so. Do not say "yes" just to be polite. The "RSVP" is to help the host plan how much food and drink to prepare; an accurate count is necessary.
- If your invitation says, "Regrets only," you only need to tell your host if you do not plan to attend. If you are unsure how to dress, call the host and ask, "What should I wear?"
- Student gatherings are much less formal. What time you arrive makes little difference, because people are coming and going all the time. Many student parties are "BYOB" (bring your own beverage). You will make enemies rapidly if you go to parties and drink other people’s beverages. If a party is BYOB, then you should BYOB!

GIFTS FOR HOSTS

It is not necessary to bring flowers, candy or a gift to a dinner host. However, it is a nice thing to do. You should always say “thank you” when you leave. It is also polite to write a note or telephone the next day and repeat your thank you. Overnight house guests usually bring a small, inexpensive gift to the host, such as a souvenir from your home country or other small remembrance.

TABLE ETIQUETTE

If you have dietary restrictions, it is a good idea to tell your host when you are invited. When you are at the dinner table and are asked if you would like something, do not refuse out of politeness. The host or hostess probably won't ask you a second time. After you have had enough, it is all right to politely decline additional servings.

CHILDREN’S BEHAVIOR - FAMILY AND SOCIAL BEHAVIORS

US individualism shows in attitudes toward children. In many societies, it is important to have many children. In the US, a few religious groups emphasize the importance of large families, but most people think one or two children are enough, and many couples have no children. Because taking care of a child is very costly financially, emotionally, and socially, many couples view large families as a disadvantage. Having many children would restrict the freedom and individualism of the parents as well as the other children in the family.

Parents teach individualism by the way they raise their children. They want to create a self-reliant, independent child, who can make it on her own by age eighteen. Parents begin teaching this self-reliance early, asking the child to do things on her own and praising her when she does. As a result, children are more talkative and assertive than children of other cultures. If they seem rude, it is because they have been taught to be assertive.
Parents want their children to be healthy and happy, and to have a better life than the parents. Families spend a lot of money to give their children what they want: nice clothes, many toys, adequate health and dental care, and a good education. Strangely enough, many parents give up time with their children to pay for these things. In most two-parent households, both parents work to support this life-style, leaving their children with babysitters and child care programs for eight, nine or ten hours a day.

Many parents want to expose their children to a variety of situations. They bring their children with them to church, to sporting events, to stores, and to social events. However, many places, such as expensive restaurants and live theater productions, do not welcome children. Most formal social gatherings, those with written invitations do not welcome children either. If you are going to such a place, you should leave your children at home with a friend or babysitter.

Children, especially boys are expected to be energetic and assertive. That does not mean, though, that they are allowed to "run wild" in public. Parents are expected to keep their children under control at all times, particularly in public places and in the homes of others. When a child misbehaves, only the child's parents may discipline him. Other adults should not interfere unless the child is doing something which may be harmful to his/herself. Most parents discipline their children by rewarding good behaviors, not by punishing bad behaviors. While a spanking, a slap to the child's buttocks, is acceptable to some people, any punishment that wounds the child or leaves a mark is considered child abuse and is against the law.

Perhaps the most difficult situation facing international families is how much US culture they want their children to learn. Many of the attributes which are valued in the US, and which your child will unconsciously learn, will not be valued when the child returns home. You will need to give this issue serious thought and discuss it with your spouse.

**THE CROSS CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT CYCLE**

There are a number of different stages people normally go through when they spend an extended amount of time abroad. Below you will find a graph of what most people experience when first arriving in and living in a new country:

- **Honeymoon Period:** This stage is characterized by feelings of excitement, anticipation, and the intrigue of everything new.
- **Culture Shock:** A point where you are immersed in new problems, including housing, transportation, food, language, and making friends. You may experience a few of the cultural stresses listed above. You might also wonder, “Why did I come here?”
- **Gradual Adjustment:** During this phase, you slowly begin to orient yourself to the new culture and are able to make sense of your new environment. Everyday activities such as housing and going to school are no longer major problems. Language skills and self-confidence are established.
- **Adaptation:** You have accepted the habits, customs, food and characteristics of the people in the new culture. You feel comfortable with friends, associates, and the language of the country.

**SUGGESTIONS TO HELP YOU IN ADJUSTING TO YOUR NEW CULTURE**

As you start to adapt to your new home in the US, consider the following ideas to help you in your transition:

- **Listen and observe.** Since there are new rules and norms that may be unfamiliar, you will need to listen and observe the new communication styles. Learn as much as you can about your host culture and your new environment.
- **Think positively.** Try not to focus on the things you do not like about your host culture. Do not spend time with people who have negative attitudes or are always complaining.
- **Keep your sense of humor.** Look for the funny side of embarrassing situations or mistakes. Everyone makes mistakes; learn from yours.
- **Keep an open mind.** Do not judge what you see as right or wrong, but challenge yourself to try to understand the many behaviors you will encounter. You do not have to partake in something you do not agree with, but you should try to understand it.
- **Keep realistic expectations.** Movies and television do not offer a realistic view of life in your host culture. If your expectations were different, you may need to re-evaluate them.
- **Recognize anxiety and your frustration.** Learning to live in a new culture is not easy. Allow yourself time to adjust. Take care of your body and your mind. Exercise regularly, eat well, and get plenty of sleep.
- **Speak English as much as possible** and do not worry about making mistakes. The more you practice, the easier it will be.
Feel free to contact the International Students & Scholars Office at isso@uml.edu if you or your dependents wish to explore additional **English as a Second Language Instruction resources**.

- **Go out. Take initiative.** Try new things and discover the wonderful opportunities that the cities of Lowell and Boston have to offer! Find out where people meet and socialize and attend programs sponsored by ISSO! Make an effort to go to these places and discover new places to visit. Plan fun activities that you can look forward to!

- **Engage in campus life.** Join campus clubs and activities.

- **Maintain relationships** with friends and family at home, but make friends at your new school, too.

- **Ask questions.** You should not assume that you know everything that is going on, or that you always understand what is being communicated. Ask questions to clarify the meaning of something. Your questions will help you understand your new environment and will help improve your language skills.

- **Keep your perspective.** Hundreds of thousands of international students have gone through this same experience before you - and succeeded. You will, too! Do not be too hard on yourself and know you will succeed!

The following people on and off campus can also help you in adjusting to your new life in the United States:

- **The International Students & Scholars Office,** isso@uml.edu or 978-934-2383 (Cumnock Hall, 2nd Floor)

- **Your Family and Friends** can often be a good source of support. Friends who have been in the United States longer than you have probably experienced the same feelings when they first arrived here. Talk to friends who have a positive attitude about living in the United States. Your family can also be supportive, but they may also be worried about you since you are so far away. If you talk to your family when you are down, make sure you also talk to them when you are happy so they know you are doing better.