U.S. CULTURE SERIES:

U.S. Classroom Culture

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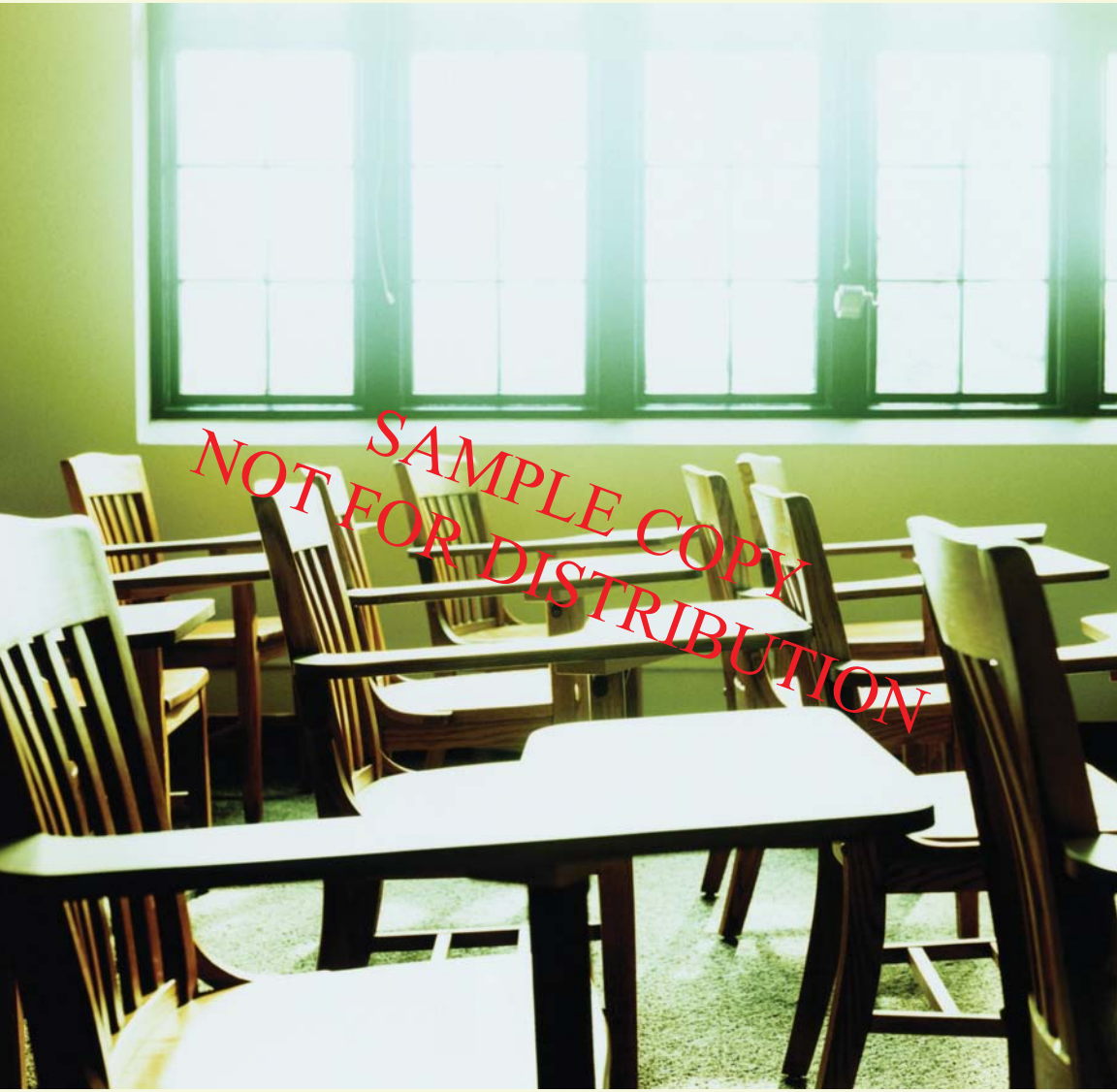

Funded by a grant from the Bureau of Educational & Cultural Affairs of the U.S. Department of State



About NAFSA: Association of International Educators

NAFSA is an association of individuals worldwide advancing international education and exchange. NAFSA serves its members, their institutions and organizations, and others engaged in international education and exchange and global workforce development. NAFSA sets and upholds standards of good practice; provides training, professional development, and networking opportunities; and advocates for international education.

About United States Department of State

Educational and Cultural Affairs Bureau
Educational Information and Resources Branch

The Educational Information and Resources Branch (ECA/A/S/A) of the Department of State's Educational and Cultural Affairs Bureau promotes the international exchange of students and scholars through a network of overseas educational informational centers located in nearly every country of the world. More than five million prospective students contact these centers each year. The Branch estimates that a majority of the international students now studying in the U.S. contacted a Department of State-affiliated center for information on U.S. study. These students contribute an estimated $12 billion annually to the U.S. economy. The Educational Information and Resources Branch also works with partner organizations to support international students and scholars on U.S. campuses; fund professional development and training for international student advisers, admissions personnel, and others at U.S. institutions; and supports activities that build mutual understanding through the exchange of people and ideas. Programs assist international activities of the U.S. academic community, including student and faculty exchanges, study abroad, coordination with foreign governments, evaluation of foreign institution's credentials, and recruitment of foreign students. ECA/A/S/A funds research on international education, including *Open Doors*, the annual census of the international academic community in the United States that tracks statistics about international students and scholars in the U.S. and U.S. students who study abroad.

U.S. Culture Series

This booklet is the first in a series of detailed booklets designed to be used in preparing students for successful cultural adjustment. The U.S. Culture Series booklets will address different aspects of U.S. culture and can be used in several ways: by overseas advisers at advising centers, including predeparture orientation programs and American culture discussions; by international student advisers on campus during orientation programs for new students; by international student advisers in cultural training sessions; by ESL teachers in classes preparing students to enter a U.S. college/university; and by international educators in the training of others to work with international students (such as resident assistants).

The first two booklets in this series are funded by the United States Department of State, Educational Information and Resources Branch. They are developed and written by NAFSA members.

Purpose

Now that you have confirmed your plans to study or are already in the United States, this booklet can provide you with an overview of the classroom in U.S. colleges and universities. People who choose to study abroad for part of their education most often find their experiences the most rewarding of their lives. The exchange of ideas, experiences, and insights makes the U.S. classroom a vibrant place to study. This sharing of knowledge and experience is one of the most important reasons U.S. universities treasure the presence of international students in their classrooms.

Of course, cultural values and practices outside the classroom also affect what happens in the classroom. So, you will find a variety of topics included such as an overview of U.S. higher education, its academic structure, and faculty roles, and then attention is turned to the classroom itself. All of these components should help to create a desire for you to learn more. The authors have provided some recommendations to help focus your search for a school. In addition, there are comments from a variety of international students about their classroom experiences. Knowledge of all these components can contribute to your success and productivity. The authors have been international student advisers for many years, and they know it takes both knowledge and experience to be successful. Their experience and individual backgrounds are expressed in these pages. Also, you will find included a number of quotes that were made to one of the authors (Eland) during dissertation research. They reflect important insights about U.S. education and the classroom. Reading this book is an important step toward your success as an international student in the United States. Good luck!

A Brief Overview of the U.S. System of Higher Education

The U.S. *system* of higher education is different from what most international students mean when they use the term *education system*. The chart below offers a general framework that may help to distinguish the U.S. system from those that many international students are familiar with. Please keep in mind that there are exceptions and minor differences, both in this country and abroad, that this model does not accommodate. The column on the left describes various aspects of the U.S. education system while the column on the right describes ways in which other education systems may differ.

U.S. EDUCATION SYSTEM	NON-U.S. EDUCATION SYSTEM
Characterized by multiple models and a complexity of interacting educational systems and subsystems. For some, it may look both centralized and decentralized at the same time.	Characterized by hierarchy or centralization. Often, the local educational institutions must depend on the central government to make decisions.
U.S. Department of Education influences schools, but does not govern them.	Ministry of Education governs schools from the top down.
Characterized by flexibility for the individual student, who can choose from a variety of subjects and change from subject to subject easily.	Characterized by inflexibility for the individual students, who must choose a fixed plan of study and not deviate from it.
Admission tests are designed, written, and scored by private organizations. Standards differ among schools, including which tests to require.	Admission tests and standards are centrally administered.
Faculties are recruited through public advertising or private solicitation. The hiring process is competitive and intensive; potential departmental colleagues choose candidates. Administrative staff assesses the process to assure diversity and equality of opportunity. Focus is on teaching skills in teaching institutions, research, and publications in institutions engaged in advanced research and/or administrative skills. The weight given to each varies from school to school.	Either faculty is centrally recruited, certified, and allocated, or those processes occur at differing levels of the system. Certification requires proof of credentials and quality of references. Focus is on knowledge acquired and administrative experience where appropriate.

U.S. EDUCATION SYSTEM	NON-U.S. EDUCATION SYSTEM
Is characterized by both public schools heavily funded by both federal and state government monies, and by private schools funded through tuition monies paid by students or their families, as well as funds from endowments and gifts from alumni and other benefactors.	Heavily funded by governmental monies as well as directed by employees of the centralized government. (In the U.S. educational system, some public universities and colleges have endowments and receive gifts from alumni and other benefactors.)

Over the past two decades, there has been much more fluidity in education structures and policies everywhere. Even centralized systems of higher education have been subject to change. Furthermore, there are examples of both centralized and decentralized educational institutions in the United States. Military academies and federal research laboratories are examples of centralization, while private schools and universities are examples of decentralization. However, the dominant pattern is of one of decentralization. Furthermore, *public institutions* are more directly affected by state legislatures than *private institutions*. Some states, counties and municipalities exercise detailed control over budgets, curriculum, and the hiring and dismissal of faculty. Even that, however, varies from one institution to another. Public institutions are also influenced by taxpayers' current attitudes toward education. This affects how much money the public, through their elected representatives, is willing to invest in public education. Still, the differences in the classroom within the United States are minimal.

Understanding The Academic Structure

The Structure of Higher Education in the United States

There are more than 3,500 institutions of higher education in the United States. They include two-year community colleges offering the associate's degree; four-year colleges offering only the Bachelor's degree; four-year colleges offering principally the Bachelor's degree along with selected Master's and doctoral programs; universities that offer degrees at every level awarded by departments that are grouped by field of study into various schools, institutes, and programs; and finally, multiple campus universities that each have an assortment of schools, institutes, and programs that are spread out in different cities within the state. Also included are English language institutes that are affiliated with colleges and universities and English language institutes that are independent of colleges and schools. There are schools that operate solely via *distance education* or computer-based education, which may simply have a postal and/or Internet address and no campus.

Private and public colleges and universities are similarly organized. Despite some important differences in terms and organizational structures, the chart below summarizes the general features of school structure and decision-making.

University or college board of trustees appoints president or chancellor in private universities.	State board of education, board of regents, or equivalent appoints president or chancellor in state universities.
The vice-chancellor or vice-president for academic affairs manages the various schools and departments.	
The council of deans oversees the separate schools, institutes, and programs offered by the university or college.	
The departmental chairperson manages the affairs of the separate departments in each school or college.	
Faculty is responsible for teaching and research in and beyond the classroom. The role and responsibilities of the faculty in U.S. higher education differ considerably from those of other nations.	
The graduate assistant (those who are teaching, research, and administrative assistants) is appointed by the department and faculty to carry out specific duties.	
Secretaries and technical support staff have much more authority than their counterparts in other countries. They are treated respectfully by faculty and students alike.	

Administrative Component of the Classroom

The academic year varies from school to school. The three most common models are (1) the semester system comprising two terms, one in fall and one in winter/spring (summer term is not required); (2) the trimester system comprising three terms that includes summer (one of these terms can be a term of vacation); and (3) the quarter system comprising the four terms of fall, winter, spring, and summer, and in which the student can choose one of them to take as a vacation.

All educational institutions must monitor the number of students enrolled in each particular course to control class size. In addition, the schedule of the classes during the week is an administrative concern. While there is a standard five-day week for classes, the week may be divided into a variety of models. For example, some schools use the Monday/Wednesday/Friday (MWF) and Tuesday/Thursday (TT) model. As a result, the class hours per week are the same, but the length of time per class for the MWF will be different from the TT.

The offering of courses is affected by the number of students seeking to take these courses and by the academic department's ability to allocate faculty to teach the courses. Each college and university has a course bulletin. This publication identifies all the courses being offered. You will see that some courses are offered only one semester per year, while other courses are offered each semester and in the summer. Finding the courses you want to take will not be difficult. However, there are times where you will not be able to take the course in the semester you want because of limited space.

The hiring of faculty to teach varies within each institution. Most often, the department chairperson plays a significant role. The chairperson oversees faculty and department staff, manages the department budget, oversees the department programs, and undertakes new research and teaching initiatives. Each institution tries to hire the best possible faculty. In some cases, institutions compete for the same faculty member. However, the financial and other resources available to hire faculty varies by institution.

U.S. college campuses require certain standards of behavior in order to achieve a safe, fair, and productive learning environment for everyone. This reflects U.S. values of fairness and independence. Many of the standards that students are expected to grasp relate to the diverse student population on campus in terms of ethnicity, race, country of origin, gender, religion, and sexual orientation. Standards of behavior seek to ensure the rights and responsibilities of all students, regardless of background. Most institutions that define the rights and responsibilities of their students also provide a code of conduct to guide their behavior. For example, the code permits free speech but prohibits and penalizes behavior that threatens or harms others. Some examples of statements of rights and responsibilities and codes of behavior can be found at http://students.syr.edu/handbook/, www.smith.esu/sao/handbook, and www.georgetown.edu/student-affairs/handbook.

RECOMMENDATION

Investigate the background of the school you will be attending. Most schools will have an extensive Web site online. In addition, there are resources and people available to help you in the American library or Fulbright resource center in your country. These Overseas Advisers can be found at: http://exchanges.state.gov/education/educationusa/uniadvising.htm

In addition to all of the above, the international services office is an important component of the campus administrative environment. This type of office provides a bridge between prospective students and their new cultural environment in the United States. In addition to the programming and personal advising function, it serves as the interpreter of U.S. immigration regulations. It is these regulations that specify the legal benefits and limitations of your stay in the United States. While these immigration regulations do not affect the *content* of the curriculum in the classroom, they *do* affect international students in other ways. Two of the most important ways are the *full-course of study* requirement and *employment authorization*. International students are required to register for a full-course of study each academic semester (generally the summer term is excluded from the requirement). The number of course credit hours that constitutes a full-course varies by academic program, level, and institution, but generally ranges between 6 and 15 credit hours per term. Regarding employment, under certain circumstances immigration regulations allow international students to gain practical experience during their studies through employment in their field of study. For example, you may become eligible for participation in an internship during your study, and for one year of employment after you complete your studies. For information about these kinds of issues, contact the international students office at your college or university. Again, the Web site of the school of your choice should have information about this office. There are many other benefits and limitations you should be aware of before coming to the United States. You can review these at the following Web sites: http://sumweb.syr.edu/lescis, www.indiana.edu/~intlcent, and www.nyu.edu/osl/oiss/index/index.html.

RECOMMENDATION

You should not attempt to arrive and study in the United States on the B visitor visa ***unless*** the visa is clearly marked *prospective student*. You will find it very difficult to change to an F-1 student status if you have not entered the United States on a *prospective student* B visa. For answers to questions concerning immigration status, contact the international students office on the college or university campus of your choice. Your school's Web site should have information about this office.

Faculty: Professors, Instructors, and Graduate Assistants

It is the faculty and, at larger institutions, their graduate assistants, who are most responsible for the delivery of education and classroom learning. In both private and state institutions of higher education, faculty are recruited by their departmental colleagues through a highly competitive process involving the review of credentials, ranking of candidates, interviews, and, often, demonstrations of teaching skills. In the United States, under the guidance of federal and state statutes, there is broad effort at most institutions to ensure that faculty (as well as staff and students) come from a wide variety of backgrounds.

The U.S. concept of *diversity*, which includes race, religion, ethnicity, gender, nationality, and sexual orientation, applied to recruitment and hiring practices tries to assure that students will benefit from the experience, knowledge, creativity, and perspectives of faculty with various backgrounds. Faculty will differ both in rank and the duration of their contracts. Distinguished teaching and research faculty hold the most honored rank among faculty. They typically have the doctoral degree and are usually tenured (i.e. on a permanent contract with the school until they retire). It is their record of innovative teaching, publication, and research, and the acknowledgment of their accomplishments here and abroad among other faculty and administrators that accounts for their standing. Tenure, under the guidelines of the American Association of University Professors, typically requires that department chairpersons and faculty review the performance of candidates and recommend tenure to the dean of their school or college, where their deliberations are subject to review. The candidate review considers several key features of faculty performance– as teachers in the classroom; as writers, researchers and publishers; and as colleagues in the administration of their departments and schools. They are also reviewed in terms of the impact that tenure and promotion has on the department or school's budget. Emeritus professors are honored faculty who have retired from the university but continue to teach or undertake research at colleges and universities. Full professors are also tenured and hold the doctoral degree. It is length of service and the support of departmental chairpersons, colleagues, and administrators that leads to the promotion to this rank. Associate professors typically hold the doctoral degree and are the most recent to receive tenure. Assistant professors may or may not yet have their doctoral degrees and have held their teaching or research posts for less than seven years. Instructors are usually the newest faculty. They may or may not hold the doctoral degree and are working towards tenure. Adjunct professors and visiting professors may hold professorial rank at another institution. They are not tenured (usually retained on a year by year contract) and are not voting members of the department faculty, although they are often honored members of the university community. Administrators, including the chairpersons of departments, are often chosen from the ranks of tenured and experienced faculty.

Graduate assistants, or Teaching Assistants (TAs) play important roles in the education system. Although there is more than one kind of graduate assistant, the teaching assistant is responsible for assisting the main instructor. Duties usually include teaching, grading, meeting with and assisting individual students with difficulties, and administrative work. If you are a student in class, consider the teaching assistant a resource. Teaching assistants are very knowledgeable about the course content. They are also usually very approachable because they are students themselves, and sometimes they are international students as well. Should you be seeking such a position, your institution may have a training program to help you with teaching to a U.S. audience (Smithee 1990, p. 114). More information can be found at the following Web sites: http://gradschpdprograms.syr.edu/programs/tap.php, www.utexas.edu/ogs.ta_ai/policies.htm.

Just as every effort is made to recruit faculty, staff, and administrators from the most qualified candidates, so, too, are students recruited with an eye to their qualifications and their *diversity*. As international students, you also contribute to diversity in U.S. education. Although it may or may not be a part of the application process in your home country, faculty and staff in the United States typically want to know who you are, where you come from, and what makes you unique and special. Do you play a musical instrument? Are you an athlete? Have you participated in community organizations? Have you published articles or books? Did you win any awards for these activities? If you belong to a minority group in your own home country or region, or if you are a woman in a field of study dominated by men, you play a part in bringing diversity to our institutions of higher education and should, therefore, stress that experience in your application.

RECOMMENDATION

Upon your arrival, you may find that you play a part in bringing diversity to our institutions of higher education. In addition, if you are a woman in a field of study dominated by men, then you should stress that fact in your university application.

The faculty largely sets the standard by which student performance in the classroom is judged. In most instances, the professor provides a syllabus for each course he or she teaches, and that syllabus explains the standards by which student performances will be evaluated. It lists the readings students are expected to complete; the combination of quizzes, oral presentations (individual or group), research papers, or short essays and exercises students are expected to complete and the rules and dates for their completion; and addresses the emphasis given to any particular assignment as a proportion of the final grade. The syllabus can be a wonderful tool for students to use to plan their term. It helps them identify and balance the requirements for all of their courses. Syllabi usually define what cheating or plagiarism is and how it will be treated. For examples of this

topic, see *Academic Honesty* on page 34 of www.syr.edu/policies/rr2001.pdf, www.lib.umich.edu/acadintegrity, and www.bluffton.edu/studentlife/handbook/honor.

RECOMMENDATION

See the following Web site for a sample of a syllabus: www.faculty.washington.edu/ktupper, and select one of her courses, or http://syllabus.syr.edu/CSE/drcolasa/cse691/syllabus.htm

Graduate students writing a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation must meet a set of criteria that is typically defined by the school and/or department through the graduate thesis adviser or graduate director assigned in each department. Here, the most crucial factor is the commitment of students to provide constant and continuing feedback on their work to their advisers. Theses and dissertations are guided projects, and students need to consult with their advisers and dissertation committee members on a continuing basis to assess their progress toward a successful defense. If you will complete a thesis or dissertation, you should talk to other students who have done so.

In U.S. higher education, the students themselves can play a role in establishing standards and evaluating their course and the faculty's performance. In many institutions, at the end of the semester or quarter, professors or instructors ask that an evaluation of the course be completed by the students. Your answers to questions on those forms are taken quite seriously and sometimes considered in faculty tenure decisions. The evaluation forms are anonymous, and their confidentiality is carefully protected. Most often, the evaluations provide feedback that helps faculty improve the quality of classroom teaching and learning.

College and university programs are assessed/evaluated by other means as well. Professional colleagues, known for their good judgment and experience, are sometimes invited to serve as assessors of programs other than their own. Regional accreditation associations and professional associations send assessment teams to colleges and universities to evaluate every aspect of the programs being offered, including faculty recruitment, programs of study, recruitment and retention of students, administrative effectiveness, and success in placing graduates. These are very intensive evaluations, and it often takes schools and departments a year or more to prepare. The independent accreditation and evaluation process is another feature of the U.S. decentralized system of higher education.

RECOMMENDATION

You can do a great deal to prepare for your encounter with U.S. culture in higher education by checking a college's Web site to learn about the backgrounds of faculty, staff, and students at the college or university to which you might apply, or where you will attend.

Understanding The U.S. Classroom Learning Environment

Although there are many similarities between the U.S. classroom and classrooms in other countries, the U.S. classroom is a unique blend of pedagogical approaches and cultural values that has been influenced by this country's historical roots, by influential thinkers throughout the country's brief history, and by U.S. cultural values. The following are important cornerstones of the U.S. classroom learning environment: the rights of the individual, personal responsibility, freedom of choice, interactive learning, liberal education, independent thinking, and democratic principles. You will find these values and principles represented in the following discussion, which offers an introduction to important features of the U.S. classroom.

Pedagogical Approach

A useful approach to understanding the culture of any classroom begins by distinguishing two different pedagogical approaches: *teacher-centered* classroom culture and *learner-centered* classroom culture. The chart below identifies some characteristics of each approach.

ASPECT	TEACHER-CENTERED APPROACH	LEARNER-CENTERED APPROACH
Preferred teaching methods	Lecture	Lecture, discussion in large and small groups, application of theory.
Instructor's role	Direct the learning process, be source of knowledge, clarify and interpret written texts.	Present content, facilitate dialogue, demonstrate analytical skills.
Learner's role	Listen to lectures, take notes, read assigned texts, memorize content, demonstrate memorization in tests and papers.	Listen, take notes, read, think critically about content, express perspectives in class, participate in dialogue, demonstrate understanding.
Who directs learning process	Instructor	Instructor and student.
Use of the computer	Considered only as an adjunct to the lecture.	Can be an intrinsic part of the course objectives, and used by the professor to engage the students in further exploration of the topic as well as out of class discussion topics.

ASPECT	TEACHER-CENTERED APPROACH	LEARNER-CENTERED APPROACH
Learning mode	Top down, i.e. instructor imparts knowledge to students.	Cooperative, participatory, interactive between instructor and learner.
Evaluation methods	Written and oral exams.	Written and oral exams, presentations, class participation, papers, quizzes, group projects, classmates' evaluation.
Who conducts evaluation	Instructors evaluate students.	Instructors evaluate students, students evaluate instructors, classmates evaluate each other.
Desired outcomes	Memorize texts, absorb knowledge.	Application of concepts to new situations, critical analysis skills.

These two pedagogical paradigms provide general guidelines for comparing different classroom approaches across cultures. Most classrooms draw heavily from one or the other of these models. Though both models are often represented in the classrooms in a given country, generally one approach is more dominant than the other in a particular country.

If these two approaches were placed on the poles of a cultural continuum, the U.S. classroom would be firmly at the *learner-centered* end of the spectrum.

However, although the learner-centered approach is dominant, the U.S. classroom style depends on the professor's style, as well as the field of study. The learner-centered model is highly favored in the social sciences, education, and the humanities. The teacher-centered model is more often integrated with the learner-centered model in the physical and biological sciences and engineering.

International students who study in countries such as the U.S., Canada, and Australia, where the learner-centered approach is strongly favored, often bring this approach to their home institutions when they return. The spread of the learner-centered model of classroom pedagogy to institutions in other countries has had a considerable impact on models of teaching and learning in countries

where teacher-centered classroom culture was once the preferred model. Surveys of international students from Europe and Asia signal the shift as increasing numbers of students report their encounters with learner-centered classrooms. Your familiarity with these styles of teaching depends on your previous educational experiences. The social structure of your culture plays a critical role in how your country's educational system is organized. This in turn affects how you perceive both education and the process of learning.

Indeed, the globalization of information has affected the educational and learning behaviors of many international students, but many students are still affected by the dominant mode and style of education and learning to which they have been exposed. As a result, students coming to the United States to study find that their expectations, attitudes, and values often conflict with those of their faculty and U.S. students. These differences can be sources of cultural shock and cultural misunderstandings that inhibit adaptation and adjustment. While the United States is a multicultural nation with many higher education institutions, you will find that not all institutions are as multicultural as the institutions hope for. Even though your background may cause difficulties in understanding for faculty and other students, you will find most faculty and administrators willing to assist newcomers to their university. Often they will be generous with their time in an effort to make you feel welcomed, and they will support your efforts to be an excellent student.

RECOMMENDATION

Find people you know who have already studied in the United States. Ask them what differences they encountered in the U.S. academic system and how they overcame these differences.

Variety of [Variation in] Teaching Methods

Comment from an international student: *"The system [in my country] is based on a lot of memorization and a kind of mechanization of the learning process."* (Eland 2001, p. 86)

In contrast to the above statement, a variety of teaching methods are used in the U.S. classroom. An instructor will generally employ many methods within a single course. The course syllabus (discussed above under Faculty: Professors, Instructors, and Graduate Assistants) will likely include information about which of the above teaching methods will be used by a professor. The following are methods that professors often combine

Lecture is used to convey critical information, history, background, theories, and equations. As in many countries, the instructor will stand at the front of the room and present important information, equations, theories, models, history, context, and concepts.

Discussion, both in the large group consisting of the entire class and in small groups of students, is called for to help students discuss and clarify what they

learn, as well as add their own perspectives and experiences. Some courses have one large lecture per week, and then a TA may conduct a *recitation* the other two times per week. In this mode, the TA will review the lecture, expand on the concepts, and you will be invited to discuss your thoughts about the topic.

Observation is when students learn from example by observing instructors and TAs who demonstrate models and skills.

Practical application is used to help students learn, understand, and apply new information and theories. The professor may initiate small discussion groups or encourage students to cite examples where the concept is used in various situations. It may also be possible to engage in an internship outside of the university during a later semester to see the theories at work.

Case examples/studies and real world examples are used in class and in assignments to give students practice in applying new knowledge and concepts to new situations.

Experiential or active learning is used to apply what is learned in a controlled environment or in a real-world setting. This type of learning can take place in the laboratory, in the natural environment, in the community, or in other settings.

Computer-based instruction provides a way to hold an entire course online, to expand on the lecture concepts or practice problems, or to engage in discussions online about the topic. In some computer-based instruction the course is self-paced; in others it is based on specific schedules related to completion of requirements.

By these various methods, students learn from the instructor, their peers, experts outside the university setting, and from written materials.

RECOMMENDATION

Look for people you know who have already studied in the United States. Ask them what teaching methods they encountered and whether they have tips for you on how to be effective with these methods.

Interaction in the Classroom: Importance and Challenges

As indicated previously, student participation is a very important part of the U.S. classroom. International students often report that the amount and type of interaction expected of them in the United States is different from their classroom experiences at home. However, exactly how classroom participation differs from home depends on the country and on the specific institution that the student comes from.

Value of Student Perspective

Comment from an international student: *"[Here], if you speak up in the [classroom], they will listen to you…In [my country], it is hard to make your own voice, if you are … just a student. People don't listen that much."* (Eland 2001, p. 103)

Compared with classrooms in many other countries, U.S. classrooms "tend to reflect more of a Socratic ideal, where teacher and student interact a great deal in pursuit of knowledge" (Anderson and Powell 1991). This is especially true in smaller size classes, and more so in the social sciences, humanities, and education than in other sciences. Students are expected (and often required) not only to know the content of their courses, but also to think independently about it and to express their own perspectives and opinions in class and in their written work. If they disagree with the instructor or their classmates, they are able to express this in class. Openly disagreeing or simply expressing one's opinion can be challenging for students who are accustomed to listening and taking notes rather than speaking up. It is an added challenge when the student has an attitude of awe toward the instructor.

It is also important to point out that some international students find that the discussion in the U.S. classroom is less open than in their home countries. Some find U.S. students hesitant to discuss or argue openly with each other or the instructor, or to freely discuss controversial topics. Students with this experience may feel some frustration at having to adjust to what they perceive to be a less-open classroom environment.

RECOMMENDATION

When in the United States, use your observational skills to determine the nature of the particular classroom you are in. Also, talk to the professor about your shyness or English skill. In some classes, students can raise this with the professor and have an opportunity to influence the atmosphere in the class.

Sometimes international students are surprised that U.S. students contribute freely to the class discussion, even when they have not prepared for class or read their assigned documents (much less memorized them). These U.S. students sometimes seem to hold the attention of the professor with irrelevant comments. However, the professor may have a different perspective–he or she may see the quick, irrelevant comment as an indication of interest, and thus an opportunity for teaching and learning.

Why is participation important? International students need to understand that their opinions are valued in learner-centered classroom culture. International students are a part of the class. Their participation helps the professor determine what students are learning and how well they understand the concepts at the heart of the course being taught. At first, international students may find it difficult to think of a question or comment fast enough to respond quickly. Even if international students use indirect comments, or terms, or have a different

point of reference, speaking up in class is valuable. Prior to class, think of questions you might want to ask. Your fluency will improve over time.

Comment from an international student: English fluency: *"Sometimes when I start talking, I know immediately that I cannot express wholly my idea because it takes me a much longer time [than U.S. students]."* (Eland 2001, p.146)

In many courses, U.S. faculty, including some international faculty and teaching assistants with experience in the U.S. classroom, measure their own performance and that of their students by the verbal responses of students in class.

Comment from an international student: Here *"a lot of times [your grade] depends on your day-to-day conversation with [the professor] and your participation in class. So, people in my [country], they don't usually talk that much. That has a very negative impact on their grade…Cuz the U.S. culture is like, 'If you know it, speak it out. Then we know you know it.' But in [my country]… the professor reads the question [but] nobody would answer the question cuz if you answer it, if you are wrong, then he will laugh at you. If you are right, then he will just think, 'Hey, everyone knows [that], why you speak it out?' So it's different. Culture is different. [In my country], people appreciate those [students] who just work without talking much."* (Eland 2001, p. 87)

If faculty cannot elicit a response from students, they cannot tell if the students understand the material. Faculty may feel that they are forced to delay moving to the next topic, or they may seek another way to express their ideas to students. That wastes time and energy and delays the completion of the curriculum they worked hard to design. Most of all, if they have no response with which to measure what students are really learning, then they might conclude that students are not learning very much. To the professor/faculty, the student's learning is the most important objective.

Students in U.S. higher education need to find a balance between being *independent learners* and *asking questions* in class. Failure to participate in the classroom or consult faculty advisers can be serious obstacles to academic success. Lack of participation can be interpreted by faculty as failure to learn the course content or disinterest in the topic. Simply reading the book, listening to lectures, and taking the exam may not be sufficient to assure the faculty that you really understand the subject. Class participation is often one of the most difficult skills for international students to learn.

What is difficult about classroom interaction? In teacher-centered classroom cultures, students are often expected to memorize texts, including those written by their college professors. Their performance is judged by how well they read back precisely what the professor has said, without quotation marks or references.

RECOMMENDATION

You should withhold judgment of the U.S. classroom until you actually are in one. The experience may be new and possibly difficult at first, as it has been for many international students. But this can be mastered.

In the teacher-centered classroom, students are not expected to express ideas of their own or to draw boundary lines between what their faculty tell them and their own independent, innovative interpretations of the information they acquire. Students speak only when they have something extremely important to say. Their role is to listen intently. They are expected to perform their work diligently, and they are deeply embarrassed to seek guidance from faculty before they have fully completed assignments. Otherwise they would be forced to display their ignorance in public and suffer loss of face. Lack of English language fluency, the inability to respond quickly before the subject of discussion changes, and difficulty in following the professor's frame of reference are the obstacles many international students find most difficult to overcome. If this lack of skill in class participation is joined with the view that professors are to be held in awe, then the problem can be reflected in the grades given for class participation. The recommendation below is one way of addressing this problem.

RECOMMENDATION

For international students who are used to working together, this might be an appropriate way of rehearsing questions and answers before class. Someone in the group can serve as *the instructor* while others practice responding. Another approach is to establish a friendship with one or several professors or graduate teaching assistants and ask them to help you formulate responses to readings and lecture notes before you hand in an assignment or participate in the next class. While many professors and teaching assistants may find it difficult to make time for this type of help, there are many who will, and they can establish a model for you to draw upon. Most colleges and universities have tutoring centers where international students can find assistance in preparation for essays, exams, and classroom participation. Apart from these alternatives, repeated practice is the best solution to the problem.

Valued Knowledge and Course Content

In the U.S. education system, there is often an emphasis on "rational, logical, objective, and verifiable" information (Eland 2001). In many classrooms, analysis of information, text, readings, and data follow this emphasis. It is reflected in the content that U.S. professors choose to emphasize in the classroom. It also means that students are expected to focus their work on these types of knowledge. The extent to which concrete, verifiable information is valued in the U.S. classroom varies, depending on academic program, level, and institution. Although some subjects may have different methods for expressing their knowledge, analysis is still expected to be objective and backed by evidence. Rules of evidence are applied in most classrooms.

Comment from an international student: *"You have to give support for your actions and your positions…you have to be more objective. You have to provide reasons. Almost anything you say in your paper has to be backed up. You have to provide references or you have to provide equations. If this is a new piece of knowledge, you have to prove that it holds."* (Eland 2001, p.84)

International students also report that there is generally more of an emphasis on practical application in U.S. education than in their home countries. Many students report that in their home country institutions, there is more emphasis on historical foundation, theory, and abstract thinking than on practical application (Dunphy 1999; Eland 2001). Some international students find that breadth of knowledge or familiarity with a wide variety of subjects is valued more in the United States than depth of knowledge. Students in the United States "are given large quantities of content to master in a short period of time" (Eland 2001), whereas in many other countries professors spend more time teaching a smaller number of topics. But, again, that varies in the United States. Graduate programs generally focus more in-depth on the major subject, while undergraduate programs require students to take a wide variety of subjects.

People in the United States tend to value new information, models, inventions, and perspectives. This contrasts with some countries where wisdom and ancient knowledge are valued and taught (Fox 1996). All of this means that the emphasis found in a particular course will depend on the professor, the subject (such as engineering, social science, etc.), and the level of study (undergraduate or graduate).

Communication Style

Oral Communication. Directness and specifics are expected and valued. If a student does not understand or needs assistance, then clarification should be requested. Being direct is considered rude in some countries, but in the United States it is considered not only polite but also necessary for academic survival. The professor, graduate assistant, or other classmates can be approached. In addition, most professors do not mind having a tape recorder in the classroom, but students should always ask their instructors for permission to use a tape recorder or other learning device in class. It is helpful to pay attention to how other students successfully elicit help from instructors. Depending on the location of your school in the United States, the style of communication will differ because of regional accents, the use of slang (which is sometimes also regional), and the professional jargon used in the classroom. The best approach is to talk to your instructor or teaching assistant when terms are hard to understand. You can prepare ahead of time by asking your professors for the name of references, articles, or texts from which you can list difficult terms or concepts.

Academic Writing. Direct and clear writing is valued in the United States. The author must write in a way to convey the same message to all readers. The main point or thesis is stated clearly, proven with related evidence, and then summarized. However, some courses have a literature that may seem ambiguous at first. In the humanities and social sciences, in particular, both American and international students will be asked to learn unfamiliar vocabularies that are unique. You can learn about this literature by asking international students who have already studied in the United States in these disciplines or by asking the department to which you are applying to give you a list of references to the literature they intend to use in

classes they teach. International students sometimes find U.S. academic writing to be dry and repetitive compared with how they were taught to write at their home institutions. However, to be successful in a U.S. institution, international students must learn and conform to the writing style in the United States. Previous international students have found that, once they adjust, their grades do not suffer.

RECOMMENDATION

If you are not familiar with U.S. academic writing, there are several resources to help you. In class or on the syllabus, instructors may give specific writing guidelines or recommend specific style manuals that can be purchased. Instructors may give you feedback on your written work about your writing. U.S. students may be willing to read your papers or other assignments to give your suggestions on style, vocabulary, and grammar before you submit them. Also, many universities have writing courses both at the graduate and undergraduate level, less formal seminars, and tutoring services. Ask at your academic department for available resources.

Interacting with Faculty

Faculty members in the United States can be less formal than in many countries. For example, it is not uncommon for faculty to be on a first-name basis with students, especially at the graduate level. But it is important to check with a faculty member before addressing him or her by their first name only. Classroom etiquette may differ from what you have experienced before coming to the United States. Students and faculty often dress very informally, and it is not unusual for faculty to roam the classroom while talking or to sit on the edge of a table in a very relaxed posture. Relaxed dress and posture are not, however, signs of relaxed standards of performance. Mostly at the graduate level, but sometimes at the undergraduate level, faculty, administrators, and even staff may sometimes hold receptions or dinners for their students. In that case, students should ask what the dress should be for the occasion; sometimes students will be expected to wear *professional* dress (suit coat and tie for men, and a suit or more formal dresses for women).

Although U.S. faculty members are often friendly and helpful, many international students feel that they are not as caring or as personally involved with students as faculty at home. This is because the faculty-student relationship in the United States is considered to be professional. Relationships in the United States are most often determined by some kind of function. One can have friends from church, from school, or from work. These relationships are focused on the interest of the people in that category. Sometimes there is overlap, and one person is in all categories. The professional relationship is one that does not overlap with other categories.

Although faculty members genuinely care about their students, they also expect students to take care of their personal lives privately. However, the professor will most likely help with issues that concern the course, for example, giving ideas on a paper written for a conference presentation or introducing the student to important

academic and non-academic people. If you have a major personal issue or trauma that may temporarily interrupt your work, for example, a death in your family or a personal illness, it is appropriate to share that with your faculty so that they know why you are absent from your responsibilities. Most faculty members will be sympathetic and helpful to you in making up work in such situations.

Comment from an international student: *"[In my country] you spend hours in the professor's offices. [They] are telling you how you're going to do this. They guide you…. [Here], I am writing my dissertation in a vacuum."* (Eland 2001, p.101)

In the classroom, students are expected to share their knowledge and to express their perspectives, even when those perspectives differ from those of the instructor. This can prove to be challenging to students who have not had prior experience speaking up in the classroom. The language of the classroom is different from the informal language of the café. It will take time to adjust to these formal and informal conversational usages. Space here does not allow for a full exploration of this topic. Students need to listen to others in the classroom to learn these skills.

Comment from an international student: Faculty roles/status: *"In [my country], the teacher is pretty much sitting next to God, and God asked them for advice three times a day. So when you talk to a teacher…there is a power issue and a status issue. Whereas here, it is more, you can call your teacher by their first name, it is less formal."* (Eland 2001, p. 101)

Regarding communication, students are expected to be direct and specific with faculty. Students should come to meetings prepared with questions. If a student has a need, the faculty expects him or her to ask for help directly. In many countries, this direct communication would be considered impolite, but it is a survival skill in the U.S.

RECOMMENDATION

When you meet with instructors individually, prepare ahead of time. Think about and write down your questions. At the meeting, try to be clear and concise about what you are trying to convey or ask. Instructors want to help you, but they are often very busy and will appreciate your arriving well-prepared. Writing the questions you wish to ask can be very helpful.

Some international students have reservations or are shy about approaching faculty. Consulting with a faculty member about your work or questions from the class is considered normal in the United States. Most faculty members welcome students who have questions about the content or requirements of the course. In addition, the academic adviser, who is typically a faculty member, is a critical resource that students are expected to draw upon.

You will find that there are several types of faculty you will meet with. Most faculty are available to meet with students during *office hours*, which are posted

each semester. You can visit the professor during these hours if you have a question or concern related to the subject or course. You will meet with your course instructor, your academic adviser, and your thesis adviser. At both the graduate and undergraduate levels, meeting with your course instructor is important to clarify issues related to the course, such as topics for term papers, grades, projects, and class participation. Discussions with the course instructor should focus specifically on the course. Office hours are not for the purpose of discussing your research agenda or other degree requirements. It is best to ask the faculty member for a separate appointment for this type of topic.

The academic adviser provides feedback to you about your progress toward your degree. This adviser expects to review your course requirements toward your degree and any special interests you have about the field of study. The *academic adviser* will review your progress *before* you move on to the next year or stage of your work. Similarly, *teaching assistants* in both undergraduate and graduate programs are expected to report back to faculty on your progress as you *proceed* through a course of study, not at the end of your study when it is too late to provide adequate guidance to assure your success. It is always a good idea for students to ask their advisers how often they are expected to meet. The academic adviser can also provide guidance to who among the faculty might serve as the thesis adviser.

The thesis adviser provides assistance in exploring the relevance of your course work to your research agenda, and then the actual research you conduct. The thesis adviser is the person who will guide you in both research and writing. Whether you are a graduate or undergraduate, the thesis adviser is an important component for your success. When meeting with the thesis adviser, you will want to develop deadlines to guide your progress.

Freedom of Choice

Students have a great deal of freedom to choose their major field of study, courses, and research topics and designs. They also have the ability to change their academic path, almost at any point in their education. International students generally find the amount of choice and freedom in U.S. universities to be appealing. In fact, the flexibility of the system is one of the reasons students choose to study in the United States. But responsibility comes with freedom. Students will likely not find as much assistance with making choices in the United States as in other countries. Students must learn how to make decisions on their own. This can be frustrating and even daunting to students who previously were in an education system in which administrators and instructors make the majority of academic decisions. Such students need to take responsibility to learn about available options, and they may need to learn decision-making skills as well.

In the United States it is assumed that people can and should make decisions for themselves. It is also recognized that good decision-making comes with experience. Most U.S. undergraduates are confronted with decisions about personal and academic issues when they arrive on campus. Academically, for

both graduate and undergraduate students, these decisions are perceived by the university to be personal in nature. From the array of courses of study, the student has to choose that which is perceived best. For international students, other factors, such as parents, may play an important role.

RECOMMENDATION

Contact your international student adviser. He or she is very knowledgeable of the campus and its resources. While your international adviser will not make your decision for you, such a discussion will help you find a way to manage the decision-making process.

Evaluation of Learning

In the U.S., students are evaluated in many ways, including exams, papers, lab reports, simulation results, oral presentations, and participation in classroom discussion. Generally, the instructor's evaluation methods will be indicated in the syllabus, which is a course outline normally available on the first day of class. For examples of this, review one of the syllabus listed on page 10.

Regarding exams, U.S. educators tend to put a great deal of faith in standardized tests. Instructors use a variety of types of exams, including multiple choice, short answer, and essay. The multiple-choice test (or *multiple guess*, as some people think of it), such as the format used in the TOEFL, ACT/SAT, or GRE, is very common.

Comment from an international student: Regarding multiple-choice exams: *[In my country], "there's no multiple choice questions…You have to come up with the answers…The idea of being given the answers and choosing from answers is a foreign concept to us. It is almost like an insult to your brain."* (Eland 2001, p. 88)

Although constructing a fair multiple-choice exam is time consuming, it is very easy to grade once constructed. Many students, including U.S. students, wonder whether multiple-choice exams adequately assess their knowledge in the subject area. However, because they are popular with instructors, students should expect them and learn how to take this type of exam effectively.

Students can also expect to be evaluated on their written materials such as papers, on the extent of their participation in class discussions, and sometimes on their attendance in class. The instructor will usually give students advance notice of what is expected in assignments and how to prepare for exams.

Standards of Academic Conduct

Each culture has its own standards, rules, and policies regarding academic conduct or behavior. The rules in the United States are related to the value that is placed on the rights and responsibilities of the individual. Academic rules, and U.S. laws, protect the individual's right to own his or her words and ideas. Each university student is expected to know, understand, and follow the academic conduct rules at his or her institution. Here are some general guidelines.

Ownership of Knowledge

In the United States, an individual is thought to own original ideas, words, and knowledge. This means that students must carefully give credit to the authors of sources they cite. What is already written must be cited, including written sources in books, journal articles, unpublished manuscripts, and the Web or other Internet sources. There are also cases when spoken words, such as a formal speech, must be cited.

Comment from an international student: *"Everything you say, you have to put someone's name and the date and the page…. And at home, that was not the case."* (Eland 2001, p. 85)

RECOMMENDATION

There are many resources available for learning the appropriate ways to cite others' work. University departments often offer guidelines. At the university bookstore there are also various style manuals available that provide a step-by-step guide for correctly citing sources. Some disciplines of study have specific style manuals that must be used. International students should consult with faculty in their departments about choosing the appropriate citation style.

Academic Misconduct

It is considered quite serious when academic conduct rules are not followed. Two common types of academic misconduct are plagiarism and cheating. Plagiarism is using the ideas and words of another without giving proper credit to the author. Cheating can refer to many practices, but usually means using unauthorized sources or assistance on a test, or in a paper or other assignment.

Cheating sometimes results from international students' experiences of living and working in groups starting as members of extended families and later in school. Student groups play an essential role in supporting individuality of their members, but they do not encourage individualism, a set of ideas that stresses independence from groups and their conventions. Nor do they encourage intense competition in and outside the classroom. In the learner-centered classroom, students are expected to express their own opinions, free of influence of others including their friends and schoolmates. In their home country, students often share notes, papers, data, and

resources. In the United States, there are appropriate and inappropriate times to share information and ideas. As a general rule, students can share class notes, ideas, and materials when expressly instructed by the professor to do so as part of an exercise. In special circumstances, for example, when you become ill, the professor may permit you to borrow notes from a lecture or discussion you may have missed. However, there are certain situations and contexts where this sharing is not appropriate. These can be on a test (of course) but also when the professor explicitly states, for example, that all work on a project must be done individually. This means that even sharing ideas or talking about the topic with others is forbidden. There have been occasions where professors accused students in their class of cheating because their work looked very much the same. Violating direct instructions not to share data, ideas, or to copy the work of other students may lead to charges of cheating. This is most often the case because research papers and tests that students turn in to the professor often look too much alike. In such cases, a student can receive a suspension from the program, expulsion from the school, or failure of the course or assignment.

RECOMMENDATION

Understanding the limits and intents of educational practices are very important. One should not assume that what is accepted in your country would work the same way here. If you are uncertain about rules of citation and rules that address cheating, contact the international student office at the school you attend.

Whether or not you agree with the rules, you must learn and follow them or face serious consequences. Instructors often have the power to decide how to handle cases of academic misconduct. It is not unusual that a student would receive a failing grade for an exam or paper on which he or she is accused of cheating. If a student is accused more than once of academic misconduct, even if it is not the same type of offense, the student may be asked to leave the university. In cases like these, a high standard of proof will likely prevail. Student rights are weighed against the allegations of misconduct. How these rights are protected varies from campus to campus but, most often, students can bring a complaint of unfair treatment either to the chairperson of that department and/or the dean of their school. In some cases, complaints may be presented to an on-campus judicial board or a university governance committee for a hearing. On some campuses, TAs have the right to a hearing before a faculty ethics committee when their contracts are dismissed. Wherever it occurs, students usually have the opportunity to defend themselves and lay claim to their rights as well.

RECOMMENDATIONS

(1) Make sure that you understand the rules of the U.S. institution you attend. You are expected to take responsibility for learning and honoring those rules.

(2) If you are accused of academic misconduct at a U.S. institution, be sure to consult with staff at the international student office. The staff is familiar with cultural differences in academic practices and can often provide you with valuable advice on how to handle the situation, and they may be able to act as an advocate on your behalf.

Advice from Previous International Students

Here is a summary of advice from international students in the United States to new students who will arrive soon.

1. "Once you are in the U.S., find someone to 'show you the ropes'" (Eland 2001, p. 160). Either an international student from your country or a U.S. student can help you learn about, understand, and adjust to the U.S. education system.

   Comment from an international student: *"Make good friends from the U.S. and [your home country] that you can ask stupid questions [and not be misunderstood]… The question might be cultural, academic, or anything."* (Eland 2001, p.161)

2. "Be independent" (Eland 2001, p. 162). In the United States, you will likely not get as much help as you are used to. You are required to figure things out for yourself, to learn by doing.

   Comment from an international student: *"If [new students] can survive by themselves, when they are used to it, they are gonna learn a lot."* (Eland 2001, p.162)

3. "Arrive prepared" (Eland 2001, p.162). Find out as much as you can about the institution that you will attend, and the surrounding community, before you arrive. For non-native English speakers, improve your English skills before arriving.

4. "Try to adapt" (Eland 2001, p.162). As you encounter differences in the U.S., think of ways to deal with them constructively.

   Comment from an international student: *"Don't expect it to be like [in your country]…Try to adjust…Just because things are different doesn't mean they are wrong."* (Eland 2001, p.163)

   Comment from an international student: *"Just try to be open and understand how people in this society behave…I think you have to understand [this] before you can be successful….Look for opportunities, don't be afraid of changes."* (Eland 2001, p.163)

5. "Everyone has similar experiences" (Eland 2001, p.162). It is normal to go through some ups and downs when you first arrive. Talk to other students who are going through the same thing. You will get through it.

   Comment from an international student: *"Maybe in the first month, you feel a lot of stress….Don't be too worried about academia. Normally, we are here because we are able to handle that."* (Eland 2001, p.164)

OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

Relationships are an important part of the academic experience. Relationships with faculty are very important for academic success. Make sure that you have a good working relationship with your instructors and with your academic adviser. If you are having difficulty with these relationships, seek advice from a friend, classmate, instructor, or staff at the international office. Social relationships with other international students, U.S. students, and family both in the United States and at home can provide tremendous support. Take time to build your relationships. Take time to talk to others about challenges you face during your studies. Have confidence. Approach the U.S. education setting with confidence and with a sense of discovery.

International Students Are Successful

There is a kind of sharing that is always welcome. International students often say that their best experiences are derived from learning about and from one another. Experienced international students are wonderful resources for new comers. Working together, in this context, helps to bridge many of the cultural differences that new comers encounter. The result of these interactions are often life-long, career-related ties between students from different countries engaged in mutual exchange that adds value to all our pursuits here and abroad.

International students usually perform very well in the U.S. setting. Despite cultural differences, their contributions to global knowledge and practice here in this country, in their home country, and elsewhere have been extraordinary, and we are deeply indebted to them. We hope that prospective international students will use the information and advice in this monograph to review their own values and patterns of behavior as a way of preparing to enter learner-centered classrooms in the United States so that their success adds to an already stellar record of accomplishment. Remember that your qualifications for study in the United States were confirmed when you were admitted to a U.S. University.

EXPLANATION OF THE COMMENTS FROM INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

The comments from international students used in this publication are from interviews with international students at a large Midwestern university and cited in an unpublished doctoral dissertation by one of the authors. The students in the study came from 12 countries around the world. There were both female and male students and from both technical and non-technical fields (Eland 2001).

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