Understanding U.S. Culture

For many international students, adjusting to American culture can be difficult and at times frustrating. American customs and values might be very different from those of your home country, and you might find them confusing. You will probably want to familiarize yourself with American culture before your departure, in order to make the transition as easy as possible.

- Staying **too close** to an American during your conversation may lead him/her to feel that you are "in their face" and may back away. In general, try to give people a little extra space.
- **Eye contact** is important. It is an indication of openness, honesty and enthusiasm.
- Americans are quite personally expressive. It is quite common to speak about your family and offer details about your personal background, or even express your personal opinions and viewpoints. The U.S. is one of the only cultures in the world where it is quite common to strike up a conversation with a complete stranger and share personal information. That said, be wary of subjects like religion, politics, race, income, or weight and physical appearance. These are **sensitive topics** which should not be discussed until you know a person well.
- Be **punctual**. You are expected to arrive on time to classes, events, and other personal commitments.
- **Assertiveness** means advocating for one's rights or expressing one's point of view in a way that is strong and confident. It's a very individualistically oriented form of communication. Saying "**no**" is therefore considered ok. Whether you are busy, not interested or even pressured to join or participate in something, people will understand.
- **Independence**. Americans strongly believe in the concept of individualism. They consider themselves to be separate individuals who are in control of their own lives, rather than members of a close-knit, interdependent family, religious group, tribe, nation, or other group.
- **Equality**. The American Declaration of Independence states that "all [people] are created equal," and this belief is deeply embedded in their cultural values. Americans believe that all people are of equal standing, and are therefore uncomfortable with overt displays of respect such as being bowed to.
- **Informality**. This belief in equality causes Americans to be rather informal in their behavior towards other people. Don't be surprised if store clerks and waiters introduce themselves by their first names. Many people visiting the U.S. are surprised by the informality of American speech, dress, and posture. Nevertheless, good manners and politeness are always appropriate.
- Overall, people in the U.S. generally value **directness**. Americans tend to value frankness and openness in their dealings with other people. They believe that conflicts and disagreements are best solved by means of forthright discussion among the people involved. Americans believe that if someone has a problem with someone else, they should tell the person clearly and directly in order to come up with a solution to the problem.

Information adapted from https://www.internationalstudent.com/study_usa/way-of-life/american-culture/