

American Culture

Characteristics of Americans

Citizens of the United States of America call themselves “Americans”. U.S. society is composed of people from many social, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. They all have vastly different philosophies of life. Therefore, it is difficult to generalize about what “Americans are like”. Probably above everything else, Americans consider themselves individuals. There are strong family ties and strong loyalties to groups, but individuality and individual rights are most important. If this seems selfish, it leads Americans to an honest respect for other individuals and insistence on human equality. Honesty and “frankness” are more important to Americans than “saving face”. They may seem blunt at times, and they may bring up in polite conversations, topics and issues that you may find embarrassing, too controversial or even offensive. Americans are quick to the point and do not spend much time on social amenities. This directness encourages Americans to discuss disagreements and try to patch up misunderstandings about themselves.

Americans like to dress informally, entertain informally and treat each other in informal ways. International students may consider this cross-generation, cross-class informality disrespectful, even rude, but it is part of U.S. culture. The United States is a highly active society, full of movement and change. If you are used to a more leisurely pace, you may find the fast tempo exhausting. If you do not understand a certain behavior or want to know more about American culture, do not hesitate to ask questions.

When we think about communicating with people from another country, we think first about their spoken language. But much communication between people is nonverbal, involving dress, facial expressions, gestures and postures. When they are talking to someone, Americans alternate between looking briefly into the listener’s eyes and looking slightly away. When they are listening to another person, they look almost constantly at the speaker’s eyes. Americans tend to distrust people who do not look into their eyes while talking to them.

Like any other society, American society includes people who are friendly and people who are not. American society includes people representing large numbers of ethnic, religious, socioeconomic, age, occupational and other types of groups. Even with this diversity, it is possible to mention certain characteristics and a custom that in general, describe attitudes and practices that are common among Americans.

Upon meeting each other for the first time, men and women generally shake hands firmly and say “how do you do”? Often people just say “hi” or “hello.”

First names are more readily used in the U.S. than in other countries. It is acceptable to use the first name of someone your age or younger. A man or woman older than you is often addressed as Mr. or Mrs.; or Ms. (pronounced *Mizz*, is used for a single or married woman and is useful form of address if you do not know whether to use Mrs. or Miss) unless the individual requests that you use their first name. It is not correct to use Mr., Mrs., or Ms. with the first or “given” name. The use of nicknames in the U.S. is fairly common. A nickname is not the person’s real name, but a given name by family or friends. A nickname is often the sign of affection.

Our sense of time can differ from culture to culture, but in the US it is important to be on time for appointments with doctors, professors, administrators and other professionals. If you find you cannot make an appointment, or you are going to be late, call the person and ask if you may re-schedule for another time.

When social invitations are extended, it is common to respond to the person either by telephone, or in person. If R.S.V.P. is noted on an official invitation, it is necessary to reply as soon as possible whether or not you plan to attend. Never accept an invitation if you do not plan to go.

Dating in the US

Generally, in the United States, young, unmarried people associate with members of the opposite sex. The social rules governing romantic relationships in the United States are not set. When getting together, Americans tend to go to the movies, out to dinner, or to a concert. Relationships usually begin through mutual attraction. It should be emphasized that if you or the other person agrees to a date or invites you to his or her home; **THIS IS NOT A COMMITMENT TO ANY SEXUAL INVOLVEMENT ON EITHER PART.**

The non-American faced with this variety of values and practices could become confused. American students themselves are not always certain how to meet another person who is interested in romance, how to find out what that person thinks or feels, what kind of relationship the other person is looking for and what kind of behaviors the other person expects in situations. If you are unsure or feel uneasy, do not be pressured into a relationship or situation that you are not comfortable with.

The questions of sexual involvement is problematic in any society. It can be confusing in the United States since there are a wide range of attitudes and practices here. The American media sometimes conveys that all Americans are ready and available for sexual activity, although in reality this is not necessarily the case. If you decide to develop a sexual relationship, it is very important to protect yourself against unwanted pregnancy, and to prevent STD's (sexual transmitted diseases), HIV/and AIDS. You can make an appointment with our Health Services Office to obtain information or counseling. The following is also a helpful web link if you need more information:
<http://wso.williams.edu:8000/orgs/peerh//sex/safesex/>

Popular American Slang Words or Phrases

Ace – to succeed or do well

Hang out – gather in a social manner.

Blow – to fail

Hang-over – the physical effects of heavy drinking (headache).

Blue or Have the Blues – to feel depressed or sad.

Hit the books – to study

Buck – one dollar

Hit the road – to leave

By the skin of your teeth – just Barely.

Jock – an athlete

Cool – agreeable, okay

The “late” Mr. Smith – a term used when the person is dead.

Cop - a police officer

Oops! – said after a mistake

Couch Potato – a lazy person, one who sits and watches TV all day.

Pass the buck – transfer the responsibility to someone else.

Cram – to study feverishly before an exam.

Piece of cake - easy

Drive up the wall – to irritate

Pig out – to overeat

Dutch or Go Dutch – each person pays for his/her own meal.

Pop-quiz – an exam that is not announced

Get under one’s skin – bother

Rip-off – overcharge or steal

Give the cold shoulder – ignore

R.S.V.P. – the formal reply to an invitation

What’s Up – Hi, or how are you doing?

U.S. Holidays

January 1 – New Year’s Day, starting the night before (New Year’s Eve on December 31st), this is a celebration to welcome the new year.

January (3rd Monday of the month) – Martin Luther King, Jr. Day This holiday is in memory of the birthday of the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968), an African-American civil rights leader who received the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize.

February (3rd Monday of the month) – President’s Day This is a holiday honoring past U.S. presidents. This month was chosen because of the birthdays of two famous presidents; George Washington, the first U.S. president and Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president who held office during the Civil War and was known for abolishing slavery.

February 14th – Valentine’s Day People celebrate their fondness for one another by sending gifts, flowers and/or cards.

May – (last Monday of the month) – Memorial Day This is a commemoration of all those who died during a war involving the United States of America.

July 4th – Independence Day On July 4, 1776, the United States of America declared independence from England. Fireworks displays mark this holiday.

September (first Monday of the month) Labor Day This is a holiday honoring the contributions and efforts of laborers.

October 12th - Columbus Day This holiday is in recognition of Christopher Columbus who is credited with the discovery of America in 1492.

November (last Thursday of the month) – Thanksgiving Day This is a day of thanks for everything. It is usually celebrated by families reuniting and eating a big turkey dinner. The feast was initiated by the Pilgrims (the first settlers in the colonies of the U.S.) and the Native Americans who already lives on the land.

December 25 - Christmas Day This is a Christian holiday that marks the birth of Jesus.

Commonly Used College Terms

Major: a student's primary field of study

Minor: a student's secondary field of study

BA: Bachelor of Arts

BS: Bachelor of Science

MS: Master of Science

MBA: Master of Business Administration

CAGS: Certificate of Advanced Graduate Study

Dorm: abbreviation for dormitory or residence hall, a college building students live on-campus.

RA: Resident Assistant

RD: Resident Director

GA: Graduate Assistant

Academic Advisor: a faculty member assigned to each student to help and assist in forming the student's academic plans.

Add or Drop a course: add – to enter a course in which you had not originally enrolled; drop – to withdraw from a course in which you were enrolled.

Cut or Skip: to be absent from class purposely.

Mid-Term: an exam (or the grade you have) in the middle of the semester.

Final: the last exam to the end the semester.

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