

## American Culture: The Basics

The United States is a diverse country, with many customs and traditions. It is difficult to be specific about U.S. culture because of the many regional, religious, and national differences. Here are some key values and generalities that might help you understand Americans and their culture.

These generalities are not always true, but can be a good guide to understanding. Your willingness to understand a new culture and to adjust to the cultural differences will greatly contribute to your smooth and sufficient adaptation to MVCC and the U.S.

### **Making Conversation**

"**Small talk**" includes topics, such as sports, weather, jobs, or past experiences. Most people do not talk about religion, politics, or feelings with strangers. Sex and bodily functions are not discussed. People do not usually talk about the personal lives of their conversation partners. This emotional distance does not mean people dislike you, but personal lives are discussed only with close friends and family.

You should know that "How are you?" and "How's it going?" are greetings, not questions about your life. "See you later," or "See you soon," are ways of saying goodbye, not appointments.

People in the US are curious. *They will ask you a lot of questions.* Some of their questions may appear ridiculous, uninformed and basic, but try to be patient in answering them. You may be the first person from your country whom they have met, and they will have very little understanding of your life. Most people are sincerely interested in learning about you.

Loud conversations usually mean people are angry. Most conversations are moderate in volume with few gestures. Do not speak too loudly or too quietly, and keep your hands under control.

### **Non-verbal Communication**

When you have communication difficulties, you may think it is because of spoken or written language. However, many misunderstandings happen because of non-verbal communication, or body language.

- **Eye Contact:** During a conversation, the speaker looks briefly into the listener's eyes, briefly away, and then back at the listener's eyes.
- **Touching:** Touching people often makes them uncomfortable. Men are especially nervous when touched by another man.

- **Space:** You do not have to touch people to make them nervous. 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." Also, you will hear people say, "Excuse me," although they have not actually touched anyone. No matter where you are, give people plenty of space.

Remember, these are generalizations. Some people will be uncomfortable if you do not touch them during a conversation. The hard part is figuring out who wants what.

### **Some Characteristics**

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. You can see examples of individualism in the classroom as well. Teachers ask students to be independent and individualistic, to work alone, and to make original work.

- **Equality:** You can see equality in such common practices as "waiting in line." When you go to the bank, to the post office, or to immigration, you will be asked to take a number and wait. 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 should be the same in the eyes of professors, and many professors view students as their equals.
- **Informality:** 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. 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 always arrive a few minutes early.
- **Materialism:** Success in the United States is often measured in dollars. Many people think about money and material possessions as much as time. As a result, you may think that people ignore more important things in life, like love and friendship. This is not true; like people in every country, most people in the US value friendship more than wealth.

## Misjudgments and Differences

- International students often think that people in the United States are incapable of deep conversation or thought. Many people are able to think and talk deeply; they are just reluctant to do so with strangers.
- People in the US often think that internationals who speak rarely or quietly are shy, too formal, or just dumb. Also, some might assume that internationals with a strong accent don't know English.
- Arguing may alarm some people. They expect violence or long-lasting anger to follow such encounters.
- Many people are easily embarrassed by sex, religion, and politics, and may assume that those who mention such topics are rude.
- People in the United States have no taboo associated with the left hand; they touch you or hand you objects with either the left or the right hand.
- People in the US have no negative association with the soles of the feet or the bottom of the shoes.
- A common way to greet children is to pat them on their heads.
- People point with their index finger.
- Respect for someone is shown by making eye contact.
- Relaxed postures, whether sitting or standing, are very common; do not think your listener is inattentive because she is relaxed.
- People are uncomfortable with silence.
- The doors of rooms are usually open unless there is a specific reason to close them.

## 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. 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. Many 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. Christianity has many different faiths, and the United States has many different religions.

Utica has many places of worship: Protestant, Catholic, Islamic, Unitarian, and many other religions and denominations.

Someone may call you or come to your house to talk about their religion with you. These people are sales people for their beliefs. 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.

### **Socializing**

Shaking Hands - People usually shake right hands when they first meet, but it would not be considered rude or disrespectful to use the left hand. Handshakes usually last just a few seconds.

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 Tom Cruise." Most official forms ask you to write your family name first, followed by a comma, then your first name: "Cruise, Tom." 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 swear words around their "superiors."

### **Use of Names**

- It is ok 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 know the individual better.
- Men and women will be confused if you use Ms., Miss, Mrs., or Mr. with a first name; they are used only with the family (last) name.

- Some women in the US prefer Ms. (pronounced "Miz"). Ms. is used for either 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.

### **Meeting People in the United States**

Meeting people in the United States is not easy. Because of the problems mentioned previously, internationals sometimes stick together and avoid contact with people who live here. The best way to learn more about the United States is to meet and talk to new people.

### **Relationships**

Clocks are very important to American life. "Wasting time" or not doing anything, is considered a bad thing, although many people still do it.

When people seem warm and open with new acquaintances, this does not mean that close friendships are forming. At social gatherings people readily welcome new people, and the warmth expressed is genuine and sincere but confined to that occasion and may not always continue. Close friendships do develop as a result of repeated interactions and shared interest between individuals.

Another problem in forming relationships is that the definition and expectations of "friend" are different in different cultures. The majority of friendships in the United States tend to be shorter and shallower than those of other cultures. People have different groups of friends: "work friends," "school friends," "family friends,"

### **Romantic Relationships & Dating**

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.

Generally, however, when a couple makes a "date" they will do something: go to a movie, have dinner, go dancing, etc. A man or a woman can ask for a date. The person who asks will probably pay for the date, although this should be a conversation - so people would rather pay for their own part.

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.

Dating does not mean sex. If one person says they are dating another, it means that they have gone out with that person before and plan to again. It does not say anything about the physical relationship between the people. There are many ways to use the word "dating."

### **Sexual Involvement**

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:

1. Sex is not necessarily expected during the early stages of a romantic relationship, and agreeing to a date or going to the home of your partner does **not** obligate you to have sex. Regardless of what you have seen in US movies or on television, that is not how dating works in the US. You always have the right to say no at any time.
2. Sex is a personal decision. Different people have different ideas about what is and isn't acceptable. The important thing is that both people are respectful of each other.

Date rape and sexual harassment are growing concerns in the United States especially on college campuses. It is sometimes very difficult to know what to do. On a date, sex should only happen by mutual informed consent. If either partner says "no" or is not willing, do not force it. That is rape. Sexual harassment is difficult to define, but it means that no one in a position of power or authority can take advantage of that position for sexual favors. If you feel sexually uncomfortable with an employer or professor who has authority over you, talk to someone and get advice. You can always talk confidentially to someone at either in International Student Services, Health Center, or the Counseling Center.

If you are sexually active, practice "safe sex." "Safe sex" means you and your partner do not exchange bodily fluids. Condoms are available at the Student Health Center and at any pharmacy or convenience store. Use them to protect your health. AIDS, Chlamydia, Herpes, and other STDs are real.

### **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. The host-guest relationship 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: "Will you come over Tuesday evening at 8:00?" A statement such as "come and see me sometime" or "drop in" is not an invitation. It means that you must call before you drop in. If you accept an invitation, it is important that you go and be punctual. The host expects you to call/text as soon as possible if you must cancel. It is considered rude to simply not show up. If you are not interested in the invitation, it is better to politely refuse the date or appointment in the beginning. Refusing a date is not considered rude in the United States.

A formal, written invitation requires a response and often a written response.

- If the invitation says "RSVP," you must tell the host whether or not you will be there. If you cannot attend or do not plan to attend, tell them. Do not say "yes" just to be polite. The "RSVP" is to help the host plan how much food and drink to prepare.
- 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 text 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**

US individualism shows in attitudes toward 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 often talkative and 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. Many parents give up time with their children to pay for these things. In most two-parent households, both parents work to support this lifestyle, 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.

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.

If 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 himself. 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.

*Source: University of Arizona's CESL program website*