

Cultural Adjustments

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New students typically have a host of concerns when they arrive in the U.S. Academic issues often top the list, but students also worry about making friends, finding a place to live or worship, and what to eat. From our experience with thousands of new international students, we know that the ability to adapt *culturally* leads to better successes in: academic, social, and personal health arenas. New students should *expect* a cultural adjustment process by anticipating small and large changes in the perception of others, interactions in academic and social settings, and reactions to unexpected situations. This process can be challenging, but awareness and some tips can help!

Cultural Adaptation

Even if you are adept in new situations, you will need to adapt at many levels of your life as a student in the U.S: academic, social, cultural, and emotional.

For example, in the American classroom, students are expected to “participate” by asking questions and giving opinions. Your active participation indicates that you are paying attention, engaging in the learning process, and interested. If you come from a country where “the teachers talk, and the students listen,” then this will require some modification. Our point is: the things that have defined your academic success in your home culture may or may not ensure your success in the U.S. So, watch your American classmates, and mirror their general behavior. Speak with your professor about his/her expectations.

This is just one example of the *many* adaptations you may make. The good news is that many students find a good balance and like their new home!

Adjustment Curve

Most students experience a U-shaped curve as they move through the cultural adjustment process. You will likely move from high expectations and excitement to some dissatisfaction, or frustration. You may then feel uncertain or depressed; however, you’ll soon experience an increasing understanding of the new culture and your fit within it. Eventually, you’ll achieve balance between your own needs and cultural norms with U.S. culture. We liken this normal adjustment process to the letter “U” – up, down, then up again! Each person experiences this adjustment curve in a unique way, but you are certain to have some of these feelings as you move through the stages of adaptation.

Tips

Here are some tips that we share with new students to ease their adjustment to the U.S. college and university experience:

- Anticipate that you will experience cultural adaptations, even if you are good in new situations.

- Bring items such as photos, posters, music, or artwork from home to remind you of family and friends.
- Identify students from your country or region or *any new student* who may be experiencing the same issues. Talk with them about your feelings.
- Ask your Foreign Student Advisor for advice and campus resources.
- Get involved in a campus activity: athletics, a club or student group, or campus job. Make a new group of acquaintances right away.
- If someone asks you to lunch, say “yes!” Otherwise, you’ve lost an opportunity. If no one asks, then *you* can take the first step by asking “would you like to get a quick bite to eat sometime this week?”
- Watch for signs of depression – sleeplessness, lethargy, lack of appetite – and consult a trusted friend and/or your campus health or counseling center for help.
- Plan some quick conversation starters with new American friends – the weather, sports, American holidays, family members. Consult an ESL teacher for tips on starting, having, and ending casual conversations.

Successful adaptation to a new culture is wonderful! When you have arrived on the upside of the adjustment curve, you will have achieved a new area of expertise. Your familiarity with a different culture will serve you well for the rest of your life. So, enjoy the process while learning about yourself and others. And, don’t forget to share your successes with the next round of new international students arriving on your campus.