

LIFE & CUSTOMS IN THE UNITED STATES



Everything you need to know
about life & culture in the
United States during your time
at Bellevue College!



BELLEVUE
COLLEGE

OFFICE OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION
AND GLOBAL INITIATIVES

LIFE IN AMERICA



The United States is the third largest country in the world with a population of more than 320 million, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Because of this, the United States is one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world. Nearly every region of the world has influenced American culture, as it is a country of immigrants, most notably the English who colonized the country beginning in the early 1600s. U.S. culture has also been shaped by the cultures of Native Americans, Latin Americans, Africans and Asians. Native Americans make up at most 2% of the American population today. The other 98% are either immigrants or descendants of immigrants. Many people came to the United States to seek economic opportunity or religious freedom. The United States is sometimes described as a “melting pot” in which different cultures have contributed their own distinct “flavors” to American culture. Just as cultures from around the world have influenced American culture, today American culture influences the world. The term Western culture often refers broadly to the cultures of the United States and Europe.

NEW CHALLENGES

Studying and living internationally are new experiences for everyone, and with new experiences come new challenges. You may occasionally feel confused, unsure and uncomfortable in the United States. People may have different values and new ways of doing things that seem strange to you.

Dealing with Culture Shock, the Adjustment Process in a New Culture:

Understanding the cultural adjustment process can help you in coping with the often intense feelings that you may experience as you begin your life in the U.S. Each stage in the process is characterized by “symptoms” or outward signs typifying certain kinds of behavior. **Culture Shock** occurs when the individual is immersed in new challenges including housing, transportation, shopping, and language. Mental fatigue results from continuous straining to comprehend the new language.

Initially, during the **Honeymoon Period**, many people are fascinated and excited by everything new. The visitor is elated to be in a new culture. And eventually, an **Initial Adjustment** period takes place where everyday activities such as housing and shopping are no longer major problems. Although the visitor may not yet be fluent in the language spoken, basic ideas and feelings in the second language can be expressed.

Sometimes, a feeling of **Mental Isolation** can happen when individuals have been away from their family and friends for a long period of time and may feel lonely. Many still feel they cannot express themselves as well as they can in their native language. Frustration and sometimes a loss of self-confidence result. In time, **Acceptance and Integration** take place when a routine (e.g., work, business, or school) has been established. The visitor has accepted the habits, customs, foods, and characteristics of the people in the new culture. The visitor feels comfortable with friends, associates, and the language of the country.

▶ HOW TO REDUCE & COPE WITH CULTURE SHOCK

Some ways to combat stress produced by living in a new environment are:

- Take a class, develop a hobby.
- Be patient, becoming accustomed to the US will take time.
- Include a regular form of physical activity in your routine. Exercise such as taking a walk, going for a swim or enrolling in a yoga or aerobics class will all help.
- Relaxation and meditation are proven to be very positive for people who are passing through periods of stress.
- Maintain contact with people from your own country. This will give you a feeling of belonging, and will reduce your feelings of loneliness and alienation.
- Seek out opportunities to interact with the local people. This will help you to learn English more quickly and adjust to cultural differences more easily.
- Volunteer in community activities. This will help you feel less stress about language and feel useful at the same time.
- Spend time with students and other colleagues from other countries. This will give you a more global view of the world, let you find out how you are all experiencing being in the U.S., and put cultural differences into perspective.
- Focus your power on getting through the transition.
- Pay attention to relationships with your new friends. They will serve as support for you in difficult times.
- Establish simple goals and evaluate your progress.
- Find ways to live with the things that don't satisfy you 100%.
- Maintain confidence in yourself. Follow your ambitions and continue your plans for the future.
- If you feel stressed, ask your counselor for help.

AMERICAN CULTURAL NORMS



COMMON COURTESIES

Greetings: In the U.S, people shake hands firmly with each other when first introduced, or when they meet again, but rarely when they part. A hug is also acceptable between men and women who know each other well.

Distance & Eye Contact: In America, when two people are standing and talking to each other they maintain a “personal space” of about 16 inches from each other, farther away than is customary in many other cultures. A person may feel threatened if you come too close, even if such a distance is ordinary in your own culture. Touching is not recommended, but making full, unambiguous eye contact at the first meeting stage is essential. In the U.S., people tend to warm up to people who smile, especially when the smile is accompanied by full eye contact.

Getting to the Point: In the U.S., pleasantries are exchanged among people who know each other, however, they are likely to get to the point relatively quickly.

Holding Doors: It is customary to hold the door for the next person because people in the U.S. assume that most would prefer to walk at their own speed rather than walking fast to reach the door being opened for them. People from other countries might not regard holding doors as an important part of being polite. So, experiencing almost everyone holding doors for the next person here in the United States – it’s heartwarming.

Punctuality: There is a high value placed on punctuality in the U.S. If you make plans with someone, you should be there when you say you will. Three to five minutes early is even better, because it shows that you are really looking forward to spending time with the other person. Most people will allow five or maybe ten minutes late, but more than that is considered bad form. Not showing up at all – called “standing someone up”-- is considered very rude and, unless you have a very good reason, the other person may never want to make plans with you again.

ETIQUETTE & BEHAVIOR

Celebrations: As in any other country, people in the U.S. like to celebrate special events like birthdays, retirements, confirmations, or graduations. Celebrations take place at people's homes, in restaurants, and sometimes in substantial catering halls that specialize in such events.

In some situations, gifts are expected. In other cases, particularly if you do not know the person well, an appropriate greeting card will be sufficient. Throughout the United States, "card and gift stores" sell cards for all occasions. These "card and gift stores" also sell small, inexpensive gifts that may well be appropriate, just to be on the safe side, if a large gift isn't expected.

If you know the person honored, a celebration may be the ideal occasion in which to say a few words, formally, or propose a toast. If you are not a native English speaker, keep the speech short. You can be sure that even if you make errors in the language, everyone attending will appreciate your thoughtfulness.

Cellular Phone Etiquette: Please keep in mind that it is not considered polite in America to carry on a long conversation on a cellular phone while seated in a restaurant or other area in which people are trying to converse quietly. You may, of course, see (and hear) other people doing exactly that, but this is no reason for you to be impolite.

Foreign Languages: If you are with a group of mainly English-speaking people and the conversation is going on in English, it is not polite to speak in your own or another foreign language for more than a few sentences.

Introductions: If you meet someone you know on the street while you are with someone else they do not know, it is polite (and customary) to introduce the people to each other.

Taboo Topics: The use of swear words, obscenities, or ethnic vulgarisms is best avoided in conversation, even if you hear someone else using this kind of language. Also, avoid telling off-color or sexually explicit stories or jokes. This kind of language may be effective to some people, but can be deeply offensive and off-putting to others. The habitual use of obscenities, in or out of context, is never a good idea. You may indeed hear it, but do not repeat it.

If you are in a movie theater or at a concert or play, it is never polite to talk during the performance, even in a whisper. Though you may hear others doing it, of course.

Home in America: Generally speaking, people enjoy showing off their homes to others, especially if they have put a lot of work, or money, into them. If someone in the U.S. invites you for a home tour, even if it feels odd in your culture, the proper thing to do is to accept the invitation with enthusiasm.

The homeowner may be exceptionally proud of rooms or home improvements that mean absolutely nothing to you, say a buried lawn sprinkler system, an elaborate home theater setup, or even a refurbished bathroom. A tour of a child's room will require an appropriate compliment, as will photographs of the children themselves.

One of the areas of the home that attracts the most passion among people in the U.S. is the kitchen. Bear in mind that attention to kitchen design and equipment often has no direct relationship with the homeowner's desire or ability to cook. Avoid asking about the owner's cooking skills, or enthusiasm for cooking as a pastime, unless the owner brings the subject up.

】 MAKING CONVERSATION

In America, people can become fairly intimate and personal in conversation, though controversial subjects like sex, religion, and politics are often best avoided, at least until you get a good idea of the views of the people you are talking to. It is permissible for a person to start a conversation with a stranger but the conversation should be immediately ended if the person does not seem to want to talk. Be especially careful not to force your attention on someone in a plane, train or bus.

An accepted conversation starter is "What do you do?" meaning "What do you do for a living?" "Do you have any brothers or sisters?" is also a safe question. People also love to talk about their children. Since most of the time it is not particularly open about the subject of death, you will want to make sure a person's parents are alive before referring to them or asking about them.

Some people can spend a great deal of time in casual social circumstances talking about astrology. You can be sure that sooner or later you will be asked "What's your sign?" in a friendly manner. If you don't know your "sign" you can find it in any newspaper's astrology column. Even if you don't believe in astrology, it is often a good, non-controversial subject of conversation among people who do not know each other well.

Unless you know a person very well, it is not a good idea to criticize American society, apparent social injustices in America, or American ways of doing things. In a social setting with people you have just met, starting such a political argument is undiplomatic. With people you already know, you can take some changes with controversial subjects.

If someone starts a conversation with you on a subject you consider tactless, improper or offensive, it is best to try to change the subject rather than making the problem worse by asking the other person embarrassing or personal questions. Don't lower yourself to the other person's level.

THE SOCIAL SCENE



▶ ATTENDING PARTIES, EVENTS, & GET TOGETHERS

Formal & Informal Events: Social events and parties can pose bewildering problems for people in the U.S. and for foreigners alike. You'll have to determine how formal the party or event is, what kind of food or drink will be served (if any), whether or not a gift is expected, and, if so, what type of gift is appropriate. Gifts are normally opened when received.

For some people and in some regions, "informal" means blue jeans and T-shirts. For some others, it can mean sports jackets and ties. It pays to ask specific questions about how you should dress when someone invites you ("Do I need to wear a dress? Jacket and tie? Is everyone wearing shorts? Are jeans alright?"). Even if informal clothing is in order, keep your clothes clean. Neatness counts when making first impressions on other people in the U.S. If in doubt, let others dress down, and maintain your own appearance at a higher level.

On invitations to events like weddings and receptions, "formal" (also referred to as "Black Tie") means tuxedos for men and evening dresses for women.

Entertaining Outside: In the U.S., people enjoy entertaining guests outdoors, most commonly in the backyards of their homes, weather permitting of course. If the event occurs during the daytime, especially in summer, most people will be wearing decidedly casual clothing, especially if swimming is involved. An evening event may be less casual. Even if the event is casual, it is always wise as an outsider to wear neat, clean summer clothes, and avoid ultra-casual clothing like tank tops and sweat pants.

As with any other invitation where food is involved, you may ask if you can bring something and bring a small gift like wine even if the hosts say "no."

Be prepared at an outdoor summer party to participate in some outdoor games and light sports. Choose a suitable pair of shoes. Participants (and these may

be children) may begin throwing a Frisbee around, kicking a soccer ball, or organizing a game like volleyball or badminton. No one expects you to know all the rules, or have any particular skill at the game, in order to "join in."

At outdoor events in which it is obvious that the party is going on behind the house, it is not impolite to join the party directly through a side yard door rather than ringing the front door of the house.

Bringing Food & Refreshments: Some parties are "potluck" or "covered dish" affairs. The idea is that everybody brings something for the entire group to enjoy. Sometimes the person giving the party will assign various types of food (breads, beverages, pasta, or dessert) to different people to assure a variety. In some cases, the hosts will prepare the major dishes, such as meats or fish, and expect guests to bring side dishes, like salads and potatoes. If in doubt, ask. You cannot please everyone, but it never hurts to ask the hosts whether they have any food allergies or preferred foods, and choose your own contribution accordingly. They will appreciate your thoughtfulness.

When bringing food, the thoughtful guest purchases a dish of some quality, the even more thoughtful guest goes to the trouble of preparing a dish, provided he or she has the skill. If you are particularly adept at preparing the cuisine of your own country, this might just be the time to introduce it to others. If your cuisine is pungent or spicy, however, you might decide to modify the strong flavors a little so the dish will better appeal to a broad variety of tastes for everyone. Bear in mind that, in any case, people in the U.S. usually shy away from organ meats and slimy vegetables.

In some "potluck" events, just a few friends bring the food, often in large amounts. If you find yourself at such an event without being warned in advance, just dig in and enjoy the food. You weren't expected to contribute. Common sense does indicate that it is a good idea to compliment the dishes prepared by the other people, of course.

If a party is given on a B.Y.O.B. basis (it means, "Bring Your Own Bottle") you'll be expected to bring a beverage, often alcoholic. If you do not consume alcoholic beverages, it is perfectly acceptable to bring a soft drink, mineral water for example. As a general rule, bring about twice as much as you would ordinarily drink, whatever the beverage.

If your religion mandates that you avoid certain foods, it is best to simply say, "No, thank you" when they are offered to you rather than going into detail on the topic. You do not want to make others feel uncomfortable about consuming these foods in front of you.

EATING OUT



】 DRINKING, TIPPING, & TABLE MANNERS

Legal Drinking Age: The legal age for drinking in America is 21, which seems quite high to people from many other countries. As Western countries tend to be more open and progressive compared to some conservative Eastern countries, people are surprised at the high minimum drinking age as in most Eastern countries the legal drinking age ranges from 18-20.

Tipping Customs: Travelers from other countries find it hard to understand why additional gratuities (tips) should be paid to servers when they are already being paid by their employers. Not only do the visitors find this culture bizarre, but they also have a difficult time calculating the appropriate amount of tip to be given to which usually ranges from 10-20% of the cost of the meal. Many people find tipping economically burdensome.

Table Manners: In America, people try to eat neatly, without making a lot of noise. If something is out of their reach, they politely ask someone to pass it to them. Food should be lifted up to the mouth. Do not bend over to eat it. Sit up as straight as you can without being uncomfortable. Do not talk with your mouth full. Table napkins are placed on your lap, folded in half if they are very large. If you are in a small group, it is polite to wait to start eating until the host sits down and begins. With larger groups, you may begin after noting that a few people have begun. You may also begin if the host urges you to.

Use your fork, knife and spoon to eat your food. Some exceptions include lobster, corn on the cob, cookies, shrimp, and fried chicken. Watch what other people do. If you do eat with your hands, don't lick your fingers to clean them.

Use the napkin carefully. If you have to take food out of your mouth, such as a pit or bone, do it discretely and quietly. It is not polite to pick your teeth at the table. If you must do this, excuse yourself and go to the restroom.

TRADITIONS & HOLIDAYS

While there are a dozen federal holidays, not all businesses may be closed on those days. Retailers especially may be open, however banks and other financial institutions are closed so plan ahead.



Dress in costume on Halloween



Wear green on St. Patrick's Day



Bring food to share at picnics



Enjoy your drinks but don't slurp



Americans enjoy pretty flowers

Federal Holidays

- | | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------|
| ■ New Year's Day | ■ Independence Day |
| ■ Martin Luther King, Jr. Birthday | ■ Labor Day |
| ■ Washington's Birthday | ■ Columbus Day |
| ■ Memorial Day | ■ Veterans Day |
| | ■ Thanksgiving |
| | ■ Christmas |

Common Observances

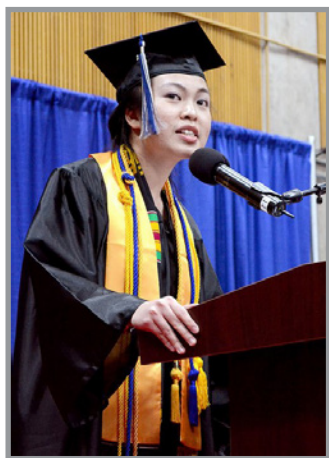
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|---------------------|----------------|
| ■ Valentine's Day | ■ Mother's Day |
| ■ St. Patrick's Day | ■ Father's Day |
| ■ Earth Day | ■ Halloween |
| ■ Easter | |

TESTIMONIALS

» A WORD FROM OUR INTERNATIONAL ALUMNUS

"I have been studying in America for a couple years and I still remember the first time I arrived. Everything was new to me. I was surprised by the cultural differences. Now I am so glad to have an opportunity to let new students know more about American culture and customs. It is important for us to adjust to the American life and study habits. Hopefully this booklet will help you know more about it. Enjoy your time at Bellevue College and get ready to start a new journey. Have fun!"

~ Sandy Su, China



"Aside from academic success, I am thankful for the many opportunities Bellevue College has given me to acquire many leadership experiences. Thanks to my second family at Bellevue College, I am now able to continue my education at one of the most prestigious institutions."

~ Anh Nguyen, Vietnam

(The first international BC student selected as a commencement speaker. Now graduated from the UW Foster School of Business.)

"I had the opportunity to learn and improve my speaking and writing skills at Bellevue College in the ESL program. I'm now a college credit student and I'm actively involved in campus student life. I still have great appreciation for the hard work and dedication of all the BC instructors who have helped me to create a memorable experience."

~ Valery Borodina, Ukraine

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