

U.S. Academic Culture & International Students

How does U.S. culture impact the academic environment?

- U.S. culture creates an educational system that is more learner-centered than teacher-centered, but each professor also has their own style of teaching that may be more or less learner-centered
- Flexibility of programs for individual students
- Rights of the individual, personal responsibility and freedom of choice are a focus
- Informality in the classroom and in work settings

	Teacher-Centered	Learner-Centered
Preferred Teaching Method	Lecture	Lecture, large/small group discussion
Instructor Role	Directs learning, source of knowledge, clarifies/interprets text	Present content, facilitate dialogue, demonstrate analytic skills
Learner's Role	Listen, take notes, read, memorize, demonstrate memorization through testing	Listen, take notes, read, think critically about content, express opinion in class/papers, demonstrate understanding
Learning style	Top-down	Cooperative, participatory, interactive
Learning Outcomes	Memorize text & absorb knowledge	Gain knowledge, apply concepts to new situations, use critical/analytic skills

Potential Higher Education System Differences

- *Grading Systems and Course Credit:*
 - GPA / course credits are calculated differently
 - Self-selection of classes is not universal
- *Student/Instructor Relationship*
 - Formal vs. informal relationship
 - Teacher-centered vs. learner-centered educational style
 - Hierarchy
- *Faculty Office Hours*
 - Faculty office hours may be new to some students since contact with professors outside of the classroom in their own culture is often not customary or encouraged.
- *Collaboration vs. Competition (Working Together)*
 - Different understandings of the meaning and range of acceptance of collaboration in class, and on examinations, papers and other assignments.
- *Research and Citation Methods*
 - Some students come from societies where attribution is unnecessary.
 - A student may come from a cultural background where paraphrasing is considered disrespectful.
 - In other cultures, citing word-for-word without mentioning sources might indicate a level of respect to the author whereas changing the author's text may be judged as disrespectful.
 - Undergraduate Honor Code & Academic Conduct: <http://www2.tulane.edu/college/documents.cfm>
 - Graduate Honor Code & Academic Conduct Policies: <http://www2.tulane.edu/ogps/policies.cfm>
- *Common Knowledge & Intellectual Property*
 - What constitutes common knowledge naturally differs for students depending on the countries and cultures from which they come.
 - In a collectivist culture, knowledge is inclined to be viewed more as community property. In these and other cultures, the concept of intellectual property may be quite foreign.

Contact the Office of International Students and Scholars (oiss@tulane.edu) for more information about U.S. Classroom Culture or to find out about other ways to support and engage international students in your classroom. Some information in this handout was adapted from the NAFSA, U.S. Culture Series, on [U.S. Classroom Culture](#), by Michael Smithee, Sidney L Greenblatt, and Alisa Eland (2009).

Potential Cultural Challenges in the Classroom

Keys to Academic Success

Expressing own point of view in papers and research	Understanding what is expected and seeking feedback from the Professor, especially for the first assignment
Lack of knowledge of U.S. rules and norms regarding plagiarism and academic honesty	Learning U.S. rules and norms regarding plagiarism and academic honesty
Eye contact, deference to authority	Learning U.S. cultural norms related to student/professor interactions
Group work may look very different in the U.S.	If the guidelines for group work are not clear, seeking clarification
Participating in class discussions	Improving English skills and getting more comfortable with voicing opinions and speaking in front of others, even with an accent and less than perfect English skills

“Sometimes American students would sleep in class, eat food, or were noisy. I was surprised that professors tolerated it. Maybe it’s because of the American concept of individual expression. It was a very **different learning environment** for me.” – Student from Japan

“When you have a lecture, you just sit on your chair and you just copy everything on the board and then you have to memorize it, but now, no, I mean, in the U.S. It isn’t enough. **I need to read and sometimes I say that is my opinion.** So you have more interest to go to the library or go to different authors and try to find support of what you think or your ideas.” – Student from South America

“Sometimes it’s embarrassing or you feel low if you don’t achieve in that subject and you’re falling behind in your classes. In the first or second semester, I felt like, oh, my God, that’s too tough and you cannot do anything....**I approached [my professor], and he told me how to study and everything.**”
– Student from South Asia

Tips for Faculty

- *In the beginning*
 - Encourage (or require) students to utilize your office hours/appointment times to further their understanding of your expectations for class meetings and all assignments.
 - Offer your support to international students adjusting to the U.S. academic system.
- *Papers, Exams, and other Assignments*
 - Define clearly your expectations regarding collaborative and group projects.
 - Offer to give feedback on drafts. Encourage students to ask clarifying questions.
 - Offer samples of written work demonstrating both correct and incorrect ways of paraphrasing and citing sources.
- *Make Lectures Accessible*
 - Visual support or recording lectures.
 - Beware of jargon or references to U.S. pop culture.
- *Class Participation*
 - Some international students are reluctant to speak because they question their ability to express themselves clearly, formulate ideas in English, and respond quickly. Additionally, many come to Tulane never having been encouraged to volunteer information or ask questions in class.
 - Give students time to prepare in advance so they feel more comfortable.
 - Explicitly seek international perspectives.
- *Small Groups*
 - Assign small groups so that the international students are dispersed with U.S. American students.
 - Use icebreakers to help both domestic and international students feel more comfortable interacting with each other.
 - Help to ensure productive group work with some guiding practices groups should follow. For example: include everyone in discussions, check for understanding within the group, elicit the opinions of those who have not spoken up, etc.

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