Living in the USA: Cultural Orientation and Adjustment

The University at Albany – State University of New York
Welcome to the United States of America and to the University at Albany – SUNY!!

You have embarked on the exciting and challenging endeavor of coming to live in the USA while continuing to pursue your education.
There are many things to look forward to:

For example meeting people from the USA and meeting people from over 90 other countries around the world who come to study at UAlbany. Finding out what the USA is like from the inside by living and going to school in the country, rather than learning from movies, TV shows and news reports. Taking courses and perhaps pursuing a degree at a USA American university.
There are also many challenges associated with this endeavor:

First and foremost, leaving the everyday familiarity of your home country, culture and community to come to live and go to school in a country, culture and community in which the language, customs and way of life are different. It’s important to learn to participate in this new culture so that you can realize your goals of meeting people, experiencing the culture and successfully attending the university. This does not mean that you give up your own cultural identity and practices. It means that you expand your skills to be able to interact and work with people from different cultural backgrounds. It means that you develop interactional flexibility.
Adjustment Cycle (or Culture Shock)

It is quite common for people to arrive in a new country full of good spirits and energy for the task of learning everything they need to know to engage with the people and their culture.
It is also common for people coming to a new country to find they are a bit overwhelmed by how different everything is from their home country. The simplest tasks of walking down the street or asking someone for directions can turn out to be quite difficult to manage. You seem to be bumping into other pedestrians and USA Americans are finding your English hard to understand. One can feel quite exhausted trying to accomplish ordinary, everyday routines and this can be discouraging.
Adjusting to a new culture can take time and involve a number of ups and downs in mood and determination. With patience and practice interacting with natives, one’s skills at managing daily life increase, as do one’s spirits.
There are a variety of suggestions for getting through the lows: Realize that these reactions to a different culture are quite normal. These reactions are the kind of thing that anyone feels when her or his world is altered significantly, and things are topsy-turvy for a while. Get plenty of exercise and rest. Talk with others who are experiencing the same thing. Try to maintain some perspective and laugh at your mistakes. Communicate with people from home. Contact the International Student and Scholar Services office at 518-591-8189, or the University Counseling Center at 518-442-5800.
Learning About Cultural Variations

But in the end, learning more about local cultural practices and continuing to interact with native members of the culture will help the most, providing a way to come to understand social cultural contexts and the meaning of people’s conduct. Two ways in which one can come to better understand and engage with others are to: 1. Learn about the cultural generalizations made about US Americans, and 2. Analyze the interactions in which you participate so you can develop skill at dealing with particular persons in particular interactions.
1. Using Generalizations to Aid Understanding

Generalizations about values and practices of cultural groups are just that: group average generalizations. They provide broad brush characterizations of values, assumptions and the social conduct of culture members as a whole. These kinds of characterizations are then often used to compare and contrast one culture with another. They do not pertain to everyone in the culture, nor do they pertain to every context or situation in a culture. There is always variation in a cultural group; people don’t all act the same way. Nonetheless, these generalizations have proved useful to persons who are in the process of adjusting to a new culture. As you read each one, think about how your home culture handles each of these concepts, and how that differs from the USA American version. Consider what a US American would need to learn to understand your culture. How would this information be useful to you living in the USA?
a. Individualism: In the USA individuals have the right to make decisions and choices about many issues for themselves, without consulting others for their views and wishes. People are often encouraged to be autonomous and even unique.

b. Informality: USA Americans tend to employ more informal modes of speaking across many situations, including when talking with supervisors, teachers, etc.

c. Time: The clock governs the temporal course of many, if not most, activities. Events should begin and end “on time” as scheduled. People should arrive on time for appointments and classes. Work should be completed on time. Also, the pacing of events is viewed as fast.
d. **Achievement Orientation**: In the USA, people want to be successful and to be seen as having accomplished or achieved some goal. Being successful is how people gain recognition.

e. **Interpersonal communication**: USA Americans’ talk is ordinarily regarded as direct and straightforward. People are able to speak their minds and state their opinions in an open manner.

f. **Friendship**: Often USA Americans are pleasant and friendly when first meeting others. They show an interest in people. Friendship requires getting to know each other better, but can happen fairly quickly in the US.
There is nothing quite like living in a culture and interacting with members of a culture to help one become more skilled at interacting in the culture. First there are details of how general patterns, like the generalizations above, are actually used in particular contexts with particular persons. These can be picked up during interaction by observing how others act and interact with each other, by thinking about how the social conduct is similar to and different from one’s own cultural practices, and by asking interaction partners about the meaning of conduct. This kind of observation and analysis is something that people do routinely their home cultures whenever they enter a new situation. If you go to a new school, begin a job with an organization, or move to a new community, you will find yourself tentatively participating and observing how things are done in the new setting.
As a warm up exercise, in preparation for coming to the USA, consider the following scenarios. These are descriptions of interactions between a USA Americans and an International Student who grew up in another country and culture (You). As with the generalizations discussed above, try to think about the scenarios from the perspective of your home culture and from the perspective of the US American culture. Imagine yourself in the situation.

For each scenario, ask yourself:

1. What thoughts come to mind as you read the scenario?

2. In what ways might this situation be understood in your home culture?

3. In what ways might the US Americans understand the situation? How could you find this out?

4. What would you do next?

>> Jot some notes down about each scenario. <<
While walking along a campus path, you see a fellow student, Sam, a USA student from your History class, walking toward you.

- **Sam:** Hi, how’s it goin?  
- **You:** Hi. Well, pretty well. I went with some friends to see a movie last night and that was fun. My math class this morning was pretty interesting. And I got an email from a friend from home; that was great.

As you are talking, you notice that Sam seems to be moving away along the path and not really listening to you.

- **Sam:** That’s good. See you later. (smiling with a small hand wave)

And Sam walks off down the path.
Scenario #2

It is September of your first semester in the US. You get to your Communication class a little early, enter the room and sit down next to Chris, a USA student who smiled and said “Hi” to you at the last class meeting. You would like to get to know Chris better and hope this may be an opportunity to do so.

- **You:** Hi.
- **Chris:** Hi.
- **You:** How are you doing?
- **Chris:** Okay. You?
- **You:** Okay.

You pull your textbook and tablet our of your backpack to get ready for class.
• **Chris**: It is really hot in here today. (shaking his head from side to side)

• **You**: It sure is. I thought the fall season was supposed to be cooler.

• **Chris**: It is, but sometimes the summer heat extends into the fall. I really wish the school would turn the air conditioners back on. It’s hard to think when it is so warm in the room.

• **You**: Yeah. It’s more comfortable outside. (chuckle)

  (pause)

• **You**: Did you get the homework done for today?

• **Chris**: Yeah, but it took forever. I hardly got any sleep last night.

• **You**: I know! It took a long time to answer the questions.
**Chris:** What did you write about for question 2? The one about learning to do something new.

**You:** I wrote about going kayaking last weekend.

**Chris:** Yeah? I talked about learning to sky dive.

**You:** (nod your head)

(pause)

**Chris:** Doing anything this weekend?

**You:** Probably just studying.

**Chris:** Right. I should do that too.

The professor enters the room and the class begins.
The setting is a small sized discussion class. Ten to 15 students, sitting in a circle. The professor has assigned 3 short papers to read and discuss in class. About half an hour into the class, the topic shifts to the second of the three papers.

- **Professor**: Who wants to start us off discussing this paper?

Everyone is looking around the group to see who might volunteer. There are two students who always have something to say, whose hands went up immediately. But the professor is looking around the room at everyone but those two.

- **Professor**: Let’s see if we can’t have someone new start us off on this paper.

The professor’s eyes come around to you.
Scenario #4

You are standing in the hallway outside the room where your next class meets. There are several International and US American students from the class milling in a cluster which you join. The students are all chatting about the course. One of the US American students makes a remark about the teacher of the course and all of the US American students and some of the International students burst out laughing. You weren’t able to hear well or understand what was said. But everyone is looking around to see how the remark is being taken up.
Some Thoughts on the Scenarios

Scenario #1:

In the USA, people often greet others by saying “hello,” “hi,” or “hey.” They also greet others by saying “How are you?”, or maybe “How’s it goin?” Sometimes people will use a combination of these items. When “How’s it goin?” is used as a greeting, it is being used like “Hi” or “Hello.” It is not expected that the recipient will actually expand on how he or she is doing at that time.

In many countries and cultures around the world, the question “How’s it goin?” is only asked when someone is making a sincere inquiry about another’s state of being. In such cases it is not used as a greeting.

What could be the interactional consequences of these two cultural forms coming together in an interaction?
Scenarios #2:

International students in the USA sometimes ask how they can get to know USA students better. The international students report that they can easily have “small talk” chats like the one in Scenario #2, but want to know what to do to get past small talk.

One suggestion might be to ask a USA student to meet for coffee or lunch. In that context it is easier to talk at greater length.

Also, in the context of Scenario #2, is there a place in the conversation where an inquiry about the other person could be made that might get things past “small talk”?

USA students also have asked how they can get to know international students better. Where in the Scenario #2 might the USA student have had an opening to get to know the international student better?
Scenario #3:

In many classrooms at the University at Albany, and throughout the USA, there is an emphasis on student participation. In this scenario, the professor is trying to get students who have already been speaking up to volunteer to start off the discussion of the second paper assigned for the class meeting.

Depending on the educational formats in their home countries, international students sometimes find student discussion in class unfamiliar and therefore somewhat difficult to participate in. It’s important to note that some USA American students also find speaking in class difficult.

What might international and USA students do to help them become able to join the discussion in such classrooms?
Scenario #4:

Humor and figurative language is always difficult to understand when moving into a new cultural context. A person can have a very nuanced command of the language and still find humor and figurative language puzzling. A native English speaker from the USA can be confused about humor in England. It can sometimes feel discouraging or maybe embarrassing not to understand.

The good news is that natives are often happy to explain humor and figurative language to newcomers. And spending time living in the culture can help as well. It requires becoming familiar with the culture to understand humor.