

## Characteristic traits of Americans

**Directness** – Honesty and frankness are more integral to American culture than saving face. Americans may raise conversational issues, which may be sensitive and embarrassing; try not to be offended. Frankness might appear to be rudeness, but in most cases, it is not intended to be. Americans are quick to get to the point and may not spend as much time on polite social talk as do many other nationalities. Americans also tend to ask many questions, some of which may appear to be unusual, uninformed or elementary. Try to be patient in answering them, as the person is probably genuinely interested in knowing more about you.

**Competition and Cooperation** – Americans place high value on achievement and success, which naturally leads to friendly and not-so-friendly competition. Although seemingly always in competition, Americans also have a good sense of teamwork; that is, of cooperating with others toward a common goal.

**Individuality** – Most Americans like to be treated as individuals rather than as members of a certain class or group. They dislike being dependent on other people.

**Informality** – In most cases, young Americans avoid elaborate social rituals. This is not to say that there is no form of etiquette, but they tend to prefer being casual and informal. However, this should not be taken as a lack of respect.

**Punctuality** – You are expected to be on time or punctual in the U.S. If you have an appointment for a certain hour, you should be there at that hour. If you cannot keep an appointment or cannot avoid being late, it is important and courteous to call ahead and explain. Most social functions, theaters, lectures, etc. begin on time.

### Family Life

In a great many countries, the extended family is the basic social unit. In the U.S., the family unit is much smaller and tends to play a comparatively smaller role than it does elsewhere. The average-sized family is a couple with two children. Families tend to be very mobile; by the age of 21, children often move out of the family home to begin living on their own.

Women's roles in society have changed dramatically in the last decade, largely due to the women's rights movement. More and more women now have professions and work outside the home, many in fields, which were traditionally dominated by men. American women may appear to be assertive if judged in another cultural context, and in fact, many are. In the U.S., this is not necessarily considered a bad thing.

### Religion

There is no state religion in the U.S., and many different religious sects exist. The importance and intensity of religious beliefs vary from person to person, although most Americans attend organized religious services. People are generally not judged on the basis of their religious beliefs. Freedom of religion and respect for all religious beliefs are major American tenets.

### Social Customs

Like every other country in the world, the U.S. has its own set of customs and behavior patterns. Here are a few things that every American automatically knows and might not think to tell you:

**Greetings** – Men usually shake hands the first time they meet. Women, generally do not do so in a social situation, but do in a business atmosphere. "How do you do," "Good Morning" and "Good Afternoon" are formal greetings. Usually, people just say, "Hello," "Hi" or "How are you?" If greeted with "How are you," a correct response is "Fine, how are you" or just "How are you?" Remember this is usually only a greeting, and an actual response to the question is not expected.

**Social Invitations** – Invitations should be accepted as soon as possible. Appointments for social affairs are more flexible than those for business functions. For example, if a party is to begin at 8:00 p.m., many guests will arrive at staggered hours and some may come as late as 10:00 p.m. This is acceptable.

It is not acceptable for a dinner invitation. Under normal circumstances, a person who invites you to dinner or to the theater takes care of the bill as well. However since students are often short of money, you should be prepared to pay for yourself. If you are in doubt, ask! Going "Dutch" means each person pays for his/her own way. You may receive an invitation that asks you to bring your own beverage (B.Y.O.B.). Although it may seem strange, this is perfectly acceptable way of entertaining in America.

**Saying "Thank You"** – It is considerate to send a thank you note to your host or hostess. It is not necessary to take a gift, especially if you are invited only for dinner. If you are invited to a birthday party or for Christmas, a small gift is appropriate. It is never necessary to give an expensive gift; a small souvenir from your country would be happily received. "Thank you" is used often in the U.S. even for small favors done by a person who is only doing his or her job (such as a clerk in a store). It is customary to say "Thank You!" The response "You're welcome" is also customary.

**The Use of Names** – First names are probably more readily used in the U.S. than in other countries. It is automatically correct to use the first name of someone of approximately your same status and age or younger. A man or woman older than yourself should be addressed as Mr., Mrs., or Miss or Ms. until the individual requests you to use his/her first name. The title Ms. is used by many American women instead of Miss. or Mrs. If you do not know whether a woman is single or married, Ms. is a proper form of address. The titles of Mr., Mrs., Miss, and Ms. are used only with last names in the U.S. Finally, if you have any doubts as to what to call someone, ask. If people are unsure of what to call you, tell them what you prefer.

### **Male-Female Relationships**

Young men and women in the U.S. associate more freely with members of the opposite sex than in other countries. The kinds of activities in which they engage include: having a cup of coffee together in the student lounge; sharing a meal together in a dining hall or a restaurant; studying in their residences or library; going to a movie, lecture, museum, athletic event, concert, party or dance. The decision to get together for one of these activities could be on the spur of the moment (spontaneous) or planned in advance. The latter arrangement is called a date because the time and place are pre-arranged. For example, a man might ask a woman to a concert, dinner or dance. If she accepts, they have a date. If she declines, it may mean that she has other plans or that she does not want to go out with him. If she is simply busy, she may suggest an alternative time, or he may. If she declines a suggestion, it is a pretty good indication that she does not want to go out with him. The same would be true if a woman invited a man to the theater, dinner or party, which is perfectly acceptable and fairly common in the U.S.

Social convention dictates that a man or woman never tells someone directly that he or she does not want to go out. It is also considered impolite and inconsiderate to break a date (cancel an engagement) without giving prior notice to the person. A date should be broken only for compelling reasons; otherwise, the person will assume you have changed your mind or do not want to go out, and will be hurt or insulted. You can change your plans if the other party is agreeable. Also, the one who issued the invitation should pay for any expenses related to the date. However, as mentioned above, students are often on restricted allowances and camaraderie may dictate a sharing of expenses.

Although there are fewer restrictions on male-female relationships in the U.S. than in many other countries, the casual, free-and-easy interchange that can be observed among students on American campuses should not be misinterpreted. Some male-female relationships do progress from casual acquaintances to close friendships to intimate personal relationships, but this can never be assumed and most likely will develop only over time and by the mutual consent and desire of both parties. Americans as well as non-Americans realize that they are responsible for their actions, but in the United States, great emphasis is placed upon individual conscience in defining acceptable adult behavior between the sexes. It is difficult to give guidelines that will be appropriate for all situations. Just remember that honor and respect for the feelings and beliefs of others are the basis for all enduring relationships in America just as they are elsewhere in the world.

If you have difficulty in understanding campus ways and social life, do not hesitate to talk with your fellow students and your foreign student adviser; visit the student counseling or health centers. Social relationships may be very different in the U.S. than in your home country, but this does not mean that you should feel pressured to abandon customs and beliefs that are important to you in order to fit-in. Do what comes naturally and feels comfortable to you. Try to keep an open mind and a sense of humor while exploring this new culture, and with time, patience and goodwill, you will discover that this initial period of transition and adjustment can present a variety of challenging experiences.