

Top 5 Ways U.S. Academics are Different

Notes and Vocabulary

Here are 5 of the biggest academic adjustments international students might face.

1) Assignments are due throughout the semester.

Course grades usually don't depend on one final examination, but on a number of pieces of work submitted over an entire semester.

Some classes have papers that you have to write every week, others have group projects you have to work on with your classmates, presentations you do in the class, or research you do by yourself to prove a thesis you come up with.

So, instead of being stressed out all at once at the end of the semester, you get to be stressed out in little bits all the way through.

2) Participation matters.

Many professors will also grade you on your classroom participation – how much you speak up and contribute to the class discussion. Classroom participation can make up up to 50% of your final grade in some courses.

One Indian student explained in a discussion, "The US education style is definitely more interactive; in most courses, class participation counts toward your final marks. You have to keep this in mind and be sure to participate in class discussions from the very beginning of the program."

3) Understanding can be more important than memorization.

One reason classroom discussion is so important is that it demonstrates your understanding of the course material, which many American professors value more highly than your ability to memorize the material.

One student commented, "I've taken examinations, even in math courses, where you were not expected to get the answer, but rather to demonstrate your thought process as you tried to work it out."

4) Being intellectually well-rounded is encouraged.

American higher education tends to emphasize intellectual exploration, and many schools will allow you to take electives outside your specialization. Undergraduate students in particular are often encouraged to take courses in subjects far removed from their major.

5) Work happens in groups

American schools think it is important to teach their students how to work in a team, and sometimes assign group projects. So, the very vital tip is to always be sociable, especially in your classes, so you are always ready to work in a group.

Another vital tip for group work: Work hard on the assignment, but not so hard that the rest of the group dumps all the work on you!

One More Thing: Plagiarism is BAD

In the U.S., plagiarism is a big deal, and American professors care A LOT whether your work is original. Copying from another source can cause you to be suspended or kicked out of school.

In fact, even copying from YOURSELF can be grounds for disciplinary action (if you use something you already wrote in a previous paper, for example). So, never ever copy anything and paste it directly into your paper! What you should do is paraphrase and reorganize what you want to include in your paper, use quotation marks to indicate direct quotes from a primary source, and be sure to provide a proper citation for the information.

What Does it Mean to 'Be American' as a Chinese Student?

Notes and Vocabulary

Source: <http://blogs.voanews.com/student-union/2011/10/13/the-cultural-collision-and-self-identification-of-chinese-students-in-the-us/>

I'm Chinese, but kinda American.

Since August 16, 2008, the day I arrived in the United States, I have been asked thousands of times, "Where are you from?" For most Chinese students studying abroad, the automatic answer would be, "Yea, China of course!" However, for some, it is not as simple as the nationality presented on their red, Chinese passports.

This summer, a Chinese friend of mine from Syracuse University visited me in Beijing after spending a semester studying abroad in Europe with a few American students. "I enjoyed my stay in Spain so much last semester," she told me, speaking in Mandarin Chinese interspersed with some English terms. She showed me pictures of various parties with other American students, and said, "The American culture I adopted last semester was more than what I had tried for the past three years. I feel I'm so American right now and I nearly forgot how to speak Chinese when I just came back to China from Spain."

I felt happy for her for feeling comfortable "being so American." However, her words left me in deep thought as well; do we, Chinese students studying in the US, have to "act like Americans" in order to live comfortably in this country?

My freshman year, I had a culture clash with my American roommate and felt very isolated from the American students in the dorm. The reason was simple: I didn't party with them, nor did I talk to them often.

Yet, how I perceived and adapted to American culture began to change after I studied abroad in Hong Kong and Israel with some American students from my college. In order not to be isolated again, I forced myself to learn how to dress up, to go to parties, how to drink and to dance like everyone else in the group. Slowly, as "efforts" began paying off, I began to hear people saying, "You sound so American," or "Oh my gosh, you look so American in this picture!"

Waking from an alcoholic stupor after a party and walking in 5-inch-heels with my friends in the empty streets of Hong Kong at 3:00 am, I kept asking myself again and again, "Is this the life you want? If yes, why did you feel uncomfortable? If no, why do you have to continue this lifestyle you don't actually enjoy?"

I was not able to come up with the answer until this summer when I went to Hong Kong again to attend the 2011 World Youth Leaders Forum.

During the farewell dinner on the last day of the forum, a student from China came over to me, and asked in English, "Are you ABC (American-born Chinese)?" "Why?" I asked back, surprised.

She explained that during my presentation, she had not only heard a slightly American accent, but also thought that the way I included humor in the presentation and used a lot of gestures when I spoke was very "American." In addition, I had talked about my plan to travel to India and Africa after graduation, and she said she knew Americans who had taken time off to travel after school, but not a single Chinese college student who had done it.

During the past three and half years, I thought "being American" means "going out to parties, bars, and clubs to have fun, being able to dance, drink and do crazy things, and so on." However, at that moment, I suddenly recognized how I had been holding onto an incorrect concept of "being American." I realized what I really have learned and gained from the past three and half years studying in the United States is that "the American dream" refers to being independent and determined – knowing what you want and insisting on it until you achieve your dreams.

I still remember that on August 16, 2008, I, a 17-year-old, arrived at the JFK airport in New York City, carrying three overweight luggage cases. Now, I am a 21-year-old adult who will graduate from college in half a year. I believe, however, what I gain is far more than a degree certificate. In China, parents usually play an important role to secure their children good schools or good jobs. However, as an international student whose parents are on the other side of the earth, all I have is myself. And I believe that's how I have been practicing the concept of "the American dream," and that's how to "be American," in a good way.

At 3:00 am last Sunday, I finished some readings and walked through an area of Washington D.C. populated by many bars. I had to pick up my roommate who had gone to a party but needed someone to walk her home. The temperature was low, but the street was busy. I saw some Chinese-looking girls dressed up nicely at a corner bar, drinking beers, and talking and laughing loudly. I didn't know whether anyone among them was facing a similar dilemma as the one I had previously faced, but had there been such a person, I would have liked to share a quote with her from John Mason: "You're born an original, don't die a copy!"

How to Be a Good Student in America: 3 Dos and Don'ts

Source: <http://blogs.voanews.com/student-union/2013/07/11/how-to-be-a-good-student-in-america-3-dos-and-donts/>

Notes and Vocabulary

Part 1: This group will be reading the 3 "dos;" another group will read the "don'ts."

DO: Persevere

Writing papers has always been a challenge for me. The type of writing that is considered a vital skill in the U.S., being able to construct and defend an argument, is not something I learned in Russia. Yet this fact did not scare me away from taking writing-intensive classes as soon as I started at Mount Holyoke College. I thought that I had to start somewhere, and the sooner I started the better, as I would have more time to hone my skills. So my first semester at MHC I signed up for an advanced 300-level writing intensive seminar.

My grade for that class depended not only on a term paper, but also on a set of smaller writing assignments. The professor told us that everyone would submit five assignments during the semester and that our final grade for the assignments, rather than being a summary of those five grades, would instead reflect the progress we had made over the semester, from the first paper to the last.

Behind the "A" that shows up for this course on my transcript is the story of how I struggled in that class and the lesson I've learned.

Toward the end of the semester, I knew my progress wasn't where I wanted to be. The highest grade I had received for my writing was a B+. But I would not be satisfied with a B+. So I asked the professor if I could submit more assignments. Unexpectedly, she said yes!

Producing more papers gave me an opportunity to better understand my professor's expectations, as well as to improve the overall quality of my writing. I climbed from a C+/B- to an A- in my assignments and knew very well my professor's standards by the time my term paper was due. The term paper made up the biggest part of our final grade, and I got an A in that class.

The lesson: Persevere. Don't let a setback cause you to give up or give in - there's usually a way to move forward, if you are willing to work hard for it.

DO: Ask professors for help

The other lesson from my first writing class was that professors are often willing to help you in unexpected ways, if you are willing to ask.

In one of my other writing-focused classes, I had to write a 10-page research paper. When I told the professor that I was having difficulty with the assignment, she agreed to talk to me about my paper. Discussing my paper with her certainly helped me formulate my ideas and understand the assignment. But what I was really hoping was for her to read my drafts, which she wouldn't do.

In a class the next semester, I, again, had to write a research paper. I again asked the professor to read my drafts, expecting him to refuse. But he did not. In fact, he willingly read my drafts three or four times during the semester. To my big surprise, when I asked him to take a look at my final draft, he agreed to take it only a few days before the paper was due. He returned my final draft with his comments one day before the deadline, enabling me to even make final cosmetic corrections.

The lesson: Professors have different teaching styles and have different ways of helping you learn. Even if one professor refused to help you the way you wanted it, they may be willing to help in other ways, and it does not mean another professor will also refuse.

DO: Speak out

In seminars, participating in class discussions usually constitutes a significant percentage of a student's grade. I took a few seminars at MHC and got an A in all of them. In all of them, I spoke in every class. In all of them, I spoke either more than anyone else or not less than the most active students in my class.

Being an international student, I understand the fears and concerns about speaking in class. I, too, before coming to MHC, had thoughts like, "What if I make a grammar mistake or choose the wrong word and Americans laugh at me?" and "What if I start a debate in class, but can't express myself quickly enough to rebut an opponent's argument?"

I knew that before speaking, I needed a few seconds to construct the sentences in my head, so that I did not stop in the middle of my speech searching for the right word in English. But I also knew that often class discussions move so quickly that I would often not have those few seconds I needed. How did I get out of this? I stopped worrying about these things and started speaking. The only way to learn was to speak off the top of my head and react fast.

Yes, there were many situations when I made grammar mistakes, picked the wrong words, or just stopped in the middle of my sentence unable to find the right word. But no one ever laughed at me. Now, I don't even think about the concerns I had before. Sometimes I even raise my hand having only a vague idea of what I am going to say.

If this does not convince you to cast off your fears, think about it like this: One day you will need a letter of recommendation from two or three professors. You can choose a professor whose 100-person lecture class you took two years ago, hoping that he or she will recognize you. However, you will probably want your letter-writer to be someone who has had a chance to get to know you better, like one of your seminar professors. But will they have anything to say about you if you never spoke in their class?

The lesson: Don't let your concerns about the language affect your grades and your career. THIS is your chance to learn to speak English!

How to Be a Good Student in America: 3 Dos and Don'ts

Source: <http://blogs.voanews.com/student-union/2013/07/11/how-to-be-a-good-student-in-america-3-dos-and-donts/>

Notes and Vocabulary

Part 2: This group will be reading the 3 "don'ts;" another group will read the "dos."

DON'T: Cheat

One of my discoveries at MHC (a university) was that cheating in classes is not only a matter of honesty but also of culture. What is regarded as cheating in the U.S., such as copying ideas without citing them, would not necessarily be problematic in, say, Russia or China. Similarly, behavior that is encouraged approved in the U.S., like reporting students who cheat, may be disapproved of somewhere else.

It is your responsibility to learn the American understanding of cheating and stay away from it as far as possible. If not for reasons of morality, than at least for the sake of your grades.

One of my Chinese friends did not bother to read the MHC student guide on plagiarism and cheating. When her professor gave her an F for plagiarism, she tried to explain to him how Chinese academic culture is different, but he was unyielding. When she told him,, "I did not know this is plagiarism," his response was simply, "Well, now you know."

The lesson: Take 15 minutes to read your school's guide on plagiarism. It will save you a lot of pain later.

DON'T: Chase two hares at a time

My extracurricular activities have always been as important to me as school. Their value for me is multifaceted: they don't just contribute to my personal growth, but also expand my knowledge about my career field. Yet I felt that striving for As at MHC and pursuing all the extracurriculars I wanted was not prudent. I was reminded me of the Russian proverb that if you chase two hares you will not catch any. One of my biggest challenges at MHC has been deciding how to allocate my time between school and extracurriculars, as everything seemed important but I couldn't do it all.

I talked to my professors for advice and took note of their opinions. One of my professors told me, "Your grades are always there [on my transcript]," which stuck with me. She said that if you sacrifice a grade for an activity, everyone looking at your transcript will notice your bad grade and maybe that extra line on your resume. But if you sacrifice your activity for a grade, everyone will notice the good grade on your transcript but not the activity you did not do.

The lesson: Know your priorities. Don't chase two hares at a time, unless you are a superman (or woman).

DON'T: Stop trying

Remember how I suggested being persistent in your classes? Sure, in my first writing class doing extra writing assignments brought my grades and my skills up to where I wanted them. But what happens when persistence is not enough? What if, even after doing all those extra writing assignments, I had climbed up only to a B?

Professors in the U.S. value a student's effort – they value it much more than professors do in Russia. So extra effort is not wasted. It may be reflected in your final grade and your professor's impression of you as a student, even if it does not change your grade on a test or assignment.

Last semester I was struggling in one of my math classes. I strived for an A, as usual, but was closer to an A-. I went to almost all of my professor's office hours. I did all extra problems at the end of each chapter – problems that were not assigned as homework. I borrowed supplemental books from the library and consulted them. By the end of the semester, I was oscillating between an A and an A-. The final exam was expected to determine my grade.

During the final, however, I got so nervous that I got myself confused and did only about half of the problems. I estimated my grade and realized that I could only expect a B+ at best. But I got my A-. What for, if not for my effort?

The lesson: The effort always matters.

5 Qualities of the Perfect Host Family

by Sarah Elaine Eaton, Ph.D.

Notes and Vocabulary

Finding super host families for home stay students is key for a successful home stay program. Here are the top things that the best host families do.

1. **Act like a family.** This may sound obvious, but you really want families who act like a family. They eat dinner together around a table (not in front of the television and not all at different times). They engage in conversation. They may not always agree, but they do listen to one another. They spend evenings and weekends together and understand the value of "family time".

2. **Know that safety and security come first.** A good host family understands that it is their responsibility to keep the student they're hosting safe and secure. This means that they set reasonable rules to help keep the student safe. This may include things like a curfew, checking in with a host parent during late excursions with friends and advice on safety in the local area such as avoiding certain areas of town. An ideal host family understands that having and following safety rules is a good thing.

3. **Include the student in family life.** The ideal host family thinks of their home stay student as part of the family. They include the student in dinner conversations, family outings and activities. The ideal host family never lets on that they're being paid to host a student. Instead, they see their role as both giving and receiving. In addition to the fee they receive to care for the student, they also receive a tremendous opportunity to learn about another culture, as well as the chance to learn how to host international guests. In turn, they give their student the opportunity to experience life as part of their own family, offering a safe place to live, support, encouragement, opportunities to learn new things in the informal setting of the family unit.

4. **Know when not to include the home stay student.** This may sound counter-intuitive but one difference between a good host family and a great host family is that great host families know when not to include the home stay student. They understand that while they want to make the host student feel like part of the family, they also keep in mind they are still a guest. All families have their ups and downs. Great host families don't burden their home stay students with things like obligatory visits to the hospital to see a terminally ill grandparent. They also avoid having heated arguments in front of the home stay student. Ideal host families protect their home stay student from distressing experiences, understanding that the student is experiencing his or her own stress from culture shock, missing their own family back home and stress from school. While it is normal for family members to disagree from time to time, the best host families understand that "domestic drama" does not make for a pleasant home stay experience.

5. **Know how to have good wholesome fun.** Families who do activities together such as play board games, enjoy sports, go for walks and have family gatherings such as dinners and birthday parties are ideal. Together, these create long-lasting happy and warm memories. Your best home stay families strike a balance between work (including school work), responsibilities around the house and time to relax and have some fun together as a family. These families understand that spending time together doing fun activities creates opportunities for sharing, laughter and positive bonding. And that in the end, happy memories are the best souvenir the student can take with them when they leave.

6 Lessons Learned While Studying Abroad

Notes and Vocabulary

Posted By Mabel Aguirre

Before embarking on the adventure of studying abroad you will surely have some ideas about the country and culture that you're going to face during your journey. My experience is that besides rewarding moments you will learn about yourself and the world. Therefore, I would like to share with all those who are planning to study abroad the lessons I've learned:

1. You're not going to understand it all.

If you are studying in a country with a different language than yours, at the beginning you will feel a bit out of place and sometimes a bit stupid when you do not understand or when you're not able to say exactly what you're thinking. Don't worry, you are neither the first nor the last to feel that way, wanting to express something but being unable to do so. My advice is that you try despite of making mistakes, moreover, surround yourself with people who have a better language level than yours and ask them to correct you when you make mistakes. Learn quickly by reading and talking as much as you can to native speakers, and try to reduce the conversations with your family and friends in your native language.

2. Absorb the culture around you.

Despite the cultural shock you'll have the first few days (new food, language, beliefs, traditions and ways of doing things), my recommendation is that you observe and learn from this new environment. Do not cling to your life in your home city, instead, take this new opportunity to learn from it and grow as a person. One of my biggest learning opportunities was to understand different cultures, be more flexible with my beliefs and points of view and to find out that although some people can be very different from you they can become your very best friends.

3. You'll do things you never imagined you could do.

When you live abroad, you understand the value of things, how easy is to travel and see new cities. You will try to find a source of funding for these activities. Why not get a job? My advice is that besides giving you a way of funding your trips and entertainment activities, a job will be the best way to improve your language skills, increase your confidence and make friends. It is true that most students will find a job as a waiter/waitress, working at supermarkets, department stores, and events such as concerts, exhibitions and sports tournaments. In my opinion, I recommend you to contact a recruitment agency (an organization that helps to match employees with employers) and prepare

yourself for learning new skills that will help you in the future like time management, how to be more organized, social skills and off course to appreciate your home and the value of money.

4. Everything is temporary.

The first few days can be tough and sometimes you will want to go back home and leave your project. Remember, that everything is temporary and after a month, you will feel more comfortable, make friends and see the advantages of the city you inhabit. During the first weeks, get to know the city, have fun after classes with your friends and socialize with your classmates, all of this will help you to not get homesick.

5. Do not plan it all.

Although before traveling you are going to plan the duration of your course, chose the destination, activities you will like to do while there, etc., you must be open to changes and unexpected events. It may be that at the end of your course you will have the opportunity to extend your studies or study a new language in a nearby country/city. Go with an open mind and if you find new opportunities along the way, take them. Remember that you will meet people from around the world. The opportunities are there; take them when they find you!

6. Self-Knowledge.

One of the biggest lessons I've learned during my time studying abroad is how much you can get to know yourself. Not only you'll find out what your limits are, but you'll also face your fears, develop new skills and the end you'll come back being more resourceful, adaptable and mature. My advice is to always have the courage to take on new challenges, push yourself to the limit, both in your academic and extra-curricular activities, take part of student groups, sports teams, get to know your teachers and classmates and never isolate yourself.

To sum up, this will be an experience you'll probably have once in your life time. Take every opportunity to learn and enjoy. Without a doubt, you'll return home as someone who makes better decisions, who effectively communicates ideas and someone with a better understanding about what is happening around the world.

Source: <http://www.viva-mundo.com/en/noticia/post/6-lessons-learned-while-studying-abroad/>

Culture Shock: A Fish Out of Water

Source: <http://www.johnsesl.com/templates/reading/cultureshock/>

Notes and Vocabulary

Kalvero Oberg was one of the first writers to identify five distinct stages of culture shock. He found that all human beings experience the same feelings when they travel to or live in a different country or culture. He found that culture shock is almost like a disease: it has a cause, symptoms, and a cure.

Whenever someone travels overseas they are like "a fish out of water." Like the fish, they have been swimming in their own culture all their lives. A fish doesn't think about what water it is in. Likewise, we often do not think too much about the culture we are raised in. Our culture helps to shape our identity. Many of the cues of interpersonal communication (body language, words, facial expressions, tone of voice, idioms, slang) are different in different cultures. One of the reasons that we feel like a fish out of water when we enter a new culture, is that we do not know all of the cues that are used in the new culture.

Psychologists tell us that there are five distinct phases (or stages) of culture shock. It is important to understand that culture shock happens to all people who travel abroad, but some people have much stronger reactions than others.

During the first few days of a person's stay in a new country, everything usually goes fairly smoothly. The newcomer is excited about being in a new place where there are new sights and sounds, new smells and tastes. The newcomer may have some problems, but usually accepts them as just part of the newness. They may find themselves staying in hotels or with a home-stay family that is excited to meet the foreign stranger. The newcomer may find that "the red carpet" has been rolled out and they may be taken to restaurants, movies and tours of the sights. The new acquaintances may want to take the newcomer out to many places and "show them off." **This first stage of culture shock is called the "honeymoon phase."**

Unfortunately, this honeymoon phase often comes to an end fairly soon. The newcomer has to deal with transportation problems (buses that don't come on time), shopping problems (can't buy their favorite foods) or communication problems (just what does "Chill out, dude." mean?). It may start to seem like people no longer care about your problems. They may help, but they don't seem to understand your concern over what they see as small problems. You might even start to think that the people in the host country don't like foreigners.

This may lead to the **second stage of culture shock, known as the "rejection phase."** The newcomer may begin to feel aggressive and start to complain about the host culture/country. It is important to recognize that these feelings are real and can become serious. This phase is a kind of crisis in the 'disease' of culture shock. It is called the "rejection" phase because it is at this point that the newcomer starts to reject the host country, complaining about and noticing only the bad things that bother them. At this stage the newcomer either gets stronger and stays, or gets weaker and goes home (physically, mentally or both).

If you don't survive stage two successfully, **you may find yourself moving into stage three: the "regression phase."** The word "regression" means moving backward, and in this phase of culture shock, you spend much of

your time speaking your own language, watching videos from your home country, eating food from home. You may also notice that you are moving around campus or around town with a group of students who speak your own language. You may spend most of this time complaining about the host country/culture.

Also in the regression phase, you may only remember the good things about your home country. Your homeland may suddenly seem marvelously wonderful; all the difficulties that you had there are forgotten and you may find yourself wondering why you ever left (hint: You left to learn English!). You may now only remember your home country as a wonderful place in which nothing ever went wrong for you. Of course, this is not true, but an illusion created by your culture shock 'disease.'

If you survive the third stage successfully (or miss it completely) you will move into the fourth stage of culture shock called the "recovery phase" or the "at-ease-at-last phase." In this stage you become more comfortable with the language and you also feel more comfortable with the customs of the host country. You can now move around without a feeling of anxiety. You still have problems with some of the social cues and you may still not understand everything people say (especially idioms). However, you are now 90% adjusted to the new culture and you start to realize that no country is that much better than another - it is just different lifestyles and different ways to deal with the problems of life.

With this complete adjustment, you accept the food, drinks, habits and customs of the host country, and you may even find yourself preferring some things in the host country to things at home. You have now understood that there are different ways to live your life and that no way is really better than another, just different. Finally, you have become comfortable in the new place.

It is important to remember that not everyone experiences all the phases of culture shock. It is also important to know that you can experience all of them at different times: you might experience the regression phase before the rejection phase, etc. You might even experience the regression phase on Monday, the at ease phase on Tuesday, the honeymoon phase on Wednesday, and the rejection phase again on Thursday. What will Friday be like?

Much later, you may find yourself returning to your homeland and -guess what? - **you may find yourself entering the fifth phase of culture shock. This is called "reverse culture shock" or "return culture shock" and occurs when you return home.** You have been away for a long time, becoming comfortable with the habits and customs of a new lifestyle and you may find that you are no longer completely comfortable in your home country. Many things may have changed while you were away and it may take a little while to become at ease with the cues and signs and symbols of your home culture.

Reverse culture shock can be very difficult. There is a risk of sickness or emotional problems in many of the phases of culture shock. Remember to be kind to yourself all the time that you are overseas, and when you get home. Give yourself time to adjust. Be your own best friend. If you do these things you will be a much stronger person. If you do these things, congratulations, you will be a citizen of the world!