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Cover and brochure designed by Cheryl D. Collins, NAFSA

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Congratulations and good luck as you embark on a great life experience. By choosing to study in the United States, you will join a vibrant community of students and scholars from around the world who study and live here.

This international community consists of more than 670,000 students,1 making the United States host to the largest number of international students anywhere. Students who come to the United States enhance our colleges and universities through their scholarly contributions. They contribute to cutting edge research and advances in technology. They increase our global connectedness and provide opportunities for U.S. students to learn more about how others live and think. All across the United States—in classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and college communities—international students make significant contributions to the quality of U.S. academic life. Because contributions are valued as vital components of academic excellence, international education has become a proud U.S. tradition in colleges and universities throughout our country.

For most international students, preparation for study in the United States has involved hard work and sacrifice. This brochure has been prepared for you as part of that preparation. It is a general guide, designed to provide you with some basic information as you begin your orientation to life in the United States. Some readers may have visited or studied here before. Even for those for whom it will be the first U.S. experience, the place may seem familiar. You can find McDonald’s restaurants, and it’s easy to get a Coke almost anywhere. But the menu at McDonald’s is a little different from that in your hometown, and the Coke has a slightly different taste. Familiar things are recognizable but

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not exactly what you expect. As these two examples illustrate, many things you experience will be recognizable, while others will be completely new. Furthermore, U.S. life as depicted on television or in movies is not an accurate picture of what you will find. Even when you think you know what to expect, there will be surprises. What will you encounter?

You will certainly encounter diversity. In the United States, there is no single type of national behavior, no one life style, no one culture. We are, after all, a nation of immigrants and our country is physically very large. Individual differences, ethnic customs, regional traditions, the size and type of higher education institution—all these variables will affect your own experience of American life.

A general guide cannot prepare you for all that you will encounter, but it can give you a basis for planning and for thinking about and reacting to your experiences as a student upon your arrival here. We hope that this discussion of some of the issues you may encounter will help you understand student life in the United States.
“What time is it? You may wonder why people in the United States are always looking to see what time it is. They look at their watches, and check the clocks on their cell phones and computers. “What time is it?” “Am I late?” “When is the project due?” “How long do we have?” “How much time is left?” These questions are repeated over and over. Americans seem obsessed with being on time—with their schedules, deadlines, and project-due dates.

Although time is simply an idea—an intellectual concept—people talk about time as if it were a commodity. People view time as something that can be saved, spent, used wisely, or wasted. Many in the United States not only speak of time as something tangible but, more importantly, they believe it is scarce. It is considered a valuable but limited resource. “Time is money!” One hears people wishing aloud that they could just add a few hours to the day or another day to each week. Then they could get everything done. “There’s never enough time,” they complain!

“Time and tide wait for no man.” This often heard proverb illustrates the attitude toward time of many in the United States. Because their time is scarce,
every valuable minute needs to be organized or allocated to a certain activity. In this environment where time is considered a limited commodity, the emphasis tends to be on accomplishing tasks and getting things done. That is considered a good use of your resource—time.

Furthermore, being on time in a U.S. environment is considered a sign of respect. It shows that one values the other person’s time. Whether it is arriving a few minutes before a meeting or turning in an assignment exactly when due, being on schedule indicates that a person is serious, committed to the activity, and respectful of the other people involved. Conversely, being late is considered rude and impolite.

Time and tasks often rule the days and the nights. The United States is an achievement-oriented society where what a person accomplishes has an over-riding significance. “What is due and when is it due?” “What’s my deadline?” “What time must I be there?” “Be on time! Don’t be late!”

The idea of being on time—not being late—is a fundamental concept that shapes how people organize their activities. Being on time is defined in a precise and seemingly rigid way. If a class or a meeting is scheduled to begin at 10:00 a.m., one is expected to arrive a few minutes before the hour. It is preferable to be slightly early but definitely not a minute late. Only in social situations, for example, when dinner is to begin at 7:00 p.m., is it acceptable, and indeed recommended, to arrive five to ten minutes after the appointed time. On the other hand, if you are invited to a party that is scheduled from 8:00 to 11 p.m. or from 4:00 to 7 p.m., it is okay to arrive any time between the stated hours and leave any time up until the ending time.

For people whose concept of time is that it is abundant and on-going, this demand for strict adherence to a timetable can be frustrating. One asks, “What’s the difference in a few minutes?” “Why are these people so upset?”

**Changing Times**

To shift from one view of time to another, from abundance to scarcity or vice versa, is far from simple. As long as one stays in an environment where others share the same idea of time (scarce or plentiful), no one even notices how the view of time affects life. However, shifting from one concept to the other is often extremely difficult. You cannot just change your watch and make the shift.

People who have lived in many places and have experienced a variety of attitudes toward time report that the concept of time is one of the biggest challenges faced in adaptation. It is not simply about how much speed is required to get something done. Because the idea of time shapes how we organize our lives, the adjustment can be particularly complicated.

Our view of time tells us how to answer the question of what is more important: getting the task completed, finishing the project, or paying attention to people? For example, if time is viewed as plentiful, you are free to assume that what doesn’t get done today will fit in tomorrow—the unexpected visitor can
be received, a conversation can run on for a few extra minutes, arriving after the appointed hour for a meeting is acceptable, what isn’t done right now will be finished later.

But from the other perspective, adhering to the schedule, getting projects done in the time allotted is critically important. Because time is limited, one must use it carefully. Changes in schedule or unplanned events can be problems; they are seen to use up time that is supposed to be spent in another way. Whatever is scheduled to be done today must be completed today, for we are told “time is fleeting.” The U.S. automaker, Henry Ford, is quoted as saying: “Time waste differs from material waste in that there is no salvage.” Watch the clock. Keep to the schedule. Tasks must be completed before we are free to spend time with our friends.

**Do One Thing at a Time**

The U.S. approach to accomplishing tasks is generally to do one thing at a time, completing one activity before starting another. People frequently talk of multitasking. Talking on the phone while watching television and eating a snack is one popular way of multitasking.

However, in business settings, the sequential approach is the norm. People follow an agenda in meetings, discussing the points in the order listed. Other topics cannot be discussed until planned agenda items have been covered. Interruptions are limited and are not well-received. “Stay focused” people say. “We don’t have much time, stay with the agenda!”

**Be on Time**

Being on time is not just a matter of organizing one’s schedule. When there is a schedule set for a meeting, an appointment, a class, or a deadline, it is important to meet that time precisely. Again, being on time is considered a sign of respect. If you are late, it is interpreted that you do not value the person’s time and, therefore, the person.

Some international students have had the experience of arriving 20 or 30 minutes late for an appointment and finding that they could not meet the individual they needed to see. The individual was either meeting with the next appointment on their schedule or may have left the office for an appointment elsewhere.

In an educational environment, being on time applies not only to classes but also to meeting deadlines. It isn’t just professors who focus on time. U.S. students are also concerned about meeting time commitments. U.S. students may complain if other students aren’t on time with work that is part of a group project. Honoring time commitments indicates that one is serious about the work and respectful of the others involved.

When a friend in the United States tells you he or she can’t talk because of being in the middle of a project due in two hours and promises to call you back later, remember it isn’t that the person doesn’t want to visit with you. Your friend is just watching that clock. Meet your deadline and then have fun and visit with your friends. The rule, learned in childhood, is work first, play later!
One of the first things you may notice in talking with people from the United States is that they do not like interruptions. One person speaks, then another replies. It is as if they are tossing a ball back and forth. For most people, communication means conveying thoughts and ideas in one’s own language. While there are thousands of languages in the world and we may learn many during the course of our lives, for each of us the one that truly belongs to us is our native or mother tongue. Our first language is the one that is most comfortable and familiar.

Our first experience with language is a set of sounds, organized in a specific way. People in a given group share an understanding of the meaning of those sounds. Because spoken language is part of our life from infancy, we usually think about it as simply a means to communicate with each other, but it also conveys our culture.
**Cultural Styles**

The words of a language can indicate what the culture considers important. For example, Eskimos have more words for snow than do people in Africa. The French have many words for food and wine while the vocabulary of someone from the United States includes a variety of words that relate to business and technology. People develop an ability to communicate what is important in their environment.

The culture is conveyed not only in the selection of words but also how they are presented. Given the U.S. view that time is limited and tasks must be accomplished, the language favors direct, clear communication. Sentences are often simple and factual. Extensive descriptions and allusions to history or books may make some Americans impatient. Children are told “get to the point,” “just say what you mean.” In a business environment, this idea is often phrased as “just get to the bottom line, we don’t need all the details, just get to the bottom line!”

Often, conversations in the United States tend to be a search for information. Americans ask a lot of questions, and they are very direct. Their replies to questions may seem abrupt. They are not cautious about their intent or meaning. For example, if the answer to a request is no, generally those in the United States will simply reply “No.” They may add a brief explanation as to why they are declining the request, but no does mean no. The answer of no does not mean that it is time to start negotiating. Such a direct answer is done without any sign of embarrassment. It is simply communicating a piece of information.

Such directness can be puzzling for people who have a more subtle communication style. People from the United States rely less on people inferring meaning from other information, such as the status of the speaker or the particular surroundings than would be normal in many other cultures. It is important to note that those from the United States will expect everyone to communicate in a similar way. They are likely to miss subtle clues and indirect messages because they don’t expect them and are not accustomed to them.

People will not hesitate to ask questions if they want information. In a classroom environment, instructors often view questions as a sign of interest in the material being presented. If an instructor’s requirements are not clear, it is the responsibility of the student to ask questions to clarify the matter. Children are taught that there...
are no stupid questions; moreover, they learn that it is important to ask questions when they don’t understand. Asking for further information is viewed as a positive action showing that the person asking the question wants to learn.

But communication isn’t entirely about words; it also includes physical elements, sometimes called body language. Where one looks while talking, gestures made during a conversation, facial expressions, and body posture are all part of the process. An element of the direct U.S. style is the practice of looking directly at someone when conversing. Children in the United States are taught to look at the person speaking, to make eye contact. A parent tells a child, “Look at me when I’m talking to you!” It is considered a sign of respect and an indication that one is listening carefully. Looking away, at the floor, or at one’s hands is considered a sign of disrespect for the person talking. It can even be interpreted as a lack of interest in what is being said.

**What Can I Talk About?**

You might expect that, in an environment where directness is valued in communication, all topics are appropriate for conversation. That is not really true though. Some topics that are generally discussed with acquaintances or people you do not know well:

- The weather
- One’s travel/commuting experience and cars
- Classes and jobs
- Sports
- Music, movies
- Fashion, shopping, and clothes

Topics not usually discussed unless you know the people well:

- Money, how much one earns
- Family
- Religion (see the section Religion in the United States)

Another area that can be confusing is humor. People in the United States often use humor to make their point or to diffuse uncomfortable situations. Humor frequently relies on shared experiences and understandings that a newcomer may not have. That may lead to misunderstandings. This difficulty exists for people in the United States, too. They may not understand humor that is clear to you. For example, some of the more subtle British styles of humor are puzzling to those in the United States. If you think of humor as another form of language, you can relax and realize that, over time, you too will speak this language and share the amusing moments.
As in most countries, status and hierarchy differences do exist in the United States. However, differences based on social status may be more difficult to perceive than in many places and do not always have obvious effects on student life. The United States is a highly individualistic culture and, as such, respect based on individual accomplishment tends to define status more than age, tradition, or family background.

This idea rests in part on one of our founding U.S. values: “that all [people] are created equal.” That value is stated in the Declaration of Independence, the document that set the principles for the establishment of the United States of America in 1776. The equality of individuals is one of our national ideals. Although throughout U.S. history we have not always achieved this ideal, it continues to be an underlying principle that guides interaction among individuals and informs how businesses, organizations, and officials treat people. It also creates an expectation among people for equal treatment, regardless of rank or status.

In the United States, it is extremely important to extend the same courtesies and respect to all individuals, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, national origin, or
sexual orientation. Academic communities are particularly diverse and provide opportunities to meet and interact with a wide variety of people. As a member of the academic community, you will be expected to treat everyone with respect and can expect to be treated courteously by others.

The style of interaction in the United States tends to be informal, and communication can be more casual than in many other countries, reinforcing feelings of equality. People of the same age usually refer to each other in a familiar manner. For example, students usually address each other by their first names. Formal titles, like Doctor, Professor, Mr., Mrs., or Ms., with the person’s surname (family name) are reserved for speaking with persons in authority, teachers, older people, and in office or business interactions. This informal style can be perplexing. When one is uncertain about how to address another person, it is best to observe others and follow their example. If this is not possible, it is always appropriate to ask.

Social settings also guide how individuals interact. Though many relationships are informal, differences can still occur. Giving gifts does not happen as commonly as in some other places and tends to be limited to family and close friends. Invitations to an individual’s home may be purely social, such as when the invitation is from a friend or fellow student, or status-related if invited by a professor or employer. Small gifts are welcome under such circumstances. You might consider bringing flowers, a bottle of wine, or even a small artifact from your country.

University life has its own cultural norms related to status and hierarchy. Frequently the style of interaction can become quite informal between professor and student. It is not uncommon for a professor to prefer being addressed by his or her first name and to join students for meals or other socializing. However, even when there is a familiar and collaborative relationship, it is important to remember that faculty members are authority figures with higher status than students. Similarly, college administrators and staff members may communicate and relate informally, while still retaining authority. For more detailed information about classroom behavior and relationships between students and faculty, please see the brochure *U.S. Culture Series: U.S. Classroom Culture*.

Some students will have the opportunity for off-campus work in internships or other employment. Employment settings vary widely in terms of how relations among employees, supervisors, and customers occur. Large organizations, particularly in the business sector, may be more formal than academia. You may find that following the examples of fellow employees or colleagues would be helpful in determining the appropriate style of interaction.
The United States operates under a system of laws that provides both rights and responsibilities for individuals, including international students. This system is designed to protect and provide equal rights for everyone. Laws exist at the national and state level to cover criminal offenses, like robbery or assault, and civil matters, like contracts and driving privileges. Underlying our system of laws and equal protection is the principle that everyone is held accountable. Not knowing that a law exists or that a certain action is illegal is not a defense; you will still be held responsible for abiding by all regulations.

Immigration regulations are federal laws that affect international students while present in the United States. As a visitor, the conditions of your presence in the United States are seen as a benefit rather than a right, so it is a particularly critical area of the law for students to comply with. Failure to do so can result in losing your student status and not being allowed to remain in the United States. International student advisers at the school you are attending can assist you in understanding the regulations affecting you.
Other U.S. laws exist to cover a broad range of criminal matters. As part of the U.S. system of laws, people have certain rights in these instances. If charged with a crime, an individual is considered to be innocent until proven guilty. Being proven guilty can occur at a trial or can occur when an individual admits to being guilty and accepts a punishment from a U.S. court. Punishments can include a fine, a prison sentence, or deportation from the United States, depending on the severity of the crime. An individual who has been charged has the right to be represented by an attorney. If an individual cannot afford to hire an attorney, the government will arrange to provide one. For an international student, being convicted of a criminal offense can also mean being required to leave the United States. Therefore, having the assistance of an attorney, if you are charged with a crime, is extremely important.

Of course, most students will not violate any laws while in the United States. However, there are some acts that do occur in student populations that can result in serious problems for individuals. The laws about these acts may be different than in other countries. The age of twenty-one is the legal age for drinking alcoholic beverages. If you are younger than twenty-one, it is against the law to purchase any type of alcoholic beverage. Possessing illegal drugs is a criminal offense at any age. For information on which drugs are illegal, go to www.justice.gov/dea/index.htm and click on the links below “Drug Policy.” Driving an automobile or motorcycle under the influence of alcohol or drugs is also illegal and has serious penalties. Physical assault of another individual, including disagreements with a spouse or partner that result in physical contact like pushing or hitting, can result in legal charges. Excessive physical punishment of children is also against the law. The definition of “excessive” in this context may be different in the United States than in other countries.

Legal contracts are civil agreements that frequently occur in the United States. Such agreements might include signing a lease for an apartment or purchasing an automobile. It is important to remember when signing such agreements that they are binding, and that each person is legally obliged to comply with all the terms included. Not following all the terms of the agreement usually results in financial penalties.

Colleges and universities also have their own rules and regulations for students. These rules are usually contained in a student handbook or on the school’s Web site. They protect students and provide for equal treatment. The regulations also govern many aspects of student conduct in class and on campus. Knowing and following these regulations will be very important as you adjust to student life in the United States.
Diversity in the United States applies to places as well as people. With fifty states and a landmass of 9,629,091 square kilometers, the geography of the United States is quite varied. Within the continental United States, the East Coast, the South, the Midwest, the West, and the West Coast are all considered distinctly different regions. The states of Hawaii and Alaska are also distinct and unique environments.

Geography can affect various aspects of life. The most basic of these is the weather. As part of your preparation, you will want to know what to expect at the place where you will be studying. For instance, in the northern parts of the United States, winters will be extremely cold and may have a lot of snow. One exception to this is the Pacific Northwest. Winters there can be fairly cold and damp, but extreme cold and large amounts of snow are unlikely. Summers in the south are known for intense heat and humidity.

But weather is not the only thing affected by regional differences. Speech patterns, notions about time, how people communicate and interact, how friendly
or hospitable people seem—all these are influenced by locale. These regional differences are part of what makes life interesting in the United States.

Although it is important not to generalize too much about particular parts of the country, it is helpful to understand some of the differences. People in the eastern part of the United States may be seen as being in a hurry and very businesslike compared with other places. The South is known for a slower pace and its tradition of hospitality. Midwesterners can be described as being practical and pragmatic and a bit more traditional. Westerners are also seen as a bit more traditional, as well as very independent and individualistic. The West Coast is viewed as relaxed and informal. These are broad descriptions and will not apply to every person from a particular region; part of your experience as a student will be to observe, learn about, and enjoy whatever may be unique about where you are studying.

The microgeography of where you attend school may have an even more significant effect on your experiences. The size of the city or town in which the college or university is located strongly influences what life is like. Large cities anywhere in the world are busy and crowded and can be impersonal. The pace in a small town may be slower and may seem to be more friendly and personal. Even the size of the college or university will play a role in determining the culture at the location. Some schools have thousands of students; others have a few hundred.

Just as the United States is proud of the diversity of its people, each place considers itself to be unique. As part of your preparation, you may decide to study the history, traditions, and geography of the specific area in the United States where you have chosen to study. In doing so, you will be ready to experience what is special about your new home.

One particular tradition you may want to pay attention to is the religious tradition in the area where you will be studying. Religious practices in the United States vary greatly; geographic area can be one determining factor.
You may wonder why we advise that you not talk about religion with someone you don’t know well. The reason is that religion in the United States is a very personal choice; you cannot assume to know a person’s religious faith or its importance for that individual. The United States overall is a very religious country compared to other Western countries. Christianity remains the faith of the majority of the population, but there are many different faiths, both within and outside of Christianity. It is important for you to know that religious freedom and, in particular, the separation of church (e.g. any religious institution) and state (the government) is fundamental to the United States. These two values are deeply embedded in U.S. culture and in U.S. law as well.

We must go back to the beginning of the United States as a country to understand these values. The United States was founded on the principle of religious freedom for Christians of all different faiths. The earliest European settlers in New England left Great Britain to practice their own faith, which was different from the established church at that time. The founding documents were based
on a belief in God, and the absence of an established church. Early settlers who came from various European countries brought other Christian faiths when they settled in other parts of the East Coast. “In Maryland, as earlier in Rhode Island and later in Pennsylvania, there grew up a system of religious toleration which became one of the cornerstones of the American Republic.” The settlers of the Rhode Island colony belonged to many different Christian sects; to maintain unity, they accorded religious liberty to all Christians.³

The mid-1800’s saw a wave of Catholic immigrants, and later immigration brought other religions, including Judaism from Europe and multiple faiths from the Far East. Even later, some 80–90 years ago, immigrations from the Middle East brought large numbers of Muslims to the United States. The separation of church and state that led directly to tolerance became increasingly important as immigration continued to bring many new religions.

In the United States religious affiliation “is both very diverse and extremely fluid.” Every major religious group is simultaneously gaining and losing members. American attitudes toward particular religious faiths are also changing all the time. You may notice that there is a strong Christian evangelical movement in parts of the United States. This movement can have a significant effect on the politics of the moment. However, it is not possible to predict how this will influence any specific election or public policy.

What is important about religion in the United States for you, as an international student, is that religion should not be a stumbling block as you experience life here. If you are religious, you should be able to find a temple, mosque, church, or other place of worship of your own choosing where you can feel comfortable. Most college and university campuses have a center for religious organizations of many, if not all, faiths. That is a good place to start your search for a religious home; or, if you want to learn about any other faith, such a center will be very helpful. Such centers will probably have chaplains/priests from Buddhist, Hindu,

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³Ibid.
Muslim, Bahai and, perhaps other faiths as well as from many Christian denominations and different Jewish traditions. These chaplains nurture the spiritual/ethical lives of students and honor religious freedom and human dignity. They usually hold regular religious services and are available to talk with and counsel students. They may also hold informal discussions and other activities for students. If wanted, they can advise students about where to find a suitable religious organization off campus. Many interfaith centers will hold religious festivals for particular faiths at appropriate times of the year.

As it has been noted, the United States has many diverse religious traditions; holidays celebrating these traditions are observed by followers of those religious traditions. However, it is important to note that Christmas (December 25), while not observed by all, is a holiday for all. This means that most businesses, stores, government offices, etc. are closed that day. Most campuses will have a winter break at Christmas, probably for a week or two. Students from the United States will usually go home during this period. On some campuses, dormitories will be closed and all students must make other arrangements. If this is the case on your campus, you should ask your international student office for suggestions about what to do. Some U.S. students will invite their international friends to spend the holiday at their home; some campuses have host families who will invite international students.

2007 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life showed that about 75 percent of the U.S. population is affiliated with some Christian faith. That 75 percent is composed of:
- 26.3 percent evangelical Christians
- 23.9 percent Catholics
- 18.1 percent mainline Protestants
- 6.9 percent historically black church members
- 0.3 percent other Christians

The rest of the U.S. population is composed of:
- 1.7 percent Jewish
- 0.7 percent Buddhists
- 0.6 percent Muslims
- 0.4 percent Hindus
- 1.2 percent other faiths
- Approximately 16.1 percent are unaffiliated with any religion
The mobility of U.S. society is, perhaps, the most significant influence on relationships in the United States. Many students do not attend college in the same city where their families live. Similarly, people frequently do not live in the same communities for their entire lives. Many large corporations require their employees to move often if they want to advance in the company. It is not unusual for families to be separated by hundreds, if not thousands, of miles. This mobility influences how people interact and form friendships. People in the United States tend to be very friendly on a casual basis and open to meeting many new individuals, but these interactions do not always result in close, lasting relationships.

Adding to the impression that people in the United States do not have deep friendships is the segmentation of their lives. Consequently, people have niches where friendships develop. It is typical for people in the United States to develop friendly relations with others in the classroom, at the gym, where they live, and where they work. An individual may have a friend to study with,
another to play tennis with, and still another as a movie companion. These relationships do not necessarily carry over into other aspects of their lives; these niche friendships usually do not become deep personal friendships.

A common U.S. habit of casual, friendly people is the tendency to say things like “Let’s get together sometime” or “Let’s do lunch,” and then not follow through with a specific invitation. This casual, informal style is sometimes seen as superficial by others and can be frustrating for a new international student. As a newcomer, an international student may need to initiate a meeting. If someone says, even in passing, “Let’s get together,” it is perfectly appropriate to make a call and suggest a meeting time.

Certainly the potential for close friendships does exist. College and university campuses have many student organizations and clubs and offer many activities in which students can participate and have the opportunity to meet people with similar interests. Residence halls and apartments where students live are also good places to form friendships. In academic settings, graduate students may form close relationships with other students in their academic departments. Similar opportunities exist for undergraduates by joining study groups and through smaller size classes.
Your time as a student in the United States is an opportunity for exploring many different ideas in a new culture. Countries and cultures have different values, norms, and accepted behaviors related to sexual health and sexual activity. Some cultures may be more conservative than the United States, and some may be more liberal. In the United States it is common for young adults to be sexually active, although not all college students are sexually active and many may prefer abstinence.

In this context, your usual practice (i.e. the way you have behaved at home) may come into question, but we suggest you use caution before you make a complete change in the way you behave.

Understanding a country’s culture is not simple or easy. Some of the values and norms seem obvious, such as food, dress, language, etc. Others are hidden and must be sought out. Culture has many layers. A good analogy for culture is an iceberg, a term first suggested by Dr. Else Hamayan, from the Illinois Resource Center. Imagine that you can see only the tip of the iceberg because the rest is
under water. Sexual norms and values are the more invisible or difficult part of any culture to discern, the part that is beneath the water. You are familiar with that part of your own culture, but how can you find out about that invisible part of U.S. culture? We hope the following information will help you to understand some of the norms and values in this area of U.S. life.

Dating and romantic relationships are special cases and occur in a variety of styles and levels of commitment. Sometimes people go out together as friends, as a couple, or with a group, and romantic involvement is not necessarily part of that activity. Many people in the United States also date many people before or instead of engaging in more committed relationships. It is not uncommon or inappropriate for someone from the United States to date more than one person at a time or to date many people over time before making a commitment to one individual. Individual customs and protocols vary widely, but it is still somewhat common for the male to invite the female and then to pay the expenses of at least the first few dates.

Committed relationships tend to gradually become more serious. Not all such relationships, even very serious ones, result in marriage or long-term partnership. There is, however, a strong expectation that romantic friendships involve mutual attraction; it is never appropriate to pursue another person who expresses no interest in developing or continuing a friendship.

As in other countries, certain kinds of conduct are considered inappropriate in the United States. For example, making personal comments or touching someone in a personal manner can be considered sexual harassment and is not acceptable. It is important for international students to understand what is appropriate behavior, especially in relating to the opposite sex. To learn what is considered appropriate, you might ask U.S. friends, the resident assistant in your dormitory, or other international students who have been in the United States for some time.

You will, of course, want to develop many friendships during your time in the United States. Some may be dating relationships. When it comes to the role of sex in a dating relationship, do not assume that you understand dating/relationship norms from the U.S. television programs you have seen. For example, all college students are certainly not like the casts of the popular U.S. reality television shows. You can probably remember some television programs from your own country that do not accurately depict “real” life. Instead you should take your cues from other students, especially those from the United States. Observing others can be useful, but it is also okay to ask other students. In doing so, it is important to ask more than one or two people because, while there are some overall norms, different students will have varying practices.

The roles that religion and the government play in many countries in setting cultural norms around sexual behavior may not be the same as in the United States. Although individual religious faiths have their own values regarding sex, there is no overall norm in the United States where religion is concerned. In addition, the
federal (national) government has only a very few regulations regarding sexual behavior. Individual states will have additional regulations. Federal regulations include laws regarding sexual harassment, sex offenders, and sexual exploitation.

One area that could be confusing to you is interracial relationships. Great progress has been made in the United States concerning such relationships, but racial prejudice does still exist in some places, and some interracial couples will experience discrimination. Geography may play a role; discrimination can depend on the part of the country where you are studying. By carefully observing those around you, you will come to understand what is considered acceptable.

In addition, you should always trust yourself and your own feelings. No matter what others tell you, you should never do anything in a dating relationship that feels wrong to you. Do not ever respond to social pressure. “Everybody does it,” is not a reason you should do it. Whether you are male or female, just remember this basic rule: “No” means no!

Whatever you decide about the role of sex in your relationships, it is up to you to protect yourself. Should you decide to be sexually active, you will need to plan ahead for birth control/contraception and preventive measures to help protect against sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). While some sexually transmitted infections (STIs)/STDs are treatable, some such as HIV and AIDS, have no cure. Even those that are treatable will have a significant impact on your health and, therefore, your studies. In this context, we use the term “safer” sex instead of safe sex because no preventive measures are completely effective.

What would you do if you or your partner became pregnant during your stay in the United States? You should think about what it would mean to be a parent while still a student. Would you consider the alternatives, such as terminating a pregnancy or finding adoptive parents? Student health services located on your campus can usually provide information and assistance about birth control and pregnancy.

Another issue you should be aware of is that of alcohol abuse. This is important
because excessive drinking can often impair your ability to make good decisions and may result in involvement in sexually risky or other unwise behavior. You should be sure you know the laws concerning alcohol in the state where you are living. No matter what the norms are in your own country about drinking, as in many other matters, following the cues of your U.S. colleagues is usually a good idea. Of course if their behavior makes you feel uncomfortable, you need to trust yourself and your own values. You should certainly know your own limits and understand that your tolerance may be different with new/different alcoholic beverages.

A sudden and deep level of intoxication could mean that you have been drugged. Date rape drugs can cause periods of blackout or memory loss, especially when combined with alcohol. During such periods there is the possibility of sexual violation. Although use of such drugs is not especially common in the United States, incidents do occur here as elsewhere.

For information and advice about these sensitive topics, you will usually find help at the student health service center on your campus. The professional staff there will be experienced in dealing with students who are concerned about such matters. They will be able to advise you about preventative measures and safe behavior.

What about students who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered (GLBT)? Many cultures/regions within the United States, as well as in the rest of the world, have various taboos. You may find that acceptance is more or less forthcoming in the United States than in your country. Romantic relationships among people of the same sex occur openly in most, but not all, parts of the United States. However, because these relationships can be subject to prejudice and negative reactions from others, many colleges and universities have organizations to support and assist such students. On almost any college campus, you will be able to find GLBT organizations that will welcome you and offer good advice on the norms of that particular area. The student health service or your international adviser should be able to help you find the appropriate resources.
CLOSEING

The decision to study in the United States is an important one, requiring commitment and purpose. The educational opportunities and life-enhancing experiences will be tremendous, but it is not easy for a student to leave family and friends to undertake such a challenge.

By reading this booklet, you have taken the first step. We hope that you will use the information provided here to think about and discuss with others what to expect when you arrive, and what you will experience throughout your study. We urge you to read all you can about the United States and about your school in advance of your departure.

Upon your arrival, there will be many resources available at your institution to assist in your adjustment. Many schools offer orientation programs that are invaluable sources of information as well as opportunities to meet other new students. Colleges and universities that admit international students have offices providing international student services or a designated school official who can provide special assistance to you. Those individuals are knowledgeable about immigration regulations, cultural adjustment, and school resources and procedures.

Most schools offer a broad range of services available to all students. These include counselors, academic advisors, student health services, libraries, computer labs, and academic mentors dedicated to providing the support you need to be successful and fulfilled throughout your study.

William J. Fulbright, U.S. Senator and leader in founding the Fulbright Exchange Program, in expressing his hopes about the benefits of international educational exchange, stated that:

“...by producing generations of leaders, who, through the experience of educational understanding of other peoples’ cultures, ... can find in themselves, through inter-cultural education, the ways and means of living together in peace.”

As an international student, you will join an academic community of students undertaking international study in that tradition. We wish you well in your endeavors.

ABOUT NAFSA

NAFSA: Association of International Educators is a member organization promoting international education and providing professional development opportunities to the field. Hundreds of NAFSA members volunteer to serve the Association and thousands advocate for international education. NAFSA serves international educators and their institutions and organizations by establishing principles of good practice, providing training and professional development opportunities, providing networking opportunities, and advocating for international education.

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ABOUT THE U.S. CULTURE SERIES

This series of booklets is designed to help prepare students for successful academic experiences in the United States. They address different aspects of U.S. culture and can be used by overseas advisers at advising centers, including predeparture orientation programs and U.S. culture discussions; by international student advisers during orientation programs for new students and in cultural training sessions; by ESL teachers in classes preparing students to enter a U.S. college/university; and by international educators in the training of others to work with international students (such as resident assistants).

The first edition of these booklets, published in 2004, was funded by the U.S. Department of State, Educational and Cultural Affairs Bureau, Educational Information and Resources Branch.

One of the most accessible resources for information about the U.S. higher education system and U.S. culture is an EducationUSA office. Visit the EducationUSA Web site to locate the one nearest you:

http://educationusa.state.gov