



INTERNATIONAL STUDENT HANDBOOK



Revised March 2024

ADJUSTING TO THE UNITED STATES: HELPFUL TIPS FOR A BETTER TRANSITION

CULTURAL NORMS

This information is meant to provide some generalities about people in the United States, but it does not apply to all people from the US.



Equality

People in the US attach a lot of importance to the ideal of equality for all. Although this dream has not been achieved yet, respect for individuals regardless of occupation, handicap, sex, race, sexual orientation, gender, ethnicity, class or religion is expected. All individuals you meet deserve the same consideration and courtesy. Typically, racists or sexist jokes and comments are not tolerated in many social and business settings. In fact, people who make such comments could lose their jobs.



Independence and Privacy

The United States was founded by people who valued independence. An independent spirit is still evident in this culture. People in the US tend to be rather independent and tend to think for themselves. The concept of individual rights is important, especially the right to free speech. Being self-reliant is considered highly important within the US. Privacy is also valued for many of the same reasons. Even among members of a family, issues such as money, marriage, and career decisions may not be discussed out of respect for a person's privacy.



Religion

Also, freedom of religion is a basic tenet of US society. People tend to be involved in their community, which usually involves the local church, mosque, synagogue, or other place of worship. Churches often organize recreational activities and also perform a wide array of services for the local community—dinners, tutoring, free English lessons, etc.

Dress



US culture is increasingly more informal. The way people dress, act, and treat each other is generally considered to be relaxed, informal and not rigidly structured. Certain occasions or business settings are more formal than others, so take your cue from other people until you feel comfortable gauging just how formally to act, dress, or speak.





Work Ethic

People from the United States tend to value motivation and hard work ethic. We value being busy, and tend to start the day off with hopes of completing a list of responsibilities. You may notice people in the US walk quickly and talk quickly. Many Americans have the mentality to “get down to business” rather than make polite conversation. We don’t mean to be rude! We just have a lot to do (or think we do). Your own cultural norms may conflict with accepted behavior in the United States. When a clash in beliefs, values, or traditions occurs, please try to understand the distinction in culture. Keep in mind that no one culture is right or wrong; they are simply different from one another. Observing the behavior that is happening around you is a good way to learn some of these generally accepted US norms. If you have any questions about any of the US social customs described below, do not hesitate to ask a fellow student or the CGE staff. Social customs tend to be vague, especially compared to other countries where the social life is more structured. It is not unusual to be confused at first, so please ask for explanations or help.



Manners

People in the US tend to be friendly, patient, and polite, and they expect the same treatment from others. “Please,” “Thank you,” “Excuse me,” and “I’m sorry” are used frequently. “Hi! How are you,” is a common greeting in the US. Very often, the person who asks the question, “How are you?” does not wait for a response. Some international students think this is very rude, but it is not intended to be. Instead, it is usually meant as another way to say “Good morning,” or “Hello.” An appropriate response is saying, “Fine, thank you. How are you?” It is customary that they will answer with a brief response. When departing, phrases such as, “See you later” and “Let’s get together sometime” are often meant as a casual goodbye rather than an actual invitation. When in doubt, please clarify whether it is an actual invitation or not. People in the United States tend to wait in lines, wait their turn, and usually give others at least an arm’s length of “personal space.” Eye contact is also important. Generally, it is considered impolite to make phone calls before 10:00 a.m. and after 10:00 p.m., though these times can vary depending on a person’s schedule (a fellow student may have a different bedtime than your professor).

INTRODUCTIONS

When meeting someone for the first time, a handshake is standard behavior, and many people introduce themselves rather than waiting for a formal introduction by someone else. “Nice to meet you” or “Pleased to meet you” is the standard response either after someone has been introduced to you, or after someone has introduced himself or herself. It is always better to address someone as Mr., Mrs., Ms., or Dr. at first rather than by their first name, especially if they are older than you. They can always tell you to call them by their first name if they feel that this form of address is too formal. Be prepared to explain where you are from and, if necessary, repeat your name several times and explain how to pronounce it.



INVITATIONS

You may be invited to certain events by personal invitation, which can be printed, handwritten, or verbal. If you are invited and you cannot attend, you may politely turn down the invitation. However, accepting an invitation and then failing to show up is inconsiderate. If you are not sure whether or not you can attend, say so and if possible, call or text later to indicate your plans. If you are invited to someone's home for the first time, it is customary to bring the person a small hospitality gift, such as flowers, a small token from your home country, or some other inexpensive item. If you are unsure about what type of gift may be appropriate, ask. If you are invited to a meal or refreshments and you have special dietary restrictions, it is considered polite to inform your host of these restrictions in advance, preferably at the time you accept the invitation. When expressing thanks to a host, a short letter or card is sufficient.

TIME

The concept of time is very important to most people in the US. Classes, plays, concerts, public meetings, dinners, and other events begin as scheduled. Being late is generally not accepted and is considered rude behavior, as if the person being made to wait is less important than the person keeping them waiting. Setting appointments or scheduling a specific time to meet is common practice. If you know that you will be late to a meeting or appointment, a phone call or text to explain your tardiness is generally expected along with an apology. "Late" is being more than 5 or 10 minutes behind your scheduled time. If your appointment is with a dentist, medical doctor, or other professional, arriving more than 10 minutes late generally indicates that you have skipped your appointment, and you will likely be charged a fee for failing to call to cancel or to inform the receptionist of your anticipated late arrival.

DATING

The norms and traditions of dating in the US are different from other countries, and can be difficult to explain. To date a person implies that you would like to know him/her better. Going to social events together indicates an enjoyment of the other person's company, rather than implying a serious commitment. US women and men are generally treated equally. As a result, dating norms and acceptable behavior are subtle, implied, and constantly changing. Many students prefer to go out in groups or date casually, often meeting for a date in a pre-determined location and sharing the cost of the date. The person who does the asking is generally expected to be the person who pays for the date, though it is polite to offer (once, without insisting) to pay your share and see if your offer is accepted.



HYGIENE

People in the US are very much aware of their personal hygiene. They tend to shower daily, and deodorants are universally used. Clothing is worn one day and then a different outfit is worn the following day. Many people also change from one type of outfit to another, depending on the activity that will be taking place later that day (you may wear a t-shirt and shorts to class, but you would put on khakis and a more formal shirt to go to a party or to dinner).



TIPPING

Tipping is a prevalent custom in the United States. In restaurants, customers are expected to tip the waiter or waitress between 15% and 20% of the total amount of the bill. If your car is parked by a valet attendant, you should generally give him or her a dollar or two. The attendant who checks your coat at a restaurant or other event should also receive a dollar or two. When you get a haircut, you are generally expected to tip your stylist 10% to 15% of the cost of the haircut. Bellmen in hotels and airport skycaps generally receive one dollar per bag, unless they are extraordinarily helpful and go out of their way to assist you. Room service attendants should generally receive a 15% to 20% tip, and the pizza delivery person should also receive a tip of at least 10% to 15% of the price of the pizza. Taxi drivers should be tipped approximately 10% to 15% of the cost of the fare.

SHOPPING

In the US, prices are fixed, the practice of trading and bargaining is not widely utilized. There are some exceptions, or instances, in which bargaining is used, such as buying a car, buying a home, or shopping at an outdoor market or flea market. Generally speaking, there is an abundance of stores in the US and comparing prices at several stores before buying is a good practice. When shopping, use the shopping cart/basket that the store provides. Also, keep receipts so you can return unused or unwanted items. Generally, you can return items up to three months after purchasing them; however, some stores prohibit you from returning items that were bought during a sale. There is a sales tax in Georgia on most items sold. The tax in this region of Georgia is currently 8% of the cost. Therefore, if an item costs \$1, you pay the seller \$1.08. In most countries, sales tax is already included in the price, but in the US this tax is levied when you make the actual purchase.



WEIGHTS AND MEASUREMENTS

Though a few things are measured using the metric system in the United States, most are not. There are conversion calculators available online and as apps for your phone.

GENERAL INFORMATION AND SETTLING IN

FINANCES

Most payment transactions in the US are done by credit or debit card. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, some stores do not even allow cash payments. Still, carrying some cash with you at all times is not a bad idea. Paper money is available in denominations of \$1, \$5, \$10, \$20, and higher. Coins are available in denominations of \$.01 (the penny), \$.05 (the nickel), \$.10 (the dime), and \$.25 (the quarter).

Automated Teller Machines (ATMs) dispense cash, allow transfers, and accept deposits 24 hours a day. ATMs are accessed by the account holder's debit card. If you use an ATM that is not affiliated with your bank, you may be charged a fee for using this service.

TELEPHONES

NOTE: Due to the wide use of mobile phones in the United States, most public phones are no longer available.

If you wish to purchase a mobile phone, there are various calling plans, service providers, and options available. There are currently four major mobile phone service providers throughout the United States: Verizon Wireless, Sprint, AT&T Wireless, and T-Mobile. These providers have both pre-paid/temporary plan options and contract agreement options. Be sure to carefully compare plans before choosing a mobile phone provider. Many of the contract options require at least a one-year service contract and once chosen, the contract is very hard (and expensive) to terminate.

INTERNET COMMUNICATION OPTIONS

There are many apps for smart phones that allow for easy communication with friends and family back home. Apps such as WhatsApp, SnapChat, Facebook, and Instagram also serve as cross-platform mobile messaging apps which allow you to exchange messages for free. As long as smartphones have access to internet (whether through wireless internet or coverage through their mobile phone provider), they can exchange messages with someone who also has the same app on their phone, whether abroad or within the US.

Skype or Zoom are great ways to stay connected with friends and family back home. If you and the person you are speaking to both have an internet connection, speakers, and a microphone, these are the most cost effective forms of video communication. Both parties can talk for free over their internet connections. For more information on using Skype or Zoom, please visit their websites.





HOUSING



On-Campus Housing

New undergraduate students on the Dahlonega campus are required to live on campus. The Gainesville, Oconee, and Cumming campuses of UNG are commuter campuses and do not have on-campus, dormitory housing.



Off-Campus Housing

The following information is intended to assist students in establishing housing options upon their arrival, and for their time in the United States.

Living in an apartment or house off-campus requires that you make a security deposit and sign a lease or rental agreement. A security deposit is usually equivalent to one month's rent. Paying a deposit means that you have expressed interest in the property and intend to live there. It essentially "holds" the property for you until you move in. The security deposit will be returned to you when you move out, provided you leave the apartment in good condition. When you move into the apartment, you sign a lease or rental agreement. This is a binding legal contract between you and the landlord. When you sign a lease, you are obligated to pay the landlord monthly rent for the duration of the lease. Therefore, before you sign you should be reasonably sure that you can live with your decision for the duration of your lease. Never sign a lease unless you are completely satisfied with the apartment and surrounding property. Sign only when you understand all the terms of the lease.

As soon as you have confirmed where you will live, it is a good idea to immediately contact the local utility

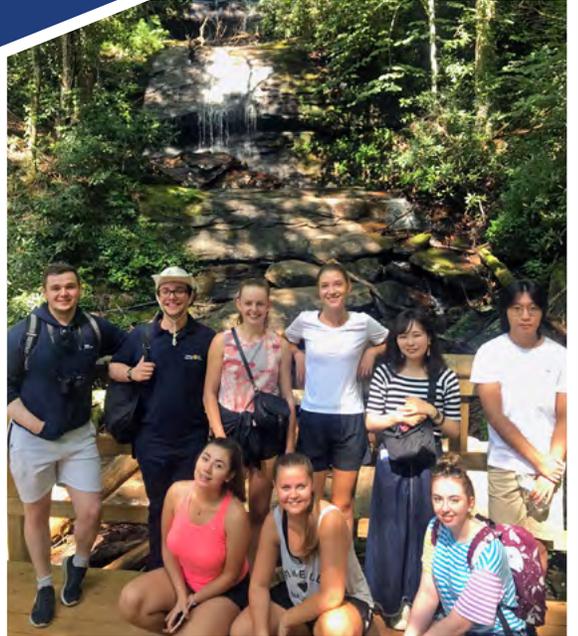
providers to set up service for your telephone, water, electricity, gas, and internet service. In some cases, hook-ups can take up to two weeks, so be sure to take care of this immediately. Utility companies usually charge a fee for connection of services and may also require a deposit, so be sure to ask about any charges or deposits that will be associated with your service. Usually, you will have to make an appointment and be present in your apartment or house when the utility providers arrive to initiate service. If you are not present, the provider will not connect your utility, and you will have to reschedule and be present at a later time in order to have your service connected.

When you vacate the apartment, it should be left clean, including the refrigerator and oven. At the time you vacate, do not leave anything behind and surrender your keys immediately. When you vacate, you must call each utility company and order the service disconnected or be responsible for usage after you leave. You must give a forwarding address for final bills, or go in person to close these accounts.

Renter's insurance will cover your possessions in the event of theft, fire, flood, or other disaster. This insurance is available for any type of room or apartment you rent. When you purchase this insurance and something happens to your belongings, the insurance company will provide you with full or partial replacement value for your possessions depending on the situation. This insurance is optional, so you might want to weigh the risks and benefits of purchasing this type of insurance. If you have expensive equipment, many valuables, or would rather be "safe than sorry," you may want to consider purchasing renter's insurance. This insurance will bring some peace of mind when unforeseen circumstances occur. Find a local insurance provider online.



Where
will you
lead?



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