



#### UNDERSTANDING AMERICA

During the academic year, OISS organizes dinner discussions and panels with Yale faculty called *Understanding America*, which focus on various aspects of U.S. culture. Consult OISS announcements for information about this and other programs at the *International Center* that put a spotlight on U.S. Culture. [www.oiss.yale.edu](http://www.oiss.yale.edu)

## GETTING TO KNOW AMERICANS

Who are these "Americans"? What makes them act the way they do? How can you tell whether or not puzzling American behavior is because of cultural conflict or individual differences?

There are no simple answers to these questions. So many factors can account for individual diversity — ethnic background, regional differences, religious or political orientation, socioeconomic class and more. It is possible, however, to examine *mainstream* American values and culture in order to begin to understand some Americans, some of the time. This brief exploration of some of the most influential values from mainstream U.S. culture should help you in your quest to get to know Americans and the American way of life.

A bit of advice though: As with all generalizations - apply this information carefully. Sometimes it will apply and sometimes it won't. And above all, as you read through it, do so with an open mind. A discussion of cultural values is not about right or wrong. It's about different ways of doing things. Remember, different can just be different.

### U.S. CULTURE & VALUES

*'It is difficult to define what an American is, because there are so many kinds of Americans.'*  
- Student from Korea

#### INDIVIDUALISM

One of the most pervasive values in U.S. American culture is individualism, and understanding its effects can help illuminate many aspects of the culture. The lone cowboy on the endless prairie, riding strong and silent with his horse as his only companion, epitomizes the American ideal of self-fulfillment and self-reliance. In American culture, in order to succeed and find out what you are meant to do in life, one must be strong and independent.

As noted by Evelyn Wanning in *Culture Shock USA*, for more collective cultures, it is unthinkable that one might make a decision without first taking into consideration the welfare of the group. The loyalty in such cultures is first to the group, rather than the self. Accomplishments or successes would be foremost considered an honor to one's family or team, whereas in American culture, they are likely to be attributed to one's own hard work, perseverance, or abilities.

In an individualistic culture, decisions made to benefit the self, such as moving far from one's parents to go to your preferred choice for college would not be as likely

to be considered selfish, but would be supported. In fact, independence is encouraged in American culture. Teenagers of all socioeconomic classes might be expected by their parents to have an after school job to promote independence and responsibility. After graduation from high school a child is considered a 'young adult' and could be asked to pay rent, or move out from the family home.

## **FREEDOM**

---

Individualism and the value of freedom intertwine. From childhood, an American is encouraged to know one's own truth and expected to forge one's own destiny, and in order to realize the self, one needs to have the freedom to do so.

"It's a free country!" is an exclamation you are likely to hear in defense of one's individual actions. This expression describes the notion of *rights*, which filters into many aspects of the way Americans conduct their lives. An individual's rights have been handed down by the most supreme power. The Declaration of Independence, asserts that all, ". . . are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, . . ." As long as one's actions don't interfere with or harm anyone else, or break any laws, one has the 'right' to do as one pleases in order to live life in a free and satisfying way. It is important to note that, while ready to defend individual rights at any time, Americans are not adverse to rules that are applied evenly and fairly to all.

Applying the ideal of freedom will help you understand why not only young children, but the elderly remain as independent as possible and make their own decisions wherever possible. It is not uncommon for young children to be given choices about even the most mundane matters such as what they might like to eat, or what activity they might like to engage in during their free time. An elderly person will generally live on his or her own as long as possible, and might prefer assisted living over living with younger family members in order to maintain independence and not burden others.

There is an emphasis on freedom of choice in American life — from courses in school and career paths to how you would like your food prepared in a restaurant. Often elective courses begin in high school, and the first years of college are weighted towards a liberal arts education. School children of all ages are as likely to be asked by their teachers to share their opinion as they are to be asked what they know. A waiter will not be surprised if a customer asks for a dish to be cooked in a different way, such as grilled instead of fried, or served with a different side dish, such as a salad instead of a potato.

The individual is expected to try new things at any time in his or her life on the all-important quest for self-fulfillment. Americans praise those who take initiative and do

*[In America] people like to decorate themselves more: earrings, necklaces, rings, sunglasses, hairpins all over the head and colorful hair. I think that Americans feel more free and more courage to express themselves.*

- Student from Taiwan

what they want. If you want to put on your jogging shoes and run non-stop across the country from South Carolina to California and back, that's great! Quit your job as an executive and sail around the world with your family? Pursue a college degree at age 60? Why not? That doesn't mean that all Americans live such daring lives, but they admire those who do, and highly value individual differences.

### **COMPETITIVENESS/WORK ETHIC** \_\_\_\_\_

Because of the emphasis on the individual, Americans can be quite competitive. There is a more fluid class system in the U.S. than in other more traditional cultures. Hard work, when coupled with greater earnings, is rewarded with a rise in social class. It is perceived as being possible to *work one's way to the top* in America, and it is, with the exception of entrance into the upper crust of society, also referred to as old money.

Americans value action, and will generally keep a very busy schedule. As the saying goes, "work is a virtue, and idleness is a sin". To not be busy could be considered strange. Even routine, social or recreational activities are likely to be scheduled. As a result, Americans may seem hurried, running from one thing to the next — unable to relax and enjoy themselves. To a newcomer, the pace of life may seem very rushed at first.

Achievement is a dominant motivation in American life. As Evelyn Wanning (12) writes, from the first English settlement in 1607, history is viewed as a "record of progress: from wilderness to jet planes in a few centuries." Without the efforts of a few dynamic individuals who never stopped looking for a better way, America would not be where it is today. To be called a high achiever is quite a complement, but this emphasis on achievement can lead to not-so-friendly competition.

One of the good things about these high achieving Americans is that they can also have a good sense of teamwork, cooperating with others toward a common goal. In the school setting, this team spirit is perhaps best exemplified by the popularity of study groups where students work together on a project or exam preparation.

### **PRIVACY** \_\_\_\_\_

The right to privacy is a notion that runs deep in American culture. It's something to be both respected and defended, and is considered fundamental to a free society. Americans carry this right like a shield, and while often very warm and welcoming hosts, the home is considered a bastion of privacy. Time alone is considered important in order to think and recharge one's energy (Althen 7). It is inappropriate to visit even close friends without calling ahead, and although Americans often tell a guest, "Make yourself at home," it is a friendly statement that must

be carefully interpreted. Some Americans have difficulty understanding those who always want to be with others or who dislike being alone (Althen 8).

Because U.S. culture is rather informal, it is sometimes difficult to know where privacy boundaries lie. Three questions that seem to violate the privacy rule are: *How old are you?*, *How much money do you make?*, and *How much do you weigh?* Generally, Americans will only ask these questions to close friends in private, and even then, they might be considered too forward.

One way to tell when privacy boundaries have been crossed is through body language. An American may stiffen and look quite uncomfortable.

### **DIRECTNESS**

Although it may seem contradictory to the American sense of privacy, Americans are raised to be open and direct. Americans may, while defending their right to privacy, feel that if you aren't willing to be open and honest, then you must have something to hide. They may be quite uncomfortable when faced with a more reserved, and less direct approach. Directness equals trustworthiness in American culture. One comforting aspect of the straightforwardness of Americans is that, unlike other cultures where what is said can be quite different from what is meant, in the U.S., *no* usually means *no* and *yes* usually means *yes* (Wanning 10).

Americans will often speak openly about things they dislike (Althen 17). However, they will try to do so in a manner they call *constructive*, that is, a way the other person will not find offensive or unacceptable. If they do not speak openly about what is on their minds, they will often convey their reactions in nonverbal ways like facial expressions, body position, and gestures. In the end, being honest is usually more important than preserving harmony in interpersonal relationships (Althen 19).

Americans are not taught, as in some other countries, to mask their emotional responses (Althen 17). It is not improper to display feelings, at least within limits. If they are tired or unhappy, you will hear it in the voice, or see it in the face.

### **EQUALITY**

America is known as the *land of opportunity*, and this has helped perpetuate the idea stated in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal." Although there are many differences in social, economic and educational levels, in theory, everyone should have an equal opportunity for success.

Because Americans do not accept a fixed position in society, there is a theme of equality that runs through



#### **TABOOS**

Social protocols are quite relaxed in the U.S. so there are very few taboos. Here are some things that are unacceptable in American culture (Wanning 48):

Cover your mouth when you yawn, sneeze or cough. Americans are careful not to spread germs. It is considered unsanitary to not cover one's mouth.

Americans are offended by strong odors, and normally bathe daily (sometimes twice daily in hot weather), and use underarm deodorant. Strong smelling perfumes or colognes are applied sparingly because they may not be pleasant to others.

Do not belch loudly in public. Flatulence should be controlled as discreetly as possible.

Do not spit. You may see people spitting on the streets, but it is considered very rude.

Do not pick your teeth or nose in public.

Do not stare (gaze continuously) at someone you are talking to.

Do not whistle at women.

*Americans speak their mind. It is normal for friends to have discussions about their differing points of view on many subjects. In America, you have the right to have your own opinion and it is okay to have a different opinion (or many) from those of your friends. This is what is called "agreeing to differ."*

- Wife of post-doctoral fellow from New Zealand

**SOME AREAS WHERE AMERICANS ARE RELUCTANT TO SPEAK OPENLY ARE (ALTHEN 18):**

Excessively personal topics such as those listed in the section on small talk, or sexual functioning or personal inadequacies.

Saying 'no' to a request when they don't want to offend or 'hurt someone's feelings'.

When they are not well acquainted with someone and they are not confident that the discussion will be understood in the way intended.

social relationships as well. Social differences are often not recognized in social interaction. Americans tend not to show as much deference to people of greater wealth, age, or higher social status as people in other cultures do. International visitors who hold higher social positions sometimes feel that Americans do not treat them with proper respect and deference. On the other hand, Americans find it very confusing to be treated differently because of their status when they visit other countries (Althen 8).

This is not to say that Americans make no distinctions among themselves as a result of such factors as sex, age, wealth, or social position; they do (Althen 9). But the distinctions are generally acknowledged in subtle ways: tone of voice, order of speaking, choice of words, or seating arrangement at a meeting or a formal dinner.

### **TIME**

---

Efficiency is a virtue in the U.S. Americans are apt to become impatient with slow moving lines in supermarkets and banks, especially if the teller or checkout person is slowing down the line by chatting with the customers. Even a customer may be looked upon impatiently if at the end of a line he or she doesn't have the bank deposit slip filled out, or the money out of the wallet quickly enough. To Americans *time is money*. It should be valued, saved, and used wisely.

Americans also place considerable value on punctuality. Different types of activities have different conventions. You should arrive at the exact time specified for meals or appointment with professors, doctors, and other professionals. You can arrive anytime between the hours specified for informal parties, receptions, and cocktail parties. Plan to arrive a few minutes before the specified time for public meetings, plays, concerts, movies, sports events, classes, church services, and weddings. If you're unable to keep an appointment, you should always call to advise them that you will be late or unable to arrive.

### **INFORMALITY**

---

The notion of equality leads Americans to be quite informal in their general behaviors and relationships with others (Althen 8). The informality of American speech, especially the common use of first name, casual dress, and relaxed posture can be quite shocking to some international students and scholars. An invitation to a party or an event will often be delivered verbally in a very casual manner. Don't expect a written invitation or a follow-up phone call. If you are interested in going to a party, and don't have all of the details, such as where to go and what time, it is customary to phone the host of the party to get more information.

## POLITENESS

---

Even though Americans can be quite informal, visitors usually find them to be quite polite. As Wanning (46) explains, *Please, thank you, and you're welcome* are used for almost every transaction, even in cases where service is not optional such as giving change after a purchase. A person who doesn't say please or thank you appears rude to an American. "You're welcome," is an expected response to "Thank you." Even when the action you are being thanked for doesn't seem worthy of thanks.

English is a polite language. Words such as would, could, can, may, and might are used to soften requests and ask for permission. "Open the door," or even "Open the door, please," which may be perfectly polite in other languages, sounds harsh in English. Americans will soften requests with would, as in, "Would you open the door, please." When asking for permission, it is better to soften it by asking, "May I have one of these?," rather than using a direct form such as, "I want one of these."

Wanning (46) adds that, "Out in public, manners can vary considerably. Lately there seems to be a rising level of concern about the lack of civility, particularly among drivers." Always do what you can to avoid confrontations while driving.

## FRIENDLINESS

---

When people visit the U.S., they usually notice immediately the friendliness and openness of Americans and the extreme ease of social relationships. Casual American friendliness should not be mistaken for deep or intimate friendships, which are developed over a long period of time, as in any culture. If you wish to deepen a friendship, it may be necessary to make the first phone calls or visits. It is polite to call someone on the telephone before visiting, unless you live in a dormitory where things are more casual. It is also acceptable to call a new acquaintance to see if she or he would like to go to a campus or community activity with you.

Even if they don't know you, in the U.S. people often say, "Hi, how are you?" or "How are you doing?" and then do not wait for a response. This is a polite phrase, not really a question. You can respond by saying "Hi", or "Fine, thanks." You may also hear an American say, "Drop by anytime" or "Let's get together soon." These are friendly expressions, but they may not be meant literally. While they may be sincere, people are busy and do not always follow through on the invitation.

Casual social life is especially evident in college and universities, because everyone is there for a relatively short period of time to pursue studies or research. The ease of casual relations are sometimes troubling to interna-

*Any man's son may become the equal of any other man's son.*

- Fanny Trollope on visiting the United States in 1831

*To fill the hour - that is happiness.*

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, American philosopher and poet

*Most Americans are casual. I mean their behavior is freer. I think they do not care too much about what other people think of them. For example, they kiss their girlfriend or boyfriend on the street, and they lie down to sunbathe anywhere. Also, I frequently see people walking without shoes or eating on the street.*

- Student from Korea

*The people of Yale are all nice. When I came here, I wasn't familiar with the environment. They were very warm and helpful. It made me feel as if I were home.*

*I think Americans are very nice. Whenever you see them, they will give you a friendly laugh and say hello to you. It's very good for a stranger in America. . . . I like Americans.*

- Students from China

*I miss my friends because in Brazil, I used to go out a lot with them - to the beaches, parties, other cities and now I am still getting to know people from other countries.*

- Student from Brazil

tional students and scholars who have left their own friends and family at home and are learning to live in a new place. They naturally are looking for new friends and may sometimes find it very difficult to develop close relationships with Americans because they cannot seem to get beyond a very superficial acquaintance.

## **FRIENDSHIPS & RELATIONSHIPS** \_\_\_\_\_

To Americans, a *friend* can be anyone from an acquaintance to a person they have known for a long time. Americans often have friendships that revolve around school, work, or sport activities. Americans also tend to move frequently, and may appear to be unable to form deep friendships or able to give them up more easily and with less stress.

You need to make an effort to meet people so that friendships can develop. The key to developing friendships is to participate fully in the activities you enjoy. Americans often have friends who are associated with different aspects of their active lives — a friend from the study group, a friend from the softball team, or a friend from the volunteer project.

If you are uneasy about your English, do not let it keep you from seeking out friendships. Be flexible, and above all, don't be discouraged by a few disappointing experiences you may have. With some effort, you will meet Americans, including those who have lived abroad, with some understanding of what you are experiencing, as well as individuals who share your interests, academic and otherwise.

## **TALKING** \_\_\_\_\_

Americans can be very exuberant, warm people. They often speak fairly loudly compared to other cultures, because it is important to be assertive. To international visitors, it may seem as if they are angry. They may be simply expressing their opinion as clearly and directly as possible.

Anger is more acceptable in American culture than in some other cultures (Wanning 43). If someone feels wronged, it may be necessary to let one's feelings show. "Stand your ground" is common advice in an unfair situation. An out-of-control temper tantrum is never acceptable, but is it expected that an individual will not be afraid to strongly stand by a point.

As part of the warmth of the culture Americans will often speak in an exaggerated way. Enthusiasm can sometimes rise to the level of being unbelievable, "Great to see you! You look fabulous. Let's have lunch soon!" (Wanning 42) The American is not being insincere in this common style of expression. The meaning of this is probably something like "It is pleasant to see you and

have this exchange on the street and it would be pleasant to see you again.”

To show honesty, Americans are taught to look into someone’s eyes while speaking. Looking down, or elsewhere, is seen as a sign of being dishonest or untrustworthy. Still, the speakers do not stare continuously into one another’s eyes — they actually look away from time to time. Also, when being reprimanded by a superior, such as a parent, boss or teacher, it is considered disrespectful to look down or away while being spoken to.

One thing that Americans are not comfortable with in conversation is silence. Research has shown that Americans are uncomfortable with silences longer than three seconds (Smith, Meyers, Burkhalter 69), whereas other cultures may take up to seven seconds or more to respond. Even after asking a question, if there is a prolonged silence, an American will normally begin talking again without waiting for a response. The three second rule does not apply when the participants of the conversation are involved in a non-verbal activity together, such as working on a lab experiment, playing sports, or doing household chores (Smith, Meyers, & Burkhalter 69).

## WOMEN’S ROLES

---

Since the 70’s there has been an active feminist movement, or women’s liberation movement, in the U.S., which aims to insure that women have equal responsibilities and opportunities to those of men. Although there are still aspects of society in which women have not yet achieved equality, women play a public and visible role in the political, economic, cultural, and social affairs of this country. Nonetheless, some people may find that American society is more sexist than their own in certain respects.

Men and women in the U.S. may associate more freely with members of the opposite sex at work and in social situations than in many other countries. You may also find that the dress and behavior of women in social situations here are quite different from those of your country. While in your country it may be the man’s responsibility to ask a woman out for a date, here it is acceptable for a woman to ask a man out for a date as well. Whether the man or the woman offers the invitation, often both share the expenses.

Some international students and scholars have difficulty adjusting to situations in which a woman is in a position of authority because of their experiences in their own countries. American women may appear too assertive or aggressive if judged in another cultural context. Approach situations involving a female authority figure with an open mind.

*I have a monitor job in the Yale School of Music and all I have to do is check ID’s and give out keys, but sometimes people want to talk for a few minutes. We talk about weather, coursework, the professors, and concerts, and I feel so happy because I learn new things during the conversation.*

- School of Music Student from Taiwan

*Americans are considerate of other people. They are always opening doors for others or saying “excuse me” and so on. These are nice aspects of Americans. I am still trying to understand their ways. I’m not yet used to saying hello and being so considerate of other people.*

- Student from Korea



#### MAKING CONVERSATION

If a person is unable to respond quickly to a question, it is normal to use a hesitation device such as, “Hmmm” or “Let me think.” You could also rephrase the question to hold your place in the conversation as in:

Speaker 1: *What was your favorite vacation?*

Speaker 2: *So you want to know what my favorite vacation was? Let me see. . . .*

#### SMALL TALK

When they first encounter another person, Americans often engage in small talk (Althen 22). This includes topics such as the weather, or the current physical surroundings (e.g. the room or building they are in). The conversation then often proceeds to common experiences such as television programs, travel to other places, or eating in local restaurants. Personal finances, religion and politics are generally considered too personal, and are topics that are often avoided in casual polite conversation. Listening to American small talk could lead one to come to the erroneous conclusion that Americans are intellectually incapable of discussion topics more complex than weather, sports, or social lives (Althen 23).

## GAY AND LESBIAN LIFE

---

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and queer people (LGBTQ) have been publicly advocating for equal rights and responsibilities within U.S. society since the late 1960's. Same sex sexuality is now legal in every U.S. state, and LGBTQ issues have emerged as a major social and political issue nationally. Representations of LGBTQ people and issues are increasingly visible within US media and popular culture, and as a consequence are now fully mainstreamed within American life.

Although there are still many aspects in which LGBTQ people have not achieved full equality in the U.S., they have achieved full equality at Yale. Yale has a non-discrimination policy covering sexual orientation and same-sex partners are granted the same benefits as members of married families. LGBTQ people at Yale vary in their degree of openness about their sexual orientation (or their gender identity). Many talk about it to their friends, their colleagues, their professors or their students. Some LGBTQ people will talk about their partners or gender identity as part of their every-day conversation in the same way a heterosexual student would talk about their boyfriend/girlfriend/husband/wife. Other LGBTQ people will prefer to keep their sexuality private. When people elect to identify their sexuality publicly, it is in part towards tearing down the veil of silence that has governed LGBTQ life in the past, for until recently the only form of sexuality allowed a public hearing was heterosexual. The metaphor of “coming out of the closet,” or being open about one's sexuality, is now used as part of the political solution to homophobia.

Yale students, faculty and staff are, usually, very friendly towards LGBTQ people, and our institutional culture mandates full acceptance of all LGBTQ people on the part of all members of the University community. We have an official and enforced non-discrimination policy. On campus, it is likely that both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ couples will be seen displaying affection for one another. While the University policy covers only direct forms of anti-LGBTQ discrimination, within the University community it is also considered polite to always assume the possibility of LGBTQ identity. Thus, for example, when invitations to parties are distributed, consider adding the phrase “*significant others are welcome*” to the more traditional welcoming of husbands and wives. This phrase has the benefit of encompassing both different-sex and same-sex partners.

## POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

---

The U.S. is a country that has undergone a lot of change in its relatively short history, and one of the most recent and sweeping changes is that of the emphasis on being politically correct (P.C.). Political correctness is a movement that followed the upsurge of the women's move-

ment of the 70's, and it is an attempt towards fairness for all – no matter one's sex, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity or physical differences. The influence of the politically correct movement has affected school curriculum, language and even Americans' attitudes towards others. One of the most common examples of political correctness is the avoidance of the exclusive use of "he", "him" or "his" as generic pronouns.

Political correctness continues to influence U.S. society in spite of the controversy. Those who uphold the notions of political correctness do so in the spirit of fairness and equality. The idea is that, with politically correct speech and ideas, one is less likely to offend or impose one's values on others. Critics of the politically correct movement believe that it endangers the most fundamental rights of free speech and free choice by dictating how things should be stated or presented. If you listen carefully, you will notice that some people will use P.C. speech and others will not.

### SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Sexual harassment is a form of sex discrimination that violates U.S. law. In 1997, Yale University expanded its own definition of sexual harassment to include a ban on sexual relations of any sort between faculty and students. Whether in the workplace or in the classroom, it is important to behave in a respectful manner towards others - whether the same or opposite sex. Any unwelcome sexually-oriented behavior could be interpreted as sexual harassment.

## ADJUSTING TO U.S. LIFE

### MAKING FRIENDS

Before coming to the U.S., you may have developed expectations of making new American friends. Who those friends would be, and what they would be like was probably shaped by your notions of what a more or less typical American is. As you may have discovered by now, a *typical American* can be rather difficult to define. So who will your friends be? There is no ready answer. You will meet so many different kinds of people in the U.S. Here is some advice about making friends:

**Keep an open mind and try not to be judgmental.**

A friend could be one of those *typical Americans*. You will also get to know international students from other countries, or students from your own country. Or maybe you will meet an American-born person who is unlike any American person you have ever met, imagined or seen in films or on T.V. Friends come in all flavors.

**Be patient.** Take this advice from a visiting scholar at Yale, "Initial social contact plants the seeds for a friend-



### LGBTQ TERMINOLOGIES

Increasingly, the more historically established categories of **lesbian** and **gay**—female and male directed same sex sexuality respectively—are now nuanced by other categories like **bisexual**, **transgender** and **queer**. *Bisexual* signifies an erotic interest in both sexes, while *transgender* implies a partial or complete refusal of one's born biological sex, including but not limited to, surgical sex reassignment. The term *queer*, once derogatory, has been reclaimed as an identity that refuses any simple polarity between gay and straight, arguing instead that human sexuality is far too complicated for such stark oppositions.

### LGBTQ RESOURCES

[www.yale.edu/lesbiangay](http://www.yale.edu/lesbiangay)

Yale offers a lesbian and gay studies academic track at both the graduate and undergraduate levels through the Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies program. Lesbian and gay studies hosts an active lecture series, conferences, films, and other academic programming. All programs are free and open to anyone interested. For more information call 432-7737.

Yale LGBT Cooperative  
[www.yale.edu/lgbt](http://www.yale.edu/lgbt)

New Haven Lesbian & Gay Community Center  
[www.nhglcc.org](http://www.nhglcc.org)

#### BEING P.C. - EXAMPLE

##### Non P.C.

*The student must turn in his final paper before the end of the semester.*

##### P.C.

*The student must turn in his or her final paper before the end of the semester.*

OR

*Students must turn in their final papers before the end of the semester.*

#### SEXUAL HARASSMENT RESOURCES

For more detailed information, read the official *Yale Guide to Sexual Harassment* which can be obtained at the Benefits Office, 155 Whitney Ave, 432-5550, or on-line at:

[ogc.yale.edu/legal\\_reference/sexual\\_harassment.html](http://ogc.yale.edu/legal_reference/sexual_harassment.html)

Here are some more resources:

[www.yale.edu/yalecol/students/student\\_life/sexual\\_harassment](http://www.yale.edu/yalecol/students/student_life/sexual_harassment)

[www.med.yale.edu/owm/sexharassment.html](http://www.med.yale.edu/owm/sexharassment.html)

U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission  
[www.eeoc.gov/facts/fs-sex.html](http://www.eeoc.gov/facts/fs-sex.html)

ship." Remember that going from friendliness to friendship is a gradual process and takes time.

**Be yourself.** Because of the emphasis on individuality in American culture, it is expected that everyone will be different. Be confident about who you really are. Also, don't be afraid to be open when you are not sure of the norms of behavior. Ask, "*How do you do this in the U.S.? In my country we do it this way.*" Most Americans will be pleased to teach you about their culture.

**Look and listen.** A word, phrase or gesture that means something in your home country may mean something very different in the U.S. Watch people's reactions in their conversations with you or with others:

- How close do people stand when they talk?
- How do people greet each other?
- Do people tend to agree with you or do they express differing opinions freely?
- What makes you feel dissatisfied or uncomfortable when communicating with someone?
- How do Americans change their communication styles when talking with a professor? A student? A friend? A family member? A stranger?

**Look for the universal.** As different as we can be across cultures, there are also many ways in which we are the same. A good place to begin seeking out the commonalities between you and others is through conversation. Talk about family, school, childhood, favorite things - like music, books, and leisure activities. What do you find funny, embarrassing, sad or inspiring? As naïve as it may sound, there is some truth in the statement, *people are people everywhere.*

**Beware of stereotypes.** A stereotype is an idea about a person's characteristics or personality, which is incorrectly assumed to be shared by all members of the same group. Possible stereotypes in the U.S. might be that all Chinese are polite and good at math, or all Italians are emotional. A stereotype about Americans might be that they are all arrogant, rude, and outspoken. Try not to act on any preconceived ideas you may have about someone you meet. It may be impossible to forget stereotypes, but it is possible to be aware of them and ready to find the exceptions.

**Take initiative in meeting others.** This is one of the most important elements. Because of the work load at Yale, it is possible to fall into the rut of *all work and no play*. Don't wait for a social life to come to you. Make time each week to go out and attend events, take part in sports activities, invite a friend for a meal or a movie. Be active in building your social network. Remember too that Americans could be shy about making friends with people from other countries. Many of them have been raised in a socially and linguistically isolated atmo-

sphere. Don't be afraid to begin conversations, extend invitations and if necessary make the first move.

**Be persistent.** Some social interactions may be superficial and you may experience disappointments in your attempts to form new friends. Learn to distinguish between *friendliness* and the deeper bond of *friendship*. Most of all, don't get discouraged. As we say in English, "There are many fish in the sea," and finding true friends takes time and effort.

**Have a list of topics you are ready to talk about.**

Examples: cultural differences, slang terms, American food, family members, gestures, wedding customs, etc.

## TAKING INITIATIVE

Some of the most common questions new international students and scholars have about life at Yale concern meeting people and making friends. As in all relationships, it will take effort on your part, and taking initiative and getting involved will help you build a healthy and satisfying social network. It will also make your time at Yale a far richer, more memorable experience. This section of the guide offers some suggestions for where to start forging new friendships.

Americans often form friends around the activities in their busy lives. Seek out your interests, and get involved in extra-curricular, and off-campus activities. At the very least, sign up for an e-mail group, and consider joining a club. You may also want to try volunteering in the community if you can. If you don't find something of interest right away, keep in mind that the community is constantly changing according to the needs and interests of its members. For example, you will find that new groups are formed each semester, and you should search the Yale website for *clubs* or your specific areas of interest for more information. Visit the chapter in this guide on Student and Scholar Life for many useful suggestions and resources.

## PARTIES

An invitation to a party can be in writing, over the phone, or casually given in person. Never arrive early to a party unless it has been pre-arranged with the host. Normally you should arrive within ten to twenty minutes after the starting time. If you are going to a dinner party, or a more formal affair, and you are going to be more than 20 minutes late, it is expected that you will call to say when you will be arriving. Once you have accepted an invitation, you are obligated to come. If you suddenly cannot make it for any reason, make sure you notify the host immediately, as he or she has gone to a lot of trouble to prepare for the party.

*One thing that I didn't expect was to miss my grandfather so much. I would have never thought that I was going to miss him so much. When I got here and was just settling in, I called my grandfather to say hello. When I heard his voice, I felt like crying.*

- Student from Korea

*I find university life very nice. Although I still have problems communicating with people, I enjoy being at Yale. It is a great experience for me. It allows me to know about other cultures by meeting people from different countries all over the world.*

- Student from Argentina

**A visiting scholar from Italy gave this advice** when suggesting that it's important not to rely on a first impression: "*In the beginning, you don't really understand American ways, and it's too easy to misread a smile or a loud comment or the way a person dresses. We see with 'foreign eyes', so a 'first impression' is really based on whether or not you think a person looks nice. You should take time to get to know a person, and then decide. Otherwise you risk missed opportunities for important friendships.*"

An experienced visiting fellow at Yale said, "I'm a pretty shy guy even in my own country, but I think it is important to speak with Americans at every opportunity - people in the elevator, on the bus, or maybe relaxing in front of the library. It helps to be prepared with what I'm going to talk about."

*Personally I think I need more spontaneous speaking. I know a lot of vocabulary now. I can read and understand books and articles, but it's still very difficult to tell a joke or to answer somebody properly.*

- Visiting scholar from France

*At every event you learn something about the U.S. that you can add to your picture about what the U.S. looks like. And you learn a lot about other countries as well. If you only stay in your lab and with your books, your picture of U.S. will be very strange, so I encourage everyone to join and take part of OISS and ISPY events.*

- International Spouse from Sweden

Once at the party, you may or may not be formally introduced. It is perfectly acceptable to introduce yourself to the other guests by shaking hands and saying something like, "Hi, I'm Yin Chen. How do you know the hosts?" It also serves as a good ice breaker for having a conversation with someone you don't know.

**Dinner Party** - If it is at someone's home you should ask the host if you can bring anything. Even if he or she says no, you should bring some flowers or perhaps a box of chocolates. If the host suggests that you bring wine, you should ask what he or she is serving. Different wines go with different kinds of foods. You can then ask your local wine merchant to suggest a reasonable (\$10 - \$15), good bottle of wine to go with the meal. It is expected that you will finish everything on your plate, unless you have a good excuse such as, "It was excellent, but I'm simply too full to finish." If you refuse a second helping, it will be assumed that you truly do not want more, and the host will not offer you more food.

**After-dinner Party** - These normally begin after 9pm and often the guests don't really arrive until much later. Dress can range from casual to dressy, and there may or may not be food. An after-dinner party is normally an excuse to bring together as many people as possible, but you should always make sure it's okay before inviting other guests. Since they tend to be very informal affairs, it is okay to arrive within the first one to two hours of the starting time, and sometimes much later.

**Reception** - A reception is generally a drinks and hors d'oeuvres party for welcoming or honoring something or someone. It could be an important guest or host, a new baby, or even to honor the completion of the construction of a new building. Dress is often on the more formal side. However, some receptions may be held directly after work, in which case you may attend in your less formal work attire. Generally finger foods are served at receptions and are not meant to be eaten as a meal. It is proper to take several small plates of food instead of one large portion.

**Potluck** - A potluck is a dinner where each guest contributes a dish. The host will often tell you what category to bring, such as salad, meat dish, or dessert, and you will be expected to prepare something in that category. You should bring enough food to comfortably feed 6 - 8 people. If it's a very large party, you may want to bring a bit more. If the host says you can bring anything you want, then the choice is truly yours. It would be nice to bring a typical dish from your country. Normally informal dress is acceptable at a potluck party.

## **BEHAVING RESPONSIBLY - DRINKING** \_\_\_\_\_

Alcoholic beverages, such as beer, wine and hard liquors (gin, rum, vodka, etc.) may be served at parties in the U.S. (You must be 21 or older to consume alcoholic

beverages in the state of Connecticut.) It is important to behave responsibly should you choose to consume alcoholic beverages. Never drink more than you can handle, and do not allow your guests to become overly intoxicated. The rule is, 'Everything in moderation.' Besides, recent statistics show that the higher the average number of drinks per week, the lower the G.P.A. (grade point average).

In *Alcohol: Decisions on Tap*, a pamphlet published by the *American College Health Association*, you are reminded that it is your own decision about when and where you drink, and it should not be dependent on the habits of others. It's okay to refuse a drink and very important to stick to your own limits. Some of the people who could urge you to drink might have drinking problems themselves. The best way to stay in control is not to drink. However, should you choose to drink, here is some helpful advice:

- **Limit the amount you drink.** Have at least one large glass of water (or another non-alcoholic choice) between drinks.
- **Sip drinks slowly.** Don't guzzle or take big gulps.
- **Eat heavy meals or dairy products** before or while drinking. (These foods slow down alcohol absorption.)
- **Drink diluted alcoholic beverages** such as beer and wine, rather than straight shots.
- **Avoid carbonated mixers or sparkling wines**—they speed the alcohol into your blood stream.
- **Avoid "spiked" punch** and other drinks containing unknown amounts of alcohol.

**Never drink and drive, and never allow anyone you know to drink and drive.** Forty percent of all traffic fatalities are alcohol-related. Driving drunk in the U.S. is a serious criminal offence, with very stiff punishments of high fine, jail sentences and suspension of driver's license. A blood alcohol level of .08 or higher is considered too drunk to drive. For more information go to: [www. DUI.com](http://www. DUI.com)

**For someone who thinks they might have a problem handling drinking,** it is important to seek help. Contact:

**Marie Baker, Ph.D,** *Undergraduate Substance Abuse Counselor*, 432-1891, or **Maury Steigman, M.S.W.,** *Graduate Substance Abuse Counselor*, 432-7366.

**Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)** [www.alcoholics-anonymous.org](http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org) holds weekly meetings on campus and lists specific times and locations in the weekly *Yale Bulletin & Calendar*. You can access the calendar on the web at [www.yale.edu/opa/yb&c](http://www.yale.edu/opa/yb&c)

*You know how Americans are. When you say 8:00pm, they all arrive later than that.*  
- student from Germany

#### LUNCH

When an American says, "Let's do lunch sometime," it can simply mean it would be enjoyable to get together one day. If you get a specific invitation to lunch, with a place, time and date, that is a real invitation. Generally alcohol is not drunk during a work day lunch, but you can always follow the lead of your host to see if they order or offer alcoholic drinks. It is never necessary to accept alcoholic drinks to be polite.

#### B.Y.O.B.

If a written invitation says "BYOB", it means to bring something to drink (literally: Bring your own booze). It is okay to bring a non-alcoholic beverage, but you may want to ask the host what he or she would like you to bring.

#### R.S.V.P.

"RSVP" on an invitation means "please answer" in French. You should call the person who has invited you as soon as possible to say whether or not you can come.

#### ETIQUETTE

Writing a thank you note and sending it after the affair is appropriate in some circumstances, and for a guide to this and much more, consult the *traditions* section of *E-how* an online guide for how to do just about anything: [www.ehow.com](http://www.ehow.com). Emily Post is also a good etiquette resource [www.emilypost.com](http://www.emilypost.com)