

International Military Student Guide to the American Culture

U.S. Army Intelligence Center
International Military Student Office
Fort Huachuca, AZ 85613-7000

Culture influences every aspect of human life, from birth to death. You will gain first hand experience of the Culture of the United States of America during your training here. You may find some elements of culture to be very similar to your own, while others may be greatly different.

The United States is a cultural mixing bowl. Citizens of the United States have come from every corner of the World. They brought elements of their culture with them. So, you may recognize some elements of the local culture, while others may be strange to you. This guide is designed to help you understand some cultural elements of the United States, especially those that may influence your training.

Major Cultural Elements

Freedom - The cornerstone of American Culture. The Constitution of the United States of America ensures that the people retain certain rights and freedoms. It limits the influence the Government has on the personal lives of the Citizens. Americans who respect the rights of other Citizens are free to work, play, worship, travel, and live as they please.

Family - American families are small by comparison to many of the World's cultures. The average American family has 2 or fewer children. Most American children live in two parent households. 60% of American mothers have jobs outside the home. Parents of adult children generally live independently, maintaining their own homes though it is common for the Elderly citizens to live with their adult children late in life.

Religion - The majority of American citizens are Christian. The Constitution of the United States ensures a separation of Church and State. There is no religious requirement to be a citizen of the United States. All of the World's religions are openly and freely practiced here. However, given that most of the Citizens are Christian certain religious consolations are made. Sunday is not included in the workweek and one religious holiday is recognized.

- Christmas (December 25th) is the only religious holiday celebrated nationally. It is a celebration of the birth of Christ. It is a one-day holiday for Federal and State Government employees. Most businesses are closed.

- Thanksgiving (the 4th Thursday in November) is a generic religious holiday. Many churches have services, but it is not an officially recognized holiday by any religion. It is a time for all American's to give thanks for the blessings they have.

Food - You can get a good idea about American food preferences by looking at the menu of a typical American restaurant. Restaurants serve the food people are most interested in eating. You can see what Americans typically call Breakfast, Lunch, and Dinner.

- Americans generally eat their largest meal of the day in the evening - dinner. These meals seem to revolve around some form of meat (mostly red meats or chicken) served with a starch (potatoes are most common, rice is readily available) and vegetables. Many evening meals start with a lettuce-based salad.

- The noon meal - lunch - is usually light. It is most often some form of sandwich.

- Americans who eat breakfast favor either some form of cereal or eggs served with pork-based meat (bacon, sausage, or ham)

Daily Routines - Americans typically use a 40-hour workweek, 8-hour days, Monday through Friday. Actual working hours vary but usually begin before 9 a.m. and end before 6 p.m. Forty-two percent of the American workforce are women.

- Lunch breaks are usually an hour or less. That's why the evening meal has become the big meal of the day for many Americans.

- Most Americans sleep only once a day from 10 or 11 p.m. until 6 or 7 a.m. Weekends are personal time.
- Recognizing differences between American routines and those you may be used to will help you understand the culture and people of the United States.

Greetings

- People coming to work or to meeting each other in a routine setting will usually use a verbal greeting and response.
- Additionally, in small or rural communities, strangers simply passing on the sidewalk may exchange simple greetings. This is less common in larger cities but still may occur.
- Verbal greetings vary depending on where you are in the U.S. and the familiarity of the people exchanging the greeting.

Simple verbal greetings.

These greetings can be repeated as a response.

"Good Morning/Afternoon/Evening" - varies with the time of day. (Often shortened to "Morning/Afternoon/Evening" informally)

"Hello" - Very common telephone greeting also used face to face.

"Hi" - a shortened form of Hello

Other Common Verbal Greetings.

Require a more advance response and invite conversation. These may follow up a simple greeting.

"How ya doin?" - an abbreviated form of "How are you doing?" a common response might be "Good, and you? (Returning the question)

"What's up?" - A way of asking how busy you are. Responses vary from "Nothing much" to "Working hard" followed by "What's up with you" or "How you doin?"

Physical Greetings

- A wave of the hand or nod of the head may be used to acknowledge a friend in situations where a verbal greeting is not appropriate.
- A handshake is a common greeting used by adults of either sex, however, it is generally used upon first meeting someone or greeting someone you have not seen for an extended period of time. Americans generally do not exchange handshakes daily.
- A hug or kiss on the cheek are common greetings among family members or very close friends of opposite sexes especially if they have not seen each other for an extended period of time.

Personal Space

- Americans comfortably stand about 30 inches (75cm) apart when they are talking. Many international students come from cultures where people stand closer together. Standing too close to an American may make them feel uncomfortable or crowded. If you are aware of personal space it will be easier to talk to people and make friends.

Timeliness

- Professionally, being on time is very important. Though in social situations Americans are more understanding. If you are more than a few minutes late it is a good idea to apologize, an excuse is usually not necessary. If you will be more than 10 or 15 minutes late it is considered polite to call and inform your host of your delay.

Social Situations

- You may be invited by your sponsor or someone you meet here to their home. Arriving on time makes a good impression.
- Gifts are usually not expected, but always appreciated. A small memento from your country is an excellent gift.
- Flowers or chocolate are also popular gifts. Wine is a nice gift if you are sure the individuals drink alcohol. If you are unsure, avoid taking alcoholic beverages as a gift.
- Your host should tell you if food is involved. Let them know if you have any restrictions to your diet. You will not be expected to eat anything you do not want. Your host may serve you or allow you to serve yourself.
- If you serve yourself, don't take more than you can eat. It is better to get a second serving than leave a large portion on your plate. Many Americans will offer a second serving (called "seconds") only one time.

They will not usually force a second serving once it is declined. It is O.K. to ask for a second serving, many Americans who cook think of this as a compliment.

- Americans are indirect about when to end an evening. They may make a comment about how late it is getting or how early they might have to get up tomorrow. This is a sign that it is time to leave.

Classroom Etiquette

- Students often report to the classroom early and exchange greetings and light conversation.

- An instructor entering a classroom is a sign that class will begin. Students should take their seats. An instructor may exchange individual greetings with some students on the way into the classroom, but will not greet each student individually. If an instructor begins by greeting a class he is inviting the class to respond with a like greeting.

- **Timeliness** - It is very important to be on time for class whether it is at the start of the day or after breaks or lunch. If you do show up late, do not make an excuse or interrupt the instruction, just walk in and sit down. Do not make a habit of showing up late.

- Some instructors may lock the door at the scheduled start time. If you are locked out of class, do not knock on the door; wait until the next break. You will not get credit for attending that instruction. It is up to you to catch up with the class and learn what material is testable.

- Repeatedly showing up late for class will have a negative impact on your Academic Report and could jeopardize your class standing.

- **Rank** - When instructors are on the platform they are in charge of the class, regardless of the rank of the students being taught.

- While Americans respect officers who are senior in rank, students are equal in the classroom. This can create some challenges because international students often are senior in rank to their U.S. classmates.

- Officers may be tasked to lead squads that include Senior Officers. Rank can not interfere with the exercise or training mission. The classroom affords no privilege to rank. Everyone must participate in class to be considered for a diploma.

- **Breaks** - Instructors will usually call a break every hour or so. They look for a logical point in the instruction to break rather than the clock. Students are expected to be in their seats in the classroom when the instructor is teaching. If you must leave the classroom for an emergency situation, just get up and go. Do not disrupt the class or ask permission.

- Breaks are an opportunity to socialize with your classmates and get to know each other. You can discuss the class or outside activities. It is an excellent opportunity to exchange ideas and ask questions.

- Students who break into small groups and speak a language other than English are sending a message to other students that they do not want to talk to them. Speaking English during your course and breaks will help you improve your language skills and get to know your U.S. classmates.

- **Questions** - Questions are a great way to clarify instruction. Instructors appreciate most questions because they benefit the entire class. If you have a question during class, raise your hand and wait for the instructor to recognize you.

- It is not necessary to stand or introduce yourself when asking a question. Do not ask a question of another student or talk to other students when an instructor is speaking. Save personal conversations for the break.

Examinations and Quizzes - Examinations are often called exams or tests. They show up on the training schedule followed by a review.

- Instructors may allow international students more time for exams. Do not take additional time unless it is announced.

- Instructors may allow international students to use notes during exams. Do not use your notes unless authorized by the instructor.

- If you have a question during an exam, raise your hand and wait for the instructor. If the instructor is busy it may take a few minutes to get to you. Try to answer other test questions while you wait.

- Do not ask questions of other students during an exam.

- Exchanging information during an exam is strictly prohibited. Copying someone else's paper or allowing someone to copy your paper is sufficient reason for removal from class.

- Quizzes are short tests that are unannounced. An instructor may start the day with a quiz to see if everyone did their homework or check the progress of the class.

- Quizzes do not have the importance of scheduled exams; however, the scores are frequently included in your grade for a given block of instruction.

Practical Exercises

- Some blocks of instruction include practical exercises. Your class may be divided into squads.
- The squad must work together to complete their mission. Instructors will usually designate squad leaders and other positions in the squad. Regardless of the rank of the squad leader, each member of the squad must contribute to the exercise.
- Instructors monitor practical exercises. Students who do not participate in practical exercises are not eligible for a diploma.

Military Courtesies

- While Training in the United States it is important to observe the courtesy and traditions of the United States Army. You will meet many American Soldiers who are instructors, cadre, and classmates.
- How you interact with them reflects directly on their opinions of the professionalism of your Military. For some of the American's you meet you will be the only representative of your Army they ever encounter. It is important for you to make a good impression. How you wear your uniform and respond to military courtesies is a large part of that impression.
- Making a good impression is easy if you pay attention to some simple military courtesies
- **Uniforms** - You are required to wear your uniform in class unless otherwise directed. If you did not bring a uniform, you will be required to buy a U.S. Battle Dress Uniform (BDU) to wear in class, this includes a hat and boots. Keep your uniforms clean and neat. Make sure your boots are shined. Wear your hat at all times when you are outside.
- **Saluting** - International rank insignia can be confusing for some Americans. It is always proper courtesy to return a salute rendered by a soldier in uniform.
- When you are in uniform, outside and approached by a Junior Officer or a Non Commissioned Officer outside they will render a salute. It is important for you to return the salute. If you are seated, stand and return the salute.
- When you are outside and approach an Officer who is senior to you, you should render a salute and hold it until the Officer salutes in return.
- A salute is not necessary if either of you is involved in a work detail or participating in PT at the time.
- When reporting to the Commander, always salute upon entering the room.

Tributes to the Flag - The American Flag is raised on the post at reveille (0600 hours) and lowered at retreat (1630 hours) each weekday. These ceremonies are accompanied by a bugle call, which can be heard throughout the post. If you are outside when you hear the call of reveille or retreat you should stand at attention facing the flagpole until the music stops. This is true even if you are driving in your car. Pull over and get out of the car to show respect. Americans in uniform will salute the flag; Americans in civilian clothes will put their right hands over their hearts. You can salute or put your hand over your heart if you are so inclined.

Slang & Non-Verbal Communication

- When learning a second language most people focus on vocabulary. But the language that is taught is often different than the spoken language. Some words have common usage's that are not found in dictionaries. Most languages have some form of slang.
- Slang is a personal form of communication based on common experience. Movies and television shows introduce many slang terms. Your class may develop slang terms for individual blocks of instruction, instructors, or events. A social event where someone named Sam falls in a swimming pool may be referred to as "Sam's Splash" for the remainder of the class' time together.
- The only way to learn and understand slang is to talk to people and ask questions. Slang dictionaries seem to be outdated before they are ever printed.
- A large percentage of communication is non-verbal. However, words are affected by the tone with which they are delivered and the gestures and mannerisms that accompany them.
- Many gestures have different meanings in different parts of the world. Some gestures that may be offensive in your country may have no meaning here. Before you are offended by a gesture, be sure offense is intended. If you are not sure ask. Sometimes close friends use offensive gestures as a way to

tease each other. A gesture, which may be offensive between two people who don't know each other, can be funny among two friends.

Some common American Gestures

Thumbs Up - This is a positive gesture that means the outcome is good. If an instructor gives you a thumbs up, with either hand, it means he approves of what you have said or done.

Thumbs Down - This is the exact opposite of thumbs up. It shows disapproval or a negative result.

O.K. - This gesture is made with the thumb and first finger. It signifies that everything is all right or that you are in agreement. There is nothing negative about this gesture.

Stop - Holding the hand up, palm forward with the fingers either extended or together means stop. This can easily be confused for a wave of the open hand which means "Hello". You can tell which gesture is intended by the look on the individual's face. Hello is usually accompanied by a smile.

Learn as you Go

- It is important to have an open mind when you are communicating in another culture. Asking questions is the best way to learn.

- Asking questions about slang and gestures is a good way to get conversations started.

Don't be shy about asking someone what they mean with either a gesture or a slang term.

Making the most of your experience

- Working and training in another country is much more complicated than visiting or touring. You must have a greater understanding of the culture, people and language to be successful.

- While you train in the United States you should be aware of the culture and people you meet and work with.

- If details about your course were all you needed, we could send you the books. You are in the United States to learn what is in the books and how Americans put that information to use. Culture is a huge part of that experience.

- You must be willing to establish strong communication skills that go beyond simple vocabulary.

- You can make the most of your time here if you work with people to further your understanding of your training and the people who are presenting it to you.

- Reserve judgments, different is not necessarily better or worse. Accept differences and learn what you can from them.