



GUIDE
TO THE EDUCATION SYSTEM
IN THE UNITED STATES

BY

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ISSS | International
Student & Scholar
Services

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

POST SECONDARY EDUCATION

Overview

(From U.S. Classroom Culture by Alisa Eland, Michael Smithee and Sidney L. Greenblatt).

The U.S. department of Education influences higher education, but does not govern it. Therefore, the dominant pattern of higher education structure and policies, just like the one found in lower education, is that of decentralization. Of course, there are examples of both centralized and decentralized educational institutions. Military academies and federal research laboratories are examples of centralization, while private schools and universities are examples of decentralization.

Public schools (like the University of Minnesota) are heavily funded by both federal and state government monies. Therefore, they are directly affected by state legislature. Some states, counties and municipalities exercise direct control over budget, curriculum, and the hiring and dismissal of faculty. Even that, however, varies from one institution to another. Public institutions are also influenced by national, state and local economies. This affects how much money the public, through their elected representatives, is willing to invest in public education. Private institutions are funded primarily through tuition monies paid by students, but also funds from endowments and gifts, various types of federal research grants, and student loans and grants. Therefore, they are less affected by state legislature than public institutions.

Still, higher education institutions share common characteristics, such as: the flexibility afforded to students to choose from a variety of subjects and to change from one subject to another easily; the competitive and intensive process followed to recruit faculties (although the weight given to each competency – teaching skills in teaching institutions, research, publications in institutions engaged in advanced research and/or administrative skills – varies from school to school); the use of standardized admission tests to recruit the best students (although standards differ among schools, including which test to require); and the classroom culture.

A Word about Rankings

Neither the U.S. Department of Education nor USNEI provide or endorse any of the popular rankings of U.S. institutions. Rankings are frequently based on test scores, opinion surveys of academic leaders, faculty publications in selected journals, awards in popular disciplines or public research funding totals. These figures may be statistically accurate, but they are selective aggregations that overlook important subject specializations, types of research, and legitimate institutional and cultural differences. We do not believe that statistical ranking surveys can substitute for questions such as those listed above. Every subject, specialization, institutional atmosphere, local community, and personal set of needs and qualifications is different and will result in different answers to the question "What is the best school or institution for me?"

A Few Common Norms

(Written by Tony Cimasko, Purdue University; last edited by Allen Brizee, May 2009)

There are a number of values and practices that are common throughout the higher education system. A significant number of these translate (to varying degrees) to many workplaces and to the civil sector of American life. As with any kind of community, you might find that some of the traits of the academic community can be contradictory from time to time.

It's about more than a good job. While professional status and a healthy income are important goals of many students, the instructors and curricula of the US university system place at least as much importance—if not more—on the more traditional goals of individual learning, the building of new knowledge, and the creation of an informed and well-rounded citizenry. Reflecting this, undergraduates at many institutions are required to take as many as half of their courses in fields outside of their major, and much of the work that is done in the classroom is not going to be immediately or obviously relevant to the job market.

Classrooms are often participatory. A number of undergraduate courses, particularly mandatory freshman-level courses, are conducted in spacious lecture halls where the only feasible management approach to dozens or hundreds of students is to have them listen quietly to the instructor for an hour or more. Nevertheless, a good number of the courses that you will take are much smaller than this, and quiet is NOT the preferred approach. Instructors expect students to actively participate, asking questions and offering informed opinions and even openly (but politely!) disagreeing with instructors from time to time. When students are talking actively about the subject matter of the class, instructors feel more confident that students are growing from passive recipients of information into individuals who are thinking critically and who are contributing to building knowledge. When you find yourself in such an environment, look for opportunities to speak up. Don't be intimidated by perceived flaws in your English; instructors and students alike are interested in what's on your mind, the kinds of ideas you have and not the accuracy of your grammar and vocabulary.

Students often collaborate. Participation happens in small groups as well as on the whole class level. Many instructors rely on small group work to break up class time, and peer review (comments from fellow students) to provide added perspectives and unique insights, and to give students practice with intellectual authority and responsibility. In moments such as these, be thoughtful about your collaborative contributions, and take your peers' suggestions seriously.

Collaboration is limited. The emphasis turns from group work toward individual accomplishment on high stakes activities, work that constitutes a large part of a final course grade, such as term papers and exams. Other than peer review, where problems are pointed out but the writer must come up with his or her own solution, evidence that others provided answers or wrote for you will lead to severe penalties. This includes plagiarism, which means taking other written sources and using them as your own.

Diversity is a strength. This is an important cultural value in US colleges and universities, and in many parts of the country as a whole. Respect for those from other intellectual positions is a priority for many instructors, as is respect for those whose gender, race, ethnicity, age, religion, language, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic position are different. Formal

institutional guidelines allow instructors to deal severely with displays of disrespect towards others in the classroom.

Having said this, there are still incidents in classrooms where an occurrence of disrespect or marginalization is overlooked. This is sometimes done even by instructors themselves. If you see such an incident or are affected by it, bring it up with the instructor after class.

Aspects of being a College Student in the U.S.

(Developed by Dr. R. M. Paige and S. L. Smith, University of Minnesota, October 1988; revised by R. Stuck, 1993)

At many U.S. colleges, undergraduates take an average of four courses each semester (15 credits) to graduate in four years of full-time study. Class time, plus study outside class, makes this course load a full-time job for undergraduates. In addition to their courses, many undergraduates also hold part-time jobs, working 10 to 15 hours a week. Time management is an important skill for students.

Graduate students generally take two (or possibly three) courses. Six to nine credits are a full-time program). Like undergraduates, many graduate students hold part-time jobs. Some of these are teaching or research assistantships on campus. In addition to classes and jobs, graduate students spend time preparing for comprehensive exams or extended writing projects. Faculty, too, have multiple responsibilities. They teach, supervise students doing independent projects, and advise individual students. In addition, faculty are required to contribute toward scholarship by publishing books and articles in professional journals. They also have administrative duties, serving on committees of various kinds.

At the classroom level, a major goal of American higher education is the development of critical thinking. Students are encouraged to ask questions, become skilful problem-solvers, and self-motivated seekers of knowledge. Classroom discussion, one-on-one consultation with faculty members during office hours, and a variety of out-of-class learning opportunities are all important.

Following is a list of descriptors that summarize the U.S. academic environment a student can expect to find:

1. Active classroom participation is expected.
2. Time pressure is high - often there are many small assignments due each week - and time management is an important skill to develop.
3. Critical thinking must be developed.
4. Independent thinking is highly valued.
5. Presenting ideas concisely in class is expected.
6. Assignments (reading, writing, homework, tests) are numerous.
7. Competition is a common mind-set.
8. Achievement and hard work are highly valued; the finished product is most important.
9. Students must be responsible for themselves.
10. Equality—all students should be treated equally.
11. Informality is normal.

12. Direct and straightforward communication is expected.
13. Friendship is usually based on doing things in common—sports, studying, etc.
14. Combining theory and practice—the practical application of ideas—is emphasized.
15. Problem-solving orientation—“If it’s broken, we ought to be able to fix it!”
16. The scientific method and the use of logical proof are emphasized academically.

Here are some suggestions for becoming an engaged learner in a U.S. college:

- **Coming to Class Prepared.** Instructors are required to distribute the syllabus for each course at the beginning of the semester. They generally follow the plan rather closely. The syllabus lists the topics to be addressed in the course, required assignments, and how grades will be calculated. Students are expected to prepare before coming to class. Instructors assume that everyone has done the required reading and practice exercises. In smaller classes, participation may count as part of the grade. Small research projects, sometimes done with a group, are common. Students have a lot of latitude in choosing a project. The amount of time it takes to prepare well varies with the individual student, so it is important to review the syllabus carefully at the beginning of the semester and plan a strategy for getting the work done.
- **Asking for Help.** The University offers a wide variety of resources to help students learn. Plan to take advantage of them early. Your instructors and academic adviser can help you identify the resources most likely to be helpful to you.
- **Getting to Know Professors.** Instructors are required to hold office hours, which are listed on the syllabus. Students should feel free to visit their instructors whenever they have difficulties with the course, are unsure of a course requirement, or simply want to discuss the material. Most instructors enjoy individual conversations with students.
- **Learning Takes Place outside the Classroom.** Students are encouraged to learn by participating in a variety of activities both on and off campus. They develop leadership skills by participating in student organizations on campus. They learn about social issues that concern them by volunteering with community organization. They test possible careers in internships. University career and student activities offices encourage a wide range of learning activities. Out-of-class activities are considered an important part of a university education, not a distraction. They are also a way to feel useful, a member of the community.

All this sounds like a lot for international students to do! And it is. It takes time to identify the resources a student needs and to connect with them. Most students spend the first year at the University exploring possibilities. By their second year, students have some friends, know at least a few of their professors, and have found activities they like.

Not sure how to get started? Talk with your academic adviser or come to the International Student and Scholar Services. Ideas and events of special interest to international students and scholars are listed on the web at: <http://iss.umn.edu/>

The Academic Adviser

(From <http://www.educationusa.state.gov>).

In the United States, when students enter a university or college, they will usually be assigned an academic adviser who may be a member of the faculty or a member of the university staff. The academic adviser will help the student select classes and plan his/her academic program, and he or she may also monitor the student's progress. Students are free to seek advice from other faculty members as well.

Before meeting with the academic adviser, however, it may be helpful to design a tentative program plan based on the student's own needs and desires. Students should know what the degree requirements are or, if they are not certain, they should prepare a list of questions. Studying the university catalog, departmental course schedules, and the printed schedule, which lists all the courses being offered during the term and the days and times these courses will meet, will certainly help. Note that not all courses must be taken in a particular order; there is usually some flexibility in designing a student's academic program.

At the first meeting with the academic adviser, students may wish to discuss both their short-term and long-range professional plans — that is, what they hope to do during the program and after they finish your academic studies. They should discuss the tentative program plan that you have drawn up for the semester and possible adjustments to it. They may also wish to discuss opportunities for field experience and other activities that might enrich the educational experience. This information will be useful as the academic adviser helps students decide about various "elective" courses (courses students choose rather than those they are required to take). If students do not speak up, they will not benefit as much as they could from the knowledge and experience of their academic adviser.

Many international students think they should not express their opinion to their academic adviser, since this may be perceived as inappropriate behavior or a sign of disrespect in their own cultures. However, in American culture, it is considered appropriate behavior to speak up and voice your opinion freely. The role of the adviser is to help students make their own decisions, not to make decisions for them. On most campuses, the academic adviser is responsible for approving a student's plan of study and the number of courses s/he will take during each semester or quarter.

Using a student's personal plan and his or her knowledge of the school's requirements, the academic adviser will help decide upon a study plan based upon the student's goals and the requirements for a degree. During the academic year, students should make appointments with their academic adviser at regular intervals (a good time is just prior to the next semester registration period) in order to review their progress.

Freedom of the Individual to choose

(From U.S. Classroom Culture by Alisa Eland, Michael Smithee and Sidney L. Greenblatt).

"Students have a great deal of freedom to choose their major field of study, courses and research topics and designs. They also have the ability to change their academic path, almost at any point in their education." Many international students "find the amount of choice and freedom in U.S. universities to be appealing. In fact, the flexibility of the system is one for

the reasons students choose to study in the United States. But with freedom comes responsibility. Students must learn how to make their own decisions. Students will likely not find as much assistance with making choices in the United States as in other countries. This can be frustrating and even daunting to students who previously were in an education system in which administrators and instructors make the majority of academic decisions. In the U.S.

such students need to take responsibility to learn about available options, and they may need to learn decision-making skills as well.

Good decision making comes with experience and consultation." Students that are new to the system "must focus on choosing courses, in addition to making decisions about housing, transportation, and employment. Students need to consider multiple factors when making these choices. They are responsible for exploring options, gathering information, and seeking advice. Academic advisers can give information about courses and degree requirements, but ultimately the student must decide what is best for them." For international students, other factors, such as parents' perspectives, may play an important role in decision-making."

Seeking the help of an international student adviser can help students in the process. In fact, while the international adviser will not make decisions for the student, such a discussion will help the student find a way to manage his/her decision-making process.

The Importance of Volunteering

Since the early nineteenth century observers have commented on the important role volunteering plays in U.S. culture. A number of U.S. Americans feel a strong commitment to give to their communities. It is within this tradition that every year thousands of College students volunteer with community organizations working on such issues as hunger, homelessness, environmental protection, tutoring/mentoring, human rights, or advocacy for social justice. It is not hard to find volunteer opportunities. Volunteering not only is personally satisfying, but it can provide insights into U.S. culture.

There are hundreds of opportunities to volunteer in the community, ranging from one-time experiences to sustained weekly involvement of two to ten hours over a semester or a year. Many colleges also have on-campus office to learn about these, and to receive peer advising assistance in locating the right volunteer option for each student. Some programs involve volunteering over a semester or an academic year.

Volunteering opportunities are also good for "resume building." Several American employers look favourably at activities that show dedication and commitment to others, willingness to move beyond one-self, and/or ability to go outside one's comfort zone.

Leadership: An important Skill to learn in U.S. higher Education Institutions

One of the goals of U.S. higher education institutions is to create leaders for a diverse and democratic society. The word "Leader" in this sense refers to individuals that: accept responsibility for self, family, community, and societal well-being; and have the capacity to be productive, and to help create nurturing families, responsible institutions, and healthy communities. When people take it on themselves to get involved and make a difference, social change occurs. Along these lines, leadership is viewed as an essential ingredient promoting the positive transformation and prosperity of American society, which in turn will

reflect those values so close to the heart of American culture: opportunity, responsibility (towards self and others), equity, access, participation, and justice.

Many American universities, including the University of Minnesota, embrace and implement a social model of student leadership development; they do so by providing students (and staff) with a number of curricular and programming activities. According to the model: leadership is viewed as a process rather than as a position; the model explicitly promotes the values of equity, social justice, self-knowledge, personal empowerment, collaboration, citizenship, and service; service to others provides a powerful vehicle for developing student leadership capabilities in a collaborative environment (learning happens by "making meaning" of life experiences). The model has two primary goals: to develop in each student greater: self-knowledge (understanding of one's talents, values, interests, especially as these relate to the student's capacity to provide effective leadership) and leadership competence (the capacity to mobilize oneself and others to serve and work collaboratively); and to facilitate positive social change at the institution or in the community.

Locating U.S. Postsecondary Schools and Higher Education Institutions

It is important that any career and technical education school or higher education institution that you select be accredited by a recognized accrediting agency. Accreditation by a recognized agency allows credits and degrees earned to be recognized by institutions, employers and state licensing boards outside the home state or territory as well as by recognition authorities in other countries. The following searchable databases contain only institutions and programs accredited by recognized accrediting agencies.

[**ED Database of Accredited U.S. Institutions and Programs**](#) is a database of accredited postsecondary career and technical schools, higher education institutions, and specialized programs located inside the territorial United States.

[**CHEA Database of Institutions and Programs Accredited by Recognized U.S. Accrediting Organizations**](#) provides the ability to search for accredited U.S. institutions and branches located outside as well as inside the territorial United States.

[**College Opportunities Online Locator \(COOL\)**](#) is a database of accredited postsecondary career and technical schools, higher education institutions, and specialized programs searchable by state, degree level or program.