

INTRODUCTION

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

Welcome to the exciting and challenging world of teaching in the American educational system. Whether you are a visiting scholar, a new professor, an international teaching assistant (ITA), or an intern, this guidebook is designed to help you understand and appropriately respond to your experiences as a teacher in the United States.



The institution where you plan to teach wants and expects you to succeed; otherwise they would not have offered you a teaching position. Because your success also contributes to your school's success, most schools offer international teachers some training in teaching, English language, and American culture.

A safe strategy for managing your own learning is to take advantage of the training programs available to you, but don't let those programs be the only training you receive. In addition to whatever teacher training your school may offer, this book will help you become a successful teacher in the U.S.

Your school's training programs and this book are both parts of teacher training, but a significant part of your cultural training will come from firsthand interaction with Americans and American culture. Likewise, an important part of the academic experience for American students is interaction with you. This may sound simple enough, but many intercultural interactions go wrong. So, it is essential to understand the differences between your culture and educational systems and American culture and educational systems, as described in this book.

Although living and teaching in a new culture is very demanding, you have the power to determine what kind of experience you will have. On the one hand, your time as an international teacher can be frustrating and lonely. On the other hand, it can be an enjoyable learning opportunity. As you read this book and adapt to living and teaching in the United States, be slow to make judgments about people, experiences, and customs. Have patience and a sense of humor, whenever possible. As you become more accustomed to American life, you will become more skilled at managing your responsibilities, and you will become a comfortable, skilled, and inspiring teacher who will build wonderful relationships with your students.

THE U.S. EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

As a new teacher in the United States, it is important for you to understand the academic backgrounds of typical American students and the educational system that you are entering.

2.1 Primary and Secondary Schools

Whether you teach at a secondary school or at a college, the students you teach will come from a variety of educational backgrounds. The majority of students in the United States attend locally-funded public schools. Local, state, and federal governments fund **public schools**. Typically state and local governments contribute most of the funding, while the federal government contributes about 13%. This does vary somewhat from state to state, but public school students do not have to pay tuition to attend.

Nowadays more and more children are actually beginning their educational experience in **preschools**. These schools are for children aged three and four. They may be private or public. One well-known national **preschool** program, Head Start, is designed to meet the needs of families who cannot afford private preschools.

Students generally start **primary school**, usually referred to as **elementary school**, when they are five years old. In elementary school, they complete grades K (**kindergarten**) through six. Then students enter **middle school** or **junior high school**. The grades included in middle school and junior high school vary around the country, usually starting in fifth or sixth grade and ending in eighth or ninth. Students are generally 12 years old when they enter the seventh grade.

High school in the United States consists of grades nine (or ten) through grade twelve. When ninth grade is included in high school, students are referred to as **freshmen**; in tenth grade they are called **sophomores**; in eleventh grade they are **juniors**; and in twelfth grade they are **seniors**. Students generally enter ninth grade at age 14; by the time students graduate from secondary school, most are 18 years old. Unlike many other countries where students take placement exams to determine what secondary school they will attend, students in the

United States follow school zoning rules and usually attend the school that is closest to their place of residence. Each school belongs to a **school district**. A school district is an organization that oversees and regulates multiple schools in one area. Generally, the school district is responsible for things like staff assignments, curriculum development, finances, and student transportation.

There are many options for students who do not want to attend a public school. **Private schools** require students to pay tuition because private schools do not receive any state or federal government money. About 10% of all students in the United States attend private schools. Of those students, about 43% attend a **religious private school**, which usually uses a religion-based curriculum. **Prep schools** are also available to students. These are private schools whose main focus is to prepare students to enter a prestigious university. Many prep schools are also **boarding schools**. **Charter schools** are another option for students. Charter schools are publicly funded but may also receive funding from private sources and do not require the students to pay tuition. They usually have open enrollment and any student can attend a charter school as long as the school has space available. Charter schools have been gaining popularity in recent years (many have a **waiting list**) because a charter school may focus on a specialized curriculum such as an internationalized curriculum or curriculum based on U.S. history and the constitution. Teachers are allowed more freedom to be creative and innovative in teaching the curriculum.

Alternative schooling options include **homeschooling**, in which the students do not attend daily classes at school but study at home, often taught by their mother or father. In addition, there has been a recent interest in **online schools**. Online schools can be public or private and provide an alternative to attending daily, structured classes at set times and in set locations.

At the secondary level, some students drop out of school, study on their own, and take a test called the G. E. D. (General Educational Development). By passing the test they are considered to have the equivalent of a secondary school **diploma**.

2.2 The No Child Left Behind Act

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), a federal government initiative, was passed in 2001. The purpose of the act is to ensure that all children, regardless of socioeconomic status and other factors, receive an adequate and equal education. This federal act requires any schools receiving state or federal funding to show through testing that their students are making adequate progress. The NCLB requires public schools to administer statewide standardized tests to all students. If a school's students repeatedly perform poorly on the standardized tests, the school will be required to take corrective action, which may include replacing teachers, closing the school, or hiring an outside company to help run the school.

NCLB has been controversial. In many parts of the U.S., there are efforts being made to change it, encouraging teachers to teach to the particular needs of their students and spend less time on preparing their students for standardized tests. Other educators point to school improvement under the NCLB.

2.3 Colleges and Universities

Whether you are teaching in a high school or at a university, it is important to understand the different types of higher education institutions available to students. **Technical colleges** usually offer two-year programs that provide a certificate or **associate's degree** in specialized areas such as dental hygiene, culinary arts, massage therapy, and firefighting. **Community colleges** are similar to technical colleges because they provide two-year degree programs resulting in an associate's degree. Community colleges tend to be less expensive than four-year colleges and are often in close proximity to where students live, allowing students to live at home while they attend school. Many students attend community colleges for two years and then transfer to a four-year college to complete the requirements for their bachelor's degree. A **business college** is also a two-year program. It provides students with vocational skills such as typing, computing, clerical work, and bookkeeping. It is different from a **business school**, which is most often found within a four-year college and leads to a bachelor's or master's degree.

2.8 Sports in Schools

Student athletics is a big part of secondary school and college life. Depending upon where in the United States a student lives, their public high school team may be the main source of entertainment for the town in which they attend school. For example, high school football games are often a community event with parents, friends, and neighbors attending the game on a Friday or Saturday night. Consequently, unlike in some other countries, high school athletes often become the center of student attention, and they are held in high esteem by their high school peers.

In many countries around the world, high school-aged athletes attend a school that is known for its focus on a particular sport. This is not common in the U.S., but there are some private schools dedicated to a sport such as skiing. In the United States, if high school student athletes attend a public school, they are required to attend the appropriate school within their district (probably the school closest to their place of residence).



When exceptional student athletes graduate from high school they are often recruited by colleges and universities. Student athletes frequently choose the school they will attend based on the college athletic program and/or the scholarship the college offers them. As with secondary school, college athletes are highly esteemed on most campuses. If a student performs well on a top-ranked team, after they graduate from college, they may become a professional athlete.

AMERICAN STUDENTS AND CLASSROOM CULTURE

3.1 Student Development

Most American students have not yet decided what their future professions will be when they are in secondary school or beginning higher education. In the U.S. students generally specialize in their studies later than do students in other countries. The college undergraduate years are the first opportunity for many of them to live independently from their parents—though many students are still supported by their parents financially, and many still live with their parents. Undergraduate students are still developing socially and emotionally. Particularly in lower-level courses at a college, students might not be prepared for functioning independently in a higher education context.

3.2 Student Obligations

Since most of your contact with students is in the classroom, it might be easy to forget that their lives outside the classroom often differ greatly from your life and from the lives of their classmates. Understanding your students' lives outside of class can help you interpret the behavior you see during class.

Like you, most students have obligations outside of class. A great number of students work part- or full-time jobs while simultaneously struggling to manage their school responsibilities. Car payments, tuition, and housing costs are common student expenses that may cause them to feel extra pressure as they try to complete class assignments on time. Other obligations outside of class might include involvement in clubs, bands, or sports teams. In such cases, it is advisable to ask students participating in these types of activities to provide written notification of dates that may conflict with attendance or assignments.

Unlike students in many other countries, some young undergraduate students are married. They are adapting to a new lifestyle. They share interdependence with their new family—especially with their spouse and, possibly, children. A student might perform poorly because they were awake all night with a baby or because they needed to care for a sick spouse. Most institutions do not have a standardized policy for dealing with a student’s personal issues. It is often left to the discretion of the instructor. Be sure to know your institution’s policy on excused absences. Then make your policies clear to students at the beginning of the semester. If a student informs you in advance that an extracurricular activity conflicts with class, you may want to work together to find ways that assignments can be made up. Showing that you respect their other obligations while still holding them to a high standard of performance will help build a classroom of mutual respect. As you learn about your students, show that you remember details from their lives. Call your students by their first names. Talk to your students before and after class. Greet your students when you see them during other hours of the day. Ask them about events in their lives that they have shared with the class. Doing this will show your students that you care about them. Ultimately, students want you to get to know them.

3.3 Diverse Academic Backgrounds

There is no simple description of an American student’s level of learning or academic capacities, because students come from diverse academic backgrounds. Even within a single American high school the student population is quite diverse. In the United States, unlike many other countries, students are usually assigned to their high school based on the neighborhood in which they live, not their academic ability or professional interest. Students of very different abilities and ambitions can be found within a single high school classroom, but the curriculum is intended to be understandable and accessible to all of them.

Because American high school students are usually still deciding what career they would like to pursue, American higher education institutions typically require all students to take introductory-level classes on various topics called general education classes—such as history, science, math, and language. This helps them to broaden their education and decide on a possible college major. By the time students begin college, many of them may still be searching for a direction for their future studies; your presentation of the subject matter that you teach may help them discover which direction to take.

Another factor to consider when thinking about your students and their needs is the type of institution in which you are teaching. The institution's admission requirements and expectations may give you an indication of the academic skills and capabilities that your students come prepared with. When attempting to understand your students' academic capabilities, you may want to consider the following key aspects of the numerous American institutions of higher learning.

Differences in institutions

- ✿ Type of institution (secondary, college, university)
- ✿ Admission requirements (SAT/ACT score, high school GPA)
- ✿ Academic programs available
- ✿ Faculty research requirements
- ✿ Public or private
- ✿ Graduate degrees available
- ✿ Size of institution
- ✿ Location of institution

The more prestigious the institution, the more your students may expect your class to be rigorous and challenging. This does not guarantee that all students will be willing to put in the time needed to succeed in a difficult class, but if they have been admitted to a competitive institution, they should be capable of doing the work you require.

Follow these tips for creating appropriate student/teacher relationships:

- ✿ Be friendly, but not friends, while you are their teacher.
- ✿ Treat all students equally. Call on them equally, smile at them equally, and grade them equally.
- ✿ Apply classroom rules to all students equally. Do not show favoritism.
- ✿ Avoid discussing overly personal topics in private settings. Do not discuss students in the class with other students in that class.
- ✿ Keep your office door open when meeting with students.

Do not let these guidelines for friendship make you afraid of being close to your students. Remember that they need to know that you care about them. As the semester progresses, you will probably become closer with some or all of your students. That is good. Professors and teachers have been known to invite classes to their houses for casual get-togethers during the semester. This kind of interaction can be good as long as it is a whole-class activity and not just you meeting with one student.

3.14 Sexual Harassment

The term “sexual harassment” means unwanted sexual attention in an education or work setting. Sexual harassment is most obvious when promises or threats related to a position (status), employment, or grades are linked to requests for sexual favors. Suggestions for sexual favors may even come from subordinates or from students, but consent and participation from the teacher is not allowed. Federal law forbids this behavior, and educational institutions also have policies against it. Furthermore, sexual harassment can include even passive behaviors, including inappropriate glances or acts of speech such as gender-based joking or comments. And be careful about touching students. A friendly, caring gesture may be misinterpreted by the student as a sexually motivated action.

A more comprehensive definition of sexual harassment cannot be given here, because specific policies differ from place to place. Read the policy at your school for more information.

3.15 Tips for Working with Different Student Types

❁ *With students who don't seem interested in the class:*

These students prefer a lot of structure in class and require positive feedback for their contributions. Make your syllabus clear and easy to follow. They likely won't wade through pages of prose to find course requirements. Positive and specific feedback may spark an interest in the subject, and they may become more attentive and hardworking if they feel they are doing well. Be sure to have lots of hands-on activities as well as real-world examples, interesting anecdotes, and creative activities.



❁ *With students who seem excessively busy, overworked, or burdened:*

Encourage these students in very specific areas where they perform well. Reassure them that they are doing well, or that their efforts in a certain area are good. Be specific in both written and verbal praise.

❁ *With talkative or relationship-focused students:*

Allow for the students to seek a personal relationship with you, but work to develop a positive way to contain or channel their energy. For example, it is acceptable to joke with them in class as long as it does not distract from the learning atmosphere for other students or hinder other students' progress.

class. Try to find a balance between trust and caution that is appropriate for your particular students.

- ✿ Make tests and quizzes fair and meaningful.
- ✿ Create several versions of the same test so that students sitting next to each other will have different tests.
- ✿ Spread out student seating as much as possible and walk up and down the aisles during tests. Stand in the back of the classroom for part of the test.
- ✿ Do not allow students to use any cell phones, iPads, calculators, etc., during test time unless needed on the test.
- ✿ Have students put belongings in the front of the classroom; ask them to remove hats and sunglasses.
- ✿ Have students leave all food and especially water bottles with labels in their bags.
- ✿ Do not let friends sit next to each other.

If you think you see cheating going on during a test you can do the following:

- ✿ Continue the test; do not stop it.
- ✿ Approach the student and ask them to stop talking or put away any suspicious material.
- ✿ Remind the students mid-test that they must keep their eyes on their own paper.
- ✿ If necessary, separate students mid-test.
- ✿ Record names of students who cheated, invite them into your office and ask them if they cheated. If they did, follow university policy.

Some educational systems have committees that deal with cheating. Not only can you ask these committees whether your student has a history of cheating, you can refer your student to the committee if it is determined that they have been dishonest. The committee can help the student overcome his or her tendency to dishonesty (McKeachie, 1986).

COPING WITH YOUR CHALLENGES

When students walk into a classroom on the first day of class and realize that their teacher is not American, they immediately attach expectations and stereotypes to the teacher. Professors, colleagues, and strangers may also have opinions about you before they get to know you, just as you have opinions about them. This is an unfortunate fact, but you do not need to be troubled by the attitudes of those around you. Instead, use this chapter to learn what preconceived ideas your students and colleagues may have about you (Damron, 2001). Understanding Americans' cultural expectations will help you understand and better manage their interactions with you.

5.1 Common Complaints from Students

Negative beliefs about international teachers can be better understood by familiarizing yourself with student's perceptions and attitudes. The following sections explore some of those perceptions.

❁ *International teachers stick to the book too much.*

"Sticking to the book" usually means that a person is unable or unwilling to change the content of the lesson in instances when it could or should be adapted. It can be thought of as rigidity, strictness, and lack of creativity.

❁ *International teachers are not good at explaining.*

Students expect the teacher to be able to explain concepts in different ways. If you struggle with this, review difficult vocabulary before class and find synonyms or alternate explanations that you may use if students don't understand your first explanation.

❁ *International teachers are unable to relate the material to the real world.*

The popular opinion among students is that international teachers struggle to provide real-life examples and practical applications of the classroom material. To overcome this, review material before class and think of various ways the material can be applied to real life so that students can easily understand. For example in a physics class, when discussing force, time, and momentum, use a bat and baseball to illustrate the concept.

❁ *International teachers give bad grades.*

American students sometimes believe that international teachers give lower grades than American teachers. To avoid running into any problems of this nature, be sure to familiarize yourself with the grading standards of your supervisor or advising professor. Make sure that your grading policy and any exceptions to your policy are clearly explained in your syllabus.

❁ *International teachers have little interest in student/teacher relationships.*

Students have often reported that they feel that international teachers are distant and unconcerned with having a relationship with students. Remember that students need to feel that their teacher cares about them, so the perception that an international teacher is distant – even when it is mistaken – will be hurtful to the students' involvement in the class.

❁ *International teachers are responsible for communication problems.*

Be aware that students generally admit an unwillingness to work on communicating better with international teachers. They acknowledge that they think the teacher should solve issues related to communication problems. If you feel frustrated in communication

difficulties, remember that communication takes two people. Your students can and should help out in difficult situations.

❁ *English: the root of all problems*

Most students agree that the cause of problems with their international teachers is the English language. The quality of international teachers' communication skills is the biggest single complaint from students. Because students may not have much experience with international people, this often limits their patience, compassion, and willingness to understand.

Finally, consider the fact that some students blame their classroom failures on other people. Consequently, these students complain about all of their teachers: American or international, TA or full professor. Therefore, do not evaluate your own performance by the way a minority of students appear to evaluate you. With time they will learn that you are knowledgeable and competent and that they can learn a great deal from you.

5.2 Becoming Acculturated to American Life

Although improving your fluency in English is an important aspect of becoming a better international teacher, it is just as important to become "fluent" in American culture. The United States of America has historically thought of itself as a "melting pot." This means that people from all countries and cultures have come to this land and have blended together to make American culture what it is. Most Americans welcome newcomers to this country, but many expect them to assimilate into the people and cultures that are already here, like different ingredients melting together. In recent years, however, with the large number of illegal immigrants, Americans have become less and less welcoming to immigrants or visitors from other cultures.

Students and colleagues will hope that you are learning about the local culture and that you can adapt to it, at least while you are in the classroom. Some students and faculty believe that international teachers purposefully