
ambassadorship in an age of global conflict

What determines someone's initial perceptions of you, your country, and your culture? At the core, it's their attitudes toward the political, economic, social, and cultural systems of your homeland. This perspective on your home country is a big part of what you'll gain by studying away. You'll see first-hand that the world is asymmetrical, full of people and nations with divergent views—and yet that we are more interdependent than ever. Your time abroad will ready you to live in that world.

Be prepared, though. Recent events have altered the United States' image overseas. Most people are still very welcoming, but it helps to be ready to discuss current events in a considered, respectful manner. In a way, during your time away, you'll be something of an informal ambassador for the U.S., introducing others to a real-life, representative U.S. citizen. Consider your actions in that context, and get ready for the kind of international exchange that transforms all who participate—and, slowly, even their communities and nations.

The image of the U.S. overseas

When people of other nations think about the U.S., what do they think of? A land of freedom that provides a safe environment for its residents. A society that offers wealth, upward mobility, and other opportunities that may not be available in their homeland. People with a can-do mentality that has led them to many prominent achievements. Many aspects of U.S. life are admired, but there are questions, too. How can such a wealthy society have such poor health and emergency care for the less fortunate? Why does the Iraq War, unpopular in many places around the globe, continue? Questions like these have led to a tough examination of U.S. leadership.

In this world of CNN and the Internet, what ends up in the news becomes part of the process of instant, constant communication and commentary that we all participate in—and influences people's thinking worldwide. For example, the way Hurricane Katrina was handled injured America's image as a land of plenty where problems get fixed, as a society that works even in the face of natural disaster. Events like these have led to a deterioration of the U.S.'s image overseas. Polls conducted in many countries say that the proportion of people with positive opinions of the U.S. has fallen. Even in Europe and Latin America—traditionally regions full of strong U.S. supporters—America has become less popular. At times, these sentiments can even manifest themselves as a kind of anti-Americanism: when the U.S. is disliked for its views or actions, American citizens overseas can bear the consequences.

Now, most people you'll meet will be able to separate your behavior and intentions from that of your political leaders—and if they dislike the viewpoints of your President or Congress, they won't automatically dislike you. Most locals overseas are welcoming, curious about your beliefs, and understanding of your views even if you don't agree on every issue. Few think that the foreign policy of any sovereign nation should be conducted according to world opinion polls. People do evaluate U.S. cultural values and norms, though, whether consciously or unconsciously. And because we elect our political leaders, we can sometimes be perceived as responsible for their actions, and their unpopularity can become ours. In those cases, you could end up on the receiving end of negative feelings that arise when those in your host country are unhappy with American government and management. Of course, the attitudes you encounter will differ depending on where you study and who you meet, and attitudes change over time. Students who lived overseas during the Vietnam War remember being questioned (and even yelled at) about America's intentions and behavior in Southeast Asia. Strong reactions to volatile situations are natural, but as time passes, both situations and inclinations change. Much anti-American feeling, when it exists, is related to specific military, social, or foreign policies that are unpopular in one or more countries abroad. Even in times of dissent, though, the U.S. collectively, and its citizens individually, will be welcomed around the world.

ambassadorship in a global world

While you're away, you'll learn to cohabitate with people in your new host culture. How will you interact with locals to make friends? How will you promote the exchange of ideas across borders? Your ability to think for yourself, support a particular political or social agenda, and act as you see appropriate is part of your national heritage—and vital to real, person-to-person international exchange. If you think about it, while you're away, you're representing the U.S. as a kind of informal diplomat. When you have a conversation with someone, no matter how brief, you'll become part of his most recent and personal encounter with American behaviors and attitudes. You'll be part of what she thinks of when she thinks of the U.S. Think, consider, and discuss difficult issues respectfully. Here are some ways you can prepare:

before you go

You know perfectly well that not everyone shares your opinions, and you'll probably meet people overseas who disagree with your point of view on certain subjects or find U.S. society less than perfect. Some may be intelligent, well-educated, and polite; some may be misinformed, rude, or even radical. No matter who you encounter, it'll help if you spend time in advance thinking about what situations might arise and considering appropriate responses. You could also read up on current U.S. and international events. You'll notice that many people overseas study U.S. history extensively and follow U.S. news closely. More information at your fingertips will help you bring more to the discussion and express what you're thinking and feeling more clearly. With a little awareness and preparedness, you'll be very ready to interact positively with people who may see the world differently than you do.

while you're there

You'll find that many people overseas enjoy discussing social and political issues, and you'll have plenty of chances for fascinating conversations with people who espouse different points of view. Some may be on lighthearted subjects like your personal interests and local or U.S. pop culture; others might involve weightier topics like the role of government in society, the gap between the haves and the have-nots, human rights, access to government services, support for those who have not been able to support themselves, the extent to which a nation's values should be exported elsewhere, and how military might should be exercised. Just recognize that these debates are not about determining black from white, good from evil, right from wrong, red state from blue state. They are about understanding different points of view and evaluating your own ideas in the context of new ones. Be prepared to reconsider your own views, or better understand why you think what you do.

Go into any experience remembering that you are, though informally, representing the U.S. This doesn't mean you have to represent U.S. interests as a nation, just that you want to represent what you think it means to be an American like you. It's a chance to confront stereotypes with truth. Are you a straight-A chemistry major who is a first-generation college student and grew up with a single parent? Or are you an economics major who loves playing ultimate Frisbee and writing your politically-themed blog? By being yourself—and representing various dimensions of our society like gender, race, socioeconomic background, hobbies, academic interests, and personal views—you can widen the very definition of what it means to be an American.

Always be respectful when expressing yourself, even if you're confronted with hostility. If things get heated, you can always agree to disagree. The plus side of all of this conscious thinking about the exchanges you'll have is that it really helps with your cross-cultural learning. Even if you're only overseas for a few weeks, you'll get a clearer understanding of how you as a person—and the U.S. as a nation—fit into the larger world.

once you're home

Part of the circle of going away and coming home again involves assimilating what you learned into your life going forward. Telling tales of your experiences—because that always involves reflecting on events and drawing conclusions—is extremely valuable in putting your time away into perspective. Also, what you encountered while overseas might be different from what friends and family know and understand, so you can help widen their worlds by explaining the different views you encountered in your host country. Prepare to tell

your story to family, friends, and maybe even groups you're involved with at your host university through photos, essays, and videos. The process of storytelling will help you think critically about your own views, the feelings of others you encountered, and our human responsibility as individuals and societies to address issues that inspire dissent. Conscious reflection and communication with others will not only help you get everything you can out of your time abroad—it will equip us all to be better citizens of the U.S. and the world.

enhancing study away

- get up to speed on local and international history and current events
 - think about what kind of political, social, and economic discussions might arise; think through appropriate responses
 - consider new points of view and re-evaluate your own beliefs
 - be respectful when expressing yourself
 - if things get heated, agree to disagree
 - once home, put your intercultural exchange into perspective by sharing what you observed overseas with friends and family
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So What Are U.S. Values?

Answers to such questions always depend upon who is observing and reporting. For example, a few of the most common conceptions held by people from other countries about people in the US include:

- Ignorance of geography, world affairs, and other cultures
- Generosity and charity
- Wealth and materialism
- Informality
- Loud, uncultured, & naïve behavior and attitudes
- Living to work, not working to live
- Self-assurance and independence
- Emphasis upon practical, problem-solving solutions
- Arrogance and self-righteousness
- Showing little respect for authority
- Friendliness, they want to be liked
- Relatively blunt and direct communication style

Obviously, people from the U.S. would see some of these characteristics as positive. Others are obviously negative and critical of the U.S. To succeed overseas, it's important to resist reacting negatively when people suggest that your values are not seen or appreciated in the same way you're used to.

Trying to see things from another cultural perspective is always useful because the same behavior can be interpreted completely differently. This is one of the first rules for going to a new culture.

For example, when a person from the U.S. is showing enthusiasm, high spirits, and typical excitement, local people may interpret that behavior as boorish, undisciplined, rude, and insensitive. The normal U.S. tendency to be friendly toward strangers, smiling at them and making eye contact, is considered quite strange in many parts of Europe and Asia. This can be seen as inappropriate behavior, often associated with the mentally ill or prostitutes! The U.S. student who insists that a relatively new acquaintance use first names can be particularly disconcerting to adults in societies that value hierarchy.

The underlying value structures and ideas which comprise U.S. cultural values can be reduced to a relatively few general themes. It doesn't mean that all U.S. citizens believe in every value that exists in their culture or always act according to these principles.

U.S. Citizen Values Definitions

Some definitions of some of the most commonly held values in the U.S.:

- Action-oriented: Doing versus talking, putting meaning and action behind your words
- Directness: Honesty and forwardness, saying what you mean
- Emphasis on Accomplishment: Success is very important
- Optimism: Always thinking positively, viewing the glass as 'half-full'
- Self-Determination: Determination of one's own fate or course of action without compulsion; free will
- Self-Reliance: Depending on yourself, being able to do things on your own
- Not judging by appearances: What lies beneath the surface is most important
- Risk-Taking: Experimentation, doing something new is good
- Egalitarianism: Equality, we are all the same

Responding to Stereotypes about You

While you are away you are likely to encounter many occasions where the host nationals or other international students will make stereotypical comments about the U.S. and U.S. Citizens.

One of the things you can do is explain your culture in terms of its general patterns. This assumes that you know what they are, which is something most of us don't think about very often. The following section will introduce you to the numerous values that underlie the actions and thoughts of most people living in the United States. For example, imagine that your Thai host father has commented on how individualistic people from the U.S. are. He claims they always want to express their own ideas and look after their own welfare rather than their family's. Using generalizations, you can give a cultural overview, saying something like James Lassegard did:

Yes, Americans like to be independent and to see themselves as in control of their lives. This does not mean that all people living in the U.S. value individualism in the same way or to the same extent. It simply means that many, if not most, Americans appear to have this value, and that the culture views this as a positive attribute. - James Lassegard, Japan

The Wealthy U.S. Citizen?

One challenging stereotype people may have is that you're rich. The reality may be that you're going into personal debt to be on this trip or that you have saved for months for the opportunity to study away. In either case, you may feel very far removed from wealth and very much like a poor student!

Yet by world standards, you may very well be wealthy. Consider the following:

- Did you have a job to save money for study away?
- Will you be able to find a job when you return?
- While attending college in the U.S. may not feel like elitism, only 1 in 5 people do. Do you know what the ratio is in your host country?

In many countries, the United States has an image as a land of limitless wealth and opportunity. The lives depicted on U.S. soap operas and in most Hollywood movies probably bear little resemblance to your own, and it may seem laughable that those depictions would be accepted as reality anywhere.

With the imbalance of superstars, pop singers, and multimillionaire athletes versus ordinary U.S. citizens represented in the media, it is not surprising that there is the stereotype of people from the U.S. as rich and materialistic, and by extension, greedy, shallow, and wasteful. Depending on your host country, you may find a strange mix of curiosity and apathy directed toward you because of these stereotypes about the U.S.

You may hold strong views about the United States. You may feel that your home country is the land of opportunity, a special place in the world where those who work hard can achieve unlimited personal success. Or maybe you feel that this is a country riddled with social problems and gross inequalities. Or you may not have given these issues much consideration up to this point, and you accept the United States as it is. Regardless of your opinions, it will be worthwhile to pay attention to the differences in wealth and personal opportunities that

you notice between your host country and your home country. Some differences may be overt and some may be subtle, so look closely. Write down what you observe and talk with your friends and host family if you can. In the end, the point is not to come away with a definitive answer or opinion, or to define which value system is right and which is wrong. Hopefully you will discover what you feel is valuable in both cultures.

Culture-Learning Strategies Inventory

Strategies for when I am in surroundings that are culturally different from what I am used to:

- Think about different cross-cultural perspectives to examine situations in which I seem to offend someone or do something wrong.
- Figure out what cultural values might be involved when I encounter a conflict or something goes wrong.
- Use generalizations instead of stereotypes when I make statements about people who are different from me.
- Consider ways in which different cultures might view things in different ways (e.g., how different cultures value alone time or independence).
- Counter stereotypes others use about people from my country by using generalizations and cultural values instead.
- Make distinctions between behavior that is personal (unique to the person), cultural (representative of the person's culture), and universal (a shared human concern).
- Look at similarities as well as differences between people of different backgrounds