

Life beyond the classroom: How to reap the rewards of an American education

By Shelley Motz

American colleges and universities are known throughout the world for their exceptional research and teaching facilities but there is more to college than hitting the books.

Although students are expected to meet the academic demands of their classes, educators throughout the United States are increasingly encouraging them to satisfy their emotional, physical, social and spiritual needs as well.

By immersing yourself in American culture and participating in a surprising range of social and extra-curricular activities, you could earn much more than a degree. You could establish enduring friendships and gain experiences that will benefit you throughout your entire lifetime. You will also enjoy an incredible opportunity to share your culture and traditions with people from all over the world.

Get Connected

The importance of supportive friends and advisors cannot be underestimated. When you first arrive on campus you may feel isolated and alone, especially if you have traveled to the United States without family or friends to accompany you.

Saned Raouf, an international student from Jordan who is currently enrolled in his freshman year at Yale University, urges students to “remember that the American students are really in the same position.” Even if their families are not so far away, he points out that “in the beginning, all students are very apprehensive and unsure of how to act or adapt to college life and classes. You are not alone!”



Raouf was fortunate. A friend of his brother lived nearby so he knew someone who could help him settle into the United States and become familiar with its customs. If you do not know anyone near your campus, you do not have to worry. There are a number of programs and services available to help you make friends. At the same time, you will be shown around the campus and given links to your host community.

Find out what programs are available at your school and take advantage of any opportunities that present themselves. You will ease into college life more quickly and enjoy the experience a whole lot more.

Attend an orientation session

All schools offer orientation programs to ease the transition to college life. These vary widely, incorporating everything from half-day, on-site information sessions to weekend camping trips in nearby parks.

Most orientation programs, however, share some common objectives: articulating academic expectations; outlining appropriate behavior; introducing students to faculty; and coordinating social events where students can get to know their peers. Raouf, for example, initially met a lot of his friends through a series of orientations that were coordinated by Yale's International House.

Form a relationship with an American host family

Many schools also offer host family programs, which match international students with local families. These programs vary from school to school. Some provide housing while most simply extend opportunities for students to visit

the families' homes for meals, especially during traditional American holidays like Thanksgiving. All offer a unique opportunity to experience how an American family lives, providing a rich cross-cultural exchange and, in many cases, leading to rewarding, lifelong friendships. For many students, the opportunity to spend time with families—including grandparents and children—alleviates some feelings of homesickness and helps them feel less isolated from their own family.

Take advantage of mentoring and tutoring programs

On campus, international students can gain further support through services designed to meet their academic and social needs, including peer mentoring and one-on-one English as a Second Language tutoring. It can be especially helpful to have someone explain unfamiliar English words or phrases as well as pop culture references.

Join a study group

Many international students also choose to join or create study groups. Predictably, students who do so earn higher grades; they also tend to have a healthier outlook and find their classes more enjoyable. This isn't surprising. Study groups are an effective way to meet people who share similar interests. They also provide a forum for sharing ideas, comparing notes and preparing for exams.

Ideally, a study group should have a group leader as well as a designated meeting time and place. (Many campuses enable students to reserve rooms on campus. Other options include libraries, dorm rooms and cafeterias.) Everyone in the group should contribute equally and the experience should be fun and rewarding for everyone.

Share your culture and traditions with peers

Finally, most schools feature minority and international guest speakers, film festivals or

concert series in order to expose all students to diverse cultural experiences. By getting involved in—or even initiating—some of these events, you will be able to sample foods and cultural traditions from around the world while introducing your peers to authors or filmmakers from your own country.

Some of the events you are likely to find on campuses throughout the US are Holocaust Remembrance Week, Women's History Month and African American History Month. These cultural celebrations provide an enlightening experience for all students and offer international students in particular a close look at the diverse nature of America's population.

As you immerse yourself in your new community, explore this diversity. Reach out to as many people as you can. And, although it may seem less intimidating to introduce yourself to students with a similar background, try to strike a balance between the familiar and unfamiliar.



At Yale, Raouf has observed that a number of his peers primarily associate with other international

students. Over time, he has established a healthy mix of friends from the US and the Middle East as well as other parts of the world. In fact, he currently lives in an apartment with two Americans; he met one in his dorm and the other in a class.

Acknowledging that he was apprehensive about meeting new people at first, he offers this advice to other students in a similar position. "I think that you can try meeting some other international students first—if you feel like you have more in common with them—before branching out to meet more people throughout the university."

Find your school spirit

School spirit abounds on American campuses. And, as any student will tell you, there is always something to do. From varsity games to fraternities and sororities, from service organizations to religious services, there is a club or program to satisfy all of your interests.

Athletics

Sports are a big part of American life; they contribute significantly to the American economy as well as its culture, especially baseball, American football, soccer (European football), basketball and hockey.

College and university campuses typically offer three different levels of athletic competition: varsity teams, intramural teams and club teams. The most elite athletes perform at the varsity level, which requires intense tryouts, a rigorous practice schedule and serious commitment. At the other end of the continuum are intramural teams, which are created solely for fun and fitness. There are no coaches nor are there any tryouts. Club teams exist somewhere in between; this level is often the first stop for students interested in playing at the varsity level.

When asked what role sports play in his life, Raouf jokes: “Only the obvious.

Like all the other international students I play soccer—or football. We put together a team for that purpose.”

Of course, if you are not athletically inclined, you can still join the fun. Cheering your team on from the sidelines can be just as exciting as scoring a touchdown or winning goal. Even Raouf, who admits he is not that interested in this aspect of college life, finds himself

watching college basketball with friends during the peak season, known as March Madness.

Join a Club

Social clubs bring people with similar interests together and provide much-needed breaks from studying. During orientation, your school will provide you with a list of the different clubs operating on campus. Since there are hundreds of clubs on most campuses, it may be difficult at first to decide which ones to join.

Many students find it helpful to attend a few events or meetings before they commit to any particular group. They may also drop in on several different clubs until they find the ones they like the best. They may even find that their reasons for joining a club change over time.

Initially, Raouf joined the Arab Student Organization at Yale in order to meet people but he soon found himself taking on more and more responsibilities, eventually becoming an officer on the Board of Directors. He also began writing letters to the editor of the campus newspaper. Now he’s interested in writing longer articles for publication.

Whatever your interest, there is bound to be a club that meets your needs. Among your options: engaging in the arts by joining the drama club; raising money for non-profit organizations through a fraternity like Alpha Phi Omega; meeting people from around the world through the international students’ association; or serving on your student government.

Student governments in particular enable you to develop and fine-tune leadership skills. Many oversee budgets in excess of US\$1 million in student fees. They also liaise between students and campus administrators. All of which is invaluable to anyone hoping to pursue a career in management.

Serve Your Religious Community



Many international students stay connected to their culture and faith by participating in religious programming and services. Meeting with other students and community members who share your beliefs and traditions can help alleviate feelings of homesickness. It can also ease your transition to college life.

Many private colleges and universities allow religious groups to hold weekly meetings and special events on campus. Check with the Dean of Students to see if there are any suitable religious offerings available at your school. If there are not, explore places of worship nearby. The US is highly diverse, with a high number of faith communities and places of worship, including Muslim, Bahai'i and Christian among others.

Explore Your Community

Do not hesitate to explore the community surrounding your campus. The US is vast and varies greatly from region to region. Depending on where you settle, you may find yourself near mountain ranges, the desert or the ocean. Reading break and other holidays present a great opportunity to put your textbooks aside and enjoy a once-in-a-lifetime getaway. Your school most likely has a club that organizes camping trips or day hikes. You could also plan a trip on your own or with a group of friends.

And, do not forget to check out the nearest cities or towns. Travel guides and local newspapers are good sources of information about local attractions, including art galleries, science museums and restaurants. Other popular gathering places for students are movie theaters, comedy clubs, concert venues, cafés and swimming pools.

Some people, however, find everything they need on campus. Raouf admits that "Mostly I have stayed on campus; there is so much to do." Like Raouf, you may see little reason to leave the campus. Doing so, however, will help you experience America in a different way. Ask your friends to recommend their

favorite places, in addition to discovering new interests you may gain new experiences to share with your friends and family back home.

Get Involved

Once you have become familiar with your new home and have settled into a routine, consider finding ways to contribute to the community. Volunteerism is an important part of American culture. By volunteering your time, you will gain new skills, valuable work experience and personal satisfaction. For many people, volunteering is an emotionally rewarding experience. They take pride in knowing that they have made a positive impact on the environment or on someone's life.

Raouf agrees. When he first arrived at Yale, his dorm organized some volunteer activities. He took part and enjoyed the experience, which was entirely new to him.

It is not hard to get started. The Office of Student Affairs, or a similar department, on your campus can provide you with a list of student-run organizations seeking volunteers. These may range from large, established organizations like Amnesty International or Oxfam to smaller groups that address humanitarian causes, environmental concerns or other issues. If you would like to work on a number of different volunteer projects, then a service club like Circle K may be an ideal choice for you.

You can also meet community leaders and gain valuable work experience by volunteering for an organization off-campus. Two of the most established organizations in the US are the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) or Habitat for Humanity, a housing mission which brings groups of students together to build homes for people in need.

Getting Fit for Education

It may seem tempting to focus solely on your school work when you first arrive in the US.

After all, that is why you traveled so far from home. Academic advisors, however, would advise you to resist that temptation.

American campuses are vibrant places filled with innumerable opportunities for learning and engagement. By meeting your physical, social and spiritual needs you will be better prepared to meet academic demands—and you will enjoy your classes much more.

Despite the pressure to study night and day, studies have found that students who lead well-balanced lives perform better in school. And, employers are increasingly hiring well-rounded individuals with varied experiences and interests.

To get the most out of your American education strive for a healthy lifestyle. You will be able to study longer and more efficiently if you eat well, get sufficient sleep and exercise regularly.

Most schools provide students with complimentary access to gym facilities and equipment. Take advantage of it. Thirty minutes of cardiovascular exercise performed four times a week will relieve stress and help you stay mentally alert. If you do not like the gym, try running, cycling or swimming.

As for sleep, medical professionals advise students to get nine hours of sleep per night, however, most students admit they rarely sleep for more than seven hours.

Raouf admits that it can be difficult to manage your time and meet all of your obligations when in school. When asked what he likes to do in his spare time, he responds with good humor: “I feel like this is so silly, too typical of a college guy, but really, it’s sleep! I feel so exhausted that any time I can I try to catch up on my sleep!”

The decision to pursue an education in the US is not for everyone. College life is both physically and mentally exhausting, but it offers huge rewards. Just remember: the more

you invest into the experience, the greater the return.

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