

Academic Culture in the US University

Characterization of US and non-US educational systems:

US	Non-US
*Multiple models	*Hierarchy or centralization
*Complexity of interacting educational systems and subsystems. Can look both centralized and decentralized	*Local institutions depend on central government to make decisions
*US Dept of Education influences schools, but does not govern them	*Ministry of Education governs schools from the top down
*Flexibility for individual student, who can choose from range of subjects and change easily from one field to another	*Inflexibility for individual student, who must choose fixed plan of study and cannot deviate from it
*Admissions tests are designed, written, and scored by private organizations. There is no single national entrance exam	*Admissions tests and standards are administered by the central government
*Faculty is recruited through both public advertising and private solicitation. Hiring is competitive and intensive, with departmental colleagues choosing candidates. Institutions assess to ensure diversity and equality of opportunity. Focus is on teaching skills, research, and publications, with relative value accorded each varying by institution.	*Faculty is recruited centrally, certified, and allocated to institutions, or at different system levels. Certification requires proof of credentials and quality of references. Focus is on knowledge acquired and administrative experience where relevant
*Public institutions heavily funded by state and federal government funds; private institutions funded primarily through tuition, gifts from alumni, and endowments	*Heavily funded by government, as well as directed by employees of central government.

Structure of US Higher Education

There are more than 3,500 institutions of higher education in the US. These include two-year community colleges offering the Associate's degree, four-year colleges offering the Bachelor's degree and sometimes selected Master's and Doctoral degrees, universities offering degrees at every level and grouped by fields of study into various schools, institutes, and programs, and multiple-campus universities with an assortment of institutions at different levels throughout the state. There are also English-language institutes (within or separate from universities), distance-education and computer-based learning programs, and continuing education programs for adult learners.

Private and public colleges and universities are similarly organized, despite some important differences in funding and organizational structures. At Wesleyan:

The **Board of Trustees** appoints the President.

The **Vice-President for Academic Affairs/Provost** manages the various divisions and departments, overseeing the **Academic Deans** for each division (Humanities & Arts, Social & Behavioral Sciences, and Natural Science and Mathematics). They may also teach and do research.

Each academic department or program has a **Chairperson**, from within its faculty, who oversees the working of the relevant department or program. These positions rotate, usually every 2-3 years. Chairpersons also teach and do research.

Faculty (professors) are responsible for teaching and research in and beyond the classroom. Unlike their counterparts in other countries, faculty have open office hours for students with questions, generally encourage discussion in the classroom, and aim to help their students understand the material and produce solid academic work. Some courses will have **Teaching Assistants**.

Administrators work to help students with all aspects of life on campus, from physical and behavioral health to community service to athletics to dormitory living. There is much more administrative support on US campuses than at universities in other countries.

Secretaries and administrative assistants have more authority than do their counterparts in most countries. They are treated respectfully by students, staff, and faculty alike.

Standards of Behavior In and Beyond the Classroom

US college campuses require certain standards of behavior in order to achieve a safe, fair, and productive learning environment for everyone. This reflects US values of fairness and independence. Many of the standards students are expected to grasp relate to the diverse student population on campus in terms of ethnicity, race, country of origin, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. Standards of behavior seek to ensure the rights and responsibilities of all members of the community, regardless of background. See the Wesleyan Student Handbook for the Honor Code, Standards of Conduct, and related documents.

Pedagogical Approaches in the US University Classroom

The US classroom is a unique blend of pedagogical approaches and cultural values that has been influenced by this country's historical roots, by influential thinkers throughout the brief history of the US, and by national and regional cultural norms. Important cornerstones of the US classroom learning environment: individual rights, personal responsibility, freedom of choice, interactive learning, liberal education, independent

thinking, and democratic principles. Consider the differences between teacher-centered and learner-centered approaches to classroom culture:

Aspect	Teacher-Centered	Learner-Centered
Preferred teaching methods	Lecture	Lecture, large/small group discussion, application of theory
Instructor's role	Direct learning process Be source of knowledge Clarify/interpret written texts	Present content, facilitate dialogue, demonstrate analytical skills
Learner's role	Listen, take notes, read assigned texts, memorize content, demonstrate memorization in tests and papers	Listen, take notes, read, think critically about content, express perspectives in class, participate in dialogue, demonstrate understanding
Who directs learning process	Instructor	Instructor and student
Use of computer	Considered only as adjunct to the lecture	Can be intrinsic part of the course objectives, and used by professor to engage students in further exploration of the topic, as well as tangentially-related topics out of the classroom
Learning mode	Top-down, i.e. instructor imparts knowledge to students	Cooperative, participatory, interactive between instructor and learner
Evaluation methods	Written and oral exams	Written and oral exams, presentations, class participation, papers, quizzes, group projects, peer evaluation
Who conducts evaluation	Instructors evaluate students	Instructors evaluate students, students evaluate instructors, students evaluate each other
Desired outcomes	Memorize texts, absorb knowledge	Application of concepts to new situations, critical analysis skills

These two paradigms provide general guidelines for comparing different classroom approaches across cultures. Most classrooms draw heavily from one or the other of these models. Though both are often represented in the classrooms of a given country, generally one approach is more dominant in a particular country or institution.

Although the learner-centered approach is dominant in the US, the classroom experience also depends on the professor's style and field of study. The learner-centered approach is

avored in the social sciences and humanities, whereas the teacher-centered model is often more integrated with the learner-centered model in the sciences.

Teaching Methods in the US Classroom

Lecture is used to convey critical information, history, background, theories, and equations. The instructor will stand at the front of the room and present important information, equations, theories, models, history, context, and concepts.

Discussion, both for the full class and in smaller groups of students, is used to help students discuss and clarify what they understand, as well as add their own perspectives and experiences.

Observation enables students to learn by example, watching instructors and TAs demonstrate models and skills, or watching scientific phenomena, for instance in a lab.

Practical application is used to help students learn, understand, and apply new information and theories. The professor may initiate small discussion groups or encourage students to cite examples where the concept is used in various situations. Some departments permit students to do internships, laboratory research, or other activities that rely on practical application of theories.

Case studies and real-world examples are used in class and assignments to give students practice in applying new knowledge and concepts to specific situations.

Experiential or active learning applies what students have learned in a controlled environment or real-world setting, such as the lab, natural environment, or community.

Computer-based instruction provides a way to hold entire courses online, to expand on the lecture concepts or practice problems, to engage in online discussion about a topic, or to incorporate web-based technology or materials into the course.

Interaction in the Classroom: Importance and Challenges

Student participation is an essential part of the US classroom. The Socratic Method, whereby a professor poses questions to students in a public way, is a common approach to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding. Students not only must know the content of their courses, but also think independently about it and express their own perspectives and views in class and in their written work. If they disagree with the instructor or classmates, they can express this in class. This can be challenging for students accustomed to listening and taking notes rather than speaking up, especially when the course is offered in a language not your own.

Despite this emphasis on public speaking and discussion, some international students find debate in the US classroom to be less open than it would be in their home countries. Use your observational skills to determine the nature of the particular course you are in. Discuss with your professor your shyness or concern about your English level.

As an international student, you provide a valuable perspective to classmates and the professor in the learner-centered classroom. Student participation also helps the professor understand what students are learning and how well they understand the concepts at the heart of the course being taught. Furthermore, discussion of concepts often helps students – both those offering a view and those listening – a way to process the materials under review.

Communication Style

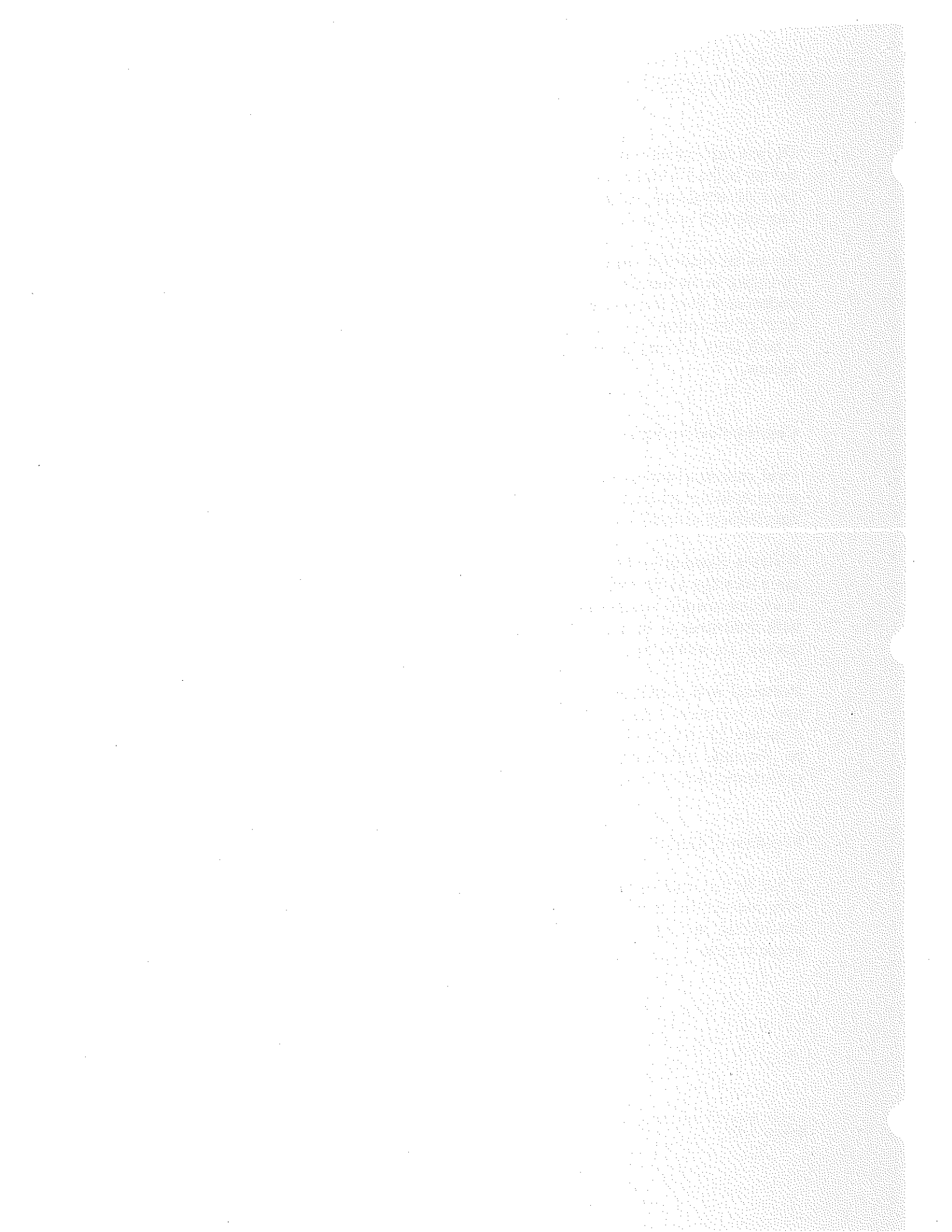
Oral communication: Be direct and specific, while also being respectful. If you do not understand the content of the course or can't keep up with classroom discussion, make an appointment to speak with your professor.

Written communication: Academic writing should be direct and clear, conveying the same message to all readers, and basing arguments in fact. You may need to learn some discipline-specific vocabulary. In class or in the syllabus, the professor may provide you with guidelines as to how to write papers for him/her, and may even suggest a style manual. Be sure to make use of Wesleyan's Writing Center and writing tutors.

Personal and professional: US faculty tend to be friendly and approachable, and to appear relatively informal. That said, the relationship between professor and student is considered to be a professional relationship, so it's best to keep your personal issues such as romantic relationships or homesickness separate from your relationship with professors (those who serve as advisors, such as Alice Hadler, are a notable exception).

Freedom of Choice

It can be very challenging to have no one tell you the 'right' way to select courses. Speak with your advisor to plan out a four-year schedule of courses that makes sense given your intellectual interests, but maintain sufficient flexibility to change as new academic interests arise.



Culture Shock

Culture shock: the anxiety produced when you move to a completely new environment. It's the feeling of not knowing what to do or how to do things in a new environment, and not knowing what is appropriate or inappropriate. It generally starts during the first few days/weeks of arriving in a new place.

Culture shock includes the physical and emotional discomfort you suffer when coming to live in another country or a place different from what you know. The way you lived before may not work in the new place. So much is different, from the language to banking, from telephone etiquette to flirting, from how you behave with a professor or a fellow student to how you schedule your day.

The symptoms of culture shock can show up at different times, and sometimes conflicting feelings overlap. Although you can experience real pain from culture shock, it's also an opportunity to learn about yourself, your own culture, and your host culture.

Symptoms may include:

- Sadness, loneliness, melancholy
- Preoccupation with health
- Aches, pains, and allergies
- Insomnia or a desire to sleep too much
- Changes in temperament, including depression or feeling vulnerable, powerless, or lethargic
- Anger, irritability, resentment, or unwillingness to interact with others
- Identifying with the old culture or idealizing the old country
- Loss of identity
- Trying too hard to absorb everything in the new culture or country, or to abandon your own ways
- Inability to solve simple problems
- Lack of confidence or feelings of inadequacy or insecurity
- Developing stereotypes about the new culture
- Developing obsessions such as over-cleanliness
- Longing for family or homesickness
- Feeling lost, overlooked, exploited, abused, or misunderstood

The Stages of Culture Shock

Culture shock has many stages, which may occur one by one or overlap.

1. The **honeymoon stage**: you may feel euphoric and be pleased by all the new things encountered. Everything seems wonderful and exciting.
2. You encounter some **difficult times** and crises in daily life. Miscommunication may occur. You may feel discontent, impatient, angry, sad, misunderstood, or even incompetent. This happens when you are trying to adapt to a new culture that's very different from your culture of origin. The transition between your ways of doing things and the way things are done in the new country is a difficult process and takes time to complete.
3. You begin to gain some **understanding** of the new culture. A new feeling of pleasure and a sense of humor may be experienced. You may start to feel a certain psychological balance, to feel less lost and to start having a feeling of direction. You have begun to be more familiar with the environment and you want to belong. This can initiate an evaluation, or even a comparison, of the old ways versus the new.
4. You gain **perspective**, realizing that the new culture has both good and bad things to offer. Sometimes this occurs while you are still getting to understand the new culture, or even while you are still feeling off-balance. Integration is accompanied by a more solid feeling of belonging.
5. "**Re-entry shock**" can occur when you return home. You may find that things are no longer the same. Some of your newly-acquired customs are not appropriate at home. On the other hand, some of the things you remember most fondly might have changed, or you might not like them any more.

These stages are present at different times and each person has his/her own way of reacting to culture shock. As a result, some stages are longer and more difficult than others. Many factors contribute to the duration and effects of culture shock: mental health, personality type, past experiences, socio-economic conditions, familiarity with the language, family and/or social support systems, and level of education will all affect how you experience living in a different culture.

Sources of Stress from Culture Shock

Sources of stress abroad are often similar to ones we encounter at home, but may be magnified in a new setting. Without accessible support, living abroad can become, often temporarily, more a daunting challenge than a pleasurable experience. A "bad day" at home usually can be attributed to something concrete (a fight with a friend, a bad test result, lack of sleep) and quickly resolved. Sources of stress abroad are a bit harder to identify. They usually come from:

1. Functioning in unfamiliar social and academic settings without a clear understanding of how to succeed or avoid failure. "Trying harder" without understanding the unwritten rules of the culture or modifying your normal behavior tends to compound the problem rather than resolve it;
2. Going abroad with unrealistic expectations and preconceptions of what life will be like and discovering that those ideas are naïve, idealistic, or stereotypical;
3. Making every effort to learn the language or culture and failing to make the kind of progress you expected;
4. Attempting to make "foreign" friends, but finding this does not result in the kinds of relationships you had hoped to have.

These kinds of frustration are likely to solve themselves as you become more knowledgeable and competent in the new culture. They probably fall under the category of "culture fatigue." Culture shock is a somewhat different and more intense version of "frustration" and usually arises from sources that are less obvious and from circumstances that persist over time.

While reactions that signal transition shock are frequent enough to be considered completely "normal" by psychologists and study abroad advisers, they can present a great personal challenge to students struggling through a difficult period in their adjustment. When travelers begin to ask themselves questions like, "What have I gotten myself into?" "What am I doing here?" "What is the matter with these people?" and "Why can't they do it the right way?" you can be pretty sure that some degree of transition shock is present.

Ways to Fight Culture Shock: A Non-Exhaustive List

Remember your strengths! Remind yourself of your talents and abilities.

Keep an open mind: different is not necessarily better or worse. Try not to be judgmental; maintain tolerance for otherness.

Keep your sense of humor. If you can laugh, you will be better able to fight off embarrassment, fear, shame, despair, and some of the other reactions people sometimes feel when experiencing culture shock.

Eat healthy foods and get enough rest.

Develop a hobby (also a good way to meet people).

Remember that there are always resources that you can use, and don't be afraid or shy to ask for help.

Be patient. Adaptation is a process, and it takes time.

If you encounter a problematic situation and don't know how to handle it, ask someone you trust to help you understand it from a local perspective.

Don't try too hard to be like everyone else: you need to be flexible, but not to change your core self.

Learn to include a regular form of physical activity in your routine. This will help combat the sadness and loneliness in a constructive manner. Exercise, swim, take an aerobics class, etc.

Relaxation and meditation have proven to be very helpful for people who are passing through periods of stress.

Be curious. Ask questions – this will get you using English and learning colloquial phrases while learning important cultural cues and norms.

Maintain confidence in yourself. Follow your ambitions and continue your plans for the future.

Some Wesleyan Resources for International Students

- Associate Dean for International Student Affairs: Prof. Alice Hadler, x2832
- Chaplains:
 - Rabbi and Director of Religious and Spiritual Life David Teva: x2278
 - Student groups exist for some religions. See the WSA website at <http://www.wesleyan.edu/wsa/groups/contactlist.htm>
- Class of 2011 Dean: Dean David Phillips, x2765
- Davison Health Center: x2470
 - Behavioral Health (emotional issues): x3144
- Emergencies: x3333
- Faculty Advisor (name and contact info varies by student)
- Financial Aid: x2800
- Freeman Athletic Center: x2690
- International Studies (Dr. Carolyn Sorkin), x2550
- Public Safety: x2345 (emergencies: x3333)
- Queer Resource Center: x2425
- Resident Advisor (name and contact info varies by student)
- Residential Life (housing issues): x3550
- SARN Peer Advisor (name and contact info varies by student)
- Sexual Assault Crisis Service of Central CT: (888) 999-5545, toll-free
- Student Employment: x2800
- Visa issues: Ms. Sandy Niemczyk, x2736
- Women's Resource Center: 287 High Street
- Writing support: Prof. Alice Hadler, x2832; Writing Workshop, x2440

COMMUNICATION STYLES

Communication styles vary widely across the globe. Most cultures tend to favor one or the other in each of the five pairs listed here:

Linear versus Circular = straight-line discussion versus a more circular approach

Direct versus Indirect = meaning conveyed by words versus through suggestion

Detached versus Attached = objective presentation versus expressive style

Intellectual Engagement versus Relational Engagement = Discussion about the task versus discussion about the task and the person

Concrete versus Abstract = example-driven versus theory-driven discussion

Why Should You Pay Attention to These Differences?

US-Americans tend to prefer linear, direct, detached, intellectually engaged, and concrete styles of communication. In contrast, many African, Asian, and Pacific groups prefer more circular, indirect, attached, relationally engaged styles. European cultures may use a combination; for example, in Spain (and much of Latin America), people prefer a strong, relational, attached style of communication while also being direct, linear, and abstract in their approach. The French style is often abstract, intellectually engaged, and detached. Many permutations of these five styles are found worldwide.

The point here is that anyone living in a new country is likely to encounter styles of communication which are unfamiliar and, perhaps, disconcerting. If a new acquaintance in your host country begins a long, meandering story in response to a question you posed, it is far better to say, "He or she certainly has a circular style!" than, "What is the matter with them? Can't they get to the point?" Learning to deal with a new set of communication styles is part of the challenge of studying abroad. If you learn to do it well, it will improve your ability to communicate effectively with a wider range of people than you can now and will increase your intercultural skills significantly. Basically, the better you understand how people communicate in your host country, the better you will be able to negotiate that culture and fit in.

CONTRASTING COMMUNICATION STYLES

Linear: Discussion is conducted in a straight line, almost like an outline. Connections among the points are stated as you move toward an end point, which is stated explicitly. There is a low reliance on context and a strong reliance on words. (Cut to the chase!)

Circular (contextual): Discussion is conducted by telling stories and developing a context around the main point, which is often unstated because the listener will get the point after the speaker gives them all the information. There is a high reliance on context. (Once you have the relevant information, you'll know what I mean.)

Direct: Meaning is conveyed through explicit statements made directly to the people involved, with little reliance on contextual factors like situation and timing. (What you see is what you get. Tell it like it is.)

Indirect: Meaning is conveyed by implication, nonverbal behavior, and contextual cues. Statements intended for one person may be made to a different person when both can hear. Messages may be sent through a third-party intermediary. Mostly, however, this style allows one to avoid confronting another person or cause that person embarrassment.

Attached: Issues are discussed with feeling and emotion, conveying the speaker's personal stake in the issue and the outcome. This shows the passion someone feels in a situation or for an issue. (If it's important, it's worth getting worked up over!)

Detached: Issues are discussed calmly and objectively, conveying the speaker's ability to weigh all the factors impersonally. It is important to be objective. (If it's important, it shouldn't be tainted by personal bias!)

Intellectual Engagement: Any disagreement about ideas is stated directly, with the assumption that only the idea, and not the relationship between those having the disagreement, is being attacked. This is an intellectual style found in some European countries. (We're just discussing this – don't take it personally!)

Relational Engagement: Relational issues and problems are confronted directly, while intellectual disagreement is handled more subtly and indirectly. If you have a problem with someone, it helps to talk things over, albeit in a non-confrontational manner. In an intellectual debate, it is important to tread softly. (Be authentic about your feelings and respectful of other's ideas.)

Concrete: Issues are best understood through stories, metaphors, allegories, and examples, with emphasis on the specific rather than the general. (What's an example?)

Abstract: Issues are best understood through theories, principles, and data, with emphasis on the general rather than the specific. (What's the principle?)

