

American Culture



For many international students, adjusting to American culture can be difficult and at times frustrating. American customs and values might be very different from those of your home country, and you might find them confusing. You will probably want to familiarize yourself with American culture before your departure, in order to make the transition as easy as possible.

Values

- **Independence.** Americans strongly believe in the concept of individualism. They consider themselves to be separate individuals who are in control of their own lives, rather than members of a close-knit, interdependent family, religious group, tribe, nation, or other group.
- **Equality.** The American Declaration of Independence states that “all [people] are created equal,” and this belief is deeply embedded in their cultural values. Americans believe that all people are of equal standing, and are therefore uncomfortable with overt displays of respect such as being bowed to.
- **Informality.** This belief in equality causes Americans to be rather informal in their behavior towards other people. Don’t be surprised if store clerks and waiters introduce themselves by their first names. Many people visiting the US are surprised by the informality of American speech, dress, and posture. Don’t mistake this for rudeness or irreverence; it’s just a part of their culture!
- **Directness.** Americans tend to value, frankness and openness in their dealings with other people. They believe that conflicts and disagreements are best solved by means of forthright discussion among the people involved. Americans believe that if someone has a problem with someone else, they should tell the person clearly and directly in order to come up with a solution to the problem.

https://www.internationalstudent.com/study_usa/way-of-life/american-culture/

Preview Content

A. Work with a partner. Complete each question with one of the words. Then answer the questions.

1. Why would the constitution/foundation of a country forbid titles of nobility? (titles such as "princess" or "sir")
2. If there are no titles of nobility, how does a society recognize people with high social resources/status?
3. Which do you think is more important to Americans, the well-being of the group or the benefit/individual?
4. What do immigrants have to do to achieve/receive success in their new country?
5. What are some of the natural resources/benefit found on the North American continent?
6. What resource/benefit does a person get from being self-sufficient/reliant?
7. When would it not be ethical/individual to compete with someone?
8. What country provided the language and the constitution/foundation for the political and economic systems of the United States?

B. Before you read, preview the chapter. Work with a partner and discuss these questions.

1. What is the main idea of the quotation at the beginning of the chapter?
2. What are some reasons people want to come live in the United States? Use this graphic organizer to write down your ideas. Are any of these ideas similar? If so, draw lines connecting them.



3. What is the "American Dream"?
4. Try to find some American values and philosophy and give an example by your experience, news, movies, dramas, etc.

THE CONTEXT OF TRADITIONAL AMERICAN VALUES: RACIAL, ETHNIC,

1 From the beginning of the history of the United States there has been diversity—Native Americans throughout the North American continent, Spanish settlers in the Southwest and in Florida, French missionaries and fur traders along the Mississippi River, black slaves brought from African countries, Dutch settlers in New York, Germans in Pennsylvania, and of course the British colonists, whose culture eventually provided the language and the foundation for the political and economic systems that developed in the United States.

2 Most early Americans recognized this diversity, or pluralism, as a fact of life. The large variety of ethnic, cultural, and religious groups meant that accepting diversity was the only practical choice, even if some people were not enthusiastic about it, or were even threatened by it. However, in time, many Americans came to see strength in their country's diversity. Today, there is widespread recognition of the value of cultural pluralism, particularly among young people.

3 How could a nation of such enormous diversity produce a recognizable national identity? John Zogby, an American pollster who surveys public opinion, says that what holds the United States together is that "we all share a common set of values that make us American. . . . We are defined by the rights we have. . . . Our rights are our history, why the first European settlers came here and why millions more have come here since."

4 Historically, the United States has been viewed as "the land of opportunity," attracting immigrants from all over the world. The opportunities they believed they would find in America and the experiences that most people actually had when they arrived nurtured a unique set of values. We will examine six basic values that have become traditional American values. Three represent traditional reasons why immigrants have been drawn to America: the

RELIGIOUS, AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

chance for individual freedom, equality of opportunity, and material wealth. In order to achieve these benefits, however, there were prices to be paid: self-reliance, competition, and hard work. In time, these prices themselves became part of the traditional value system. This system of values, then, consists of three pairs of benefits and the price people paid to have these benefits:

- Individual freedom and self-reliance,
- Equality of opportunity and competition,
- Material wealth and hard work.

5 These three pairs of values have determined the unique culture of the United States and its people. Another way of thinking about these basic values involves rights and responsibilities. Americans believe that people have the right to individual freedom, equality of opportunity, and the promise of material success, but these all require substantial responsibility: self-reliance, a willingness to compete, and hard work. After examining the historical origin of each of these pairs, we will discuss the current state of these values in the United States.

Individual Freedom and self-Reliance

6 The historic decisions made by those first settlers have had a profound¹ effect on the shaping of the American character. By limiting the power of the government and the churches and eliminating a formal aristocracy, the early settlers created a climate of freedom where the emphasis was on the individual. The United States came to be associated in their minds with the concept of *individual freedom*. This is probably the most basic of all the American values. Scholars and outside observers often call this value

¹ *profound: important and having a strong influence or effect*

individualism, but many Americans use the word *freedom*. It is one of the most respected and popular words in the United States today.

7 There is, however, a cost for this benefit of individual freedom: *self-reliance*. Individuals must learn to rely on themselves or risk losing freedom. They must take responsibility for themselves. Traditionally, this has meant achieving both financial and emotional independence from their parents as early as possible, usually by age eighteen or twenty-one. Self-reliance means that Americans believe they should take care of themselves, solve their own problems, and “stand on their own two feet.” Most Americans believe that they must be self-reliant in order to keep their freedom. If they rely too much on the support of their families or the government or any organization, they may lose some of their freedom to do what they want.

Equality of Opportunity and Competition

8 The second important reason why immigrants have traditionally been drawn to the United States is the belief that everyone has a chance to succeed here. Generations of immigrants have come to the United States with this expectation. They have felt that, because individuals are free from excessive political, religious, and social controls, they have a better chance for personal success. Of particular importance is the lack of a hereditary² aristocracy. The hopes and dreams of many of these early immigrants were fulfilled in their new country.

9 It is important to understand what most Americans mean when they say they believe in equality of opportunity. They do not mean that everyone is—or should be—equal. However, they do mean that each individual should have an equal chance for success. Americans see much of life as a race for success. For them, equality means that

everyone should have an equal chance to enter the race and win. In other words, equality of opportunity may be thought of as an ethical rule. It helps ensure that the race for success is a fair one. This American concept of “fair play” is an important aspect of the belief in equality of opportunity.

10 However, the price to be paid for this equality of opportunity is competition. If much of life is seen as a race, then a person must run the race in order to succeed; a person has the responsibility to compete with others, even though we know not everyone will be successful. If every person has an equal chance to succeed in the United States, then many would say that it is every person’s duty to try.

Material Wealth and Hard Work

11 The third reason why immigrants have traditionally come to the United States is to have a better life—that is, to raise their standard of living. For the vast majority of the immigrants who came here, this was probably the most compelling reason for leaving their homeland. Because of its incredibly abundant natural resources, the United States appeared to be a land of plenty where millions could come to seek their fortunes. Of course, most immigrants did not “get rich overnight,” and many of them suffered terribly, but the majority of them were eventually able to improve upon their former standard of living. The phrase “going from rags to riches” became a slogan³ for the “American Dream.” Because of the vast riches of the North American continent, the dream came true for many of the immigrants. They achieved material success and many became very attached to material things. Material wealth became a value to the American people.

12 Americans have paid a price, however, for their material wealth: hard work. The North American continent was rich in natural resources when the first

² *hereditary*: can be passed from an older to a younger person in the same family

³ *slogan*: a short, easily-remembered phrase used in advertising or politics

settlers arrived, but all these resources were undeveloped. Only by hard work could these natural resources be converted into material possessions, allowing a more comfortable standard of living. Hard work has been both necessary and rewarding for most Americans throughout their history. Because of this, they came to see material possessions as the natural reward for their hard work.

American Values and the State of the American Dream

13 In recent years, as the economy has declined, many observers have asked if the American Dream is really dead. It has traditionally meant that by working hard, parents can enable their children to have a better life when they grow up. The majority of Americans still believe in the ideal of the American Dream—that is, if they work hard, they and their children can have a better life. **14** The fact that American ideals are only partly carried out in real life does not diminish their importance. Most Americans still believe in them and are strongly affected by them in their everyday lives. It is easier to understand what Americans are thinking and feeling if we can understand what these traditional American cultural values are and how they have influenced almost every facet⁴ of life in the United States.

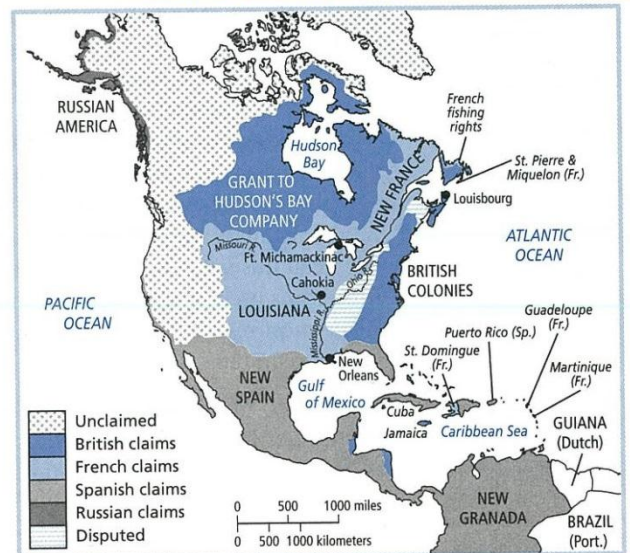
From *American Ways: an Introduction to American Culture*. By Marianne K. Datesman, Joann Crandall, Edward N. Kearny. (2014). (adapted)

*Assign **New Spain, New French, English Colonies**



for the blanks.

NEW WORLD COLONIES IN 1750



Source: <http://web.uccs.edu/~history/index/151maps.html>.

Voca.

- individual** one person, considered separately from the group
- achieve** to succeed in getting the result you want
- benefit** something that gives advantages or improves life in some way
- reliant** being dependent on someone
- constitution** a set of basic laws and principles that a democratic country is governed by
- ethical** relating to principles of what is right and wrong
- resources** a country's land, minerals, or natural energy that can be used to increase its wealth
- status** social of professional rank or position in relation to others
- welfare** money paid by the government to people who are very poor, sick, not working, etc.
- foundation** a basic idea or principle

AFTER YOU READ

Understand Main Ideas

1. The outline below shows the structure of reading: the introduction (A), the three sections containing the six traditional values (B, C, D), and the conclusion (E). The numbers under each heading show the main ideas of each section. Work with a partner to complete the outline. (Part of it is done for you.)

A. Introduction: The Context of Traditional American Values: Racial, Ethnic, Religious, and Cultural Diversity

1. The United States has great diversity, but it also has a national identity.
2. What holds the United States together is a common set of _____.

B. Individual Freedom and Self-Reliance

1. The early settlers came to the North American continent for individual freedom—the most basic of all the American values.
2. The price for individual freedom is _____.

C. _____

1. Immigrants have always come for equality of opportunity—the belief that everyone should have an equal chance to _____.
2. _____

D. _____

1. Immigrants have traditionally come for material wealth—the chance for a higher standard of _____.
2. _____

E. Conclusion: _____

1. Many Americans believe that with hard work their dreams of success can _____.
2. Even though many of the traditional values are ideals that may not describe the reality of American life, they still influence _____.

Understand Details

Choose the best answer to complete the sentences based on the chapter.

- _____ 1. Early settlers came to the North American continent and established colonies mainly because they wanted to be free from
- a. the power of kings, priests, and noblemen.

- b. the influence of their families. c. the problems of poverty and hunger.

_____ 2. There are no titles of nobility in the United States today because **(Guess)**

- a. no one likes aristocrats. b. the church does not allow it.
c. they are forbidden by the Constitution.

_____ 3. The price that Americans pay for their individual freedom is

- a. self-reliance. b. competition. c. hard work.

_____ 4. The American belief in self-reliance means that

- a. receiving money from charity, family, or the government is never allowed.
b. if a person is very dependent on others, he or she will be respected by others.
c. people must take care of themselves and be independent, or risk losing their personal freedom.

_____ 5. The American belief in equality of opportunity means that

- a. all Americans are rich. b. Americans believe that everyone should be equal.
c. everyone should have an equal chance to succeed.

_____ 6. In the United States, learning to compete successfully is **(Guess)**

- a. part of growing up. b. not seen as healthy by most people.
c. not necessary, because Americans believe in equality.

_____ 7. Traditionally, immigrants have been able to raise their standard of living by coming to the United States because

- a. Americans value money more than anything else.
b. there were such abundant natural resources.
c. the rich have shared their wealth with the poor.

_____ 8. Americans see their material possessions as

- a. having nothing to do with social status.
b. the natural reward for their hard work.
c. showing no evidence of a person's abilities.

_____ 9. A belief in the value of hard work

- a. developed because it was necessary to work hard to convert natural resources into material goods.
b. developed because the immigrants who came here had a natural love of hard work.
c. has never been a part of the American value system because people have so much.

_____ 10. In reality, such American ideals as equality of opportunity and self-reliance **(Guess)**

- a. do not exist because there is no equality in the United States.
b. are always put into practice in the United States and truly describe American life.
c. are only partly carried out in real life, but are still important because people believe in them.