



Ten tips to make the most of your college days in America.

By Ross Jennings

Here are the stories of two international students in the United States. The names and countries are fictional, but you probably know several examples of both.

Masahiro started in an ESL program and made a lot of international student friends, but not many Americans. He was a great singer, the life of the karaoke party, and shredded on the snowboard. He felt kind of stupid talking in English, however, so he stuck to his Japanese roommates and friends in college.

He and his friends complained all the time how unfriendly Americans were, and how it wasn't worth it trying to make friends with them. Masa qualified to work in the US for a year after he graduated with his IT degree, but his poor English and low confidence killed his first three job interviews. He gave up and went home. He eventually got a job working on a customer database for a ski resort in Hokkaido.

Sumitra took ESL too, but got involved in school activities by becoming the treasurer of the school's ski club. As a business major, it looked good on her resume, and she got to know a lot of students through her club functions. She never became a great skier, but it didn't matter. In college, she and her

ski club buddies took a lot of classes together, and many of their friends became her friends too. Her English got a lot better and she became more confident. She did well in her two internships, and one of them led to a paying job during her OPT work year. She thought about trying to get an H-1 work visa, but decided to go home instead. There, she got a good job with a multinational company in finance, based on her internships, her confident English and recommendations from two of her professors.

Two international students, two very different experiences in the US. The quality of your experience in the US is completely up to you. Here are ten tips to make the most of your time in the US:

1. Get involved

Don't just join a club, be an active member. Lead an activity. Volunteer to be a soccer coach for a kid's team. Tutor math at an elementary school. A recent Harvard study showed that involvement – a club, a job, anything up to about 20 hours a week – has no effect on grades. If you don't follow any of the other tips, do this one! Involvement will give you a rich, deep, happy college experience.

2. Escape "Little Tokyo"

Make friends from your own country but also Americans and other country friends. A boy- or girlfriend from another country is one way to do this, if your religion and values permit it, but non-romantic friends count just as much. Make friends inside and outside your language group. Believe it or not, your own language group people may object at first. Help them to escape too!

3. Work on your English

Your English won't improve much just from classes. Be brave, and use it everywhere! Talk to people, read magazines, watch TV, buy a pronunciation CD. Write down everything new in a vocabulary notebook and review it three or four times a week. If you don't keep working on it, your English may actually get worse. I've seen it happen.

4. Eat a hot dog

We say, "It's as American as hot dogs and apple pie". So eat a hot dog, go to a college football game, attend church, go to a rock concert with Americans. You don't have to love hot dogs or become a football fan, but you should "go local" from time to time to get a real flavor of the country.

5. Travel

Go visit new places, or even sightsee in your local area. It gets you out of the routine, usually forces you to use your English more, and helps you appreciate the country. Be sure everybody in your group talks to the locals, not just the best English speaker in your group.

6. Get a job

A paid job is good, but a volunteer job also works. Get a job with regular hours, real responsibilities, and a chance to communicate with people. Perform it well, no matter how humble. Job habits and recommendations from your first jobs help you succeed in later "real" jobs.

7. Network

Your friends, teachers, bosses and classmates are more than that – they are also part of your future job network. Do quality work and make quality relationships in everything, and you will have many people in life who will help you. Get to know one professor per year well, through helping in class or doing a special project. You will then have four great recommendations for grad school or jobs later.

8. Study


You will need good grades for graduate school, teacher recommendations, job applications and to become knowledgeable in your major subject. Manage your time well, and study! Participation in class is important, too. Learn how to feel comfortable speaking in class and doing group projects. Success in these will both raise your grades and give you good life skills.

9. Don't whine

There are always a few foreigners in every country that complain about how bad the local

country is. Don't be one of them! Respect the host country and its people, and do it in front of everyone. A guest should respect his host, whether in the US, China, Saudi Arabia or Argentina. Don't let the negative attitude of a few others spoil your experience.

10. Just say yes

You will have a chance to do many new and different things – skydive, snowboard, climb a mountain, learn country line dancing. Try them! It will take courage to try something new, and social courage to try them with new people you may not know well. It will be worth it. In the words of that big shoe company, "just do it"! 



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Ross Jennings is the Vice President of International Programs at Green River Community College near Seattle, WA, USA. He followed most of his own advice when he was a foreign student in Lebanon many years ago and had such a great experience that he spent a dozen years in the Middle East