



Adjusting to life in the U.S.

Three current and former international students in the United States offer words of wisdom on everything from apartment hunting and meeting like-minded people to managing money.

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Home sweet home

You've decided to continue your education in the States—but how do you find the right place to live?

It can be difficult finding your feet in an unfamiliar place. No matter where your school is, it's likely there are some areas that will suit you more than others. Rather than taking out a year's lease and hoping for the best, consider booking a month-long let instead.

"Book a month as a sublet using a site like Craigslist," recommends Kat Forgan from England, who is studying Fine Art at Pacific Northwest College of Art.

"It's tough to fully get your head around a new city when you're doing research remotely. This option allows you to find out more about the areas surrounding your college. Use the month to meet some people, and begin a more in-depth search on your student portal, or on sites like Craigslist or Flatmate Finders, to find somewhere you'd be happy to live."

The options are varied, and entirely dependent on where your university is. "The type of accommodation available truly depends on the city," Kat continues. "On the West Coast, there are some beautiful shared houses; on the East Coast, shared apartments are more common.

"I'd suggest talking to either student services

or other college staff and asking them the neighborhoods they would recommend, such as ones with good transport links to your place of study. Most student services should also be able to offer a steer on prices, too."

Choosing the right roommate is also important. Charanjit Nayyar, who moved to the U.S. from India to study for a Masters in Electrical Engineering at Arizona State University, offers advice on finding roommates: "Don't compromise when selecting who to live with; choose carefully and wisely. These will be the people that you spend the most time with."

If you're not sure where to start your roommate search, consider using social media. "I found that the best way to look for and secure apartments—and meet potential roommates—was Facebook," says Charanjit.

"There'll be Facebook groups dedicated to housing in and around your particular university, and you can quickly make contact with the current occupants, who will be able to answer any questions that you might have. I enjoyed the opportunities that flat sharing presented, too, such as the range of options to suit your budget and how close you need to be to campus. This, along with a desire to meet new people, is why I chose not to live in dorms."

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Teamwork makes the dream work

Many international students are surprised by how much importance is placed on group work in the U.S. At all levels of university, teamwork and group projects are often important—something that can be a surprise to students from other countries.

The American grading system is also quite different, too. Charanjit especially notes a major difference between his home country and the U.S.

"Like many other countries, in India, your end result is almost entirely determined by exam results, although these are slightly offset by assignments, projects, and quizzes. In the U.S, they typically give equal weight to exams and assignments. In fact, some courses have completely disregarded

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pen-and-paper exams in favor of in-depth projects.”

David Choi, who moved from Hong Kong to study Advertising at Texas State University, said that he was surprised by how much presenting was expected of him “Even during my freshman year, we were asked to present our own thoughts and ideas almost immediately. I wasn’t prepared for this, and felt a bit out of my depth. It felt as though my American peers were very used to this way of working already. I started reading up on effective presenting in my spare time, and used every opportunity available to hone my skills. I think it really paid off.”

Integrating effectively

Moving to a new country where you know no one can be difficult. Luckily, your university course will likely provide you with the opportunity to branch out and meet new people.

Kat recommends giving yourself time to find a friendship group. “Make an effort to go to social gatherings, organize social gatherings yourself, and support others where possible. Your cohort are your most immediate people and they will see you at your best and worst. Invest time, interest, and care in these people and you will quickly build relationships.” If you’re interested in building friendships outside of classes, though,

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there are plenty of opportunities to do so. Kat suggests picking up a hobby and sticking to it: “Dancing, climbing, sports, singing, whatever – just make sure it is communal! But don’t be tempted to take up too many, as you won’t have the time to stick to them all!”

Extra income

Working when you’re not in class will go a long way towards making sure you have some spare money for expenses—but be aware, not every international student is legally allowed to work in the U.S.

Getting a job can also help with more than just finances, as David discovered. “In my sophomore year, I took an on-campus job working as a social media assistant for the university and the advantages were endless,” he explains. “Not only did I benefit financially and receive hands-on experience in the social media space, which proved invaluable when I left college, I also made some great friends that I shared interests with, as well as, hopefully, some excellent contacts for the future.”

Money matters

As with any situation, it’s important to be aware of your financial situation when you’re studying in the U.S. Setting a monthly budget can help ensure you stay on track and not spend more than you have.

“Fiscal management has to be done very carefully, especially if you have taken out a bank loan to fund your studies, as many students have,” Charanjit explains. “It might sound obvious, but my biggest piece of advice would be to create a monthly budget and review it regularly. If you’re overspending, try to figure out where and why, and adjust your budget accordingly.

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“When it comes to opening a bank account, reliability trumps any discount or fancy incentives on offer – so go for a well-known bank you are confident has a good customer support network. The last thing you want is to be a long way from home and unable to access your money.”

Kat suggests speaking to your international student services about setting up an American bank account. “You simply cannot function without one,” she states. “I’d have benefited from more guidance on how to transfer money internationally, too, including how to minimize losses.”

Most importantly, though, it’s important to focus on the experience you’re having. “Try your best not to worry or stress about your finances unnecessarily,” says Kat. “It can feel like money madness, but the experience is priceless and you should live life to its fullest during what should be a very special period of time.”