

Using Your Resources

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Traveling abroad is a passion of mine, and although it doesn't always happen, sometimes when I am roaming the streets of a European country, foreign tourists will approach me to ask if I know where a particular street is. They ask me in the language of the country, so I assume they believe that I am from that city. Even though I am flattered to be mistaken for a native of the city, I cannot help them if I am unfamiliar with the address they seek.

Attending college can be like traveling to a foreign country, especially if you are a first-generation college student. There are unfamiliar words and places, customs, and beliefs. People on a college campus may expect different behaviors than students are used to. A student's internal clock may be disrupted as when one travels to a different time zone. College "natives" (professors and staff) may behave in strange and unfamiliar ways to new students who haven't yet adjusted to the local culture. Like the foreign tourists who ask me for directions, when students need help, they may not know where to find it and turn—misguidedly—to a source that may or may not have accurate information.

If you find yourself in this situation, this chapter is for you. Like a travel guide, this chapter will help you (1) understand the people you meet in this new culture, (2) understand their customs so that you have the best experience possible, and (3) explore this new "country" and know what to do when you are lost, dazed, or confused.

Understand the People

You will meet a lot of people during your college career: students (both more and less experienced), staff members including administrators, and professors. Each group will play a different role in your experience at college, and other chapters in this guide will address some of these roles. Although most of your experience will be with other students, whether they are roommates, classmates, or friends, this section addresses the "natives" of

the campus: the professors and staff. Most students will live in the college culture for a relatively short period of their lives, but staff and professors are pretty much here to stay. As a result, we have a particular "language" we use and certain "customs" or ways to get things done. Sometimes we are so accustomed to these that we forget what it's like to be a "foreigner" and don't realize that campus rituals may bewilder new students.

You should understand that, in general, the reason staff and professors work at Snow College is because we really like what we do. We like working with students. We hold the values described earlier in this handbook (see chapters 1-5) and want to share them with students. We professors also like the subject matter we teach. We hope to inspire our students to accept and pursue the values of a higher education and to make a sincere effort to learn the subject matter.

So, what will help you understand us—the "natives—of the college campus? First of all, your professors were once in your situation, new college students who had to figure things out about our campuses, course expectations, professors, etc. We persevered and discovered a real passion for learning and teaching. We dedicated ourselves to at least one area of knowledge in order to become relative experts in that field. Many of us have done in-depth research and published in our fields. If you really want to know what makes your professors tick, ask them about their masters or doctoral theses: How they came up with a topic; Why they chose that topic; How they developed a hypothesis or thesis statement; What it was like to conduct research; What helped them; Who helped them; What their findings were; And if they've followed up with additional projects. Try it. See how much you can learn about your professors and the lengths they've gone to in the career they love. Can you see yourself in their shoes 10, 15, or 20 years from now--enthused about discovery and learning, regardless of your field of study or career?

Second, your professors have a plan for your college education where your learning is the priority—not your grades. Yes, grades are used to reflect how well you demonstrate what you have learned, but for your teachers the knowledge and skills you gain are the

most important part of your experience. If you want to know what learning your professors expect from you, take a look at the General Education Outcomes and the Student Learning Outcomes listed on your course syllabi. Your professors have spent a lot of time and effort developing these outcomes and how to provide the best experiences to get you there. Whether they assign you readings, exercises, class or online discussions, papers, presentations, field trips, quizzes, or tests, their primary interest is guiding you to successful completion of those learning outcomes. Take some time to go over the learning outcomes listed on your syllabi. What are outcomes that you expected? What are outcomes that you didn't expect? How do those outcomes align with the assignments and assessments that you have been given? Is there anything that is unclear? Should you ask your professor? YES!

Third, your professors expect you to take the initiative in your learning rather than sit passively in class. Imagine trying to play catch with someone who never makes an effort to catch the ball or throw it back to you, or who picks up the ball and throws it in a different direction, or who picks up any old object lying around and throws it in any direction. While you might get a lot of exercise trying to play catch this way, how long do you think your activity would last? Your professors want to engage you in an intellectual game of catch. Give just as good as you receive and you'll find that we have more to offer you than you might first imagine.

Understand the Customs

When I teach students about foreign cultures, I try to help them discover the underlying beliefs that lead to the unfamiliar behaviors they observe and are expected to participate in. Some of the beliefs of the natives in the college culture have been addressed earlier (e.g., learning is more important than grades, active learning is more meaningful than passive learning, participating in your learning will help more than merely observing), but there are many, many other beliefs that campus natives hold that may be invisible to the "foreigner." So how does the foreigner (YOU) figure out why a particular custom or

ritual is practiced? You could ask. In fact, this may really help your professor or supervisor understand you better. You may be helping him or her open up a dialogue about the relevance of a particular custom—I remember a story about a cook who always sawed a ham roast in half before baking it. When asked why, he said that was the way his mother always did it. When he asked his mom why she always did it, she said that her parents always prepared the ham that way. When she asked her parents why they sawed the ham roast in half, they said that when their family was young they lived in a house where the oven was too small for the whole ham. They had to saw it in half so that it would fit in the oven! When the cook learned this, he stopped sawing the roast in half because his oven was big enough for the whole ham. So, don't be afraid to ask why your professors have you participate in a particular "ritual." Be prepared instead to learn something new about why your professors have you adhere to unfamiliar rituals and trust them. They tend to have a lot of experience in teaching their fields.

One last thing about customs and rituals: You may notice that groups of natives (or individuals) have different ways of doing things—variations on rituals. This can be a little confusing for the foreigner, but you'll learn to adapt. Sometimes professors don't know about the differences in rules and procedures that their colleagues in other departments and divisions follow. Sometimes staff don't know about the changes in procedures that professors follow and vice versa. So, be patient and if you get a chance, let someone know if you find a conflict. You may help other foreigners.

Explore

Finally, no one should ever let fear of new places, people, a foreign language, or unfamiliar customs keep them from traveling. Likewise, no one should let these things keep them from having a great college experience. There are so many wonderful people (natives and non-natives) at the college and enough familiar customs and rituals there that you should have no fear of exploring all that college has to offer. Remember, the natives are here because they love working with and for the foreigners who bring energy, new ideas,

and enthusiasm that keep the natives going, so never be ashamed if you find yourself a little lost, dazed, or confused. Ask a friendly native for help. You'll be glad you did, as you get to know this new country, its people, and customs. Good luck!