



# ACADEMIC LIFE IN THE U.S.

*An introductory guide to academic life in the United States.*

International Student Services | California State University, Fullerton

## Cultural Differences

In many cultures, an order exists between students and teaching professionals. Professors or teachers give lessons and students listen without questioning their authority. However, in the United States students have a voice and are encouraged to participate in classroom discussions. Of course, students are expected to respect the teacher. In return, respect is given to students as well.

## Classroom Dress and Etiquette

Casual dress is acceptable on campus, unless otherwise required for a presentation or special event. In terms of classroom manners, some professors may allow food and drinks. Many professors will explain their policies on the first day of class; if in doubt, check with your professor first.

## Syllabus

On the first day of class, you will receive a syllabus for the course. A syllabus is a document that details your course curriculum, including your schedule; assignments; important dates and exams; and the professor's office hours and contact information. An explanation of how your grade is calculated is usually included.

## Participating in Class

Participation is key in most U.S. classrooms. You may be called upon to answer a question. If you don't know the answer, it's acceptable to say you are not sure. You should try to comment or ask questions at least once a week or more. Participation may be expected and can be a factor in your grade.

## Missing Class

It is very important to attend each of your scheduled classes unless unexpected circumstances occur such as death in the family or illness. Being late or missing class can often affect your grade. If you must miss class because you are sick, your professor may ask for a doctor's note — especially for prolonged illness. A doctor's note may be obtained through the Student Health Center or the health provider that you visited. Class attendance policies will be included in your syllabus.

## Academic Integrity

U.S. colleges and universities place great importance on academic integrity. What is academic integrity? Academic integrity means being honest, trustworthy, fair, respectable and responsible when engaging in academic work. This means presenting original work and not engaging in academic dishonesty. For a list of student resources for maintaining academic integrity, visit [fullerton.edu/integrity/student/AcademicIntegrityResources.php](http://fullerton.edu/integrity/student/AcademicIntegrityResources.php).

### Academic Dishonesty

Academic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, cheating on examinations or assignments, unauthorized collaboration, plagiarism, falsification/fabrication of university documents and any act designed to give unfair academic advantage to the student.

International students should take important note of what can be seen as academic dishonesty as some of it can be attributed to cultural differences. While some cultures allow for collaboration on assignments or papers, this is often not the case in U.S. colleges. Unless a professor specifies that a particular assignment is a group assignment, the project or paper is to be handled only by the student. Sharing responses and answers with other students is considered dishonest or cheating.

### Consequences

Engaging in academic dishonesty could have negative consequences on your academics, as well as your international student immigration status. The Dean of Students office is responsible for handling any students who are found in violation of the university Academic Dishonesty policy. Sanctions include warnings, probation, educational sanctions, removal from academic program, suspension or expulsion. Acts of cheating or dishonesty will be recorded on the student's permanent disciplinary record at CSUF.

For more information on what constitutes Academic Dishonesty, please refer to the **Dean of Students** office website ([fullerton.edu/deanofstudents](http://fullerton.edu/deanofstudents)) or the **University Policy Statement (UPS) on Academic Dishonesty** ([fullerton.edu/integrity/faculty/LetterToFaculty.php](http://fullerton.edu/integrity/faculty/LetterToFaculty.php)).

## Academic Support

If you are in need of help during your studies at CSUF, a variety of academic support services are available to you. These resources are provided to help you succeed in your academic career. Here are tips and resources on how to excel academically at CSUF:

- **Contact your academic advisor.** Advisors can help you with academic matters, policies and procedures. Schedule an appointment with your advisor to identify issues and accelerate your university education.

For undergraduate students: Refer to the [Academic Advisement Center](#) for General Education advising or your [Student Success Teams](#) in your college for advice on your major.

For graduate students: Refer to your department or college for advice on your graduate program.

- **Visit your professor.** Building relationships with your professors early may become an invaluable resource to you as your course progresses. They are your allies in your education and welcome students with questions or concerns during office hours.
- **Use campus resources.** CSUF offers students many options to help students in their studies, including the University Learning Center, Writing Center and various tutoring centers. For a complete list of learning assistance centers and programs, visit [www.fullerton.edu/learn/](http://www.fullerton.edu/learn/)

**Visit Counseling and Psychological Services.** Sometimes academic difficulties can be due to a combination of various factors, including academic, personal and cultural issues. Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) offers students a variety of services and programs in developing coping skills, strengthening personal relationships, navigating the college transition, recovering from traumatic experiences and engaging in self-exploration. Schedule an appointment with a CAPS counselor or attend the various workshops they host during the school year.

## Tips for Emailing Faculty and Staff

Nowadays, the widespread presence of social media and mobile devices often encourages a casual environment, especially when communicating with friends or family. When communicating with professors and university staff, however, you should always keep it formal and professional.

Use the following helpful guidelines when emailing college faculty and staff.

- **Think business letter.** Many view emails as traditional letters, so it is best to stick to the formal style of a business letter when writing to college faculty or staff.
- **Use proper English.** This means paying attention to spelling, grammar, punctuation, capitalization and sentence structure. Here's an example of a proper sentence: "I have a question on the engineering topic you discussed in class today." Avoid short, text-style responses like "can u help w the info u talked about 2day? thx."
- **Avoid using emojis, acronyms or abbreviations in your email.** If you wouldn't include it in a business letter, it probably doesn't belong in an email.
- **Use clear and specific subject lines.** A subject should give a preview of what your email or request will be about. Avoid nonspecific subject lines such as "About homework" and use more specific subject lines that immediately tells the reader the subject of the email.
- **Include greetings, salutations and signatures.** As with formal written letters, include a greeting, and the professor's name and title (if applicable). For example, you can begin the email with, "Dear Dr. Miller" or "Hello Prof. Miller." Close the email with a closing, such as "Warm regards," or "Sincerely" followed by your first and last name.

- **Use other sources before emailing the professor.** Because professors have busy schedules and may not be able to get back to you immediately, you should try to use other resources to help you with your questions. Before emailing your professor, ask classmates, check the syllabus or look at the course materials online before contacting your professor.

## Academic Terms Glossary

**Course Load:** A course load is the amount of units you are taking in a given semester. International students on F-1 or J-1 status are required to take on a full course load to maintain their immigration status. For undergraduates, a full course load is 12 units. For graduate students, a full course load varies based on the academic program. To avoid falling out of immigration status, speak with your International Advisor before dropping a course or courses.

**Credit Hours:** CSUF assigns each class with a number of credit hours. This number is based on the weekly hours of class attendance and homework.

**Final Exam:** Final exams are listed in the syllabus and are generally a large part of your final grade. These are conducted near the end of the semester. Unless you receive permission from your professor, you must always take part in final exams. Failure to take a final exam can result in a “W” or “WU” grade and can affect your immigration status.

**Hold:** A hold can be placed on a student’s account due to various reasons and by different departments. It is vital that you clear any holds on your student account as soon as possible as it can affect registering for new classes, or even receiving your diploma. If a hold is in place, you can view which department placed the hold and how to resolve the hold on your student portal. If you have any questions about the hold, contact that department directly.

**Midterm:** This is an exam given during the middle of the term or semester. The syllabus you received in the beginning of the term should tell you when the midterm will be held. Professors will usually inform you ahead of time about what to expect on the midterm and how to prepare for it. If you are uncertain about the midterm material, don’t be afraid to ask the professor beforehand.

**Syllabus:** A syllabus is a document that details your course curriculum including your course schedule, assignments, important dates and exams, and the professor’s office hours and contact information. An explanation of how your grade is calculated is usually included.

**Transcript:** A transcript is a record that lists all of your courses taken and the grades you received. You will receive a different transcript for every college or university you attend.