



## FACULTY: PROFESSORS, INSTRUCTORS, AND GRADUATE ASSISTANTS

It is the faculty and, at larger institutions, their graduate assistants, who are most responsible for the delivery of education and classroom learning. In both private and state institutions of higher education, faculty are recruited by their departmental colleagues through a highly competitive process involving the review of credentials, ranking of candidates, interviews, and, often, demonstrable teaching skills. In the United States, under the guidance of federal and state laws, there is broad effort at most institutions to ensure that faculty (as well as staff and students) come from a wide variety of backgrounds.

The U.S. concept of diversity, which includes race, religion, ethnicity, gender, nationality, and sexual orientation, is applied to faculty recruitment and

hiring practices to assure that students will benefit from the experience, knowledge, creativity, and perspectives of faculty with various backgrounds.

The faculty you encounter in the U.S. classroom also differ both in rank and in the duration of their teaching contracts. Faculty rank can range from distinguished teaching and research faculty, who hold tenure\* and the most honored rank among faculty, to assistant professors, who may not yet have completed a doctoral degree and who have shorter contracts because they have not yet obtained tenure. There are other ranks in between such as full and associate professors. And there are emeritus (retired) professors and adjunct faculty from other departments and institutions. Rank depends on a combination of factors including degree

\* Tenure, which provides faculty with job protection from easy dismissal, under the guidelines of the American Association of University Professors, typically requires that department chairpersons and faculty review the performance of candidates and recommend tenure to the dean of their school or college, where their deliberations are subject to review. The candidate review considers several key features of faculty performance—as teachers in the classroom; as writers, researchers, and publishers; and as colleagues in the administration of their departments and schools. Candidates are also reviewed in terms of the impact that tenure and promotion has on the department or school's budget.

and other qualifications, research and teaching performance, and tenure. Faculty administrators, including the chairpersons of departments, are often chosen from the ranks of tenured and experienced faculty.

Graduate assistants play important roles in the education system. Although there is more than one kind of graduate assistant, the teaching assistant (TA) is responsible for assisting the main instructor for a course. Duties usually include teaching, grading, meeting with and assisting individual students with difficulties, and administrative work. If you are a student in class, consider the teaching assistant as a resource. Teaching assistants are very knowledgeable about the course content. They are also usually very approachable because they are students themselves, and sometimes they are international students as well. Should you be seeking such a position, your institution may have a training program to help you with teaching to a U.S. audience (Smithee 1990). Examples of TA training programs can be found at the University of Minnesota Center for Teaching and Learning ([www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/](http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/)) and the Syracuse University Professional Development Programs (<http://gradschpdprograms.syr.edu/programs/tap.php>).

Just as every effort is made to recruit faculty, staff, and administrators from the most qualified candidates, so too are students recruited with an eye to their qualifications. You may be surprised to find that it is not only your academic achievement record that is important to U.S. institutions. Although it may or may not be a part of the application process in your home country,

faculty and staff in the United States typically want to know who you are, where you come from, and what makes you unique and special. For example, do you play a musical instrument? Are you an athlete? Have you participated in community organizations? Have you published articles or books? Did you win any awards for these activities? If you belong to a minority group in your own home country or region, or if you are a woman in a field of study dominated by men, you play a part in bringing diversity to our institutions of higher education and may want to, therefore, include that experience in your application. All of these qualifications and characteristics contribute to who you are as a student and what you contribute to the U.S. classroom.

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## RECOMMENDATION

You are encouraged to listen to the conversations on this topic; to ask questions of faculty, staff, and other students about the role of diversity in American society; and to contribute your points of view when discussions of such topics occur.

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The faculty largely sets the standard by which student performance in the classroom is judged. In most instances, the professor provides a syllabus for each course he or she teaches, and that syllabus explains the standards by which student performances will be evaluated. It lists the readings students are expected to complete; the combination of quizzes, oral presentations (individual or group), research papers, or short essays and exercises students are expected to complete and the rules and dates for their completion;

indicates the instructor's expectation for class participation; and addresses the emphasis given to any particular assignment as a proportion of the final grade. The syllabus can be a wonderful tool for students to use in planning their term. It helps them identify and balance the requirements for all of their courses. Syllabi usually, but not always, define what cheating or plagiarism is and how it will be treated. This will be explained more fully in the Academic Misconduct section in this booklet.

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## RECOMMENDATION

To see a syllabus at a U.S. institution, go to the school home page and type the word "syllabus" in the search option. Several choices should appear.

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Graduate students writing a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation must meet a set of criteria that is typically defined by the school and/or department through the graduate thesis adviser or graduate director, assigned in each department. Since theses and dissertations are guided projects, students need to consult with their advisers and dissertation committee members on a regular basis so that progress toward completing the dissertation and its defense may be assessed. In addition, students will gain important insights by attending the dissertation defenses of other doctoral candidates, as well as discussing the dissertation process with students who have recently completed theirs.

In U.S. higher education, the students themselves can play a role in establishing standards and evaluating their

course and the faculty's performance. In most institutions, at the end of the semester or quarter, professors or instructors ask that an evaluation of the course be completed by the students. Students' responses to questions on those forms are taken quite seriously, and sometimes considered in faculty tenure decisions. The evaluation forms are anonymous, and their confidentiality is carefully protected. Most often, the evaluations provide feedback that helps faculty improve the quality of classroom teaching and learning.

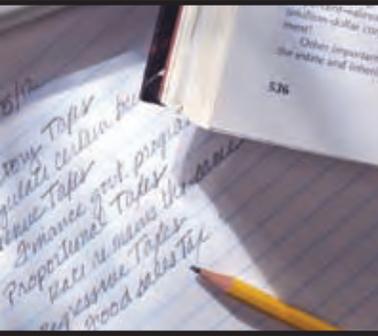
College and university programs are assessed/evaluated by other means as well. Professional colleagues, known for their good judgment and experience, are sometimes invited to serve as assessors of programs other than their own. Regional accreditation associations and professional associations send assessment teams to colleges and universities to evaluate every aspect of the programs being offered, including faculty recruitment, programs of study, recruitment and retention of students, administrative effectiveness, and success in placing graduates. These are very intensive evaluations, and it often takes schools and departments a year or more to prepare. The independent accreditation and evaluation process is another feature of the U.S. decentralized system of higher education.

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## RECOMMENDATION

To help you prepare for your education in the United States, check the Web site to learn about the backgrounds of faculty, staff, and students at the college or university to which you might apply.

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# UNDERSTANDING THE U.S. CLASSROOM LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Although there are many similarities between the U.S. classroom and classrooms in other countries, the U.S. classroom is a unique blend of pedagogical approaches and cultural values that has been influenced by this country's historical roots, by influential thinkers throughout the country's brief history, and by U.S. cultural values. The following are important cornerstones of the U.S. classroom learning environment: the rights of the individual, personal responsibility, freedom of choice, interactive learning, liberal education, independent thinking, and democratic principles. You will find these values and principles represented in the following discussion, which offers an introduction to important features of the U.S. classroom.

## Pedagogical Approach

A useful approach to understanding the culture of any classroom begins by distinguishing two different pedagogical approaches: teacher-centered classroom culture and learner-centered

classroom culture. The chart on the following page identifies some characteristics of each approach.

These two pedagogical paradigms provide general guidelines for comparing different classroom approaches across cultures. Most classrooms draw heavily from one or the other of these models. Though both models are often represented in the classrooms in a given country, generally one approach is more dominant than the other in a particular country.

If these two approaches were placed on the poles of a cultural continuum, the U.S. classroom would be firmly at the learner-centered end of the spectrum.



However, while the learner-centered approach is dominant, the U.S. classroom style depends on the

ASPECT	TEACHER-CENTERED APPROACH	LEARNER-CENTERED APPROACH
Preferred teaching methods	Lecture	Lecture, discussion in large and small groups, application of theory.
Instructor's role	Direct the learning process, be source of knowledge, clarify and interpret written texts.	Present content, facilitate dialogue, demonstrate analytical skills.
Learner's role	Listen to lectures, take notes, read assigned texts, memorize content, demonstrate memorization through tests and written papers.	Listen, take notes, read, think critically about content, express perspectives in class, participate in dialogue, demonstrate understanding.
Who directs learning process	Instructor	Instructor and student.
Use of the computer and Internet	Considered only as an adjunct to the lecture.	Can be an intrinsic part of achieving the course objectives, and used by the professor to engage the students in further exploration of the topic as well as out of class discussion topics.
Learning mode	Top down, i.e. instructor imparts knowledge to students.	Cooperative, participatory, interactive between instructor and learner.
Evaluation methods	Written and oral exams.	Written and oral exams, presentations, class participation, papers, quizzes, group projects, classmates' evaluations.
Who conducts evaluation	Instructors evaluate students.	Instructors evaluate students, students evaluate instructors, classmates evaluate each other.
Desired outcomes	Memorize texts, absorb knowledge.	Gain knowledge, apply concepts to new situations, use critical analysis skills.