

GETTING STARTED

Adjusting to American Life

Living in the United States requires a great deal of cultural adjustment, even if your English language skills are excellent. Americans and people from other countries you will encounter have different attitudes and behaviors toward matters such as religion, politics, family, members of the opposite sex, and many other subjects. You will find a high degree of freedom and diverse viewpoints here, but you should be aware of acceptable codes of behavior. For example, some cultures tend to value only a few, close friendships between people, while others (most notable Americans) believe in calling many people “friend” even if they barely know them. A conflict can result if people from the two cultures do not understand the ways of the other. Many of the problems faced by international students come from such conflicts. One of the first guidelines for avoiding such conflicts is the old adage: “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” You are not expected to become “Americanized” while you are here; nor could you leave your entire culture and history behind even if you wanted. You should, however, respect local customs and rules. For example, the many restrictions on alcohol use on the campus and the city may be different from your hometown (Drinking age is 21, but there is no alcohol allowed on campus).

Cultural adjustment can be very stimulating and fun. After all, you came here because it is different from your hometown, didn't you? Feel free to ask anyone in the OIP or any of the more experienced international students for help. As many American teachers like to say, the only stupid question is one that wasn't asked when it should have been.

Banking

Two of the closest places to do your banking are the First Trust Credit Union (located north of the Health Center between Lincolnway and LaPorte Avenue) and 1st Source Bank, on LaPorte Avenue, north of Wehrenberg Hall. Chase bank, either the downtown branch or the Strongbow branch (Walmart area) is also an option. All of these banks have a combined checking, savings, and ATM (automated teller machine) package designed for students. However, there are very few international banks in Valparaiso. These banks may not be able to change your country's currency to the U.S. dollar, so you may need to make other arrangements if you plan on transferring money from your bank at home. You should visit these banks and read their literature carefully when you sign up for an account. You will need to take your passport, as well as

your VU student ID card, to open a bank account. Do not order a credit card unless you are able to pay off the balance every month--the interest rates are very high.

Transportation

After living in Valpo a short time, you will soon discover that the main mode of transportation is the automobile. The campus, adjoining businesses, and the downtown area can all be reached by foot, however. Bicycles may be used around town, but be very wary of all the traffic. There are other means of transportation to Chicago and points beyond. Here are a few:

Local Bus Service The V-Line is the new limited bus service provided by the city of Valparaiso. Please check the website for schedule and further information: www.ci.valparaiso.in.us/v-line

Private Car Owning a car is convenient, but it is very expensive and time-consuming. Be very careful in buying a car, especially a used one. Used cars are not usually under warranty and may have hidden mechanical damage. It's best to have someone familiar with cars to help you pick one (Please consult us first if you plan to purchase a car--we may be able to assist you and prevent anyone from taking advantage of your being an international student. We have had this trouble in the past). Once you have a car, **you must buy insurance and obtain a current license for both you, the driver (if someone else), and the car itself.** Cars built after 1976 must be tested for emissions. The place to go for information about licenses is the Indiana State License Branch (BMV), off US 30, phone 462-4814. They will also tell you where to go for emissions testing. It is a very serious matter to be caught without a valid driver's license and current insurance. **Under no circumstances should you drive a car without insurance or a driver's license.** This also applies when you rent a car.

Ride Board Students at Valpo come from various surrounding areas. Cars being the preferred mode of transportation, they can also give rides, with the idea that the gas cost could be shared. Check the website at www.valpo.edu/union.

Union Board Bus to Chicago The Union Board regularly sponsors trips to Chicago. Check at the Union Information Desk for an updated

schedule. The busses leave from the Union on Saturday morning and return in the evening. (Website: www.valpo.edu/student/ub)

South Shore Train The South Shore train runs on a regular schedule between South Bend and Chicago. The closest place to catch the train is at the Dune Park station, which is located on US highway 12 just off State Road 49 in Chesterton, about 15 miles away. Copies of the schedule are usually available in the International Studies Office and the International Student House. Call 1-800-356-2079 for more information. (Website: www.nictd.com)

Coach USA The bus connects to O'Hare and Midway airports in Chicago. The closest stop is in Merrillville, next to the restaurant on U.S. 30 in the K-Mart Plaza, or in Portage, across the street from a Dunkin Donuts restaurant. Copies of the schedule are available in the OIP. Call 1-800-248-8747 if you have questions. (Website: www.coachusa.com)

The Coach USA bus also connects with other bus lines that go to a variety of places in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin. Call 1-800-833-5555, or check a list of connections available in the OIP.

Bicycles The Union offers a limited number of bicycles to be used by students. The cost is \$5.00 per day along with a \$10.00 deposit, and the borrower must show his/her student ID card at the time of rental. The \$10.00 deposit is returned when the bicycle is returned to the Union. Call the Union Info Desk for more information at 464-5415.

OIP can provide transportation only in cases of emergency and that also with a charge - \$20 for the nearest bus/train stations (Portage, Chesterton and Merrillville).

Telephones

Local telephone service is provided by the residence halls. To dial a local (within Porter County, off-campus number, dial "8" and then the number. To dial a campus number from another campus phone, just dial the last four digits. See page 2 in the Campus Directory describing phone usage and dialing from the residence halls.

Long distance service (including international calls) can be confusing and a source of tension between roommates. Having your own calling card eliminates all kinds of problems, especially between roommates who share a phone. Pre-paid calling cards are also available. Check with Holly about the best cards to buy.

Housing

As a new undergraduate student, you are probably living in a residence hall. The OIP recommends that international students live on campus for at least the first two years because it is the best way to meet American students and adjust to the U.S. Many students opt to live in Brandt Hall because it is open during break periods; however, you may live in another hall and find a friend's room to stay in during breaks. **Make sure you pay attention to the rules about the length of stay in residence and requirements for break housing, such as completing forms and picking up new keys BEFORE the deadline.** In general it is necessary to move out soon after your exams are finished. Your RA (resident assistant) will help to explain other rules, and the Office of Residential Life (in Kretzmann Hall, phone 464-5413) will also be happy to help you. You can also check their website for further details:

<http://www.valpo.edu/reslife/>

You may want to live off-campus for dietary or other reasons; however if you are under 22, you must file a petition with the Housing Office to do so. There are several apartment complexes around campus, and many houses are divided into apartments. When you seek an apartment, make sure it meets your needs and that you can meet your obligations for rent and damages. Here are some tips:

Searching for an Apartment It is best to start by asking your friends if they know of an opening. Many times other students are looking for roommates and renters. This “word-of-mouth” method is usually the best. The Housing Office has a notebook full of listings sent to them by local landlords. The Graduate School website maintains a list of apartments for rent: www.valpo.edu/grad/assets/docs/housing.pdf. The Times and Torch newspapers also carry “classified” listings of places to rent. Also, the phone book has agencies listed under “Apartments” (in the yellow pages), which rent apartments. Finally, you may see “For Rent” signs on houses and apartments near campus.

Choosing an Apartment When you find some good possibilities, call the landlord or rental agency and ask about the location and cost. If you find the rent to be reasonable, set up an appointment to see the apartment. Ask to see the actual apartment, not a “model.” Is the apartment clean and ready for immediate occupancy? Think of some of the questions you want to ask ahead of time, such as the cost of utilities and length of lease. Do not sign the lease right away -- give yourself some time to think about it.

Questions to Ask Here are some questions to ask the landlord and yourself: Is the apartment in good condition? How are the walls, the floors, the windows? Do the appliances work? (Try them to find out.) How is the hot water supply? Where can you do laundry? What are the average utility costs? How many people can live in the apartment? Are pets allowed? How long is the lease? (Remember, you are responsible even if the lease extends beyond the school year.)

The Lease After asking about the length of the lease, find out when the rent is due and how it is to be paid. Ask about the security deposit (usually it is equal to one month's rent), and find out what it covers and how much you will get back. Ask what are the conditions if you break the lease, or if your landlord breaks the lease. Remember, once you sign the lease, you are responsible for adhering to its terms, so take your time and get advice on it if needed. **DO NOT LEASE** apartments for friends, as they may back out and you will be stuck with the lease.

Insurance and Safety Your landlord will most likely not have insurance to cover your personal belongings. Several years ago an apartment building housing seven international students caught fire and burned to the ground. The students lost everything, and they did not have insurance to cover their possessions. It is not necessary to have renter's insurance, but you may want to buy a policy if you own expensive computer equipment or other precious items. Short of insurance, it is always a good policy to rent an apartment that is kept in good condition and can be secured with good locks. Use common sense in not overloading circuits with too many electrical appliances, turning them off when not in use, and remembering to lock your door whenever you leave. It is useful to know your escape route in case of fire, and to keep a list of emergency numbers next to the phone.

Other Responsibilities Keep your apartment in good shape, and report any broken features to your manager right away. Try to keep it clean. Any change in tenants should be reported to the landlord, such as when you change roommates or sub-lease the apartment to someone else. Short-term visitors are usually OK. Be respectful of your neighbor's rights to quiet, cleanliness, etc. Your American neighbors may not understand some of the things you do or may feel uncomfortable in approaching you. If you are patient and courteous, most problems between neighbors can be easily solved.

Furnishing the Apartment Many neighborhoods have “garage” or “yard” sales for used furniture and household items. Check the classified section of the The Times newspaper for listings. There are a few shops around town which sell second-hand goods -- check the phone book. Garage sales, usually held on weekends, are great places to find used furniture at cheap prices. Indiana Furniture, K-Mart, Target, Kohls, and Walmart are also good places to buy many items. Of course, you can always ask around to see who is moving out and can spare some things. Craigs’s list is another resource that you can use:

<http://www.craigslist.org/about/sites.html>

If you need any assistance with housing situations, please contact either the OIP or the INTERLINK Office, depending on your status.