

Carroll College

Guide for Cross-Cultural Roommates



The 4 C's of Living with an International Roommate

Living with an international roommate can be an amazing experience for both you and your roommate. The benefits of living with an international roommate are countless and include:

- *Developing a greater comprehension of world issues.*
- *Increasing your ability to merge your cultural experiences with those of another culture.*
- *Improving career skills and opportunities by readying yourself to work on our global society.*
- *Making a connection and possibly developing a life-long friend.*
- *Having fun.*

It will take some time to get to know your roommate and learn about them, and it is likely, as in all roommate relationships, that there will be some frustrating moments as you get to know each other. There will be cultural differences between you and your roommate. There could also be differences in how you both communicate and why. Experience has shown, though, that getting to know your new international roommate could have positive lasting effects for both of you. With patience and a willingness to communicate and learn about each other, having an international roommate is an awesome experience.

To begin your journey, learn about where your roommate is from and how they might view the world differently. Check out these websites to get started:

<http://geert-hofstede.com/countries.html>

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>

CULTURE

One of the best parts of living with an international roommate is learning about a person from a culture different from your own. You may be able to learn about traditions and holidays from your roommate's country, and share about your own. You may be able try new traditional foods from that country and learn how they taste and smell. You may learn about differences in the cultures and challenge any stereotypes that you may have about that culture. You could even learn a new language and find many similarities between your cultures.

College is all about trying new things and expanding who you are as a person. Having an international roommate is a great way to do that. What better way to expand your knowledge than to be learning from a native of that culture. You can learn about the country where your roommate is from, what it is like to live there, and how it is similar to or different from here. There are endless amounts of information that you can learn

from and teach your roommate. You may also end up with a place to stay if you ever decide to travel abroad!

COMMUNICATION

The best advice we can provide for a successful roommate experience, is to have good communication. Talk to each other (no texting or e-mailing when there is a problem)! If you have a question or do not like something your roommate is doing, talk to them about it! If you do not say anything, there is a good chance your roommate does not know that they are doing something that you do not like. With an international student, this is twice as important because there could be a language barrier.

People from different cultures communicate differently. For example, some cultures show disagreement by not answering questions. In some cultures, that silence is the same as screaming at someone in another culture. Learning about how your roommate communicates will be critical to a good living experience. Spend some time at the beginning of the year and talk about how you BOTH will go about communicating disagreements. Talking about these things before they happen will make it much easier to work through than waiting until an issue arises.

COMMUNITY

One cool aspect about having an international roommate is that in many cases you will be able to introduce your roommate to your friends, which will give your roommates another opportunity to learn about the American culture and communication. The same can be true for you as well. Your international roommate can introduce you to some of their international friends here on campus, from their home country, or around the world. This could open up your horizons and allow you to be able to interact and communicate with people from a number of different places and backgrounds.

COMRADERY

Get to know your roommate! Set up some roommate time where just the two of you can get to know each other. Go and explore the campus, Helena and the surrounding area. Talk about things that you both like, such as music, books, movies, hobbies, or the future. Do the same kinds of things you would do with anyone that you meet and want to get to know better.

By spending time with them and getting to know them, you will show your new roommate that you care about them and want them to feel welcome and comfortable. Remember, they are coming to a brand new place very far from home. You may also be new to, but they are new to the United States, Montana, Helena, and Carroll College!

“Do and Don’t Ideas” for being a good roommate for an international student

Do:

Attempt to contact your roommate: You should attempt to contact your roommate. They are also encouraged to e-mail you. However, email does have its limitations. Many countries have email firewalls that block email from other countries and some companies. Do not be surprised if your new roommate does not connect with you. It may be that your first contact will have to be after they arrive.

Get to know your new roommate: You should get to know your new roommate. Things you should know (and share yourself):

- **Home town experience (Rural, urban, common entertainment, neighborhood structures, etc)**
- **Learn the stereotypes they may have about U.S. students (what do they think are common US attributes)**
- **Family Unit and Dynamics**
 - What do the parents do for work?
 - How many siblings do they have?
 - Small family or large family?
 - Who makes the decisions in the family?
- **School experience prior to coming to the US**
- **Hobbies and Interests**
- **Favorite Foods**
- **Music, Movies, Books and Art preferences**
- **Examine the gift giving practices of the other culture**
- **Religion – can be a touchy subject so approach with caution and respect**
How does their culture experience “small talk” and what are some communication differences?
 - Direct vs. Indirect communication
 - Personal space differences
 - <http://blogs.hbr.org/2014/05/one-reason-cross-cultural-small-talk-is-so-tricky/>
 - <http://geert-hofstede.com/countries.html>
- **Know their country – use the following websites:**
 - <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>
 - <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/world-leaders-1/>

Keep an open mind and be positive: With all new roommate situations (domestic or international), it takes time to form a relationship and you should consider this an exciting opportunity. Yes, your new roommate can be very different from you. Many international students have very different worldviews and cultures. Sometimes students want to give up early in that relationship process, though many who stick to it

learn amazing things and form lifetime friendships. Know that we have limited space and you may not be able to switch rooms, as well. When you learn how to form a positive relationship with someone who may be vastly different from you, you will have developed some highly marketable life skills that make you competitive in the work force.

Know and respect time zone differences: *Many students who visit the US have family and friends in different time zones. This means that if they will be calling their family it could be a late phone call. Set some boundaries and expectations early in the relationship and be open-minded when there are family emergencies. Due to the distance between the international student and their family, family emergencies can be very challenging. Whereas most domestic students are within a few hour's drive from their families, international students oftentimes have to take multiple planes, which is time-consuming and extremely costly.*

Invest in the roommate relationship: *Set aside time every week to hang out with your roommate. Find things that you are both interested in and have fun. This can be sports, video games, movies, tea times, etc...*

Use the roommate agreement and your CA Staff: *The roommate agreement is a great way to set up some basic expectations with your new roommate. The roommate agreement is also a great way to "break the ice". When in conflict with your roommate, use a CA to help. When completing the roommate agreement be sure to use open-ended questions and avoid yes/no questions. Many cultures have problems answering yes/no questions (i.e. "What time do you like to go to sleep" rather than "Is Midnight OK for us to use as a 'lights out' time").*

Understand culture shock: *Take a few moments to research what culture shock is. Here is a blog post that can elaborate on culture shock and how it can be influencing your relationship with your roommate:*

<http://manaspecialcreature.blogspot.com/2013/01/man-adjustment.html>.

Knowing culture shock will also provide you with a framework for understanding how conflicts can arise.

Homesickness: *Homesickness is a reality for some Carroll College students. This can be especially true for students who are far from home. If you suspect your international roommate is suffering from homesickness, encourage them to be active and get involved in the Carroll community. If you feel the situation is more severe than normal, please do not hesitate to contact Shannon Ackeret at 406-447-4469 or sackeret@carroll.edu*

Use general politeness: *People in the United States can be very fast talkers. Speak slower than usual but not louder. Speaking louder will not compensate for a language barrier. Maintain a calm tone of voice and speak at a slower rate. For many of our international students, English is not their primary language. What this means is that while you are speaking to them in English, they are actively translating what you are saying in their mind then formulating a response in their native tongue and then*

translating their answer into English. This process can be very exhausting so please be patient and keep a positive attitude.

Don't:

Don't use Facebook or other social media to make first contact: *First, not all countries allow Facebook or other US social media platforms to be used. Some countries have their own form of social media and limit outside access. Second, Facebook and other social media profiles are not always accurate and can give you (or them) the wrong impression of who the person is.*

Do not bully with your English: *For many students who enter the US, English may be a foreign language. As such, their English proficiency may be lower than yours may. Do not assume that the international student's English proficiency is at that same level as yours. Many international students on our campus are in the process of learning the English language. Do not monopolize or dominate the conversations simply because your English may be better than your roommate's may. Be patient and allow time for your roommate to answer questions. United States English is actually a very challenging language due to all the different slang, colloquialisms and expressions US residents' use, which makes it hard for others to know what US residents may be saying.*

Don't Assume Anything: *Talk through everything. You are supplied a roommate contract in the beginning of the semester. This is a good tool for you to use. You can always go to a resident assistant for assistance. Silence is rarely agreement. Always ask open-ended follow-up questions.*

Don't sweat the small stuff: *This is true for both domestic and international roommates. Be wise about picking your battles. Not everything is worth having a conversation about. Remember, the 24-hour rule. Leave a minor situation alone for 24 hours. If after that time it still really bothers you, then you should talk about it.*

Don't expect to get a room change: *The reality is that space may be limited at Carroll College and room switches cannot always be made right away. You should expect to work with your roommate for the entire first semester. You will have an opportunity to switch roommates for spring semester. Please keep in contact with your CA if you wish to do this.*

Don't be a mom or a dad: *Remember that international students are adults. Moreover, many of our international students tend to be older and are typically sophomores and juniors. Attempting to be a parent figure to an international student is patronizing and insulting.*

Tokenizing relationships: *Do not tokenize your international roommate, as they are not something to "show off" to your friends and family. Be careful to share your experiences and activities instead. Moreover, each international student has their own experience with their culture and their experience does not represent the whole of the*

culture. For example, if you have a roommate from France and they smoke it does not mean that all French people smoke.

Avoid slang and colloquialisms: Americans sometimes speak with a lot of slang words and colloquial expressions. What is a colloquial expression? An example would be “You hit the nail on the head.” Common examples include; “What’s up?” and “How’s it going?” International students tend to learn textbook English, which is more formal. If you do catch yourself using slang, or you see confusion in your roommate, stop and explain the slang term.

Avoid stereotype usages: Using stereotypes when referencing other individuals is wrong and offensive. Likewise, it is inappropriate to make broad generalizations about an entire ethnicity based upon the experience you have with your roommate.

Using these tips and a positive attitude will help you to get the most from this amazing opportunity and have the best possible experience. Do not forget to use you RA and Hall Director as resources if you need them.

For questions or concerns, please contact:

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NOTE: This guide for cross-cultural roommates is being used with permission by the Center for International Education of the University of Wisconsin Eau Claire