

How to Survive Your First Year at an American University in the MENA* Region

A Practical Guide for Senior High School Students and First-Year University Students



*Middle East and North Africa

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Introduction

Have you been accepted to an American university in the MENA region? Do you find yourself overwhelmed by the variety of majors and minors on offer? Are you afraid of finding your way through the myriad of buildings on campus? Do you worry about making the most of your university experience?

As with any new place, when you join a new university, you may feel overwhelmed by the change. This is normal. You are entering a new phase in your life and you may not know how to navigate it just yet.

This guide will help you make the most of your first year at an American institution. No matter how over- or underwhelmed you feel in your new surroundings, this ebook will give you tips on how to gain the most from your first year as a university student.



Before you begin

What is an American university?

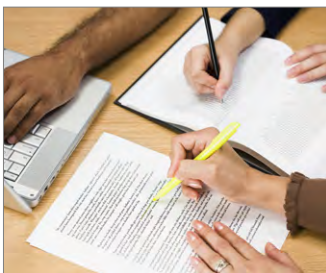
American universities are quite different from other types of universities in terms of the curriculum and campus life, among other things.

At American universities, all students take core courses in addition to those required for their major. This ensures that they gain a breadth of knowledge in addition to specialized learning in their primary area of study. Each student selects a degree program to pursue, which is commonly called a major. This leads to the bachelor's degree. In addition, many students opt to pursue a minor, which is a set number of classes focusing on a specific topic.

The method of classroom instruction emphasizes individual initiative, active learning and the application of knowledge. The curriculum is organized according to the American pattern of semesters and courses.

Student life on campus is rich with clubs, sports and cultural events, and students are encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities.

As for admission procedures, American universities may require specific tests, depending on your educational background.



Research

Once you have been accepted to the university of your choice, you will receive an admissions packet that contains a lot of important information. Your dream is now a reality, so read through all the material carefully and try to find out as much about the university as you can.

Go through the university's website and learn to navigate it as well as you can before you arrive on campus. Visit the pages of your college and department and familiarize yourself with the professors. The more you know about your future surroundings, the less unsettled you will feel.



Social media

Most universities have active social media accounts, such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. If you haven't already, now is the time to follow the official university pages. You can search for other first-year students and get to know them before you even arrive on campus. Raise a question about the university and you will find many replies from students and alumni sharing their know-how with you. Social media is a great way to connect with your fellow students.

Starting out

Orientation sessions

The first event you attend at university is your orientation. No matter how much or how little you know about the campus, you should attend all the orientation sessions. This will give you a better idea of what will be expected of you as a university student, the campus layout, the facilities and the services offered. Most orientation leaders are senior students and many first-year students feel more comfortable learning about the campus from fellow students. Make sure you ask a lot of questions.

Some universities also offer special orientations for parents. Having your parents attend this event will give them a better idea of what your university experience will be like.

Many universities offer organized peer mentoring programs, which help new students adjust to university life. Be sure to ask about this during orientation.

Make friends with other first-year students

Being new at a college where you don't know anyone can be very intimidating. The best option is to talk to other students. Not only will you make new friends, but you will also feel less intimidated in your surroundings if you meet someone who is going through the same experience.

Similarly, if you are living on campus, make an effort to get to know your roommate and people in your dorm. These people will essentially be your family, as your dorm



Get to know upper-level students

Many times orientation leaders are upper-level students who help first-year students explore the campus. Stay in touch with them. If you have any questions, they can often guide you through your college experience. Senior students have experience with professors and can tell you which courses to take and how to get the most out of your schedule. Many universities also have a peer-mentoring program that you may find helpful.



Explore the campus

During orientation, team leaders will show you the prominent places on campus and will point out the academic buildings, libraries and dining areas. Don't just rely on the orientation. It's a good idea to walk the route to your classes before the first day so that you will know where to go ahead of time. Explore the campus on your own, too. Walk around with your friends and familiarize yourself with the campus. The more you know your campus, the less daunting it will seem.

Meet with your advisor

Many high schools have a set list of courses that students have to take each semester. In college, students have several options in terms of courses, especially for their general education requirements. Your advisor can help you ensure that you meet all of your graduation requirements.



In many universities, an advisor is assigned to you in the beginning and he or she will help you make the most of your time with an appropriate course load. If you are still undecided about your major, let your advisor know your areas of interest and he or she will design a course load to help you navigate your way through college.

Your advisor can also be a valuable source of information about campus resources, course options, degree planning, academic policies, study skills and more.

Use the university catalog

Your university course catalog will help you determine the ideal course plan for your major and decide what courses

to take and when. You can mark the courses you have completed in the catalog. This gives you a visual of what courses you have left to take.

Most university catalogs contain useful information about policies, academic integrity, campus resources, graduation requirements, fees and financial aid information.



Act responsibly

Some students will live on campus while others will continue living at home. Wherever you live, you will realize that college is worlds apart from your high school life. You will have a lot more freedom than you ever had before. For the first time, you can choose what you want to study and when. Make sure you don't abuse this freedom. Try not to get so involved in your social life that you let your studies slide. Balance work and play. Make sure that you attend class and get there on time. Always bear in mind that you are now an adult and will be held responsible for your own actions.

Grading system

Credit hours

If this is your first time studying in an American system, you may not be sure of how credit hours work. Don't worry. It's quite simple.

A course is measured by its credit hours. Each credit hour is the number of hours you are in class per week during a semester. If a course is three credits, it converts to three hours of class time per week for that course. This may differ slightly in the case of labs.

Each degree plan has a certain number of credits you need to complete in order to graduate. The credits also help calculate your grade point average.



How grades are calculated

Grade point average (GPA)

The GPA is based on a four-point scale. Most universities have grades from A-F and a percentage value is given to each grade. This value coincides with a grade point. A generic example is below:

Grade	Grade Point	Percentage
A	4	90–100
B	3	80–89.9
C	2	70–79.9
D	1	60–69.9
F	0	<59

Quality points

The quality points earned in a course are calculated by multiplying the grade point value of the letter grade by the number of credits the course is worth.

Semester grade point average (SGPA)

The semester GPA is used to calculate your standing each semester. It is calculated by dividing the sum of the quality points of courses taken in a particular semester by the total number of credits of the courses taken in that same semester.

$$\text{SGPA} = \frac{\text{sum (quality points of courses taken in semester X)}}{\text{sum (credit hours of courses taken in semester X)}}$$

Cumulative grade point average (CGPA)

The cumulative GPA (CGPA) is what is used to calculate your final standing upon graduation. This is calculated by dividing the sum of the quality points of courses taken in all semesters by the total number of credits of all courses taken in all semesters.

$$\text{CGPA} = \frac{\text{sum (quality points of courses taken in all semesters)}}{\text{sum (credit hours of courses taken in all semesters)}}$$

An undergraduate student's academic standing is determined by his/her CGPA.

Academic probation

At most universities, undergraduate students must maintain a certain cumulative GPA to be considered in good



academic standing. If your GPA falls below this point, you could be placed on academic probation. Unless you raise your GPA, you could be dismissed from the university.

If you find yourself struggling with your academic performance, talk to your professors or seek help from the university's academic support center.

Academic Integrity

Abide by the academic integrity or honor code

During orientation, university officials mention the academic integrity or honor code, which states that you must adhere to a strict level of discipline and honesty. Make sure that you read the academic integrity or honor code for the university very carefully and ask professors if there are sections that you do not fully understand.

Academic integrity violations include, among other things, plagiarism, cheating on exams and quizzes, letting someone copy your work, doing work for another student, or giving another student an advance copy of a test. Academic integrity violations may result in severe penalties that may even include expulsion from the university. Do not take this lightly.

Plagiarism

Don't turn in anyone else's work as your own. Read your course syllabus carefully and observe that each one will have a special section on plagiarism.

pla·gia·rize: to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own; use (another's production) without crediting the source.
(Source: www.merriam-webster.com)

There are many websites available these days for professors to check the authenticity of your work, so don't assume that you can get away with crediting someone else's work as your own. When you use someone else's research, always cite your sources.

In class



Be organized

Managing your time will help you allocate the proper times for classes and assignments, and will also help you keep track of your extracurricular and social activities. A well-organized schedule will keep you happy and on top of things.

Your workload in college will be very intense with constant assignments, readings and deadlines to meet. Keep track of all your assignments and important due dates by adding them to your calendar at the start of each semester. You can use apps on your smart phone as organizational tools and schedule your day, week or month. The same tools are available on the Internet for students without smart phones.

Your professors will give you a course syllabus for each class. This is an important document that lists class assignments, important dates and deadlines, and other information. Professors might not remind you of exam dates or assignment deadlines since these are stated on your syllabus. Make a note of all the important dates so you don't miss out on anything. Also make sure you read the syllabus from beginning to end so that you are prepared.

To avoid stress, don't start a project the day before a deadline. Remember, the earlier you finish an assignment, the more time you have to edit and improve your final work.

Make folders for each course and store all your assignments together. Many students find themselves losing papers and course readings due to a lack of organization. Always back up your work and store it in a safe place.

Opt for the buddy system

Try to make friends with other students that you meet in class. When you start a new course, look around at other students and strike up a conversation. This will ensure that you make new friends and will help you set up a buddy system, so if you ever miss a class, you have someone to lend you notes that you have missed. While it's important to make a friend, make sure that you each do your own

work so that you don't violate the university's academic integrity code.



Meet with your professor

At most universities, professors will have scheduled office hours for each course. Make sure you meet with your professor and use the time to establish a rapport with the professor. This not only implies to the professor that you are interested in the course and would like to do well, but also gives you a chance to clarify things discussed in class. Volunteering in class and asking questions also shows the instructor that you are interested in the class.

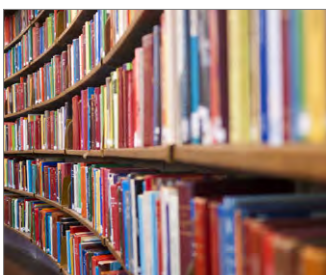
Take elective courses

Many students don't know what they would like to major or minor in right at the beginning. Don't feel insecure because your peers seem to know what they want. Many first-year students are unsure of their future. It's not uncommon to switch majors at some point in your academic career.

The advantage of the American system of education is that during the first couple of semesters you may take many general education courses. This gives you the chance to really discover what you are good at and then declare that as a major or minor. Take your time to discover your own interests and find out what you are good at. Take courses that you may never have imagined taking and it will soon become clear what direction you should take. You can then choose your major and minor accordingly.

Explore your options and choose something that interests you and makes you happy. If you are unsure about your career choice, consult with your advisor or a career counselor on campus.

Use on-campus learning resources



Visit the campus library for reference and resources. Familiarize yourself with the reference books pertaining to your major as well as with the databases you need. The library staff is always ready to help you use the library computer system and assist you with finding the right resources for your assignments. Interlibrary loan is becoming increasingly popular in the MENA region and

libraries are pooling resources to provide students with the information they need.

There are many other learning tools on campus. Many colleges offer assistance in the form of writing centers, labs, teaching assistants and tutors. If these are not for you, form a study group and set a time to revise with your group. Most libraries have study rooms that can be used for group study sessions.

Study



Often students are so excited by the freedom college allows that their classes become less of a priority. Before they know it, even the smartest students may find themselves on academic probation.

Many students are under the false impression that the final grade is the most important. This is not true. Most professors divide the grade throughout the semester and give midterms, quizzes and assignments that add up to the final grade. It is essential that you stay on top of your work throughout the semester. Plan to study two hours outside of class each week for each credit hour. For example, if you are registered for 15 credits, you should be studying for approximately 30 hours outside of class.

Though the first couple of years in college are a time to “find yourself,” make sure you keep some time each day to study. It is important to plan a schedule that you can stick to. Skipping class may mean not finding out if test dates have been changed or assignment due dates have been altered. If you cannot wake up early for a class, register for later ones. If the only option is an early class, follow a buddy system where you and a friend can act as each other’s sponsor, ensuring that you get to class each day. Keep in mind that many universities and courses have an attendance policy, and if you miss too many classes, you may fail the course.

Equally important is to find a spot on campus where you can study, such as in a library carrel, a corner in the cafeteria or under your favorite tree. Always have a go-to place where you can concentrate without any distractions.

Outside the classroom

Follow the code of conduct

As a university student, you will be expected to exhibit certain standards of social behavior. Be sure to familiarize yourself with your university's student code of conduct. This code outlines the agreed standards of behavior of your university community. It also states the ramifications of failing to uphold the set moral and ethical values of the university.

In addition, you will be expected to follow all local and national laws.



Interact with the Student Council

Many universities have a Student Council that represents students' interests. A university's Student Council is the voice of the student body. The council holds student body meetings and listens to the concerns of the students and then presents them before the administration. No concerns are too small. Student problems range from parking issues and uneven course loads to the quality of food in the cafeteria. If you have any problems, share them at student body meetings; you will be surprised at how many other students share your concerns. You can then decide together the proper course of action to take.



Participate in extracurricular activities

At any American university, there are several cultural and interest-oriented clubs to join. Find out about the different clubs on campus and join the ones that you find interesting. This is a great way to make friends, and well-balanced participation in extracurricular activities looks great on your resume.

If you don't find a club that suits your interests, get the approval to start one of your own. You can then be a president/founder of a club and hone your leadership skills. Plus, you will be able to make friends with people who have similar interests.

It's important to maintain a balance between your studies and your extracurricular activities. Don't get so involved with your events and clubs that your studies are affected.



Read your email

Most official university communication is done via email. Some universities tend to send several emails a day, which students then begin to ignore as spam. Make sure you at least skim through all your mail before you delete it. What you may consider junk mail might just be an announcement about an important university event or deadline that you may end up missing. If you're too busy, save these emails and read them later, but never delete them without reading.

Stay in touch

Once you start university, even if you are living at home, you tend to spend less time with your family. It gets very easy to lose touch with your family and friends. You can grow apart from your high school friends if you attend different universities or colleges. If you manage your time well, you will find a way to accommodate family and friendships despite the different directions your lives are taking. Maintaining a link to your past grounds you and prevents you from feeling lonely or homesick.

Take care of yourself



Maintain your health

There is nothing worse than getting sick when you live away from home, or when you have a major assignment due. Do not be lax when it comes to your own health. Maintain a proper regimen and you will be less susceptible to illness.

Don't study or socialize so much that it interferes with your sleep. Lack of sleep hinders your health and increases your stress levels, which can affect the quality of your work. Improper sleeping hours will make you groggy and will reduce your chances of waking on time for an early class.

Also, make sure you eat right. If you live alone, it can be easy to live on a diet of fast food, but you will be setting yourself up for unwanted weight gain. Plan out your weekly meals in advance, whether it is choosing healthier options from the college cafeteria, or cooking a well-balanced meal with your friends.

Stay fit



Some students will sign up for the campus sports teams right at the beginning of the term, but even if you don't consider yourself athletic be sure to check out the campus sports facilities. At the very least, visit the gym, go for a walk a couple of times a week, or walk or ride your bike to class. This is great exercise and a perfect way to get to know your surroundings better. You might even discover that you are more athletic than you imagined.

Exercise helps you stay fit and manage your stress levels. Other than putting your energy to good use, any form of physical exercise will help strengthen your muscles and bones, tone your body and increase your fitness level. This in turn helps you de-stress and increases endorphins in your brain, which result in a happier mood. This positive energy will help relax your mind and you can then focus better in class.

Make use of on-campus counseling services



Some students, sooner or later, start feeling homesick or out of place in their new university environment. There's nothing wrong in feeling that your peers seem to have settled in better than you have. Remember, there's always help at hand.

Universities typically have confidential counseling services where you have the option to speak to a counselor who can help you resolve your issues. A counselor's main job is to assist students that may be facing difficulties on the academic or personal front. They have the skills to address the problems faced by the students in and out of the classroom and conduct individual or group counseling sessions while maintaining confidentiality.

If you feel self-conscious speaking to an adult, many counseling centers also have peer counseling where senior students help you out, sharing their own experiences to help you overcome your problems. Though you may be more independent now, there is no need to face all your troubles alone.

Understand the culture



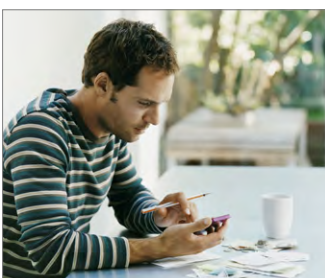
Be aware of local traditions

If you join a university in the Middle East, you need to acclimate yourself with the local traditions. If you have not been to the Middle East previously, you may not know of cultural traditions such as some women observing the veil or holy months such as Ramadan and the cultural norms expected at that time from residents. Many orientation sessions will address these issues. Even if they don't, try talking to the different people around you to understand their cultural norms. Once they detect your interest, people are usually eager to share and explain their ways of life.

Explore the city you are in

Once you feel comfortable on your new campus, expand your horizons and acclimate yourself with the city you are in. Find out the best spots for dining and entertainment. Visit different parts of the city with your friends and get to know your surroundings.

Budget



Manage your expenses

If you are living alone for the first time, you will be responsible for your own day-to-day funds. If you are getting a regular stipend from your parents or even from an on-campus job, you will need to be careful about how much you spend. Create a budget and try to stick to it. Allow for daily meals and regular outings with friends but refrain from exceeding your daily budget. Keep track of your expenses on an Excel sheet or use budgeting websites or smart phone apps that can track your spending.

Limit your off-campus activities so that you don't overspend. Often, universities have free or low-cost entertainment and events on campus.

Use the bus service if your university provides one. This is

usually free or at minimal cost and not having a car will save you having to pay for car insurance and gas.

Another way to save money is to carpool with friends who live near you. Pool your resources and take turns paying for gas. This reduces your carbon footprint and helps you save money. And it is always fun to go around with friends.

Financial aid

Another avenue to help with your university expenses is financial aid. Most universities offer a wide range of grants, scholarships and on-campus jobs. Be sure to check with your university's financial aid office to see what might be available to you.

Employment



On-campus employment

A very good way to transition from student to adult is by taking an on-campus job. Most universities allow students to work in the different departments for a reasonable hourly rate. Getting a job on campus will prepare you for future work opportunities and allow you to explore different fields. This also looks good on your resume and allows employers to see that you are serious about your work.

However, be sure that your job does not interfere with your studies. Always remember that your priority at college is getting an education.

Career advising and placement

Most American universities have career advising services on campus to help you prepare for the real world. Visit the career office and you will find a wealth of information about companies in the region and the kinds of jobs they have to offer. Make an appointment with a career counselor and discuss your options. A career counselor can work with you to provide opportunities tailored to your qualifications.

Most college career offices also host events throughout the year, from resume-writing workshops to mock interview sessions and career fairs where you can meet national and international employers. Try to attend these events even if you are a first-year student in order to familiarize yourself with the process.



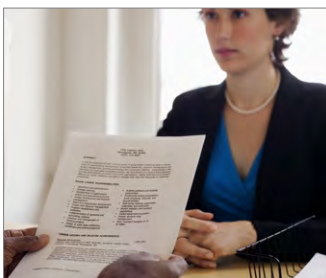
Internships

Some American universities require internships as part of their degree programs, while others provide optional internship opportunities. Internships look great on your resume, provide work experience and help you put into practice what you learned in the classroom. They are also a great way for you to make contacts in your industry, and this is very helpful when the time comes for you to get a job.

Though internships are usually done during the junior or senior year, it is never too early to start thinking about what you might want to do. If you plan to intern at a popular firm, competition may be fierce.

Some students have their career paths all set in their minds, know where they would like to do their internship and where they want to work upon graduation. If you're one of them, then it's a good idea to start directing your efforts toward it as early as you can.

Many students tend to turn towards paid internships, but it's important to note that even an unpaid internship provides a learning experience. Don't be enticed by the monetary compensation just yet. The academic credit, experience and networking opportunities you get through the internship is more important at this stage. Keep in mind that many employers tend to hire students who interned for them as they already have a good understanding of the company.



Improve your resume

Make the most of every opportunity that presents itself to you during your university life. After all, you are doing all this to have an impressive resume that employers will more than glance at. The more well-rounded you are, the more employers seek to hire you.

Take the time during college to participate in sports or join ethnic or interest-oriented clubs. Help organize

fund raising events; volunteer work always looks good on a resume. Participate in intercollegiate competitions and any international competitions that come your way. Internships shed light on your level of experience in the real world, while computer skills and knowledge of different languages help, too.

Having a high grade point average (GPA) is always impressive, but couple that with extracurricular interests, and you have a winning resume.

Conclusion

Though the first year in a new environment can be daunting, there is no need to let this prevent you from making the most of your time at university. Embrace the change, as it is your transition into adult life. Set your reservations aside and discover aspects of university life that will bring to the foreground your best attributes.

Do your best in the first year as you are laying a foundation for your future in university. Stay on top of your game, or you may find yourself trying to make up for it during the rest of your time at university.

Your first year at university will be one of the most exciting years in your life. We hope that this guide will help you make the most of your experience.



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