

# Instructor clarifies American culture

British understatement, French existentialism and Italian pasta are aspects of each nation's distinct culture. Yet when the topic turns to U.S. culture, Americans seem to have an identity problem — many say it doesn't even exist.

But at least one University instructor adamantly disagrees.

"There are just limitless amounts of American culture," says Bill Rankin, who teaches an American Culture course to foreign students at the American English Institute. "There is no question about it, and the problem in teaching it is there's so much to teach. Naturally in a course as small as mine with foreigners, we don't go too much in depth," he adds.

Rankin's course is one of two electives offered by the AEI for advanced foreign students studying English.

"Our interest is in teaching them (American) culture so that they can understand their experience here and of course, they're more aware of American culture than an American would be because it's different." Americans are too immersed in their culture to recognize it, but traveling abroad makes one more aware of it, he adds.

"Anyone who leaves the country sees America a lot more clearly."

Rankin himself lived abroad for nine years in France, six years in Africa and one year in India. Once he returned to his homeland, American culture was obvious to him.

Some people assume America is unique because of its melting pot character, but "all cultures are melting

person to Abraham Lincoln to Martin Luther King.

"Freedom is a pretty important concept to the American people. We show the good and the bad — religious freedom and cults. Religious freedom is obviously a good thing. Are cults a good thing? We talk about how much freedom we should have because it's very different in their countries."

On the lighter side of culture is the American wardrobe. Blue jeans — long a favorite American staple — are enjoying worldwide popularity now, Rankin says, and jeans epitomize the American sense of practicality.

"The whole idea of clothes as something you can do anything in is a very American concept." Americans commonly dress for comfort and practicality to fit their active lifestyles, he says.

"Practicality is a very important aspect of American culture. The world is becoming more practical, but in Europe doing anything manual, such as screwing in a lightbulb, is something only the menial classes do. This has changed, but there are still remnants of that." And this gradual shift overseas towards more practical lifestyles is partly influenced by the American 'ethic' of practicality, Rankin says.

Like its clothing, America's food exemplifies its citizens, who themselves descend from many cultures.

"We have all kinds of extremes, from junk food to granola," Rankin says. "We discuss what typical American food is, but we can't seem to get too clear on that, especially around here where Mexican food seems to be the most common American food," Rankin says, chuckling.

Another 'gray' area of American culture is etiquette. One of the most common problems foreign students have in the United States is the proprieties of dating — who calls whom, who foots the bill, how much to tip. Even many Americans don't know the answers to these questions because, says Rankin, America has no rigid etiquette rules like other nations.

Foreign cultures and manners "tend to be very fixed," and foreigners often expect to be given an exact rundown of what they can and can't do here, Rankin says.

Because no hard and fast rules exist, Americans are given instructions wherever they go.

"Everything is spelled out because nobody knows ahead of time (how to behave), and we decide what we're going to do sort of arbitrarily in a situation," Rankin says.

For example, while eating lunch in a campus restaurant, Rankin noticed small signs at each table informing patrons of the table's minimum order and maximum amount of dining time. The likelihood of finding such instructions in a foreign country's restaurant are slim, Rankin says.

"It's impossible to think of that happening anywhere else in the world but here. People would find it terribly offensive, and they would walk immediately out of the restaurant — if they didn't break a window while they were doing it — because your right is to stay



the amount of time you want to. That's a right they think they have," Rankin says. Americans feel they should eat quickly and get out, while other cultures take a more leisurely approach to dining.

Americans' relatively fast-paced lifestyle often extends to human relationships as well, Rankin says.

Although foreign students tend to see Americans as outgoing people, they have difficulty getting beneath the smiling exterior.

"I'm always surprised by how they (foreign students) tend to see Americans as very friendly and open at first, but they say you (Americans) never get to know anybody really well."

An increasingly technological society may also contribute to a decreased emphasis on relationships — and on culture. Yet technology is only another culture, Rankin says.

"Everything is cultural. You can't get away from culture. Even what we're moving into — a technological culture — is still a culture, but it's not a national culture. It's an international culture.

"But you can't get away from culture. You just cannot."

Story by Joan Herman  
Graphic by Shawn Bird

**'The whole idea of clothes as something you can do anything in is a very American concept.'**

— Bill Rankin

pot," Rankin says. "Ours is just a more recent melting pot. Generally, the better the melting pot, the better the culture, but it takes time.


"Our culture is in an early stage compared to others that have been around 2,000 years. An older culture is going to be smoother and more harmonious in that time than ours. And mixtures have almost always been good, but not immediately. You can't immediately get it all together."

Although baseball, hotdogs, apple pies and Chevrolets are distinctly American, U.S. citizens can be proud of more prestigious cultural aspects of their nation as well — in art, music, literature and philosophy.

But probably the most obvious aspect of U.S. culture is the American lifestyle.

To many foreigners, America is the 'promised land,' the 'free' land. And because 'freedom' plays a big role in the American lifestyle, Rankin devotes much of his class to tracing its roots in American history, from Thomas Jef-

## GRADUATE TO GOLD



Now Save \$25.  
on 14K gold College Rings.

You're ready! For the biggest and the best that life has to offer. And for the college ring that will speak volumes about you—and your achievements—for years to come.

What's more—you can afford it! Because now, for a limited time you can order from the entire ArtCarved collection of 14K gold college rings and save \$25. Come and see the exquisitely crafted styles—from the classic to the contemporary. And choose the ring and custom options that most eloquently express you.

Now is your time to get what you deserve. And remember—nothing else feels like real gold.

### ARTCARVED®

CLASS RINGS, INC.

**Date:**  
Monday & Tuesday

**Time:**  
8:30 - 4:00

**Place:**  
**UO**  
BOOKSTORE

Deposit Required. MasterCard or Visa Accepted. © 1982 ArtCarved Class Rings, Inc.

## ★ Sportstown Athletics

(Next to the Bookstore)

### Back-to-School Sale

## FREE SHORTS

Look for our special purchase box. Buy 1 short at the regular price and get the second one FREE!!!  
(These shorts are not seconds)

<p><b>Puma Game Cat</b> reg. 31.95 NOW <b>23.95</b></p> <p><b>New Balance 660</b> (Men's &amp; Womens's) reg. 58.95 NOW <b>49.95</b></p>	<p><b>Puma Court One</b> reg. 32.95 NOW <b>22.95</b></p> <p><b>New Balance 555</b> reg. 55.95 NOW <b>34.95</b></p> <p><b>Nike Leather Cortez</b>, reg. 41.95, NOW <b>34.95</b></p>
--	--

- Long Sleeve T Shirts • Sweatshirts
- Lots of shorts, including New Zealand Splits

### ★ Sportstown Athletics

just down from the bookstore

Open: Mon.-Sat. 10-6, Sun.12-4 • 687-8196

