

Chatterbox #246 – What university is like in North America

Episode description

Have you ever wondered what it's like to study in another country? Andrew and Suzanne answer a listener's question about what universities are like in North America.

Fun fact

The United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and the United States are the top four countries for international students. These four countries take in 40% of all people who study in a different country.

Expressions included in the study guide

- Hitch a ride
- The take-home
- Under the microscope
- On the hot seat
- Mesh with [someone or something]
- Tight with [someone]



Transcript

Note: The words and expressions that appear in **bold text** within the transcript are discussed in more detail in the Detailed Explanations section that follows the transcript.

Andrew: Hey, everybody. My name is Andrew.

Suzanne: And I'm Suzanne.

Andrew: And you're listening to Culips.

Andrew: Hey, everyone. Welcome back to another edition of the Culips English Podcast. Today, we have a Chatterbox episode for you. And if you're not familiar with our Chatterbox series, it's where we let you listen in on completely natural, unscripted English conversations and, today, I am joined by my trusty cohost, Suzanne.

Andrew: Hello, Suzanne, how are you?

Suzanne: Hi Andrew, hi guys. I'm good. How are you doing?

Andrew: I'm getting a little bit hungry, to be honest with you. I'm feeling a little rumble in my stomach. It's approaching lunchtime here, where I am, so ...

Suzanne: Yeah.

Andrew: So I'm getting hungry, but I'm OK, Suzanne, I'm OK. And I'm excited to talk about the topic at hand here today, because ...

Suzanne: Yeah.

Andrew: It's, it's my favourite type of topic. It's a suggestion that was sent to us by a listener. I'm gonna read the email that we received here. It was from a listener whose name is Steffi. I think that's maybe her English nickname. And her Chinese name—she's from China—I'm gonna butcher the pronunciation, I'm sorry. It's Huiqing, Huiqing. OK.

Andrew: So Steffi, we'll use that nickname, easier for me, said, uh, "Dear Culips, I have been listening to your podcast for a few months. I really enjoy listening to your episodes. Recently, you were talking about high school in Canada. Could you also record an episode and talk about university in Canada? I'm a Chinese student, but I live in Germany. For example, in Germany we have to collect 180 credits to get a bachelor degree. Some courses offer five credits and the other 10 credits. The tuition is around €300 for one semester and inclusive of the transportation ticket. We can use it to take the bus or subway all day in the whole semester. So, I would like to know, how many credits do you need to graduate with a bachelor's degree? Do you have to pay for every course you need to take? Do you have two or four semesters in a year? How many people will be in a course? Do you have to write a final exam or presentation for credits? And what about transportation for students? The final question is: do students live at home or share an apartment? These questions are very interesting for me, because university life in every country is different. Thanks very much." OK, wow.

Suzanne: That's a lot of questions, yeah.

Andrew: Lots of questions, yeah. So let's get right to it. Before we do, though, I want to remind all of our listeners here about the study guide for this episode, which is available for download on our website. And it's filled with lots of good things like the transcript, some detailed vocabulary explanations, and examples of all the key words from this episode, and there's other good things in there, too. The best way to, really, to experience it is just to give it a download and check it out. So Culips.com, visit the website and you can do that.

Suzanne: Yeah.

Andrew: Sue, let's take a stab at some of these questions here. Let's see, how about we start with the transportation aspect?

Suzanne: Yeah, that's great.

Andrew: When I was student in Canada, my university offered a U-Pass. It was called a U-Pass. And in Victoria, I went to the University of Victoria for my undergrad, we don't have a subway. There's no subway system in Victoria, so we didn't get to ride that, but we could ride the bus unlimited for free.

Suzanne: Nice.

Andrew: I guess, actually, it wasn't free. It was included in our tuition fee. I think there was maybe \$50 or \$75 of our tuition fee was earmarked for the U-Pass. But if you considered the U-Pass price compared to a regular year-long transportation pass price, it was a considerable discount that students got.

Suzanne: That's really great. This is for buses. There's no ... This is not for a metro? Like any train? You said there's no train.

Andrew: Yeah, there, there was no train, it was only for the bus, but that was the only system. I'm sure if the city had a subway, we would have been able to ride the subway, too. But it didn't exist there.

Suzanne: Yeah, it's, it's interesting, I don't think there was a subway where I went to university for my undergrad, either. I went to school at Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, um, and I believe it was just buses, as well. I wanna say, though, everything was really close in walking distance, unless you wanted to go really far, like, you know, into the countryside. Then you would take a bus or maybe rent a car with a bunch of friends. But, for the most part, everything was in walking distance. I actually walked everywhere or rode a bike. So that was my transportation, once I was in, you know, once I was at university. My family lived far away, so I would fly home for breaks or drive. Sometimes we'd, I would **hitch a ride** with a friend, and we would drive across country. It was pretty fun.

Andrew: Nice.

Suzanne: Yeah, that was a cool way to see the country. But, yeah, I would say on foot and on bikes, and there was a lot of bike racks and things. So it was very conducive to riding bikes.

Andrew: I also rode my bike almost every day as an undergrad. Although we got the U-Pass, we had the transportation pass, there was no option, you couldn't opt out of this pass, you had to accept it as part of your tuition fees. But, yeah, even though I had that pass, I would still ride my bike to school every day, just 'cause I love riding bikes.

Suzanne: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I really got into it in, in university.

Andrew: The next thing that I wanna mention here is something that really shocked me. Steffi said in her message that tuition was about €300 per semester in Germany.

Suzanne: That's cheap.

Andrew: That's so cheap, oh my gosh. Uh, I wish we had that in Canada, and I think it's even more extreme in the States.

Suzanne: Oh, yeah.

Andrew: What was your tuition like at Carnegie Mellon?

Suzanne: You guys are gonna die. You guys are gonna be like, "Uh!" Um ... So you guys have to remember that I am older than Andrew and older than most of you listeners, maybe, in university now. So I was in my undergrad program between 1995 and 1999. So it was the 90s. Um ...

Andrew: OK, back in the 90s.

Suzanne: Yeah. And then my tuition, so this is a long time ago, so this was over 20 years ago. No, I guess this year is 20 years. I graduated 20 years ago. Wow, that's crazy. It was \$27,000 a year in 1995, OK?

Andrew: Whoa, whoa.

Suzanne: That ...

Andrew: This is for a year for two semesters?

Suzanne: Two semesters only.

Andrew: Wow.

Suzanne: And that did not include my housing and my food.

Andrew: Right.

Suzanne: Did not include.

Andrew: And your books.

Suzanne: Right, did not include ...

Andrew: Right.

Suzanne: That was just, just tuition.

Andrew: Just tuition.

Suzanne: The first year, I stayed on campus. And then the second year I was, like, it's actually cheaper for me to live off campus than pay the additional money that it costs to live on campus. So I wound up, this is kind of another question of hers, but I wound up moving off campus, which was so much fun, and living with another friend, like a friend in my program.

Andrew: OK.

Suzanne: So I just want you to kind of have a vision of what it was like. I went to a conservatory of acting, and so it's really hard to get in and there were only 15 of us that were accepted.

Andrew: In the program that year?

Suzanne: Yes, in my program, yeah, and it's a private school. Carnegie Mellon is a private school. So that's why, I think, I googled it about 5 years ago and it was \$62,000 a year. So, I wanna say—US—so I wanna say it's probably even gone up and so it might be about \$65,000, at least, a year and you're going for 4 years. Um.

Andrew: Wow.

Suzanne: It's expensive. It's really expensive.

Andrew: That's really expensive. Yeah ...

Suzanne: I know. I had student loan debt until the age of 39 years old.

Andrew: Yeah. Yeah, I was gonna ask you how you financed that, because you have to be quite well off to be able to afford that.

Suzanne: And I had scholarships, too, as well.

Andrew: Wow.

Suzanne: Yeah. Yeah.

Andrew: Yeah, so the situation in Canada is a little bit better than the States. It's not as expensive.

Suzanne: Yeah.

Andrew: Probably the total cost of my 4-year degree was around, maybe about the same price as you paid for 1 year. So it's probably around \$25,000 for a 4-year degree.

Suzanne: Yeah, but that's a lot more than €300.

Andrew: Yeah, it's still a lot more than €300. Yeah. Man, I wish I could have paid that. I should have went to university in Germany. This is **the take-home** here.

Suzanne: Or France, it's free.

Andrew: Yeah.

Suzanne: In France, it's free.

Andrew: Yeah, but, but like you mentioned, Suzanne, when you attend a university that's not near your home, you have to pay for accommodation, you have to pay for food, you have to pay for books, and all of these extra things. So, yeah, although my tuition fee, total tuition fee, was maybe around \$25,000 Canadian, the cost is considerably more. Because I did have some part-time jobs here and there while I was a student ...

Suzanne: Yeah.

Andrew: But nothing that really covered the total expenses that I had to pay. So, yeah, me as well, I had to take out some student loans to be able to finance my university education.

Andrew: Suzanne, you mentioned that there were 15 people in your cohort. Steffi asked about class size, so maybe there were only 15 people in your program. But let's say you were taking just an elective class, a general class: how many students would be in the classroom, usually?

Suzanne: So we did actually take some elective classes and, uh, like, some history courses. I also took an art history class and a language, too. And in those larger classes, the lecture classes would hold probably about 100, 150 students. And then we had breakout sessions where we had a TA and those would be maybe, like, 20 or 25 students in those classrooms.

Andrew: Mmm, OK. Yeah.

Suzanne: I took a poetry class and it was probably about 30, 35 students as well, 'cause it was a very popular class.

Andrew: OK.

Suzanne: Yeah. But, for the most part, the class sizes were pretty small. Otherwise, like, aside from the lecture classes at CMU, my class sizes were really small, which is one of the reasons why the tuition, I think, is so expensive.

Andrew: Yeah, probably that explains it.

Suzanne: Yeah. And you? What about your class size?

Andrew: Yeah, so I have a similar experience to you. I think the first year classes that all students are required to take or that are really popular with many, many different types of majors, like, for example Psych 101 or Astronomy 101 or Sociology 101, these kind of introductory survey classes to some of the popular subjects at university ...

Suzanne: Yeah.

Andrew: They are huge, right? They'll be held in a lecture hall and there'll be over 150 to maybe even 300 students in one class.

Suzanne: Wow, yeah.

Andrew: And they're, they're just massive. And, yeah, obviously the professor can't handle marking all of those papers and grading all of those tests on his own or on her own, so there are TAs, teaching assistants, that help the professor. And, yeah, I think for some of these classes there was a lab component, as well. So you go to the lecture in the lecture hall maybe once or twice a week, and then you also go to a lab that's ...

Suzanne: Yes.

Andrew: Much smaller with the TA with maybe 10 or 15 students, more like a seminar, and you would do this once a week, as well. So there's these massive lectures, but the deeper you get into your university career, I feel like the more specialized the classes become, the more niche, and the fewer students there are. So by the time you're a fourth-year student, maybe you are taking a seminar on some very niche aspect of history, there'll be, like, 10 students in the seminar together. And, so it ...

Suzanne: OK.

Andrew: Really gets more focused. You get more individual attention from the professor the deeper you go into your studies.

Suzanne: Yeah, that's, I think, the same with the conservatory training. It's a very specific kind of university when you are at a university with a conservatory, because you audition to get in. It's not, it's your grades, but it's more about your performance. And then you're with the same people for 4 years, and you really grow up together. Like, they become your family. It's very similar to becoming, like, a, a, an artistic family. And we also get to know the, you know, the few designers and the few directors and the, uh, majors and the writers, the playwrights, the musical theatre group. It's not just 15 people, but you're, in your classes, you're with the same people all the time. And you really see each other grow and you learn from that by watching someone go from 18-year-old freshman year to like 21 and they're, really, they've learned a lot more and they're performing really well and it's quite impressive to watch.

Suzanne: There's a lot of pressure when you have a smaller class like that, and you're really **under the microscope**. So people are really looking at you because you don't just blend into the crowd. And you're **on the hot seat** a lot in your classes. There's a lot of opportunity to fail, as well. And, because of that, they actually do what's called a sophomore cut. So, actually, at sophomore year every semester, we would have our juries. So we would go and sit in our conference with all of our teachers by ourselves. It was us at the table and all of our teachers and the teachers would give us oral ...

Andrew: A lot of pressure.

Suzanne: A lot of pressure.

Andrew: Yeah.

Suzanne: Uh, I don't know if they do that anymore, but they did during my year. And, I mean, you would be friends with these people for 2 years and then you work very closely with them, they become your family, and then they're asked to leave at sophomore year sometimes. And it's so sad. And it's just shocking and it was tough. So you actually end up sometimes with less people than you started with.

Andrew: Wow. That is so different from my university experience because ...

Suzanne: Yeah.

Andrew: You know, I have a degree, I have a double major degree, in history and English literature.

Andrew: And I felt that there ...

Suzanne: Wow.

Andrew: Was no cohesion between students in the classes. Like, I wasn't really too friendly with students in my class. There was not a big effort by the university to try and make students of the same major **mesh** ...

Suzanne: OK.

Andrew: And get along with each other. I'm sure there was, there was a history club that I was kind of affiliated with, but I didn't really go to any of their meetings or anything. Maybe if I had been more proactive and, and got involved in the history community or the literature community, we would have had some cohesion with other students but, for the most part, I think students were kind of strangers with each other. A lot of students would just come to lecture, take their notes, and then leave. You know, wasn't a lot of kinship there.

Suzanne: Yeah, that's really different. We spent like breakfast, lunch, dinner.

Andrew: Wow.

Suzanne: I mean, we were together from, like, 8:20 in the morning till sometimes 11:30 at night, every day. Because we were in crew, so we would have to, like, go and paint sets and things, make costumes.

Andrew: I also, I lived off campus, right? So there were students that lived on campus in the dorms. And those students were super **tight**, 'cause they're spending, you know, almost 24/7 with each other in class and they'd go back home and the dining hall. You can tell the students that are in the dormitory, because they're always together and they're, they're super **tight with each other**. But since I lived off campus, I was kind of removed from that campus community and, to be honest, that was totally fine with me. I had my friends outside of university, so I just kind of went to school, did my thing ...

Suzanne: Yeah.

Andrew: And rolled home.

Suzanne: Yeah, yeah. It's, it's interesting, it's really different. That's cool. I think, yeah, also, like, you had what I think is closer to a real university experience. Not that mine wasn't real, but it, it was a very specific—I mean, not everyone goes to a conservatory of music or acting or something like that. So it was definitely a specific type. And even at Carnegie Mellon, just the acting program and I think maybe the opera singing program was conservatory. The rest was, I mean, it was, you know, there were engineering, engineering students and there were, um, English students and there's a really amazing architecture school, so, as well there. So it's that they had a regular college experience, just expensive.

Andrew: Yeah, yeah, so we both had very different experiences at university. But I think this is actually great, because it gives our listeners an opportunity to learn about the different types of university experiences that we can have in North America.

Suzanne: Yeah.

Andrew: Yeah, so, Steffi, thank you for your question. I'm sorry we didn't have time to cover all of those questions that you asked, but I hope that we at least answered some of your questions. And, Sue, I think we should leave it here for today. I've noticed that across the street from me, some construction guys have started sawing ...

Suzanne: Oh!

Andrew: And they're making a lot of noise. I don't wanna annoy our listeners with some background noise here. So we should maybe wrap it up.

Suzanne: All right.

Andrew: Thank you, everyone, for listening. Don't forget that the study guide for this episode's on our website. And, also, we're all over the place on social media. YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter. I think that's all of them, right, Sue?

Suzanne: That's good, yeah, yeah. We've got it all covered.

Andrew: We got it all covered. Just search for the Culips English Podcast and you can find us there. And, finally, our email address, very important. Our email address is ...

Suzanne: Yes.

Andrew: Contact@Culips.com. So if you have a question for us or a suggestion for a future episode topic, then just drop us a line, let us know. We love to hear from you.

Suzanne: We really do.

Andrew: All right, guys, well, we'll be back soon with another brand-new episode and we'll catch you then. Talk to you later.

Suzanne: Yeah!

Andrew: Bye.

Suzanne: Bye.

Detailed Explanations

Hitch a ride Idiom

Hitch a ride means to get a ride for free from someone. Usually the person giving the ride is going in the same direction that the person getting the ride wants to go. Other ways to say **hitch a ride** include **bum a ride**, **thumb a ride**, or **hitchhike**.

Hitch a ride or **bum a ride** is most commonly used when you're getting a ride with someone you know. In this episode, Suzanne mentioned that she would **hitch a ride** with a friend and they would drive across the country. **Thumb a ride** or **hitchhike** is usually used when you stand on the side of the road and lift up your thumb to get a ride from a passing vehicle.

Here are a couple more examples with **hitch a ride**:

Soren: Well, I have to get going. The store closes in 30 minutes and I need to get some groceries. It was awesome to see you again.

Pascal: Really? Which store do you go to?

Soren: The one on Main Street.

Pascal: Do you mind if I **hitch a ride** with you? I need to get some groceries, too.

Soren: Oh, yeah! That would be fine. My car is just over here.

Regina: I can't believe my car stopped working in the middle of nowhere.

Inga: I know! I guess we're stuck here unless we can **hitch a ride** back into town.

Regina: What year do you live in? We can't do that! That's so dangerous. I'm just going to call my dad. He'll come pick us up.

The take-home

Noun

The take-home is an important point or lesson that you learn from an experience, activity, or meeting. It is something you need to remember. You could also say **the takeaway**, **the bottom line**, or **the main message**. In this episode, Andrew says, "I should have went to university in Germany. This is **the take-home** here." The lesson, in this case, is that it is more affordable to go to university in Germany.

There are a few other expressions that use **take-home** as an adjective, rather than a noun. **Take-home** pay, for example, means a salary or income. You can also use it when talking about food; **take-home** from a restaurant is also known as **takeaway**, **to go**, or a **doggie bag**.

Here are a couple more examples with **the take-home**:

Guido: And that is why we always schedule a second meeting with potential employees.

Camilla: Because then we can have them interview with other members of the team before we hire them?

Guido: That's right. **The take-home** here is that the more you see the person, the more chance there is to make sure that he or she will fit with our team and work well in our company.

Mei: So when we analyze the data we collected about people who exercise and their overall health, what's **the take-home**?

Ji-Young: I guess that the more exercise you get, the healthier you are?

Mei: Correct. And how much exercise do you need to get in order to make a difference to your health?

Ji-Young: Um ... Well, just a few minutes per day.

Mei: That's right. Even a little bit of daily exercise makes a difference.

Under the microscope

Phrase

The phrase **under the microscope** means to study or examine something very closely. Usually the term is used to find something wrong with the thing being studied, examined, or watched. A person, place, situation, or thing could be examined.

In this episode, Suzanne says, “There’s a lot of pressure when you have a smaller class like that, and you’re really **under the microscope**.” This means that she and her classmates felt like they were watched carefully, so they couldn’t make any mistakes or do anything wrong.

Here are a couple more examples with **under the microscope**:

Do-Yun: When we examine the products before they go out, we have to be very sure that everything is made as per the specifications.

Gilbert: So we put them **under the microscope**, so to speak.

Do-Yun: That’s right. Thoroughly check out each item and only when you’ve confirmed it’s perfect do you send it down the line.

Yolanda: It must be so cool to be famous, having all those awesome clothes, getting a personal trainer, and being able to do whatever you want all the time.

Shun: Yeah ... But famous people must have it tough sometimes, too. I mean, they’re always being watched by fans and photographers. It can’t be easy living **under a microscope** like that.

Yolanda: I suppose. But I think being able to travel the world whenever you want would make up for that.

On the hot seat

Idiom

The idiom **on the hot seat** or **in the hot seat** is used when you're in a situation where people expect you to answer questions or are judging you based on your actions. This is usually an uncomfortable or embarrassing situation where you will be criticized. You could also say someone is **on the hot seat** if they're responsible for making difficult decisions.

As an example, Suzanne mentioned that she and her classmates would be **on the hot seat** a lot in their classes. That means they'd be in a situation where everyone was watching them and judging them on their actions. When you're **on the hot seat**, you're also under the microscope.

Here are a couple more examples with **on the hot seat**:

Oscar: How did your presentation go yesterday?

Noburu: OK, I guess. The actual presentation part of the presentation went well. It was the question and answer portion afterwards where I found myself struggling.

Oscar: Ah ... Really got put **on the hot seat**, did you?

Noburu: Yeah. I felt like I was being interviewed by the police or something.

Alena: We've got a meeting in 15 minutes about the incident the other day on the sales floor. Are you ready?

Chun: You mean am I ready to sit **on the hot seat**? No. No, I am not.

Alena: Don't worry. You'll do fine.

Chun: Sometimes I wish I were still a lower level salesperson instead of the manager. Then I wouldn't have to handle this stuff.

Alena: With great power comes great responsibility.

Chun: Oy, don't go quoting comic books at me!



Mesh with [someone or something]

Phrasal verb

When you **mesh with [someone or something]**, you get along well or work well together. To **mesh with [someone or something]** means to fit together easily. In this episode, Andrew says, "There was not a big effort by the university to try and make students of the same major **mesh** and get along with each other." What he means is that the school didn't try to help the students work well with each other.

Here are a couple more examples with **mesh with [someone or something]**:

Vanna: Hey, did you end up going to that workshop? What was it for?

Amado: The acting workshop? Yeah, I don't think I'll be going back.

Vanna: Oh no, why not?

Amado: I dunno. I don't think I **meshed with the other people** really well.

Vanna: How so? Were they mean?

Amado: Not mean, but they were all friends and kept talking about things they'd done together. I was kind of excluded.

Vanna: Oh, man. That's not cool.

Li: We reviewed your proposal for the project and we really like it.

Nikolas: Oh, that's great.

Li: We think the direction you outlined in the proposal really **meshes with our company's mission**. We'd like to hire you for the project.

Nikolas: Perfect, I'm excited to get started. I'll email you my standard contract and, once that's signed, I'll get to work.

Li: Great. We look forward to working with you.

Tight with [someone]

Slang

Much like mesh with [someone], **tight with [someone]** is used when two people get along well. Where mesh with is used for people who may or may not know each other well, **tight with** is used for close friends. Most people would use **tight with** to describe a very close relationship.

There are other ways to use this slang term. You can use it as an adjective (“we’re **tight**”) to mean the same thing. If something is **tight** (“that outfit is **tight**”), then it’s very cool or looks good.

Here are a couple more examples with **tight with [someone]**:

Berto: I met Paola yesterday.

Wendel: Oh, meeting the girlfriend’s best friend—that’s a big step.

Berto: Yeah, Gabby has been **tight with Paola** since they were kids. I barely had to talk the whole time.

Wendel: Well, get used to that. Girls need their best friends, or at least that’s what I’ve heard.

Berto: Ah, it’s fine. Paola was cool and I’m glad Gabby has such a good friend.

Kanta: Hey, Natalia! I have a favour to ask.

Natalia: What’s up?

Kanta: Do you know Connor? I saw you guys talking at the coffee shop yesterday.

Natalia: Yeah, I’m **tight with him**.

Kanta: I talked with him a week ago and he mentioned that his company has a job opening. Can you see if that’s still true and how I can apply?

Natalia: Oh, for sure! You’d be a good fit for his company. I’ll text him and let you know.

Kanta: Thanks!

Quiz

1. What is the take-home?

- a) the moment when you bring a child home from the hospital
- b) the important point or lesson that you learn from an experience, activity, or meeting
- c) the items you purchase from a store
- d) the homework you get from a teacher

2. Which of the following means to study something or someone?

- a) to join a study group
- b) to read the textbooks
- c) to put under the microscope
- d) to stare at something for a long time

3. What does it mean when you hitch a ride with someone?

- a) you get married
- b) someone carries you to your destination
- c) you and a friend hook a trailer up to a truck
- d) you get a free ride with someone who is going in the same direction

4. Mesh with and tight with are both used to describe what?

- a) relationships
- b) clothing
- c) how well something is made
- d) hairstyles

5. Which of the following means that you have to answer questions or that you are being judged?

- a) you are on cloud nine
- b) you are between a rock and a hard place
- c) you are in a pickle
- d) you are on the hot seat

Writing and Discussion Questions

1. Describe a time when you hitched a ride with someone.
2. After listening to Andrew and Suzanne, what do you consider to be the take-home message about North American universities?
3. Have you ever been in a situation where you felt like you were under the microscope? If so, what happened?
4. Do the universities in your area put their students on the hot seat? If so, why?
5. Who are some of the people that you mesh with, and is there anyone you would consider yourself tight with?

Quiz Answers

1. b 2.c 3.d 4.a 5.d

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