

Research Note

## Academic and Social Challenges of Japanese Students during Cultural Adjustment to the Rural U.S.

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This study explores the experiences of exchange and international Japanese students studying in a rural American university. Inquiry is made into the challenges, emotional turmoil and deviation from expectation of Japanese students through open-ended surveys and semi-formal interviews. The results suggest the two biggest challenges the Japanese students face are academic ability and lack of deep positive interactions with American students. Students indicate a deviation from the expected friendliness and interest in them from American students. We argue that these problems and the problems of Japanese students studying abroad are deeply rooted in the internal processes and general attitudes of modern Japanese youth. We explore the differences in self-perception of American and Japanese students and suggest the Japanese students adjustment challenges could be effectively abated through academic preparation in general education while in Japan and by joining extracurricular activities once in the U.S. We conclude this paper by providing suggestions from the keys to success from similar programs and improving the experiences of Japanese students studying at universities in U.S.

**Keywords:** Japanese students, cultural adjustment, U.S. universities, Japanese-American interactions

### Introduction

The United States hosts the largest share of international students studying abroad, serving as a temporary home to over 1.13 million foreign students<sup>1</sup>. Though this might seem just like a statistic to many, this is 1.13 million emotional stories of the struggles that all of international students have to go through, often referred to as cultural adjustment, which is the process of adjusting to a new culture. The majority of these students are college students, and while studying at American universities they not only have to overcome the same challenges faced by native students, but additionally are faced with language barriers, culture shock, unfamiliar social norms, adjustment to consumption of foreign food, different educational expectations, isolation, and inability to establish social networks (Church, 1985; Furnham & Trezise, 1983; Leong & Chou, 1996). According to the U.S. Department of Education, the 2013 six-year graduation rate for first-time full-time undergraduate students who began their pursuit of a bachelor's degree at a four-year degree-granting institution in fall 2007 was 59%<sup>2</sup>, suggesting that undertaking an undergraduate degree is not an easy task for American students, let alone for international students. Language is the

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.wsj.com/articles/international-students-stream-into-u-s-colleges-1427248801> (Retrieved: November 30, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=40> (Retrieved: December 7, 2015).

most commonly discussed problem that international students face. Individuals from Africa, Latin America and Asia were shown to have more difficulties with language than individuals from other countries, and this contributes to the adjustment difficulties (Sodowsky & Plake, 1992). In the U.S., there are over 850,000 students from Asia, however, other countries in Asia are also making efforts to attract foreign students. In 1997, over 47,000 Japanese were studying in the U.S., and even though currently the number-one destination of Japanese students to English-speaking countries is undoubtedly the U.S. with around 19,000 students enrolled in American universities, overall currently more Japanese students are studying in China than in the U.S.<sup>3</sup> This makes the assessment of adjustment challenges faced by Japanese students in the U.S. as paramount as ever. Rural, mid-size universities can be an attractive destination for Japanese students in the future with MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology-Japan) doubling its funding for Japanese college students to go abroad in 2014.<sup>4</sup>

This study is part of an exploratory inquiry into the emotional experiences, challenges and strategic techniques of Asian students during their adjustment process to American college life. In this study, the authors focus on Japanese students, making an ethnographic inquiry into both Japanese students on short-term exchange programs, as well as those enrolled in four-year undergraduate programs. This study's purpose is to explore the experience of Japanese students in a rural setting in a Midwestern university that offers in-state tuition for all international students. By understanding the challenges these students face, we can better anticipate future difficulties and explore possible solutions to alleviate the Japanese students' emotional and physical burden. We suggest some possible preparations for students prior to studying abroad and suggest strategies of coping during the abroad experience that will positively affect the adjustment process for Japanese students.

## 1. Literature Review

The majority of the literature on the problems of international students in the U.S. point to language ability, however, it is not rudimentary English fluency that is suggested to be the problem, but instead, it is the academic language that poses a challenge (Gebhard, 2012). The complications that stem from academic language difficulties include not understanding professors' expectations, inability to express themselves in essay exams and oral presentations, and limited interactions with fellow classmates during class discussions, all of which can lead to high levels of anxiety and stress (Coward, 2003; Gebhard, 2010; Han, 2007; Huang, 2006; Kao and Gansneder, 1995; Lin, 2001; Zhou, Frey, and Bang, 2011). Other obstacles that international students face are the differences in communication styles and the unfamiliarity with American social norms (Barrat and Huba, 1994; Ingman, 2003; Lee, Kang, & Yum, 2005; Rose-Redwood, 2005; Swagler and Ellis, 2003; Zhou, Frey, and Bang, 2011). The differences that are profound in the communication styles of Japanese and Americans can be seen in the direct versus indirect messages being interpreted based on a different set of standards. Furthermore, communication apprehension (CA) also varies greatly between Japanese and Americans. This comparison suggests: "[R]eluctance to speak in public settings (of Japanese) would not be expected to correlate with negative and problematic characteristics that have been associated with high CA in the United States. In fact, communication behaviors that reflect low levels of CA, thereby conflicting with cultural expectations, may be more likely to correlate with negative social perceptions" (Pryor, Butler, & Boehringer, 2005, p.250). Communication influences the perception of the interaction and is indispensable for mutual understanding.

Social interactions of international students with the local population is a major contributing factor to the students' adjustment to the host culture. Numerous studies show this to be true: the more frequently the international students interact with friends from the host country, the better they adjust (Furnham, & Bochner, 1982; Heikinheimo & Shute, 1986; Perkins, 1977). For example, the classic study by Sellitz and Hook (1962) showed that international students felt a stronger connection to the U.S. if they have at least one close American friend. In a more recent study done by Toyokawa et al. (2002), results suggest that extracurricular activities are positively related to Japanese students' experiences in the U.S. through increasing life satisfaction as well as better academic performance.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.mext.go.jp/a\\_menu/koutou/ryugaku/1345878.htm](http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/koutou/ryugaku/1345878.htm) (Retrieved August 28, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> <http://japandailynews.com/government-to-encourage-more-japanese-college-students-to-study-abroad-0728362/> (Retrieved December 7, 2015).

There is a vast amount of literature on international students' adjustment to American life, however, few studies are available on Japanese studying in the United States. American scholars focus on the international students in the U.S., without focus or careful attention paid to how cultural differences between the U.S. and Japan influence the experience of Japanese students in particular. A few extensive studies done by Japanese scholars into Japanese students adjustment to U.S. include research of Tanaka and Takahama in 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013, resulting in 12 publications in Japanese journals. In their most recent study, "Cross-cultural Adaptation and Use of Social Skills by Japanese Students Studying Abroad: Longitudinal Study of Students Who Participated in Pre-departure Social Skills Learning Session" (2013), they stated the importance of learning social skills as part of the preparations to go to the U.S., however, their findings were based on only two participants. In 2010, they did a study of Japanese students in America by providing the students (n=4) with opportunity to do roleplaying with American people, which they found to be effective in increasing social skills. The influential factor of success was the students' attitudes (Takahama and Tanaka, 2010). Another Japanese scholar who explored cultural adjustment of Japanese students in U.S. was Noriko Nakagawa. Dr. Nakagawa (2013) conducted extensive research on one person who studied abroad from Japan to find out what had changed after the student went to America and exploring concepts such as a change of images of Americans/America, Japanese/Japan, study abroad, and self-identity, using the E.H. Ericson theoretical framework. The author concluded that as a result of the study abroad, the student became more positive and reconfirmed self-identity.

Kie Kawauchi (2006) conducted a study that addressed the anxiety the Japanese students felt associated with studying abroad, making a direct inquiry into the problems of cultural adjustment and pointing to the reduction of anxiety as one of the key measures of success. The results of this study indicate that 80% of the Japanese students adjust to using English within two weeks, not because of the English language improvement but due to the reduction in anxiety (Kawaguchi, 2006). Kimura (2009) made an inquiry into the specific characteristics of Japanese which were attributed to making the adaptation process to foreign cultures difficult for Japanese people. However, through the systematic analyses of previous literature done in Japan on Japanese adaptation difficulties to different cultures, the author found no evidence in support of such characteristics. The author concluded that Japanese researchers had a negative view of Japanese, pointing to a bias and ultimately stating that the concept of Japanese uniqueness in cultural adjustment was described very ambiguously and does not have enough evidence to be supported.

According to Hayashi (2002), the past research on Japanese students studying abroad is no longer applicable due to the change of the demographic of Japanese that are able to go abroad. In the past, only the elite or exceptionally talented were able to go abroad, however, at present time, almost anyone has this opportunity. The purpose of their study was to explore the effects of studying abroad on Japanese students. Data was collected at three times: Prior, during and after the study abroad to three English-speaking countries (the U.K., the U.S. and Australia for nine months. Results showed that self-confidence and motivation increased during the study abroad period and remained high after return.

Takeda (2009) discussed what Japanese exchange students feel are the biggest differences between Japan and the U.S., giving examples of classroom behavior that are different between Japanese students and the U.S. students such as playing with cell phones and attitudes toward attending class. Japanese students in this study perceived Americans to both study and play hard, actively using self-appeal to get good grades and asking many questions. Another finding was that the TA (teaching assistant) system was different between the U.S. and Japan. In the U.S., there were many electives and undecided majors. It was easy to change majors, which some of the Japanese students said was a better alternative to the rigid Japanese system; there is more freedom, but it is accompanied by a lot of responsibility for their academic performance. Teachers' evaluation forms seemed to give the teachers a lot of pressure to perform well. In conclusion, American universities made students contemplate the point and goal of university studies and take on more responsibility with the support of an academic advisor. Takeda's research reflects the views of Japanese students which might be a bit naïve, as they ignore the darker side of the American education system, which includes low university graduation rates and the large amount of debt that many Americans incur.

Major limitations of most of the research described above done by Japanese scholars is that the studies on life in the U.S. were conducted from Japan, the methodological tools relied on quantitative surveys limited the spectrum of the experiences into boxed categories, or the data heavily relies on interviews after the Japanese students returned

to Japan (a year after the beginning of their initial experiences). Furthermore, there are two major themes emerging from the research published in Japan, which are preparatory focus or post-study effects on Japanese students. Therefore, the questions of inquiry are the effects of the treatment, such as social skills workshops, role play practice, etc., on the adjustment of Japanese students or how the adjustment process affected the Japanese students once they returned home. This is partly due to the inquiry of the challenges being faced during their study abroad and would require the researcher to be abroad with the students, during their study abroad. This leaves a gap in the literature concerning the experiences of Japanese students during their study abroad. Another question which remains unaddressed is that the majority of the studies look at universities in urban areas, giving no insight on how the lives of Japanese exchange students might be different in the rural U.S.

Gerbhard (2013) summarizes his 20 years of research in his book on the thinking and feelings of international students studying in the U.S. and identifies five phases of adaptation: 1) Preparing to leave, 2) Initial experiences, 3) Increasing interaction and challenges, 4) Culture shock, 5) Adaptation. In this exploratory study, we focus on the experiences of Japanese students during the first three phases, addressing the following questions: What were the feelings and experiences of Japanese students as they prepared to leave, and how could they have been better prepared to meet the challenges of studying in the U.S.? What were their expectations and initial experiences while studying in the rural U.S.? What were the challenges they met? How did they interact with local population? Our goal is to address these questions and to describe their experiences from the students' perspectives.

## 2. Methods

This study implements the qualitative method of inquiry and utilizes various tools of gathering data. Though ethnographic in its nature in addition to the standard interviews, group discussions and observations, we have also used open-ended-surveys. The sample population was selected from a university in the Midwestern U.S. located in a rural city with a population of less than 40,000 residents. To protect the identity of participants, the university will be referred to as M University, and it has an exchange program with three Japanese universities. The exchange program started in 2000, with an average of 10 Japanese students per year attending M university for a study period of 10 months. In the span of 15 years of the exchange program, out of approximately 150 Japanese students, there was never a case of a student not finishing the program. Besides the Japanese exchange students, there are another 14 privately funded Japanese students enrolled in M University in undergraduate programs and one graduate program student. The exchange students were contacted through a Japanese professor who explained the purpose and goals of the research before asking them to volunteer to participate in the study. The Japanese students enrolled as regular international students were approached in various ways, such as through school organizations (n=2), and through introduction of friends. Initially 15 students agreed to participate; however, some students withdrew from the study, and one student joined later on who was on a five month exchange program, leaving the sample population of n=15. The study ultimately was comprised of five males and 10 females participants between ages 18 and 34, with the majority of the participants around 20 and 21 years old. Nine of the students were on short term exchange and six were enrolled in the regular programs. The founder of the exchange program was also interviewed to provide the perspective of a professor overlooking the challenges faced by Japanese students in the past 15 years.

In the ethical consideration of this study, careful attention was paid to protecting students' identity through anonymity; however, exchange students who were very familiar with the other participants requested to meet in groups during a few sessions of the study. Informed written consent forms for interviews and focus groups were received from all participants which guaranteed the participants their right to privacy, anonymity, voluntarily withdrawal at any time and protection against any harm. One of the students who kept a private diary gave consent to use it for the study and provided photocopies of his diary from the first two months in the U.S. Study groups were organized by some students, to which the researcher was invited bi-weekly. Observations were also made during social events where the students invited the researcher to participate. The open-ended survey included the purposes, goals of the research, and the rights of participants, with implied consent to use the provided information by filling out the survey.

The language of inquiry varied depending on the tools, situation and the participants. The survey was written in English; however, some students replied in Japanese while others replied in English. During the group sessions and interviews with exchange students, Japanese was the primary language, with a few English words or sentences

when quoting Americans. However, the Japanese students enrolled in the regular undergraduate programs preferred to use more English during the interviews. Overall the language used for the interviews was selected by the participants' according to what they were most comfortable to using. The Japanese interviews and surveys were translated into English by the researchers.

### 3. Experiences of Japanese Students

#### (1) Open-ended Survey

Out of the 15 surveys distributed, we received 11 responses. The survey consisted of basic demographic information and 11 open-ended questions, with one question having five sub-points prompting more information on daily interactions with local population. The questions were divided into three major categories: 1) reasons for the decision to study abroad and at M University, 2) expectations, concerns and preparations prior to arrival, and 3) experience abroad and interactions in daily life.

	Sex	Age	Home	Why study abroad?	Why M University?	Expectations prior to arrival	Concerns prior to arrival.
01	F	24	Tokyo	Failing exam in Japan	Financial reasons	Nothing particular	Safety
02	F	20	Yokohama	Experience	Established exchange program, classes of interest	Expected spoken English would not be a problem	Academic ability
03	M	20	Chiba	Experience	Financial reasons	I expected American people more fashionable.	Safety
04	F	21	Kanagawa	Experience	Established exchange program, classes of interest	Americans image is of outgoing people	Safety, English ability
05	M	20	Yamagata	English	Established exchange program, classes of interest	There are a lot of fat people in U.S. Food is not so good.	Academic due to English ability
06	M	21		Experience	Low scores needed, safety, financial reasons		Academic ability, gaining weight.
07	F	20	Saitama	Experience	American English, countryside location, financial reasons.	No discrimination, Americans friendly, more fun life, speaking fluently within a few months.	Safety
08	M	21	Omuta	English	Established exchange program	I thought everyone would be more friendly.	Homesickness
09	M	34	Tokyo	English	Financial reasons, classes of interest	I expected Americans to be direct in what they say.	Safety
10	F	20	Kobe	English	Financial reasons classes of interest	Americans interested in other countries, actually not so many	English skill, making friends
11	F	22	Tokyo	English	Countryside location	Everyone cheerful and expressive	Safety, academic ability

#### (1.1) Reasons for Decision to Study Abroad and at M University

In identifying the motivation of Japanese students going abroad there were three major categories (Table 1). In the first category, participants answers revolved around the theme of experience (n=5), as their main goal. The

students were inspired by people in their lives or by other aspects of American culture. One female student wrote, "When I was a high school student, my English teacher told me the story about her experience of studying abroad, and I'm interested in it. My family wasn't surprised and easily accepted it because since I was a high school student I had said that I wanted to study abroad when I was in the university." Other students also mentioned that since a young age they wanted to go abroad. Another student said, "I had wanted to study abroad since I was 12 years old." In this category the study abroad was a long-awaited, pre-planned, mediated experience highly anticipated by the participants. Another student in this category describes how his brother's experience influenced his decision, "Study abroad was my dream. My brother has gone to Vermont State five years ago [and] that inspired me to want to do it. My family knew that I would like to study abroad and I am learning English, so they did not stop me."

Though some of the students do mention English, it is a secondary motivational factor for the "experience" category, contrary to the next category of students whose primary goal was learning English (n=5). Students identified learning the language as their motivation and goal, and some students mentioned that the U.S. was not their first choice for learning English, while another student indicated that the U.S. was the best place to learn English for her. Factors such as enjoying studying English since junior high school or the importance of English for the students' careers was the inspiration of this group. One student who aspires to become an English teacher wrote, "I want to be an English teacher for the future, and I wanted to study at the country that English is spoken. In addition, English taught in Japan is American English not British English, so I decided to go to the U.S. I chose M because there is the subject in which I can join the fieldwork at elementary, middle or high school in the U.S. In addition, there are some classes that I'm interested in." The third group consisted of one student, where the student was unable to get acceptance to the university of his/her choice in Japan and decided to study abroad instead. This is a common reason why some Asian students come to American universities, however, not all students admit this fact.

Three students mentioned being influenced by American pop culture, which made them interested in studying in the U.S., and which seemed to have influenced their expectations of the U.S. Overall, all students received support and encouragement from their family. Only one student mentioned that his family was against it at first. The reason for choice being that this particular university had an established exchange program with their Japanese universities and had classes in which they were interested. For privately supported students, the tuition fee being low (categorized as financial reasons in Table 1) was the reason that made them choose M University. Another underlying reason for the exchange students' decision was the university being located in the countryside and offered classes of interest to them being taught at M University. Student 11 wrote, "One of the reasons I choose M was that it is in countryside. There are two reasons I prefer countryside. First is safety. Countryside is safer than city. Second reason is that I wanted to study in quite place, I believed it made me concentrate on studying because there are not so many place to have fun. Another reason that I chose M is that I thought there were few Japanese people compared with other university."

### (1.2) *Expectations, Concerns and Preparations Prior to Arrival*

In the expectations of Japanese students, there was disappointment in the limited level of interactions with Americans, which is described in the next section. The two largest concerns that the students had were safety and their academic or language ability (Table 1). The safety concern was number one, with six of the students identifying it as a major concern. As one student described, "Mostly my concern was safety, since shooting incidents were often on the news." Another student was concerned with public safety in relation to American law enforcement officers. The second concern was with the ability to keep up with their studies and the English language. Two other students worried about communication and ability to make friends. Other concerns included homesickness and gaining weight.

In response to the prompt, "Describe your academic preparation to study abroad," eight students said they studied English, two students said they did nothing or they did not do enough, while one student read newspapers. Overall the students did not have any clear ideas of how they could prepare to increase their chances of academic success in the American education system.

### (1.3) *Experience Abroad and Interactions in Daily Life*

Almost all of the students have been abroad (n=10) either on vacation or a short-term exchange program. Only one out of the 11 students has never been abroad before coming to M University. The first interaction that nine out of the 11 Japanese students had with M University students was at international student orientation, which two students were unable to attend. The experiences vary, but many students indicated that it was boring, though the students were friendly. The orientation consisted of mostly international students and a few American students representing the school. Some of the participants were still under the effects of jet lag and could not recall much from the orientation.

In the section about interactions with the American students, most of the Japanese students said that it was extremely rare for them to talk to their classmates and that the most common interaction was with their American roommates. Three out of seven students who had American roommates indicated that there was some turmoil in the relationship. Student 1 wrote, "...[O]nly thing is senses towards cleanness or something tiny (of American roommate), which if these have accumulated, Japanese can irritated with." Four of the students directly stated that they had expected Americans to be different from what they have experienced thus far. One student wrote, "I imagined Americans interested in other countries, but actually not so many (are)", while another Japanese stated, "I thought everyone would be more friendly." Other differences in expectations were about physical appearance, as one student said that he did not expect to see so many "fat" Americans, and another student wrote, "I expected that American people are more fashionable because my favorite clothes companies are from America and there are American celebrities fashion magazines in Japan." The impression of American professors was "nice," however, some students commented that they speak very fast.

### (2) **Focus-Group Session**

Eight exchange students participated in the focus group session. It was planned from 5 to 6 p.m. on August 28, 2015, however, it continued until 7:20 p.m. Two students departed around 6:15, while six students remained until the discussion ended. The experiences described are within two weeks after arrival to the U.S.

The first prompt was challenges in everyday life in the U.S. The biggest daily challenge was food: all students agreed that the food in the cafeteria and in American restaurants was not tasty. The two of the most common words that were used are *mazui* and *oishikunai* (both meaning not delicious). Most of the students ate at the cafeteria while one girl cooked her meals herself. Though it seemed that most of the students were aware that American food might not be delicious, as one of the participants, H.I., said, "American food is bad, and I knew that from the Japanese who studied in the U.S. before." Another student, K., said: "Before coming, I knew the food is not going to be delicious, and it was exactly as I thought." One student, T., said that the food was worse than he expected. Among the students, none came to the U.S. with positive expectations of food being delicious. When asked about what it was that did not taste good, they all said everything did not taste good and was too oily. When asked to describe exactly what it was in the taste that they disliked, after a minute of silence, one student said that it was the strength of the flavor; anything sweet is too sweet and anything salty is too salty. The other students agreed that that was most likely the reason why they could not get used to the food, as, in comparison Japanese food was blander. The canteen serves a variety of food in a buffet style, including salad, pizza, Mexican food, hamburgers, dessert and a full variety of dishes, however, the flavoring is for the American taste buds, which prefer intensity over subtlety. Student E. commented that she was surprised that the drink refills were free in many restaurants and added that the portions are very large, while the fish is expensive in stores.

The other cultural differences that students talked about were mostly concerned with the town and the people. Most of the students did not expect it to be as rural as it turned out. Although they acknowledged that they knew ahead of time that they would be coming to a rural place, they did not expect it to be such *inaka* or countryside as it is. However, the majority of the students were more surprised by Americans themselves. Student E. said that the appearance of Americans was a culture shock to her, all the girls wore yoga pants to class, and she doesn't remember seeing girls in public in Japan wearing headbands, while here at M University it was common. Furthermore, she did not see any girls wear skirts with black net tights, where in Japan that is very common. Student S. added that though it is cold, American students wore sandals; he also commented on the appearance of American students, "There are many fat people in the U.S. They are big, but they eat little. How did they get that big?" K.S.

added, "Yeah, and because some of them are tall, I had an image that they would be good at sports. However, in reality, I have a sports class, many Americans aren't that great, they are big, but they can't move." A third student added, "Do you think that I could play basketball with them too and keep up?" K.S. replied, "I think you could win, because they are slow."

The students also discussed that the price of textbooks was extremely high in the U.S. compared to Japan. Furthermore, the size of the textbooks and having the option of renting the textbooks from the bookstore were unfamiliar to them. Another surprise was that some of the university events lasted late into the night and finished at 11 p.m. or midnight. All of the students agreed that there is a lot more discussion in the American classrooms than in Japan. Student T. commented, "Students raise their hands and participate in answering questions, but some students talk without even raising their hand." Manners was another point of heated discussion. Five of the six students said that their classes started on time, while one student complained that his professors were always 5 to 10 minutes late. The students went back and forth discussing the Americans professors' punctuality, while the music major student insisted that they are always late, and even in the international student orientation people were late. There was a consensus, however, that the classes ended on time and students started packing up their things regardless of what the professor was doing one minute before class ends. It was noted that in Japan students slowly pack up, hang around and chat after class, while in the U.S., the students rush out of the classroom. Most of the students had not yet had any personal interactions with their classmates, however they noted differences in manners, such as taking too much space. "The American students put their feet up on the chair in front of them, even if there is someone sitting there. In Japan this would be an unbelievable kind of behavior, but the American professors say nothing." The students who had roommates said that it was not easy to get along at times. K.S. said: "My roommate is always hot, he opens the windows and turns on the fan even when it is cold." Other interactions with people included an interesting account of an unpleasant incident where three Japanese students got scared of a local citizen. They recalled the incident with disbelief, "So we were just walking around on the sidewalk in downtown when this black man started yelling at us. He got out of the car and came really close to us just swearing for no reason." When asked what exactly the man was yelling the students felt very uncomfortable and just said it was "racial insults." Despite some negative experiences that some of the students had, overall, the students said that their experience in the U.S. thus far was positive. The session ended with all of the participants being thanked and, upon a request for future interviews, the students suggested making a social group on Facebook and consented to being contacted through instant messenger regarding the scheduling of future interviews.

### **(3) Interviews and Observations from Study Group Sessions and Social Events**

Interviews and small discussions were held at M University's commons area or at a nearby coffee shop. The first interviews were conducted in May 2015 with three Japanese students who were about to go back to Japan after completing a 10-month exchange program. In August and September of 2015, interviews were conducted with students who recently arrived in the U.S. for the exchange program, as well as with three students enrolled in undergraduate programs of M University. Another set of interviews was done in November 2015 focusing on the third phase of cultural adaptation (Gebhard, 2013). All together 16 interviews were conducted each ranging from 30 minutes to a few hours.

The interviews with the newly arrived students were all centered on their struggles to keep up with their classes and interactions with American students. It is important to note that two of the participants are from an all-girls' Japanese university. The comments and concerns were about academic assignments and the inability to understand professors due to their English ability. Interviewees indicated that they did not have much interaction with their classmates. One of the students joined the Korea Club and had a lot of interaction with the students there. Another student described her interaction in a class group activity, "So, for speech class we had an assignment to go to the library to look up some information in our group. We decided to meet on Thursday from 6 to 7:30 at the library. I did not know what to do, and how or what to look up, and mostly stayed quiet. Around 7:30 everyone started to pack up and leave, I was nowhere near being done, and some other students were not finished, but they all left. Thankfully, Andrea emailed me later that night and said because she wasn't finished either, the two of us can meet up and finish it together" (Interview S3). Overall, not only the newly arrived students, but all of the interviewees commented that the biggest difference between American and Japanese classrooms was the degree of

activity of the students. The students in the U.S. were said to be interactive and were rarely observed sleeping in class. The amount of group work and discussions was uncomfortable for the Japanese students. As Y. described, “I was in this class where I didn’t know anyone, and the teacher said to make groups. I looked around, but... Then the person who sat next to me to the right started talking to the person who sat next to me to the left, ignoring me completely, but I was sitting in the middle, I don’t know I somehow ended up in their group but I couldn’t talk and they didn’t listen to any of my ideas.” Surprisingly the most challenging classroom activity was identified as group work. Six students during their interviews said that group discussion and group work resulted in the most conflict. One student described a situation during a group project where they had to take pictures, and his partner was satisfied with mediocre photos. When H. asked his partner to help him redo the pictures, his partner said he was sleepy and needed a nap. During this part of the interview, the outrage felt by H. was re-lived and he described this emotional experience with frustration and disbelief, repeating, “I don’t know what he was thinking” concerning the behavior of his partner (Interview H13). Another student described a group project in leadership class as very stressful for her: “I asked her [one of the group members who was taking charge] if I could help with the poster, and she said ‘Don’t worry about it...’ When I contacted her about helping with the fliers, she said she already did them” (Interview K15). One of the most traumatic experiences was described by Y.: “While we were preparing for the presentation she, [my partner] was always busy, but I still tried to do all I could to do a good job. The day we were supposed to present, I asked her to meet and practice together, but she was busy again. Finally, when we had to do the presentation, she told me in class that she changed the whole PowerPoint. I asked her to change it back because I did not know what is in the new PowerPoint, but she just said ‘read the slides, you’ll be fine.’ My part of the presentation went horrible. I cried at the end of the class and felt so embarrassed. English is not my first language, I have to practice many times before class to do a good job on class presentations...” (Interview YA16).

When asked about what helps the students overcome academic challenges other than studying hard, three strategies emerged during later interviews. The first is visiting the professors during office hours. All of the students have met with their professors during office hours at least once. All professors teaching at American universities have to provide office hours at a designated time during the week. The professors stay in their offices, available for students to come and meet with them on a one-on-one basis to discuss anything related to the class. The Japanese students indicated that their home universities in Japan did not have this system, and some wished that they had understood the benefits of office hours earlier in the semester. Some of the help the Japanese students received included looking over homework assignment before submission, helping review for tests, and providing explanations for concepts that were not well understood. The second strategy that a few students used was requesting tutors. The university provides a tutoring system for most classes wherein any student can request a tutor for any class with the approval of the professor. The tutor meets with the students once or twice a week and helps the students with anything related to the class. Two of the Japanese students said they have developed friendships with their American tutors and that they sometimes spend time together outside of tutoring sessions. The tutors get paid hourly by the school for their tutoring services and have to have taken and received an A in the class for which they are tutors. The third strategy is audio recording the professor’s lecture and listening to it outside of class to get a better understanding of the lecture content.

Another difficulty that students were having was understanding American humor, though the ongoing theme of having problems with roommates was also common. One of the students, who did not have a roommate, met an American girl who was studying Japanese. This girl offered to be her roommate, and the Japanese student was very perplexed as to if she should consent or continue to live alone, as she heard that many Japanese students complain about their American roommates. One student who was a transfer student and enrolled in the sociology undergraduate program recalled her memories from living in the school dorms, “I have a dramatic story for you,” she said excitedly. “So when I first arrived at M University, I lived in the dorms and I had a horrible roommate. At first everything was okay, we signed a roommate agreement, in which we agreed that her boyfriend could visit her on the weekends. But then her boyfriend started to be in and out of the room all the time. Furthermore, I would wake up and see him half naked laying in her bed. The worst thing was his snoring, here I recorded it.” She took out her cell-phone and after a few minutes she played a 20-second recording of a loud snore, then giggling, she continued: “So I talked to the RA (resident assistant) and the three of us had a meeting about it. After that our relationship became worse. She would come home in the early morning and sleep. But I have to go to class, so I

had to turn on the lights. My roommate yelled, 'Turn off the light, I am sleeping,' but it was almost noon! Then, when I got a boyfriend and he came to my room and said hello to my roommate, she just ignored him. Finally, the night before the day we were supposed to move out she was packing all night. So I said, 'Can you turn off the lights, because it was really late,' and I wanted to sleep. She said that when she was sleeping I had the light on, so I have to get over it. We started to argue and she screamed 'bitch' at me and slammed the door" (Interview S4). When asked why she did not move out or change roommates, A. said that she did not want to lose to her roommate, as if it was an endurance competition.

When describing the activities the students had partaken in with American students outside of class, it was mostly going out to bars or house parties. One student captured the essence of the differences between Japanese and American youths interaction: "I think there is a difference in the way people interact in Japan and the U.S., particularly different ways of hanging out. For example, talking for a long time at a family restaurant in Japan is very common, but American people don't like that. How should I say it...When hanging out with Americans, they usually eat at a restaurant very quickly and then go to another place, then another place, you can go to a bar or bowling or to some other activity. The emphasis is centered on an activity they do together. But in Japan it is more about hanging out and we sit around chatting for hours. Another example is the dormitory floor meetings where resident assistant organizes an activity, usually some kind of a game. However, in Japan, this kind of meeting would consist of just sitting around and talking about our problems" (Interview M8).

When asked about culture shock, the main points were the unfriendliness of Americans, or not being as friendly as expected, as well as not being interested in foreigners. One student recalled, "This was my first time coming to the U.S. one year ago, I flew using Delta Airlines, before I always used JAL, where flight attendants are slim and friendly. But on Delta, the flight attendants were fat and walked the aisles with folded arms and unfriendly expressions. Other customer said 'Excuse me', but the flight attendant was already talking to another customer, and the attendant said loudly, 'Be quiet I am talking to another customer right now.' She was shouting. I mean I know she was busy, but this would not happen in Japan. This was my first culture shock" (Interview S5). Other students also commented on the lack of smiles they receive from clerks and other people providing services. There was a student who said that she feels Americans are very ignorant about other countries: "I was at the H. Center and the receptionist asked where I was from, so I said 'Japan.' She asked me where that was, so I showed it to her on the map, and she said she wanted to visit it sometime. But I know she never will." A student who was in a one-year exchange stated at the end of her exchange: "Americans often talk to us like we are children because Asian females look very young and they think we're at least two, three or even five years younger than what we really are" (Interview M2-7).

As can be expected, examining the interviews of students who were in the U.S. for over 10 months, the overall attitudes toward the U.S. and Americans were much more critical. The students who were in the U.S. longer had more stories about negative interactions. One of the students, Y., said that she felt a lot of discrimination and described two of such experiences. First, at a party, one blonde girl said to her "I am quarter Jap" and all of the Americans laughed, which made Y. very uncomfortable. "I think there is a lot of discrimination, and the locals don't like outsiders. No one really talks to us, probably because they don't think we speak English" (Interview S5). Another case she described was when she was walking with two American friends and their acquaintance stopped them and said hello to the two American girls ignoring the Japanese student completely. M. also mentioned that she felt like an outsider. She said that most local American students knew each other from high school and it was difficult to enter into their circle or to understand and follow their conversations.

Five of the interviewees felt comfortable enough to discuss their romantic relationships. Two girls said the courting in the U.S. is very different, and that American males are more aggressive when approaching girls. Y. said, "At a party, guys would come up and flirt. Then when I would say 'I have a boyfriend back home,' their response is, 'I don't care.' But I care. Guys in Japan are less direct..." One of the girls had a relationship with an American, and said she thinks that Americans are too different in the way that they think and that she would prefer not to date an American again. Interestingly, one of the male students who had a girlfriend in Japan was frustrated with other Japanese students' comments about his relationship saying: "They have become Americanized, and not in a good way." The local Japanese students made fun of his level of seriousness toward his girlfriend (Interview Sh13). Two

other students, Sa and K., were not in relationships but were attracted and starting to go on dates with international students from other Asian countries.

#### **(4) Observations and Data from Study Group Sessions, Social Events and Personal Narratives**

In the weekly study groups organized by the researchers for the Japanese students, the students eagerly studied and asked questions. It was obvious that the students cared about their academic standing, however their struggles with grasping the material were also obvious. During the observation of a few student social gatherings, the Japanese students' behavior and comfort level varied depending on the situation, number of people they knew and, most of all, the amount of time they had spent in the U.S.

One of the students in the study group had an assignment for a class wherein fellow American classmates offered written comments on the Japanese student's behavior during group work. The assignment was for the students to reflect on those comments. During one of the study sessions, this Japanese student offered to share her written assignment with the researchers and consented for its use in this study.

*There are three kind of comments I got from my group members: How did I work for the task, how did I communicate with group members, and what can I improve. First of all.... I got comments such as "Committed to the project," "Doing her best to understand the text," "Slides were done very well," "Portion was always done on time," and "Great job speaking in front of the class." When I worked for the group, I thought that all I could do was doing my best. Because I knew I could not speak English like other group members did, I believed I should have made up for it. That is why I decided to finish all the job on time and understand the text book. Also, I did my best for the presentation. For example, I made a slide which was easy to understand by using few keyword, and made a script for the presentation and practiced before the presentation. From their comments and my perspective, I would say that I committed to the project by doing [my] portion on time, practicing speeches for better speaking, making understandable slides, and understanding the textbook.*

*Secondly, I would like to talk about how I communicated with group members. My group members said that I was a "Very kind group member," "Struggled to understand what the group members were saying," "Always communicates through messages if she was struggling or had any questions," "Asked for help when it was needed and always asked for someone to look over her work to make sure it was correct," "Helpful and positive," "Hard worker, tried hard to involved during group meetings," "Praised those who helped me" and "Best fit under the task-related role of the information/opinion seeker because she was great about asking questions if she was unsure or didn't understand something." During the group work, I kept my mind that I should not have left something without understanding and asked anything until I fully understood what they said. This is the reason why I said that I asked for help and [was the] best fit for information/opinion seeker. I also attended all the meetings even if I could not talk to them a lot since I need to understand what our group member thought about. On top of that, I got comments that I was positive and praised those who helped me. Actually, I tried to be positive because it I got through by my attitude. Overall, I believe that I communicated with our group members by asking for help, attending every meeting, and being positive.*

*Finally, I would like to talk about suggestions I got from our group members. They said that I should speak more, such as "Should express [her] own opinions and thoughts," "Speaking more in person and showing us what [she] was working on so they could help in person for better understanding on both sides," and "Participation in group conversation about ideas and brainstorming about the project as a group." This was the hardest part for me because all I could do was keep up with their conversation. But I think I should be conscious of expressing my own thoughts and, at least, say something.*

The struggles of the student and the reactions of American students in its natural environment is clearly demonstrated by this narrative. During group communication, American students saw K. as struggling and actively asking questions, demonstrating that the Japanese student did not have a totally passive role, however the focus of suggestions for improvement revolved around "speaking more."

#### **(5) Accounts from the Exchange Program Related University Staff**

More data was provided by the Japanese staff who supported the students in the form of written materials and interviews. Through the observation of the exchange program with Japanese universities that started in 2000, the

staff provided us with the following information about the Japanese exchange students. The university has had a regular exchange with three universities in Japan and, as of 2015, has accepted over 100 students. The American students who are sent to Japan study in special Japanese classes. As long as the placement test correctly measures the students' levels, they experience no major difficulties while studying in Japan, because the Japanese classes are designed for foreigners and their classmates are foreigners as well. Conversely, the exchange students from Japan enroll in regular classes at M University with American students, which leads to major problems. The problem lies deeper and is more serious than just their English ability: It is the knowledge of the subjects they take. In Japanese universities, if one has some basic knowledge, it is possible to follow along in class, read the textbook and other literature, and soon be able to participate in class discussions. As college students having general public knowledge (such as politics, economics, and social problems) without having academic knowledge, the student at best can get average marks such as Cs.

The study abroad experience is a challenge beyond imagination for Japanese students who believed that the exchange program is just a language study exchange. There have not been any examples of failure so far. Before arriving, students were equipped with prior knowledge of the classes they were going to take at M University, and, furthermore they had good study habits. The results were clear, demonstrating that the key to predicting academic success of the Japanese students was their academic preparation beforehand. The study groups were organized by the Japanese staff who advised students in order to help the students better understand the course subjects undertaken at M University. Students who came regularly to the staff for academic advice or participated in study groups all received over 80% in their classes. This shows that motivation and sincere desire to learn and receive advice are other key factors for academic success.

According to the Japanese staff at M University, students who consider the study abroad as a mere fun experience exerted their efforts at making friends and seemed to finish their study abroad thinking that studying is useless. For the purpose of finding employment in Japan, the "study abroad" is perceived as merely a kind of experience and not as evidence that a large amount of knowledge available abroad was attained through the "study abroad." However, students who have an extensive overseas experience and utilized it to their advantage were able to become English teachers in public and private schools as well as attaining jobs at large trading companies. Also their job hunting in Japan yielded wonderful results. Even though due to the study abroad they started the process of job hunting later than their Japanese cohort, they still found jobs.

Regarding interactions with American students, the Japanese students who assisted in teaching Japanese-language courses were able to use this experience to make American friends. Other cases when friendships sparked and Japanese students became close to American students include living on the same floor in the dorms and attending sports events or participating in a Japan Club. Though the staff refrained from commenting on the influence of romantic relationships of the Japanese students with Americans, they did state that the case of Japanese female students dating Americans was indeed common and that it usually did affect the Japanese students' studies.

#### **4. Results**

From the initial analyses of the data gathered, it is suggested that the two major problems that students faced are academic ability and difficulty in having deep meaningful interactions with American students. The students that had been in the U.S. a few months, as well as students who had been in the U.S. for over a year, indicated an indifference or lack of friendliness from the American students. This was caused at least partially by the discrepancy between the expectations of the students prior to their arrival to the U.S. and their personal experiences once they were in the U.S. The strong image of "how Americans should be" in the descriptions the students provided clashed with the reality of regular students in the rural U.S. who seemed distant. The expectations were partially caused by the portrayal of Americans on TV and with the students' firsthand interactions with Americans in Japan. The Americans in Japan most likely already had an interest in Japan and therefore are different from the average American who has little knowledge about Japan (Ishii et al., 2015). The Japanese students could not pinpoint exactly how Americans were distant: Interviewees noted through instances of not exchanging greetings and not caring enough. We suggest one logical explanation is in the personal space theory first proposed by Edward Hall (1966). Japanese students come not only from a country that is heavily populated, but are also from major cities such as Tokyo, Yokohama, Kobe, while America is less populated and Americans are known to need a lot more personal

space than Japanese (Hall, 1966). However, Americans from rural areas that are even less populated need considerably more personal space than even an average American. Japanese students are likely to feel that Americans are distant on a subconscious level due to their trying to keep physically further away from the Japanese than they are accustomed. One student commenting that people seemed friendlier in California, but unable to describe how so, can further support this argument. We believe that expectations prior to arrival and the cultural differences in personal space can be plausible explanations to why Japanese students perceived American students as distant and unfriendly. However, further inquiry is needed for any definitive results.

The concerns prior to arrival were safety, however the murder rate in the city where M University is located is slightly lower than of Tokyo. Though it is true that the crime rates in the U.S. are very high compared to Japan, the concern for safety in the location this group of students chose were unfounded. Furthermore, it is even safer to live on campus as the campus is patrolled by security 24 hours a day. Daily problems of the students revolved around American food; however, in the later interviews the students did not mention the subject and talked more about difficulties in classes and interpersonal relationships. Most likely after a month of living in the U.S., the new students were used to American food, though they do not consider it delicious and instead reported just getting used to it. According to the students, the problems with their academic performance stems from their English language ability. However, we suggest the explanation lies in a lack of proper preparations prior to arrival and their attitude. The majority of the students indicated that they prepared by only studying English, but according to the staff of the exchange program office, students coming from Japanese universities that teach more general subjects performed considerably better academically than Japanese students from universities that concentrated on major subjects only. The problem is not only the language, but knowledge of the subject and the style of teaching that the professors in Japan and U.S. use, as well as the students' study habits. Furthermore, as previously noted by other scholars, international students are often impaired by the academic language; however the Japanese students themselves might not be able to differentiate between their inability to understand academic language and label the problem as "just English."

Another issue that can contribute to the Japanese students' struggles is their motivation and self-identity compared to American students with whom they are studying. In 2014, an International Survey of Youth Attitude was published by Cabinet Office of Japan on the attitudes of Japanese youth compared to six other countries<sup>5</sup>. According to this survey, Japanese youth scored lower across categories that play a key role in academic success in an American college environment. Looking at the self-reported ability to clearly express one's thoughts to others, 83% of American youth indicated they were able to do it, while majority of Japanese youth (52%) said that they did not think they had this ability (p. 12). In the American college environment, where a lot of focus goes on critical thinking, class participation and discussion, the ability to express yourself clearly to others is imperative. Another factor is making decisions and having willpower: 87% of American youth felt proud of being able to do so, while the majority of Japanese students (57%) disagreed with the statement (p. 18). An even graver outlook is given by the responses on the motivation factor: 77% of Japanese youth felt unmotivated and bored, compared to 50% of American youth; furthermore over 70% of Japanese youth felt sad and depressed (p. 23-24). In the comparison of youth from seven other countries, Japanese youth scored the highest across three categories: unmotivated, depressed, and sad.

The lack of motivation by the majority of the youth in Japan is one thing to consider, however the motivation to study hard in the U.S., instead of enjoying American life is another. The value of the "study abroad" experience on a Japanese resume during the jobhunting period is not valued as gaining knowledge from a foreign county, and instead according to Dr. Pharr, "has no positive evaluation—and if students spend over a year abroad, it is liable to have a negative impact on their prospects for finding a good job after graduation. The companies do not make exceptions for the deadlines of job applications and tests that are required for the job application process in Japan. The students studying abroad are often at a disadvantage as they return from U.S. to Japan after the jobhunting period has already begun.

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www8.cao.go.jp/youth/english/survey/2013/pdf\\_index.html](http://www8.cao.go.jp/youth/english/survey/2013/pdf_index.html) (Retrieved: September 10, 2015)

## 5. Conclusion and Direction for Future Studies

The results indicate that the Japanese students studying at M University struggled the most with their studies and in their interactions with American students. Their biggest concerns prior to arriving in the U.S. were safety and the ability to keep up with the classes. Overall, the students' success is largely dependent on their preparations prior to arrival in the U.S., their attitude and their ability to create meaningful relationships with American students. Though most of the students prepared by studying English prior to their arrival, more effective general knowledge is one of the keys to success in the American academic environment. Our results on Japanese students' preparations prior to coming to the U.S. were consistent with research done by Tanaka and Takahama (2013), in that the Japanese students did not know or have a good plan to follow on how to prepare for their study in the U.S. The social skills workshops suggested by Tanaka et al, (2013) could be effective, but we suggest academic preparation, as well as familiarity with the American student support system, can significantly help Japanese students to adjust to their new environment. According to the Japanese students, visiting class professors or Japanese professors during office hours and utilizing the tutoring system helped them improve their academic performance as well as gain confidence in their abilities. Awareness of these services prior to arrival could have eased some of their anxiety which, according to past research shows to positively contribute to the adjustment of Japanese students (Kawaguchi, 2006). Furthermore providing more basic information about food, limited public transportation in rural areas, buying or renting textbooks, asking professor's permission to audio record lectures will all help reduce uncertainty and anxiety of students coming to the U.S.

This study is exploratory in nature and was designed as a case study, therefore we advise to be cautious of using any of the data for generalization purposes. The student sample was relatively small, but we were committed to getting rich and descriptive data of Japanese students' experiences. As few studies are available on the experiences of Japanese students studying across the U.S., we hope more scholars will explore this phenomenon with larger samples utilizing various tools of inquiry. In the field of Japanese companies' perceptions on the study abroad experience as well as the perceived value of "studying abroad" by the Japanese public, little information is available in English.

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