

Kelly Shea
14 May 2020

Tanaka & Green Scholarship – Study Abroad Reflection

Although I have valued every semester in my college career so far, I believe that my semester abroad has been the most formative in shaping my future and my general worldview. I was enrolled at Keio University in Tokyo for the 2019-2020 academic year, although my time there was cut short due to my home university's suspension of study abroad in light of the current pandemic. I wasn't sure what to expect going into my program but ended up happy with my life at and outside of Keio. The seven months I spent in Japan were fulfilling academically, professionally, and personally.

I went to Japan with the goal of improving my Japanese skills, so enrolled in Keio's Japanese Language Program. I took seven Japanese courses in the fall semester – five were comprehensive courses and the other two were speaking and reading electives. I had been warned that the program would be difficult, and it was definitely an adjustment from my home university. I had anywhere from three to four and a half hours of Japanese courses on the days when I had class. The classes were focused and intensive; most of my classmates were post-graduate students who wanted to work in Japan but needed to improve their language skills in order to work for a Japanese company. At first, I was disappointed with the level of Japanese I had been placed into. Once the semester began, though, I realized it was the right fit for me, and was impressed by the dedication of my classmates.

Beyond adjusting to classes, it was my first time living in a city – and in fact, my first time living outside of Virginia. Although I had travelled abroad before and been to Japan a number of times, it was different learning to live for an extended period of time in such a new setting. My home university has a small campus, which you can walk the total length of in under 15 minutes. For my first two years of university, the walk from my dorm to classes usually took just ten minutes. While at Keio, I lived in Yokohama but commuted to central Tokyo. My commute to campus took at least an hour, including a bus ride, train ride, and walk. A lot of my Japanese friends lived in nearby prefectures like Saitama or Ibaraki, so we'd also meet centrally in Tokyo – meaning even a commute to get dinner with a friend could take upwards of an hour. Despite taking time to get used to, the commute ultimately encouraged me to manage my time well. It wasn't worth going into the city for short periods of time, so I used small trips as a chance to explore Tokyo.

When I arrived in Japan, I had been studying Japanese for two years already but had little practical experience using it. While I had befriended Japanese exchange students at my home university, we mostly spoke English; almost all of my Japanese speaking experiences were in the classroom. When I first arrived in Tokyo, I was nervous every time I had to use Japanese in daily life – even if it just meant ordering food at a restaurant or checking out at the grocery store, which were situations I had of course practiced in my classes before. After a few months, and a lot of encouragement from friends and kind strangers, I became much more comfortable using Japanese. I learned that it was

okay to make mistakes, and that my sentences did not have to be perfect for people to understand me. This helped me improve my Japanese more than any time spent in a classroom could have. People always say the best way to learn a language is to immerse yourself, and by the end of my experience abroad I definitely felt that to be true.

There are so many small and large experiences throughout my time abroad that I could touch on in this reflection. I tried joining a number of circles at Keio, where I met more local students and learned about Japanese culture and college life – my favorite one was the flower arranging circle. I interned at a non-profit which aims to improve Japan-U.S. relations, and the chance to work in a Japanese office environment was invaluable. I also traveled to different parts of Japan – Hokkaido, Fukuoka, Okinawa, Kyoto – including my first solo trip.

With each of these experiences, I came to both enjoy my life in Japan and gain a more rounded perspective on Japan. Through my program, I met many Japanese and other international students. Coming from a state school where most students share a similar background to mine, it was eye-opening meeting so many people with different perspectives. I learned more about Japan through my Japanese friends, but also through my other foreign friends – whose experiences in Japan often differed depending on their country of origin. Through my internship, I also learned about the working culture in Japan. I hope to work in the field of U.S.-Japan relations, and my experience taught me a lot about the kind of place I would like to work in the future.

I'm incredibly grateful to have received the Tanaka & Green Scholarship, which made these experiences possible. My time in Japan allowed me think a lot about what I will be doing after my graduation next spring. Before, I thought that I would like to look for a job somewhere in the U.S. Now, upon the completion of my program, I've been looking for ways to return to Japan, whether through a job or post-graduate program. While I'm disappointed that my time in Tokyo was cut short, I'm grateful for the time that I spent there – and I know I'll be back sooner rather than later.