

THE BROWN BEARS JAPAN INITIATIVE



Japan Information Session Tour Official Report

Summer 2013



I. Introduction

After a year of strenuous planning and deliberation, our project, a seven-city, countrywide information session tour of Japan by a group of Brown University undergraduates, the “Brown Bears Japan,” has ended with huge success! Working with local, prefectural high schools and private organizations across the country, the Brown Bears Japan Initiative has successfully met, and has even exceeded, its initial goals in mentoring Japanese nationals interested in studying in the United States.

The Brown Bears Japan Initiative, established by nine undergraduate students at Brown University in September of 2013, was first conceived as an online blog project authored by undergraduate students at Brown from Japan featuring daily articles about daily life at Brown University, targeted specifically for a Japanese student (and parent) audience. Our goal in undertaking this project was to convey to those wishing to study in the United States a “real voice,” that is, a personal source of reliable information that only those who are currently in U.S. universities can offer. Thanks to the warm support of our readers, our blog has held the number one position of one of the most credible online blog rankings in Japan, receiving over 3000 individual views per day. The nationwide tour project grew as an extension of our blog, and was promoted as an “interactive and inspiring discussion,” in contrast to traditional college informational sessions in Japan, ultimately attracting approximately 800 people in total across all seven sessions..

Recently in Japan, the notion of “studying abroad” has become an item of increasing interest as a measure to nurture the Japanese equivalent of next-generation “global citizens.” To this end, there has been an increasing trend in public interest in going overseas to study, which has manifested itself as increased participation in various corporate-sponsored summer schools that provide Japanese high school students with an opportunity to experience the liberal-arts learning. However, in contrast to these privately-backed initiatives, often led by business leaders interested in sending the next generation of elite students to elite universities only to have them return post-graduation to corporate Japan with a prestigious degree, our project was distinct in terms of purpose: we surmised that studying abroad is not what you “should” do, but rather is, and should be considered as, a possibility and a tool for constructing one’s own education, as is the mission of the Brown Open Curriculum.

We began with the following question as a casting-off-point: “Who do *you* want to become?” While this may seem to be an extremely broad and trivially simple question, it is not uncommon to lose sight of this priority as a Japanese high school student during college entrance “exam hell.” As a byproduct of this college entrance system, many students obsess over test scores and college rankings, as a single exam is what determines one’s acceptance into any single university. Furthermore, job prospects and social standing are effectively determined by the prestige of one’s university education, and as a result, many students in medical or law programs are there because it is prestigious, not



because they enjoy studying medicine or law. Similarly, studying in the U.S. is treated as wasteful or a disadvantage when looking for a job, unless of course one attends an elite university. As Steven P. Jobs told the graduating class of Stanford University in 2005, “[T]he only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven't found it yet, keep looking. Don't settle. As with all matters of the heart, you'll know when you find it.” – we strongly believe that through our tour initiative we succeeded in delivering this message, that studying abroad is but an option to help you achieve one’s dreams, not something that “should” be done for the sake of status or adhering to societal norms.

Finally, we are deeply thankful for the schools and organizations that lent us their support in carrying out our project. In particular, we are profoundly grateful to the corresponding staffs of the U.S. Embassy in Japan and USCANJ, both as valuable mentors and logistical support. We are also extremely lucky to have the support of many Brown University departments, including the East Asian Studies Department, the Admissions Office, and last but not least, significant financial support from the Office of the Dean of the College and Dean of the College Katherine Bergeron. This project would not have been possible without their guidance and aid.

The Brown Bears Japan Group

II. Rationale and Background Information

With our In order to bring our aforementioned message to Japanese students across the country, and to provide students with the information needed when applying the U.S. universities, we considered the following three points as the major hurdles for Japanese nationals wishing to study in the U.S.:

1. Social Stigma

While the numbers of Chinese and South Korean international students studying at top U.S. universities have ballooned within the past few decades, the opposite is true for Japanese internationals. Although this may be due to the economic slowdown in Japan within the last two decades, especially compared to the numbers of internationals studying in the U.S. in the early 1980s, we see it mainly as an issue of social stigma in our current generation. It is effectively expected for “normal” Japanese students to transition from a Japanese high school to Japanese university, graduate, and enter the workforce in a timely manner. To do otherwise is considered “abnormal,” a concept that does not sit well in a society where “The nail that sticks out gets hammered down.” Such an attitude over the course of two decades has led to a major decline in applicants to U.S. universities from Japan, so much so that many Japanese students now do not even consider studying in the U.S. a realistic possibility. Compounding the issue is the quality of English education in Japan in



comparison to that of China or South Korea, considering that functioning in Japanese society is largely independent of English ability, and there is little incentive to ever move to the U.S. once graduating college. Lastly, the idea of leaving Japan for the far-off land of America comes with certain risk. Many Japanese students are concerned with finding a job in a less-than-agreeable economy, and there is an established system of recruitment from top Japanese universities to top Japanese corporations or top positions in the Japanese government. It is commonly believed that studying in the U.S. in favor of a top Japanese university is foolish, that such a decision is, in effect, giving up job security for short-term desire. The exception is, however, that if it is possible to attend a university more prestigious than the top Japanese universities (a very limited circle that includes Ivy League-tier schools, open only to a small fraction of the student population). This regrettable favoring of world rankings and statistics is rooted in Japanese cultural norms, and is a major issue we would like to tackle.

2. Tokyo-Centrism

Yet another issue has been arising due to a shortage of U.S. educated Japanese. Many who return from abroad are headquartered in Tokyo, creating a geographical divide between major metropolitan areas and the rest of Japan in terms of numbers of U.S. educated professionals. Among the few who do return to Japan upon completing their U.S. education, there is a very slim chance for that valuable know-how of the American university system to reach the more rural regions of the country, where they may be a number of students wishing to study abroad but do not know where to begin.

3. Networking and Support

Although there has been an increase in the number of organizations aiming to promote overseas studies in Japan over the past few years, many of these initiatives are restricted to small, mostly wealthy or metropolitan regions and are largely working independently. This makes matching mentors and support with students nearly impossible. With no cohesive network of communication between prospective students and alumni, this issue is particularly troubling given the ease of communication in the social media age.

To tackle these three main issues, a plan emerged for a nationwide tour with these goals:

1. Provide a reliable source of information in regards to studying in the U.S., and dispel as many social stigmas and unfounded concerns as we can in an honest presentation.
2. Visit of each of the seven major regions in Japan, to make this information as accessible



as possible and to convey it to as wide of an audience as possible.

3. Build a foundation of a network of Japanese nationals interested in studying in the U.S. so that communication between current and prospective study-abroad students is facilitated.

III. Information Sessions and Achievements

Throughout the second half of the spring semester of 2013, and after several meetings in Tokyo prior to the start of the tour, we developed a general structure for the presentation from our three major goals. Each information session was built upon the following outline, with adjustments for host organization requests and time constraints as necessary:

1. Introduction: Who are the Brown Bears?

After a brief introduction of all the members, we introduce two of our members who came to Brown from Japanese high schools. They outline the troubles they faced pertaining to the lack of information about studying in the U.S., including a scarcity of mentors and support resources they could turn to when applying to American universities. Before moving into the main portion of the presentation, we conduct a brief overview of the presentation.

2. Compare and Contrast: U.S. and Japan, Types of U.S. Universities

We began with comparing U.S. and Japanese universities. Typically, Japanese educational style consists of rote memorization of material to pass qualification exams. In contrast, U.S. universities, especially those with a liberal arts focus, place significant weight on “what you think,” “how you think,” and why, based on your knowledge rather than “making the grade.” This ideological difference is reflected in differences in educational practice, such as the design of the curriculum and the class styles. While the Japanese system focuses on quantity of information, across a broad range of subjects (anywhere from 14-16 classes per semester), it is typical for U.S. universities to have fewer classes that are more in-depth in particular, specialized fields. While arguably more efficient, favoring mass lectures and standardized measures of progress, the Japanese system does not place value on the interaction between student and teacher, nor of what the student thinks or feels, in contrast to the many seminar-based courses available at U.S. universities. In addition, we described the various types of universities, such as liberal arts colleges, state universities, and private institutions, and weigh a sampling of pros and cons for each.

3. What is a Liberal Arts Education?



As the concept of “liberal arts,” is foreign to Japanese education, which locks students into particular departments upon acceptance to particular schools, we gave an overview of how U.S education values studies outside of one’s particular fields of interest, embodied by the freedom of course choice available in programs such as Brown University’s own Open Curriculum.

4. A Day in the Life of a Brown Student

As a departure from the informational section of our sessions, we then walked the audience through a typical day at a U.S. university in the shoes of an imaginary character affectionately named *Brown-kun* (*-kun* is a Japanese honorific indicating junior status). As he progresses through his various activities, we aimed to highlight the resources and opportunities available at U.S. universities not normally available to students studying in Japan. For instance, we introduced the idea of a First-Year Seminar, led by Brown’s own Nobel Laureate in Physics, Dr. Leon Cooper. It is almost unheard of for a professor of such status to be teaching undergraduates, let alone a seminar, in Japanese educational practice. Other concepts introduced include office hours, and extra-curricular interaction with professors, yet another “shock” for Japanese students. What we wanted to convey were that both teachers and students approached liberal arts education as a meeting of great minds for the exchange of ideas, rather than a transmission of information across the generational gap. Lastly, we wanted to emphasize that even though U.S. universities have plentiful resources beyond what may be available at the top Japanese universities, one must be willing and active in seeking out opportunity, rather than remaining passive until told what to do, something that can be seen as a chronic habit of Japanese culture.

5. The Three Hurdles: Applying, Financial Aid, and Post-graduation Employment

After completing our “day in the life,” we examine three common obstacles any international student faces when deciding to study in the U.S.: completing the admission process, securing financial aid, and employment. We emphasize that though scores and grades are important, the U.S. system views applicants as holistically as possible, and that a top SAT score will not guarantee you a spot at Harvard. Rather, it is important to showcase “who you are.” The financial aid system is also one based on need, rather than merit, as is the case for most corporate scholarships available in Japan. Hence, when applying, it is important to develop one’s inner person, enough so that university will be willing enough to financially support one’s education if the applicant cannot afford tuition. Finally, regarding employment prospects after graduating, we introduce events such as the Boston Career Forum that assemble groups of international companies that actively seek out international students, in effort to diffuse what may be called an urban myth, that if one leaves Japan for America instead of attending a top Japanese university, that come graduation, they will be at a



disadvantage in terms of employment prospects.

6. Personal Episodes

Finally, we closed each of our presentations with a personal episode of two of our members, with each member presenting at least once or twice throughout the tour. Particularly heart-wrenching, one of our members, upon receiving harsh criticism and a failing grade for a group presentation he had worked tremendously hard for during his first semester due to his lackluster English, considered returning to his native Japan when told that “if [he] can’t speak English, [he] should just go back [to Japan].” But upon reflection, he realized that more than anything else, he wanted to study in the U.S. and that returning to Japan would only mean he could never realize his dream of working in America. Upon confronting his professor through clenched teeth and tears, he then promised to himself that he would do whatever it takes, that his will is unbeatable, and proceeded to spend all Thanksgiving and Winter Break writing extra papers to improve his English proficiency. It was only through this episode that he finally discovered who he wanted to be, something that he realized he had abandoned long ago, when studying for the entrance exams for an elite Japanese high school. And what made it possible was his decision to study in the U.S. just a few years ago. We wished to leave the audience with a question: “*Who are you?*” and it was our hope that our presentation has changed at least a few minds.

A. Other Initiatives: Network Building, Tokyo College Fair

We had the opportunity to work with a group of incredible partners throughout the duration of the tour, and have been in contact with many prefectural leaders as well as private business leaders that specialize in preparing eager students for study in the United States. After every venue, we have been graciously applauded and have been invited back to spread our message. The contacts (and friends) we have made through this tour are already beginning to prove valuable for future planning, as we may be able to secure more funding for a more ambitious project in the future.

In addition, the event in Tokyo was a large-scale information session and college fair with hundreds of participants, organized by the U.S. College Alumni Network of Japan, an organization of U.S. alumni that are currently living in Japan. For this event, we were fortunate enough to work with many current students (called upon from various personal contacts) over the course of a week, developing a combined, extended presentation not altogether different from our Brown Bears Japan Initiative sessions in other cities. Through this collaboration, we are happy to report that we were able to establish a working group of current U.S. university students that we wish to expand throughout the course of the next few years.



B. Reception

All of our presentations were well received, both by our audiences and by our host organization partners. Furthermore, we have had the incredible opportunity to work with national radio, national newspaper (*Nikkei Shimbun*) and national television (NHK) to advertise the tour as it traveled across the country.

Schedule and Number of Participants

City	Sapporo	Nagoya	Niigata	Fukuoka	Osaka	Fukushima	Tokyo
Date	5/25	6/1	6/2	6/8	6/9	6/15	6/16
Venue	Hokkaido International Studies Fair	Kaiyo Academy	Niigata Prefectural Kokusai Joho High School	JFIE, Kurume University Senior High School	Osaka Global School	Fukushima 100-Year Reconstruction Initiative	Tokyo Gakugei University Senior High School
Number of Participants	40	78	89	JFIE 26 KUSHS 32	85	34	450

Total: 834

IV. Member Profiles

Chief Organizer/Public Affairs: Tomonobu Kumahira '14

Vice Organizer/Public Affairs: Tomoya Mori '16

Financial Manager/Public Affairs: Takahisa Uemura '15

Public Affairs: Ken Kashiwagi '14

Co-Art Director/Blog Management: Atsunobi Kotani '16

Co-Art Director/Blog Management: Kanoko Kotaka '16

Speaker: Kyle Erf '16

Speaker: Martin Carlsen '16

Speaker/English Translator: Shawn Tsutsui '16



V. Conclusion

As stated earlier in this report, the notion of becoming a “global citizen” is turning into a hot-button topic in Japan and as such, the Japanese government, as well as many Japanese industries, have been developing and implementing a wide variety of policies to raise the next generation as “global citizens.” As a reflection upon the “Lost Decades,” following the stagnation of the Japanese economy in the early 1990s, and more recently upon the aftermath of the March 2011 tsunami and nuclear disasters, Japanese society seems to have started to recognize that in order to survive in an increasingly globalized world market, it must abandon its well-known introversion and reluctance for change. However, as it has become in the United States, the terms “globalization” and “global citizen” encompass too much and are difficult to define in concrete terms. What, after all, does being a “global citizen” mean?

In Japan, there is much talk about how a “mastery of English,” is requisite for successful study at American universities and being a “global citizen.” While adequate English skill is a necessity, the discussion is not pointed in the right direction, especially when English skill and globalization are being equated. What many of our generation in Japan seem to lack, in addition to “mastery of English,” is a sense of purpose. With such preoccupation of test scores and entrance exams, many Japanese students lose sight of why they are undertaking their own education. As told, they go to school, cram information, and output as much as possible on paper. Those who perform exceedingly well are sent to top Japanese universities, or are recruited by corporations to attend only the best American universities, come back to Japan, and fill the highest positions of society with the highest performing citizens. As efficient as it may be, it is brutal: more than a few students enter their middle-aged years with a sense of regret, with a job they aren’t particularly fond of, all due to their performance on college entrance exams. Rarely do you find students that know what they want to go, and what they want to do. And it is this lack of drive, ultimately, that has perpetuated the cycle for over two decades. Meanwhile, other developing nations, be it China or South Korea or India or Brazil, are pushing their youth to the limits – go to America! – is the resounding message. We think the key to becoming a global citizen lies within this desire to fulfill these drives.

Many of us, as undergraduates who left Japan, our “comfort zone,” to explore new possibilities in the U.S., a completely new and unfamiliar place, only to discover the very first year filled with hardships largely due to lack of English proficiency, enough so that we could not muster up the courage to answer even the simplest questions. Despite our best efforts, some of us have been told to “go back [to Japan],” or that our writing is “incomprehensible.” However, we international students, and in particular those of us from Japan proper, will not give up. Even when compared against native English speakers who grew up with a mastery of the language, nothing will shake us. Why? Because through our experiences at Brown, we have discovered what we truly want out of



our education, and out of our lives. For us, the freedom of liberal arts education is of utmost importance, something that we think many American students take for granted, for better or for worse. The mix of such a wide strata of culture is what makes a place like Brown University, where the student body draws from so many corners of the world to exchange ideas and passions, so great, and at the forefront of what it means to be a truly “global” community. We believe that this is the future of education, and is an opportunity that should be accessible to all and considered by all, whether in Japan or in Pakistan or in South Sudan.

*“Don’t be afraid to say I don’t want to be like everybody else,
‘cause you know why?”*

*You don’t want to be like everybody else, whether you admit it or
not.”*

Michael Joukowsky



VI. References

- U.S. College Alumni Network of Japan (USCANJ)
<http://www.uscanj.net/> (Japanese)
The Brown Bears Japan Initiative in Tokyo was planned and executed under the auspices of USCANJ, as a combined info-session and college fair with approximately 30 other U.S. universities.

- Brown Bears Japan
<http://ameblo.jp/brownujapan/> (Japanese)
Our daily blog.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=srPt9xgOJm8> (Japanese)
A recording of our informational session in Osaka

- HLAB
http://hcji-lab.org/?page_id=107 (Japanese)
HLAB is a summer school where Japanese high school students interact with Harvard undergraduate students through liberal-arts seminars.

- GAKKO
<http://www.gakkoproject.com/2013> (English)
GAKKO, consisting of U.S. university (mainly Yale) undergraduate students, holds a yearly summer camp for Japanese Junior and Senior high school students.



VII. Financial Report

Transportation Expenses							
Section of Line Traveled	Transportation	Date	fare (One-Way)	# of Travelers	Budget Coverage	Total Expenditure	
Tokyo-Sapporo, Sapporo-Tokyo	Flight	5/25(Fri)	107.5	5	0	107.5	
Tokyo-Nagoya	Bus	5/31 (Fri)	51.9	3	155.7	155.7	
Tokyo-Niigata	Bus	6/2 (Sun)	25	1	25	97.6	
Nagoya-Niigata	Bullet Train	6/2(Sun)	169	3	507	50.7	
Nagoya-Tokyo	Bus (Unused)	N/A	38.8	1	38.8	38.8	
Niigata-Tokyo	Bullet Train	6/2(Sun)	97.6	4	390.4	390.4	
Tokyo-Nagoya, Nagoya-Tokyo, Tokyo-Niigata, Niigata-Tokyo	Bullet Train	6/1-6/2	N/A	1	174.5	341.2	
Tokyo-Fukuoka	Bus	6/7 (Fri)	90	4	360	792	
Tokyo-Osaka (For Martin)	Bullet Train	6/8 (Sat)	140.5	1	44.1	140.5	
Tokyo-Osaka	Bus	6/9(Sun)	44.1	2	88.2	88.2	
Fukuoka-Osaka	Bus	6/8 (Sat)	39	3	117	117	
Fukuoka-Tokyo	Bus	6/8 (Sat)	90	1	90	198	
Osaka-Tokyo (For Martin)	Bullet Train	6/9(Sun)	140.5	1	44.1	140.5	
Osaka-Tokyo (For Atsunobu)	Bullet Train	6/9(Sun)	132.4	1	44.1	132.4	
Osaka-Tokyo	Bus	6/9 (Sun)	44.1	4	176.4	176.4	
Tokyo-Fukushima	Bus	6/14 (Fri)	48	3	144	144	
Fukushima-Tokyo	Bullet Train	6/15(Sat)	81.9	3	245.7	245.7	
					Total	3188.65	5349.45

Sundry Expenses						
	Payer	Date	charge/person	# of Users	Budget Coverage	Total Expenditure
Hotel Room Charge (Sapporo)	Tomonobu	5/25(Fri)	54.50	4	218	218
Meeting Room Rental	Takahisa	5/25(Fri)	N/A	5	93.6	93.6
Purchase of Remote Controller	Tomonobu	5/26(Sat)	19.8	1	19.8	19.8
Dorm Room Charge (Nagoya)	Takahisa	6/1(Sat)	20	3	60	60
Purchase of T-Shirts	Atsunobu	5/26(Sat)	N/A	9	152.25	152.25
Taxi fare (Fukuoka)	Takahisa	6/8(Sat)	N/A	3	0	8.8
Shower Fee	Takahisa	6/9(Sun)	N/A	3	0	16.6

Transportation Expenses		Total Self-Payment	
Section of Line Traveled	Self-Payment/Person		
Tokyo-Sapporo, Sapporo-Tokyo	215/Tomonobu, Tomoya, Atsunobu, Kyle, Takahisa	Tomonobu Kumahira	323
Tokyo-Nagoya	0	Tomoya Mori	323
Tokyo-Niigata	72.6/Kyle	Atsunobu Kotani	470
Nagoya-Niigata	0	Takahisa Uemura	348.4
Nagoya-Tokyo	0	Kyle Erf	287.6
Niigata-Tokyo	0	Martin Carlsen	192.8
Tokyo-Nagoya, Nagoya-Tokyo, Tokyo-Niigata, Niigata-Tokyo	166.7/Atsunobu	Kanoko Kotaka	216
Tokyo-Fukuoka	108/Tomonobu, Takahisa, Tomoya, Kanoko	Total	2160.8
Tokyo-Osaka (For Martin)	96.4/Martin		
Tokyo-Osaka	0/Atsunobu, Kyle		
Fukuoka-Osaka	0		
Fukuoka-Tokyo	108/Kanoko		
Osaka-Tokyo (For Martin)	96.4/Martin		
Osaka-Tokyo (For Atsunobu)	88.3/Atsunobu		
Osaka-Tokyo	0/Tomonobu, Takahisa, Tomoya, Kyle		
Tokyo-Fukushima	0		
Fukushima-Tokyo	0		

Sundry Expenses		Self-Payment/Person	
Taxi fare (Fukuoka)	8.8/Takahisa		
Shower Fee	16.6/Takahisa		

*Unit: \$

*\$1=100 yen