

The Experience of a MEXT Scholar

February 19, 2016

By Robert Albrecht

If you had asked me during my early college years how I would be spending my senior year in school, I would have probably told you “the same way as everyone else: socializing with my friends, going to class, developing marketable skills, etc”, and I was absolutely right. Interestingly enough, however, my social interactions would be largely in a different language with people from all corners of the globe, and the classes I would be attending would be on a campus in a city quite literally on the other side of the world. So often our lives take us in directions we never expect they will, and my experience was no different. This was thanks to incredibly supportive professors, friends and parents, and of course, due to the privilege of being a MEXT Scholar.

When the head of the Japanese Department at my university recommended I apply for the MEXT Scholarship, I knew it was an opportunity too great to pass up. I had always considered studying abroad, but the costs and logistics of making my way to Japan seemed rather daunting. The resources, both financial and practical, provided to me as a recipient of the MEXT Scholarship were truly invaluable and allowed me the peace of mind I sought when venturing forth into a foreign country for an extended stay. I wanted to spend my time abroad absorbing as much culture and knowledge as possible and not have my focus fall on making ends meet as I was there. Being a MEXT Scholar provided me the resources to make this happen, and I am tremendously grateful.

My time at Keio University, attending class at the Mita Campus right at the heart of Tokyo, was eye-opening to say the least. Being raised in a relatively small town, the sheer scale

of the metropolis around me was significant in and of itself, but being able to explore the cultural, political and economic capital of Japan on a daily basis was extraordinary. Around every corner was a new opportunity to not only learn and practice the language, but to make new connections with people I would have otherwise never met. This opportunity to experience all of this, which was of course afforded to me by the MEXT Scholar program with the guidance of my instructors and peers, is something I know I will never forget and has made me a more well-rounded and confident individual.

Academically, my focus was mainly on the Japanese Language Program in which I was enrolled at Keio. I would say 90% of all my scholarly activity was conducted in the Japanese language. It was a terrifying prospect at first, but the speed at which I was able to adapt and learn in this fully immersive environment surprised me. I was using the language to live my daily life and solve complicated problems. The coursework was challenging and demanding and required me to rethink the way I viewed language in general. It turns out, upon mastering other languages, you really begin to understand your own native language in more interesting ways.

Of course, there is more to time abroad than classroom learning. With the amazing transit system weaved throughout the whole of the country, I was able to travel practically wherever my heart desired and know that I would be able to find my way back easily. I also participated in several club activities such as a nature hiking club and even played in a recreational baseball league. Communing with Japanese college students in more casual settings allowed me to realize that though on the surface our cultures could not seem more different, at our core, we are incredibly alike. I would not trade the perspective I gained throughout my adventures in Japan for anything.

It pained me to know that after my two semesters in the Japanese Language Program were completed I would have to return home and say goodbye to the new world I had discovered in Japan. I would miss my dorm mates and my local train station. I would miss the beautiful campus and weather in Tokyo (though the heat could be intense at times). I would never forget all the amazing people I encountered and would do everything I could to maintain these relationships even beyond my return flight. Nevertheless, I knew I would have this experience with me for the rest of my life, and that was rewarding enough.

My last semester abroad was also the last semester of my senior year, and I returned home a college graduate. I knew it would take some adjustments, but before I knew it, I was back in the swing of things in the States. I began a career in banking and finance and have had several encounters with Japanese customers who required additional assistance with the language barrier. Needless to say, in the heart of Wisconsin they were not expecting to meet someone who could speak Japanese. My love of Japanese literature is stronger than ever, and I always do my best to keep up with the latest dramas and variety shows on Japanese TV. While English will always be the first language in my head, the Japanese language built itself a niche in my heart. The opportunity to delve deep into that world was all thanks to the financial security and guidance of the MEXT Scholarship Program for which I am eternally grateful.