

The Differences between Japanese and American Universities

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December 14, 2015

Japanese and American universities have many differences. The American university can have a liberal arts college, a graduate school and professional schools for such areas as law and medicine. All of these are headed by deans and organized into departments. In contrast, the Japanese university consists of colleges that have several departments. The idea of the modern Japanese university is that it places the development of science as its center; secondly, it guarantees the freedom of learning, and thirdly, the right to receive education (Kotokyoiku Kenkyukai, 1996, p. 38). The universities of Japan and U.S. can be compared in different three ways: their styles, the professors and students, and the students' lives.

First of all, one difference between the universities is style. In Japan, high school students work very hard to enter universities. There is an entrance examination day and whether the student is admitted to the university or not is decided then. It is generally known that it is difficult to enter a Japanese university, but easy to graduate from one. Not only is this due to the more relaxed nature of the curriculum, but also due to the paternalistic concern that the school authorities show toward the students in their care. Inamoto (1996), who experienced both Japanese and American universities said the Japanese school feels responsible for the students and obligated to see that they graduate on time. The Japanese universities demonstrate *onjoo* (paternalism) to students, who react with *amae* (psychological dependence), (p. 31). In the United States (U.S.), there is no

entrance examination for college. Each school has its own standard for determining acceptance or rejection, but in general, they look at a student's high school marks and his SAT scores. SAT is the acronym for Scholastic Aptitude Test, which approximately one-third of the nation's high school seniors take before graduating. There are two parts of the test-verbal and mathematical. Each part has a total of 800 points, 1600 points in all. Of approximately 3000 universities and colleges, nearly 100 require a score of 1175 or more, while others accept students with a much lower score. Often, good grades in high school (3.0 GPA- Grade Point Average-or better) in required academic courses are sufficient for admission (Inamoto, 1996, p. 22). Thus, it is easier to enter to an American university than a Japanese one, but it is more difficult to graduate from one. Inamoto (1996) also said that American students, being disciplined from early childhood to be independent, have no feeling of *amae*. According to them, *amae* is a sign of weakness, while independence shows strength of character" (p. 32). Therefore, no special consideration is shown to the students in times of difficulty and students do not expect preferential treatment from their professors.

Next, as for kinds of students, the American university is open to any. On an American campus, there are young people, the elderly, part-time students who work in the daytime and study in the evening, and students from all over the world. The United States has attracted the best students from foreign countries. The majority of foreign students enroll in engineering, business, computer work, and science. For private schools facing financial crises, foreign students, who spend nearly \$2 billion for tuition and living expenses, can be an indispensable source of supplementary income (ICS, 1998, 7-8). On the other hand, in Japan, usually applicants for the Japanese universities are Japanese people, eighteen years or older, with most of the students around twenty. According to Ehara, Japan is one of the developed countries in the world where there are fewer adult

students (Ehara, 1994, p. 117). Moreover, students in American universities often take liberal arts, the broad area of learning that develops one's thinking ability and increases one's general knowledge, rather than developing technical skills, (Longman, 1991, p. 142). Saito (1995), who studied at Amherst college in the U.S., described liberal arts as an emphasis on a number of different fields of the study that are related to one another (p. 53). In other words, with an interdisciplinary approach, the American university aims to develop students with their own perspectives. This skill is needed and useful in American society. The Japanese university also has some liberal arts subjects, but they are not as important as in an American university. The American university also has a more flexible system and a better learning environment (ICS, 1998, p. 4-5). For example, students of American universities have enough time to decide what they want to study and can easily change their majors. In Japan, university students must decide their major before entering a university, and after entering, find it very difficult to change their departments.

Another comparison is the relationship between students and professors. In the U.S., the relationship between students and professors seems friendlier and more casual than in Japan where students seldom meet a professor. Every professor at the American university office hours, in which any student can visit the professor, ask questions about classes, consult on his/her future and talk freely. If it is inconvenient for the professor, it is possible to call him/her and make an appointment. For Japanese students, however, calling a professor seems rude (ICS, 1998, p. 19). Furthermore, when one asks American and Japanese professors, which do they believe more important, the students' education or the professor's research, more American professors than Japanese ones answered that it was their students' education.

In addition, there are student evaluations of American teachers, which worries many professors. Students will grade the professor's lectures, his attitude toward students,

the textbook used, the fairness of homework, and the exams. By reviewing these, students plan future classes and decide whether or not to take the lecture. As for professors, if they cannot get good evaluations, they may be discharged from the university. Therefore, professors in American universities try to do their best in their classes.

Not many Japanese universities have students evaluating them and professors usually can work at the university until retirement without worrying about dismissal. In Japan, there are also professors who are diligent and teach students very hard. However, some professors just teach students the same things every year. One Japanese university student wrote an article for a newspaper: "Though today students lacked the will to study hard, today professors also lacked the will to teach hard" (Enomoto, 1999, p. 14). Maybe, Japanese professors don't feel they need to teach as hard as American ones.

Finally, students in Japan and in the U.S. have very different university lives. Most American students live in dormitories. Although there are several designs in each dormitory, the common pattern is that there are two students in one room and the bathroom and the kitchen are shared. Through living together, the university aims at students learning cooperation because when a student lives in a dormitory, his/her roommate is important. Saito (1995) said that if a student cannot get on well with his/her roommate, the student will have a bad year (p. 58-60). Because Americans value independence, American students try to live by themselves. In Japan, some students live by themselves in apartments; others are in dormitories or live with their families. Unlike the U.S., children aren't forced to become independent of their parents, so many students depend on parents and don't worry about their finances or living quarters.

Next, students in American universities study harder than those of the Japanese university. In the U.S., students must do a great deal of homework every day and prepare for the next class. Therefore, the university library is open until late at night and computer

rooms are also open almost all day long and used by a lot of students. Students start their week on “Blue Monday Morning” and ends with “Thank God it’s Friday,” (Saito, 1995, p. 69). Classes start between seven and 8 a.m. and the last classes ends at close to 10 p.m. Some students, not only foreign students who have difficulty in English, but also American students, take temporary absence from the university. On the other hand, as people say, Japanese students study less than American students. Generally, Japanese students can graduate from the university easily without studying so hard, so some students skip their classes and play sports, or work part-time at jobs or devote themselves to their hobbies. The Japanese high school students look forward to college life as an enjoyable interlude between high school and their working lives. Inamoto (1996, p. 38) quotes an opinion poll about what students hoped to get out of a college education that indicated that 29.7% were social type and liked to join clubs, make friends, and get involved socially. The Leisure Type (29.3%) claimed that they looked forward to having a good time doing all those fun things that they were denied during high school. Only 11.2% of those polled considered university a place to gain new knowledge and broaden their intellectual horizons. Many Japanese students think that they should study more, but actually, few do so. In contrast, American students, study hard on weekdays, and often hold parties on the weekends. At parties, they make friends, and relieve the stress of study. However, Inamoto (1996) says, with the heavy burden of study, a holiday in its true sense is unknown to American students (p. 37).

In Japan, a lot of students have part-time jobs and belong to clubs and spend much of their free time in them. It is said that Japanese students learn much off-campus than in-campus. They learn several things: for example, relationships, friendships, tolerance, and the society they belong to, through the part-time jobs or clubs. While, many American students also have part-time jobs, their salaries are often relatively lower than

students in Japan and some do jobs for experience, not for money (ICS, 1998, p. 19). For some students, the income derived from a part-time job constitutes an important supplement to a student's tight budget. Americans take pride in being independent and able to stand on their own two feet. Consequently, even students who come from well-to-do families seek employment as a matter of principle.

In conclusion, there are numerous differences between the American university and the Japanese one. People go to university looking for higher education and what they learn has a great influence on their futures. Both universities have their positive points and negative points and it is difficult to say which is better. People should choose their own educational place that suits the most. If a person goes to an American university, they would expect to study hard and most of their memories may stem from their classes, or in their dormitory life. In the Japanese university, a person's memories may come partially from the campus and the other half from their experiences off campus. In the end, what one gets from university depends on the person.

1812 words

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