

5 ways college life is different in Japan and U.S.

TOKYO —

From fashion to extracurricular activities, the lives of an American colleges students are an ocean apart from their counterparts in Japan.

Most of the English-language RocketNews24 team spent a portion of our school days in Japan, but our Japanese-language sister site can also count a few writers with study abroad experience. We recently picked the brain of one of our Japanese writers who spent two years of college in Osaka before crossing the Pacific to the United States and finishing his higher education in Wisconsin. Below, in his words, is his personal take on the differences he experienced between college life in Japan and America.

1. Fashion

In Japan, almost all junior and senior high school students have to wear uniforms. Most people don't get to choose what they wear every day until they get into college, and in response to that new freedom, many of them start spending a lot of money on clothes and accessories. So regardless of whether the end result is fashionable or not, many of the people you'll see on a Japanese college campus have put a lot of thought into what they're wearing.

On the other hand, at American universities it seems like the emphasis is on comfort and practicality. Every day I saw plenty of my classmates wearing the sweatshirts and T-shirts they sold in the student store. Because of this gap in the fashion environment, when I wore the same outfits I had when I was in Japan, people often mistakenly assumed I was gay.

2. Extracurricular club activities

This might be something that's unique to Japan, but Japanese schools have two classes of extracurricular clubs: "bu" (teams) and "sakuru" (circles).

Compared to the "bu," the circles aren't as serious-minded, and their focus is more on everyone just having fun as a group. For example, in one of the tennis circles at my school in Japan, the members only got together to practice two or three times a week. The rest of the time, they'd just go drinking together.

Because circles have such a strong social aspect, for Japanese students they're the

primary place where they make new friends, and the circle you join becomes a group with a very big influences on the rhythm and patterns of your lifestyle.

At American colleges, though, the clubs and sports teams are closer to Japanese bu than circles. The members have to practice and train hard every day, so very few students make the commitment of joining them, and instead it felt like more of them were focused on their studies.

3. Academic pressure

To get into a Japanese college, you have to pass rigorous, competitive entrance exams, which high school students spend a huge amount of time studying for. But once you get accepted by a college, you're on easy street.

In general, as long as you attend class, you can get units in a Japanese college. Some courses don't even require you to show up, and instead just ask you to write a report and turn it in at the end of the semester to pass the class. As a result a lot of students ditch class, and spend their time drinking with their friends from their circle or having marathon video gaming sessions.

But in America, every day we had to study our butts off! In my classes, I had a report to write every other week, on top of reading the textbook and other assigned materials, plus getting my term papers ready to submit. When finals time rolled around, sometimes the library was so packed with students studying that there was no place to sit. One of my American friends know how much Japanese high school kids have to study for entrance exams, and he told me "You could have had it easy if you stayed in Japan for college! You were crazy to come here."

4. Living arrangements

Many Japanese college students live alone, and almost all of my friends when I was going to school in Japan lived in their own apartment. As a matter of fact, in Japan there's an image that getting into college means you can have your own place, which is a dream that keeps many high school students going when they're getting ready for entrance exams. Of course, it turns out some of them can't cook for themselves or keep their apartments clean, and their lifestyles gradually deteriorate.

In contrast, most of the people at my American college lived in the dorms, together with a roommate. It's a nice system if you're both on the same wavelength, but if you're not then it's terrible.

Thankfully my roommates and I got along fine, but some of the people I knew complained about their roommates sneaking their boyfriend or girlfriend into their room or playing music that they hated, and a few of them even asked to switch rooms.

5. Class participation

In Japanese colleges, the students don't really talk during the lecture. Actually, that goes for Japanese elementary, middle, and high schools too. The teacher does the talking, and the students just listen, without asking questions or debating what's being said.

Even in the rare case that a Japanese class is set up in the format of a debate, the students won't give their opinion until the teacher calls on them specifically. And in the event that Japanese students do want to ask the teacher something, they wait until after class and approach him individually, maybe in his office.

Things are completely different in the U.S. The students are always ready to speak up. If they don't understand anything, they ask about it right away, and if there are conflicting opinions, everyone joins in on the debate.

For someone like me, who'd grown up in the Japanese education system, it was a shock, and getting used to that discussion-centric style took a very long time. Looking back, I think it's safe to call the Japanese lesson style a passive one, and the American one an active one, but I learned a lot from each.

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