Kansas Undergraduates Participate in the Kakehashi Project

In spring 2014, undergraduates studying at community colleges, colleges, and universities across Kansas were invited to apply to the Kakehashi Project – The Bridge for Tomorrow. The purpose of the Project, a free 10-day study tour to Japan funded by the Japan Foundation with support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, was “to encourage greater understanding between the youth of Japan and the United States and to foster long-term and ongoing interest in one another by providing firsthand experiences with the culture of the other.” KU’s Center for East Asian Studies (CEAS) was designated Project coordinator for Kansas.

Undergraduates with any major from any college or university in Kansas were eligible to apply as long as they had not previously traveled to Japan. Prior study of the Japanese language also was not required. Nearly one hundred students applied. Twenty-three were selected through a competitive process, twelve from KU plus eleven others from Baker University, Coffeyville Community College, Haskell Indian Nations University, Johnson County Community College, McPherson College, Newman University, Pittsburg State University, and Washburn University. A wide variety of majors were represented including East Asian Studies, microbiology, theatre, business, journalism and graphic arts. Maggie Childs, Associate Professor of Japanese and Chair of the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures at KU, and Nancy Hope, Associate Director of the Kansas Consortium for Teaching about Asia at CEAS accompanied them.

The group left Kansas City on June 23rd and flew first to Denver International Airport. Christina Seeley from Washburn University captured this moment saying, “This is the first picture I took on my journey to Japan. This is the departure gate in Denver, Colorado. All my excitement started building at this point. The concept of traveling to Japan was so surreal that I didn’t believe I was going until my airline ticket was in my hand and I stepped onto the plane.”

Crossing the international dateline, the group arrived in Tokyo the next day. They stayed at the Keio Plaza Hotel in Shinjuku, a bustling commercial and entertainment center. KU student Henry Chan notes that the photo below taken from the “observation deck of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building, [across from the Hotel] overlooks countless skyscrapers in downtown Tokyo. This exemplifies the strength of the Japanese economy and its position as one of the largest in the world.”
On June 25th, after an orientation from the Japan Foundation, everyone visited the Tokyo National Museum and the Asakusa Kannon Temple. Alexis McKinnon (Pittsburg State University) recalls that “Doing the purification ritual at the Temple was such a neat experience. I have always been interested in the Shinto and Buddhist religions so completing this holistic tradition at an actual temple in Japan was inspiring.”

The Nakamise shopping district surrounding the Temple caused some participants to be absolutely blown away by the sheer amount of people and merchandise in such a small area, but others appreciated the purple potato-flavored ice cream sold there.
It was also a chance to interact with Japanese students visiting the area. Jeff Denton from Pittsburg State University “was surprised at how many people were willing to ask us questions and practice their English language skills.”
On June 26th, the group rode the famous Shinkansen or Bullet Train to Shizuoka City. Anna Cline (Johnson County Community College) notes that this train “is one example of Japan’s amazing technological advances.”

Upon arriving in Shizuoka, we were given a delicious meal. Shiva Pedram (KU) observes that, “Throughout our trip, we enjoyed the delicacies of Japanese food and practiced the art of eating with chopsticks, which was a sometimes frustrating but rewarding experience. The meals we shared in Japan helped us to further indulge in the culture and also allowed time for us to reflect as a group and discuss the day’s events.”
In Shizuoka, Emily Simon (Newman University) was impressed by “all the different forces of nature converging in one place. I have never been to a place where you can walk through a pine tree forest to the ocean and still see the mountains in the distance. It was absolutely stunning and overwhelming really. We were all in amazement and could only take our eyes off the scenes before us to take a picture, smile for another picture, or send pictures back home to show our families just what beauty surrounded us.”

Shannon James (KU) who saw this view of Shizuoka from her hotel room said that she “adored Shizuoka as it was a fairly large city that was not too big to navigate. It was perfect for exploring and had rich tradition.”

The five days in Shizuoka included 1) seeing Fugetsu, the 19th century garden of the last shogun Tokugawa Yoshinobu, 2) dying miniature fishing fleet flags at the Takehashi Dye House, and 3) making wax replicas of food at Aoi Sample as seen below:
A favorite activity though was picking tea leaves at the Nihondaira Ochakaikan Center. Harsimran Singh (KU) felt that since the “green tea plantations date back to 1241 and the Shizuoka prefecture accounts for 45% of Japan’s overall tea production, it was a privilege to pick green tea leaves in fields of Shizuoka.” Lora Krimer (Haskell Indian Nations University) appreciated being taught the traditional way to pick tea correctly by the farmer she photographed below.

Our group also toured Kunozan Toshogu Shrine, Yaizu fishing port, and Bandai Hobby Center where its popular action figures are assembled, but everyone agreed that interacting with students at Shizuoka University in an English language class and afterwards on campus was the highlight of the trip.
The Americans and Japanese connected with each other, compared lifestyles, and exchanged gifts and contact information in hopes that they would meet again one day. Some of the Shizuoka University students will have a chance to meet their American counterparts again at KU in March 2015 on their American Kakehashi tour.

Our group returned to Tokyo for a final two full days of sightseeing including visits to the National Diet Building, Suntory Museum, Meiji Shrine, the Harajuku shopping area, and the National Museum of Emerging Science and Innovation. One of the most impressive science exhibits was Asimo the robot. Lisa Scott (Haskell Indian National University) felt Asimo was “a great example of Japanese technological innovation. He was able to run, dance, sing, and interact with people without the aid of humans. This is the future and I look forward to it. I was lucky enough to get a front row seat!”
The Kansas Kakehashi study tour was an opportunity of a lifetime that resulted in some thoughtful insights. Elise Reuter (KU) thought that “seeing the country in person made it so much more tangible. I loved how preserved shrines and ancient sculptures were side-by-side with towering skyscrapers, and was astounded by how clean and safe both Tokyo and Shizuoka city felt. Coming back, it left me wondering if there was any way to integrate what I had seen into some U.S. cities, to make them greener, safer, and more efficient.”

Kalon Steinaway (KU) was struck too by the cleanliness even in a megacity like Tokyo saying, “I didn’t see any trash the entire time I was there. Even though there were cars and bikes and people everywhere, the streets were very structured. I’m from Kansas City. Things are very different here.”

Brad Pruter (KU) noted, “The pride one has in their responsibilities in Japan is something to marvel at. I felt that perfection was the norm there. As you can see in the picture (below) there are absolutely no leaves behind the worker. This is a picture of perfection in progress.”
Nancy Hope, one of the tour leaders, remarked that “Japan is the fourth largest export market for Kansas products and America’s number one military ally. Twenty-three students from our state, ones who will be leaders in their field, have now experienced it personally. Perhaps this trip will inspire them and others to learn more about Japan in the years to come.”

Indeed, Kansas Kakehashi participants will have a chance to share their new knowledge when they speak about their experience at local elementary and secondary schools this fall. In addition to disclosing how the trip changed their perceptions of Japan and even of America after being immersed in another culture for ten days, they are sure to mention lighter moments like a going to a cat café in Tokyo where people who can’t own a cat or other animal can play with one. It looks like fun!