

(Article)

Japanese and American University Students: A Comparison through Survey

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Keywords

American Japanese university

There have been many studies which compare and contrast the differences between the culture, society, and educational systems of the United States and Japan (Wray, 1999, McVeigh 2002) and this comparative survey concerning university students aims to benefit both students and instructors in both countries whom may be interested in attending school and or teaching in the either of the countries by highlighting the differences and similarities between university students in each country in terms of how they choose their majors, universities, pay for school, decide their living situations, as well as the importance they place on their class marks and attendance. The questionnaire itself was borne from the curiosity concerning the differences between students at a typical private university in the Kanto area of Japan and though selected at random, bears the traits of many universities in the region. The university chosen from the United States was California State University, Sacramento. The answers from its students could be described as a typical with regards to the questions on this survey. It could be argued that many comparisons might seem incongruent given the many cultural dissimilarities, as well as the number of universities there are to choose from in each country. Despite these caveats the responses to the questions from each group of participants is interesting.

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Procedure

For the development of the questionnaire, a pilot questionnaire was distributed randomly on the campus of California State University, Sacramento. A total of 50 questionnaires were randomly distributed to students on the campus. All students asked to

participate were outside relaxing or in study areas. The only refusals to participate came from students who were preoccupied with class work or were about to leave when asked. None of the same participants in the pilot questionnaire took part in the final questionnaire, (appendix 1). The final questionnaire too was distributed randomly, on the campuses of CSU Sacramento and the Japanese university. The original questionnaire was translated from English to Japanese by both the author and two Japanese professional colleagues. There were a total of 100 participants from each respective university.

Discussion and survey results:

The ages of all 100 participants from the Japanese university was under 23 years of age, while 75% of the CSUS students were under 23, with the other 25% being under the age of 30. For questions 1 through 3 all 100 participants in each group, as stated on the questionnaire, were asked to indicate all answers they felt applied to them. The questions are as follows:

Why did you choose your major?

The answers to this question suggest the degree of ‘sense of purpose’ students have. There were four answers available to the participants. The first of these shows a moderate difference between the two groups concerning the link between their field of study and future goals.

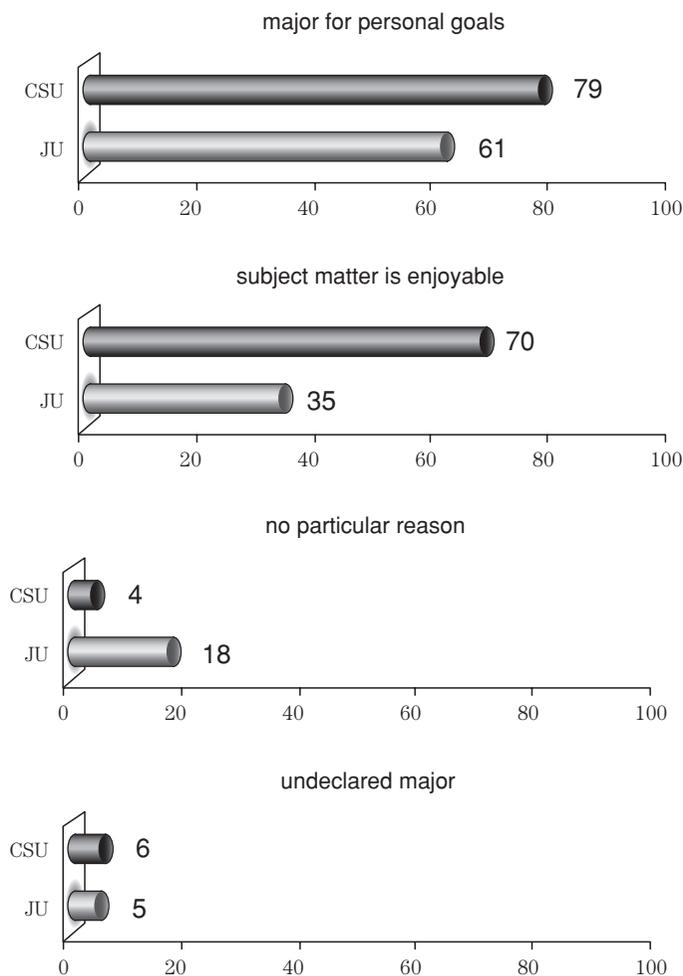
Surely, many students in both countries choose their majors with a particular professional field in mind and though responses for each group are not alarmingly dissimilar, many students have no idea what it is they would like to do after graduating. This is not to say that all students pursue professional jobs associated with their majors. And in this light the groups can be said to be similar. But from conversations with thousands of Japanese students over the past decade it is clear that many of them don’t think about their career until job-hunting begins, as early as their second year in university. (Japan Times, 12/2009)

The second answer could be rephrased as, “Do you like learning for learning sake?” In this case the Japanese answer would have to be a resounding ‘no’ with just 35 percent of the respondents answering favorably. The CSUS students on the other hand double that number. One of the major reasons students in the U.S.A. attend university is to study something that interests them. This is not to say that all Japanese university students have no direction and or lack the ability to focus on a future goal, but in the case of this survey is clear. Many students in Japan are ‘going through the motions’. For many, going to university is much like going to junior high school and high school in the U.S.A. This is in part due to the fact that actual nature of schooling does not change with regards to students passing to the next level with little accountability; the structure

of class periods, lunchtime, and limited choice of study, all characteristic of Japanese universities. University therefore becomes, for many, simply a right of passage. It would seem that if one chose their major to reach future goals, then it follows that they would enjoy the subject matter. The responses for the CSUS students only show a nine-point difference, while for the Japanese the difference is nearly thirty percent when 'major for personal goals' and whether they 'enjoy the subject matter'. Is compared. This is significant.

Students who indicated no particular reason for having chosen their major was understandably low, though 18% for the Japanese students does seem to support a lack of goal-oriented thinking.

Both groups of participants responded nearly the same with low percentages indicating undeclared majors. For the Japanese students the affirmative responses would seem to be low by default simply because most students are tracked into a particular



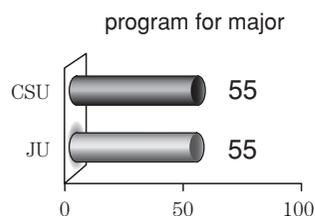
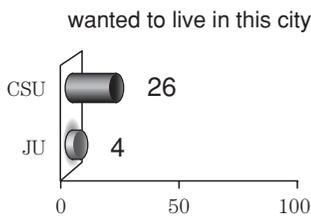
department when they take entrance exams for the university therefore making the undeclared response virtually none. And though the number of responses was similar, the CSU students recognize that changing one's major or even universities at a later time is an option. Not something common at Japanese universities.

Why did you choose your university?

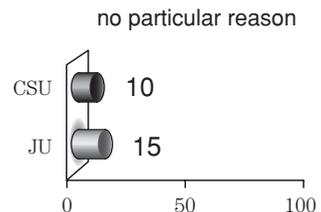
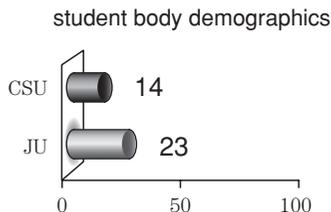
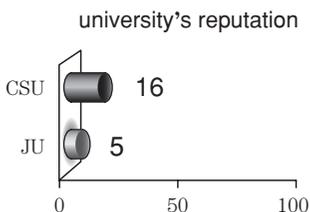
The urban sprawl of the Kanto area and bordering prefectures is dense in terms of population and buildings In comparison the city of Sacramento is a city and its immediate suburbs is fairly well defined. And though 'the Sacramento area' is often referred to, there is a clear separation from nearby cities.

Though a quarter of the CSUS students chose to indicate that the city of Sacramento had influence on their decision to attend CSUS, it seems for the Japanese students that the 'city' did not affect their decision when choosing the university. Of course, there may be reasons concerning the distance needed to commute which help a student determine their choice of schools, but instead of 'city' per se, this is a question would have best been posed as one of locale.

As for having chosen the university based of a particular major offered the marks were equal at just over half. There is no real comparison except when considering the number of majors offered. CSUS offers dozens of majors, some with minors and graduate programs. In contrast the Japanese university in this survey offers three departments under one faculty. Size itself, large or small is not the focus here as there advantages and disadvantages to both. It is important to note though that changing majors, taking courses in different majors, and transferring credits is rare in Japan universities, where it is commonplace in California and the U.S.A. in general.



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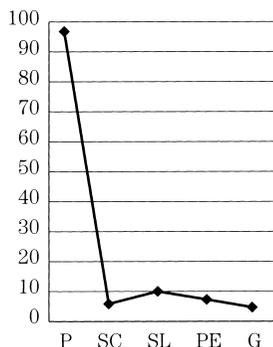
For both school's reputation seemed not be a determining factor. For this particular Japanese university it is a mere five percent. And while student body demographics accounted for nearly a quarter of all respondents on the Japanese side the number of positive respondents for the CSU students was a surprising fourteen percent. The low number may be due to the fact that many students at this particular American university are not necessarily concerned with the make-up of the student body, and probably more concerned with their individual studies. Though in consequent conversations with many of these students they did mention diversity being one of the university's strengths. Students attending university with no particular reason was respectably low for both universities.

How do you pay for school?

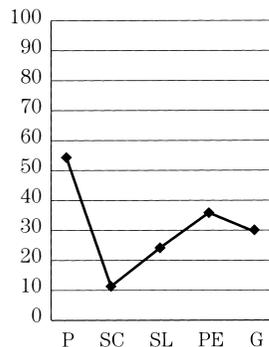
Participants were required to give percentages among five selections. The percentages are below. And though the answers among individuals varied, focusing on the totals of each column for the two groups differences become clear. The most noticeable difference in totals is for the (P) 'parents pay for school' category. Over 95 percent of the Japanese students revealed that their parents pay for their schooling, while just over half of the CSU students responding the same. The degree that both the CSU students and the Japanese students place on attending university might be questioned since their always seems to be a congruent rate between the amount which one pays for something and the value placed on what is purchased.

The next largest difference is between the totals of (PE) 'personal earnings and savings', which again shows a difference between the amount the two groups pay for their own schooling. The Japanese students pay for less than ten percent, while over thirty percent of the CSUS students use some of their own earned income to contribute to their university education. (G) Grants too differ by a wide margin for the two groups. The United States has several university aid programs such as FASSA and Pell Grants to

how university is paid for: Japanese



how university is paid for: CSUS



help low income students. The amount of student loans (SL) issued to students of the two groups also shows a considerable margin. Though in this case they person actually taking out the loan was not clarified. Whether the parents or the student themselves took out the loan needed to be clarified. Scholarships (SC) whether academic or for sports was similar for both groups.

Where do you live?

Participants were given three choices concerning their living arrangements. The CSU students' answered nearly half for two of the choices for family or having a roommate, with only six people indicating they live alone. For the Japanese students numbers were quite different with nearly eighty percent indicating that they live with their families. This may be due to economic reasons, but it also cultural. In Japan, most young adults stay in the home or close to home longer than their American counterparts. What is interesting though is the difference between the number of students who share accommodations with roommates. For the CSUS students its nearly half while only six Japanese students share their home life with someone other than a family member. This may be indicative of a more parental dependence compared to their American counterparts. Living outside the home whether it be with roommates or alone demonstrates a certain ability and or desire to be independent enough to carry out activities necessary for daily life, not excluding cleaning, cooking, washing clothes and the like.

How important are you grades in and outside the university?

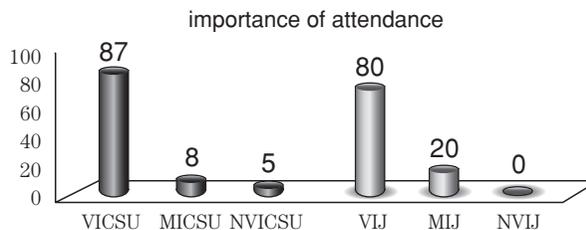
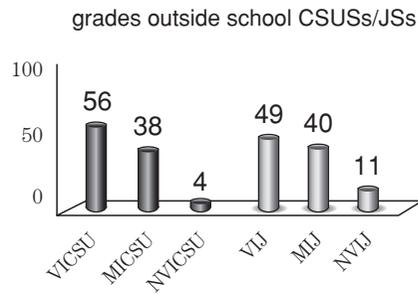
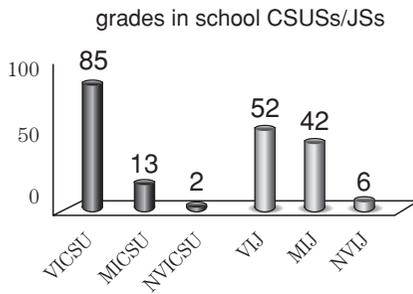
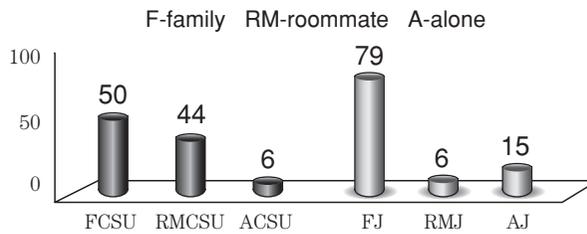
When comparing the figures of both 'inside school' in grades and 'outside school' marks, the grades inside seem to be of much more importance to the CSU students. This is in part due to the fact that the goal to have everyone pass and graduate is systemic in the Japanese university. For instance, in most university attendance is woven into the grading system. For each fifteen-week semester it is written in many university manuals that a student may be absent for a third of the classes and still be able to receive credit. This has a direct influence on the way the Japanese students think about attending classes. Of course, this is not to say that there are no students at Japanese universities who strive to get good grades for a future purpose. But the urgency or pressure to good get marks for future reference is not there like it is for the CSUS students.

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How important is it to attend class?

Both groups answered similarly concerning the importance of attending class though the reasons may be different. As mentioned above, students in Japanese universities are very well aware of the need attend classes to attain a good mark. On the other hand for CSUS students attendance is rarely, if ever a requirement. Students attend

class for fear of missing important material needed for assignments or exams. The same fear is not always there for many students at Japanese universities and is evident by the fact that when absent, rarely do students show concern by either consulting with classmates about missed assignments, or attempting to contact the instructor. On many occasions, students show up to the next lesson and feel little obligation to the previous week's work simply because they were absent whether justified or not or not. And some Japanese universities have gone so far as to issue free iphones with a functional GPS application and require students to register their attendance. (Reuters, 05/2009) This is indicative of the importance placed on attendance in Japanese universities.



VI-very important MI-moderately important NVI-not very important

Why are you ultimately here at university?

The questionnaire also asked the participants to briefly state, in general, their reasons for being at university. There were many similarities among the two sets of responses as well as those which were unique to each. The most common similar responses from the two groups included statements, which demonstrated that attending university was seen as a societal expectation, the need for exposure to new things, as well as for the purpose of attaining a special particular license such as those needed for teaching. (Okano and Tsuchiya, 1999)

Responses that were group specific, but not necessarily frequent, also help to reveal the nature of the two groups outlooks on attending university. Answers unique to the Japanese respondents included the desire to make friends, have fun with friends, enjoy club activities, as well as not being sure to why they were there. There too responses were answers which supported a long running truth or myth that university in Japan was a moratorium on studying. (Sugimoto, 2003, McVeigh, 2002)

Answers particular to CSUS students included the mentioning of the desire to pursue education beyond a four-year degree whether it graduate studies in the field of their major, medical, or in law school. The desire to attain a degree so that they might ultimately give back to the community was also mentioned.

Japanese students' impressions of CSU Sacramento students' video interviews

In addition to the survey, the Japanese students were asked to write a brief reflection concerning a video of the students at CSU Sacramento. The 12-minute video includes interviews with seven students, four males and three females, selected at random on the campus in August of 2009. The interviewees also participated in the survey and their monologues concerning their lives as students at CSU Sacramento were influenced by this, though they were free to speak as they liked. Following is a summary of the responses given by the Japanese students after having watched the interviews.

Besides noting that they often didn't understand everything that was being said, the most common response was that the CSUS students seemed 'adult-like', with many also mentioning that they couldn't believe the interviewees were the same age as them, probably in part, due to the fact the CSUS students spoke openly and clearly about their lives as students, as well as their future goals and ambitions. In conversations after collecting their comments, the Japanese students were also surprised that I had selected the interviewees at random and was not acquainted with them before taking the video. They were surprised that someone they did not know could speak so freely and clearly about themselves to a stranger. This is not surprising knowing the most Japanese are much more reserved when it comes to divulging frankly their personal thoughts and feelings to people they have met for the first time compared to Americans. It also is a

reflection of the recent revelations concerning problems with many Japanese young adults who lack the ability to express their feelings, explain, or introduce themselves or even their hometowns in a clear and concise manner during job interviews.

Many of the Japanese comments also revealed an interest or renewed interest in studying English. Several of the responses included the fact they understood that there was a large gap between the speed and the vocabulary of the classroom English they were used to and the English spoken by the CSUS students. Of course, this depends on the level of the individual student, but it was good to know that this exposure to natural English was motivating for many of them. It is also worth mentioning that they were instructed to write down as many words as they could understand. This seemingly helped spur some motivation as several also mentioned they understood more than they had expected.

Besides the interest in English many responses reflected students' desire to go abroad and or a heightened interest the U.S.A. 'America'. Other responses included similarities, including the recognition that there are people who's language or speech is easy or more difficult to understand than others, the fact that students the same age like to go shopping, to the movies and hang out with friends, as well as the importance of one's family.

Conclusion

The similarities and differences between the CSU students and Japanese students revealed values each places on different aspects associated with their university. The responses concerning the choosing of a major, university, or the importance of grades and attendance were not particularly dissimilar, but living conditions and the way schooling is paid differences were large. It is more than simply an economic difference though, but the way independence is valued in each group. For the CSU students the slide toward more independence from their parents is a conclusion that comes to light, which for western culture usually equates to more maturity. For the Japanese university students independence from the core household remains unchanged for longer than their CSU counterparts. There is also a clear difference in how the two groups of students view themselves within society. In Japanese society there is a clear distinction between 'shakaijin', societal person and 'gakusei', student. This distinction is much less clear the United States where once graduating from high school, and especially once one is able to contribute financially to their own living expenses, they aim to do so.

Appendix 1

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The following questionnaire is to help determine differences in the priorities and attitudes between students attending university in the U.S. and Japan. The data collected will be used expressly for a research paper attending to these differences. Thank you sincerely, for your time, honesty and cooperation.

Age:

17-23 24-30 31-40 41-50 51 or older

What is your major?

Reason for taking your major: (check all that apply)

- This is the best major to help me reach my goals
- I enjoy learning about the subject matter
- I have no particular reason for taking my major
- I have not declared my major yet

I decided to attend this university because: (check all that apply)

- I wanted to live in this city
- This university has a good program for my major
- The university's reputation
- Of the student population demographics
- Of no particular reason
- Other (_____)

How do you pay for school? Please indicate estimated percentages with your answers.

My parents pay % Scholarship % Student loans %
Personal earnings/savings % Grants (non-repayable) %

What do you do to relax or for recreation which is unrelated to your academic life?

Spend time with friends/family Drink or smoke Sleep
Exercise Read or Write Other (_____)

What is your living situation?

I live alone I live with a roommate(s)
 I live with my family

How much importance do you place on your grades?

Not much A little Utmost importance

What importance do you think your grades have outside the university?

Not much A little Utmost importance

How much importance do you put on attending classes?

Not much A little Utmost importance

In a general sense, what would you say is or are your ultimate reasons for being here at the university? Please briefly state your answer.

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