



2024-2025

# WATANABE SCHOLARSHIP REPORT

U.S.-Japan Council

Generously Supported by the Toshizo Watanabe Endowed Scholarship Fund

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## Executive Summary

In 2024-2025, we are thrilled to have supported a total of 39 scholars (25 Japanese and 14 Americans) as the eighth cohort after a very competitive selection process. The scholar's bio can be found online: [2024-2025 Watanabe Scholars - U.S.-Japan Council \(usjapanCouncil.org\)](https://www.usjapanCouncil.org)

As outreach efforts, the Watanabe Scholarship team hosted four virtual info sessions for American and Japanese students and administrations as well as promoted the scholarship on Japan Student Services Organizations websites and publications. In September 2024, USJC Japan joined the EducationUSA Tokyo, which is an annual study abroad fair hosted by the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo, and introduced the Watanabe Scholarship to about 100 participants in-person and 90 audience members online.



From October to November 2024, 13 American students who started their study in Japan attended the U.S.-Japan Annual Conference in Tokyo. In addition to building connections as Watanabe Scholars, they learned professional networking skills and heard from prominent leaders on the U.S.-Japan relationship.

In February 2025, Watanabe Scholars attended a virtual Leadership Training Session. They learnt insights on study abroad and career development from Daisuke Maruichi (Economic Affairs Officer at the United Nations in Bangkok, Thailand, and Watanabe Scholar 2017-2018), Yumi Araki (Managing Producer of podcasts at America's Test Kitchen, 2023 Emerging Leaders Program Cohort), and Stéphane E. Fouché (Outreach Director & Advisor for Katsuiiku Foundation, Founder & CEO of HAKO, LLC, and MEXT scholarship recipient). The scholars also met fellow students, sharing their study abroad experiences.



We are deeply grateful to Mr. Watanabe for his continuous support and care for the scholars and alumni, and to the Toshizo Watanabe Foundation for its generous endowment that makes this scholarship possible. As next year marks the 10th anniversary of the Toshizo Watanabe Study Abroad Scholarship, we look forward to the growing success of the scholarship.

Sincerely,  
Watanabe Scholarship Team

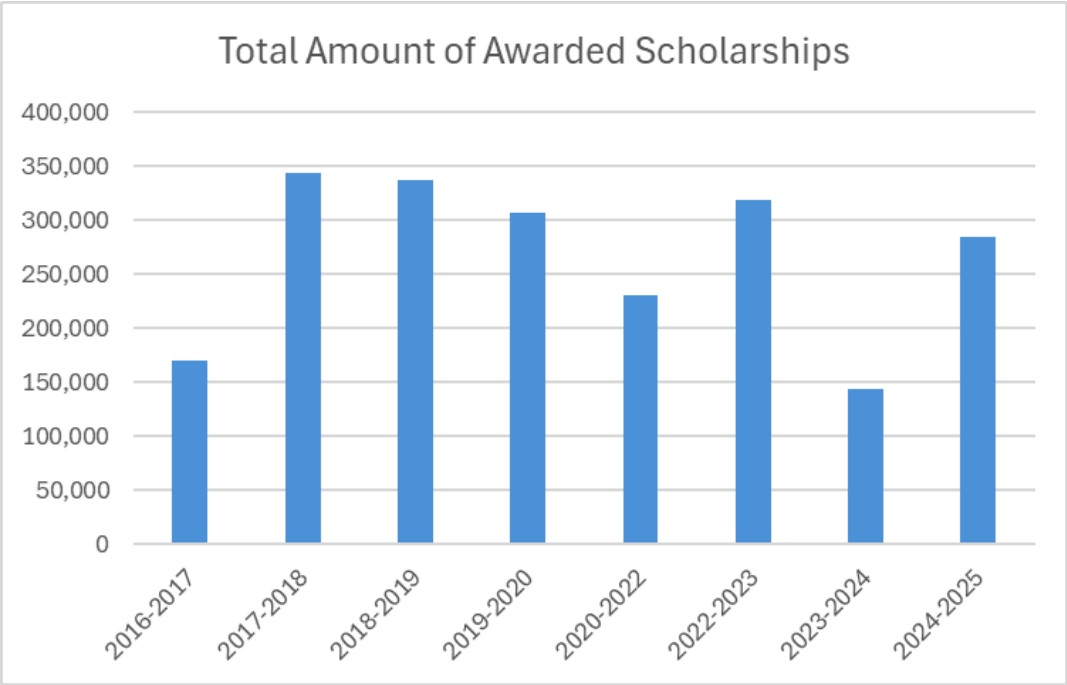
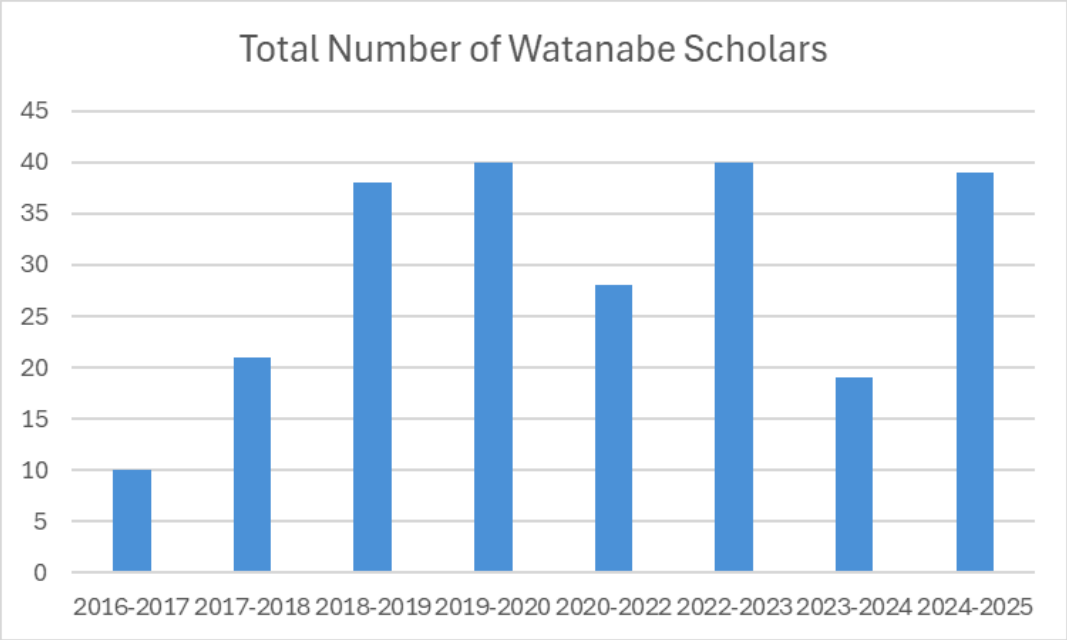
## About the Toshizo Watanabe Study Abroad Scholarship Program

The Toshizo Watanabe Endowed Scholarship Fund provides financial assistance to undergraduate and graduate students for a semester or year-long study abroad program in either the United States or Japan. A generous endowment gift of \$10 million from Mr. Toshizo (Tom) Watanabe to the U.S.-Japan Council (the Council) makes it possible to award scholarships to Japanese and American students with leadership potential for whom study abroad would not be possible without financial support. The scholarship program grants awards to recipients in amounts determined by financial need and other qualifications. For the inaugural program years of 2016-18, the scholarship supported Japanese undergraduate students who studied in the United States. Beginning in the 2018-19 school year, the scholarship also supports American students studying in Japan.

The Council will recruit, select, and support scholarship recipients, welcoming them to the TOMODACHI Generation as future leaders and contributors to the U.S.-Japan relationship. For more information, please see: <https://www.usjapancouncil.org/watanabe-scholarship/>.



# Scholarship Statistics



## 2024-2025 Watanabe Scholars' School List

### *Japanese Scholars Studied at...*

- American University
- California State University, Fullerton
- Cascadia College (through NIC International College in Japan)
- Drake University
- Diablo Valley College
- Denison University
- DePauw University
- Grinnell College
- Harvard Graduate School of Education
- Mount Holyoke College
- Rice University
- Seattle Pacific University
- State University of New York at Geneseo
- University of California, Los Angeles
- University of California, San Diego
- University of Hawai'i at Manoa
- University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
- University of Minnesota, Morris
- University of North Carolina at Charlotte
- University of Pennsylvania
- University of San Diego
- University of Washington
- Western Carolina University

### *Their Home Schools included...*

- American University
- Aoyama Gakuin University
- Brookes Westshore
- California State University, Fullerton
- Denison University
- DePauw University
- Grinnell College
- Hiroshima International School
- Kanagawa Prefectural Yokohama Suiran High School
- Kashima Asahi High School
- Keio University
- Kwansei Gakuin University
- Kyoto University
- Mckendree University
- Mount Holyoke College
- Rice University
- State University of New York at Geneseo
- St. Cloud State University
- Tohoku University
- University of California, Los Angeles
- University of California, San Diego
- University College London
- University of Minnesota, Morris
- Western Carolina University

*American Scholars Studied at...*

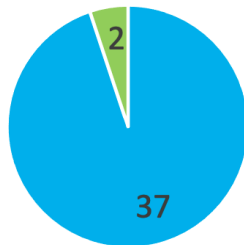
- Aoyama Gakuin University
- International Christian University
- Kansai Gaidai University
- Kwansai Gakuin University via USAC
- Nanzan University
- Sophia University
- Temple University, Japan Campus
- Tohoku University

*Their Home Schools included...*

- California State University, Monterey Bay
- Ernest Mcbride High School
- Florida Atlantic University
- Florida Virtual High School
- Goucher College
- Waseda University
- Hawaii Pacific University
- Indiana University
- International Christian University
- Middlebury College
- Montgomery College
- University of California, Irvine
- University of Colorado, Colorado Springs
- The University of Texas at Austin

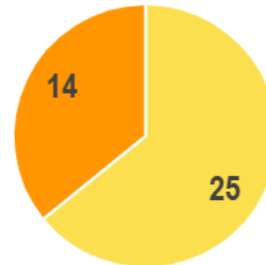
# 2024-2025 Scholars At-A-Glance

### Level of Education



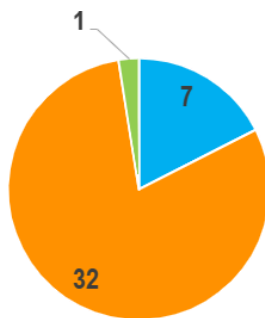
■ Undergraduate ■ Graduate

### Nationalities



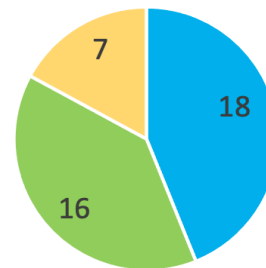
■ Japanese Applicants ■ American Applicants

### Gender



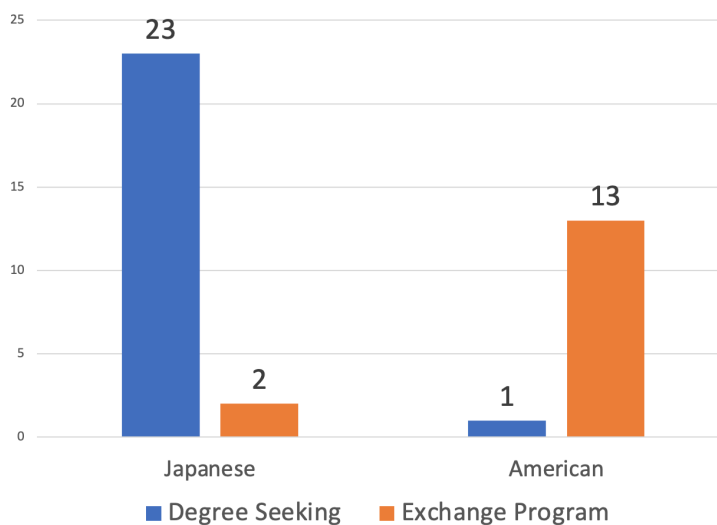
■ Male ■ Female ■ Other

### Preferential Categories

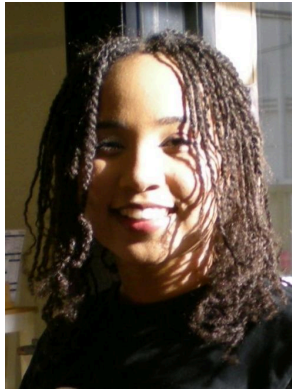


■ Single Parent ■ First Generation ■ First International Experience

### Types of International Studies Program



## Watanabe Scholars Highlights



**Aeris Thompson**

*International Christian University (Degree-seeking)*

It is thanks to the generosity of the U.S.-Japan Council and Mr. Watanabe that I am able to write this reflection letter. This year was the second year I have received the Watanabe Scholarship, and it has drastically changed my life.

This chance at studying abroad has truly made me reflect on my own confidence. For two years, I worked part-time at a vegan restaurant, connecting with the local Japanese vegan community and helping tourists from all around the world have a place to eat. While I am not vegan myself, I have long been a fan of vegan food and ideals of sustainability and ethical consumption. This job was incredibly special to me, but the sudden, unexpected closure of the restaurant created a momentary stressor where I did not know if I would be able to continue supporting myself. I have since found new employment and have switched from an American environment where I could introduce American vegan cuisine to Japanese customers, to a Japanese environment where I introduce Japanese vegan cuisine and dining culture to international customers. It had been a long time since I had been back on the job market, but I was easily able to demonstrate and explain my skillset thanks to my time at my last job.

Outside of my work experiences, I received the opportunity to dedicate my time to two projects on campus. The first was a special lecture on Universal Studios Japan's marketing strategy by an alumna of my university, Yukiyo Asai. I was recruited to help coordinate, promote, and set up the event because of my strong collaborative skills demonstrated in my translation classes. I promoted the event on campus and on social media, suggested ideas for larger reach, and the event that was previously capped at 100 participants maxed out on sign-ups, and we were able to expand the event to over 200 participants. The next project was a research assistant position with my professor, as she personally invited me to help her curate an exhibit on W.E.B. Du Bois. I sorted through archived materials on Du Bois' trip to Japan and created promotional materials, getting flyers displayed around campus by working with school officials. The display was in a busy area of campus, so I got to see how many people were also fascinated by Du Bois' unique and controversial view on Japan after he visited. I was surprised at how my various skills were able to be utilized in this setting, and to have such an amazing response to my outreach efforts gave me the confidence to do this in my professional career.

Being a Watanabe scholar is a wonderful opportunity, as are the connections you make with your cohort, who understand what it is like to navigate your host country. Good luck to the future Watanabe scholars, and I would once again like to express my gratitude and appreciation to Mr. Watanabe and the U.S.-Japan Council staff, my fellow Watanabe scholars past and present. From the support and encouragement to the training I have received, this study abroad experience has surpassed all of my expectations.



**Akari Hayashi**  
*Denison University (Degree-Seeking)*

When my freshman year finished, and when I talked about my career with some people during the summer break, I gradually became worried about my future career — should I be involved in education immediately after graduation? Some people told me that it might be difficult to change careers from education to other fields, but it might be easier to change from other fields to education. Others advised me that skills and experiences gained in other fields will be helpful when I become an educator in the future. Experiencing “shakaijin (a member of society)” might allow me to understand what society expects of young people. I thought, thought, and thought of this. I also tried new kinds of activities, such as copywriting, which I was originally interested in, and I reached out to people in various industries and gained some opportunities to virtually talk with them. However, I ended up realizing that I want to engage in education to ensure no regrets in my life.

I realized that engaging in education is something that I could immerse myself in without any pressure or stress. I also came to understand my honest feeling—I just want to embrace this feeling of engagement, meaning I want to launch my career based on my passion for education.

Overall, my sophomore year, based on re-recognition, was concluded by making me excited for the invaluable opportunities this summer and next academic year. I would say that I have no regrets about this year. I challenged myself a lot and gained outcomes, growth, and future visions. I have also built mutual relationships with my friends, professors, and faculty. This year was my turning point to recapture my determination and make me feel “coming to the U.S. and Denison was my right choice.”

Thus, my advice for people who are going to study abroad, especially in their sophomore year, would be: “Take your time to take a breath, listen to what you think and feel, and re-recognize what you want to do.” Even if you are confident in your determination of what you want to do, taking time to consider other potential paths is still worth it. It does not matter if you end up changing your path—my determination did not actually change drastically. But it matters when you step forward on your path. Deep thinking about your path will allow you to gain more confidence, grit, and kindness, to gather others’ understanding and generous support, and to find more interesting, creative paths in your career.

Lastly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude for the generous support of the Watanabe Scholarship. The Watanabe Scholarship has given me the time and freedom to reflect on my thoughts on a future plan and to pursue new opportunities. I am also deeply honored to be selected as a Watanabe Scholar again for next semester. I look forward to continuing my academic journey at Denison University and to connecting with the next cohort of Watanabe Scholars.



**Alexis Wallace**

*Temple University Japan Campus (Degree-seeking)*

When I received the Watanabe Scholarship, I knew it would open a door, but I didn't know how much it would challenge and shape me. Studying abroad in Japan has been one of my life's most meaningful, difficult, and grounding experiences so far. It wasn't just about taking classes or living in a new country; it was about learning to be on my own, adapting to unfamiliar systems, and reflecting on what matters to me.

One moment that had a real impact on me was my trip to Kamakura during spring break. I went alone, and I didn't plan anything complicated, just a visit to Hasedera Temple, the Daibutsu, and some time walking along the beach. It was peaceful. I sat by the ocean and watched the water for a long time. It felt like time slowed down. That's when it hit me: for the first time in a long time, I wasn't rushing toward the next goal or worrying about my future. I was just present. That feeling, the calm, the stillness, was something I didn't know I needed. It reminded me that growth doesn't always come from doing more. Sometimes it comes from doing less and being honest with yourself about where you are.

Another unexpected part of this year was how much being away from home made me reflect on my identity. As a first-generation college student, I've always carried a lot of pressure, to do well, to make things work, to make sure the sacrifices my family made were worth it. Living abroad made me think about that pressure differently. I started asking myself what I want, not just what I feel expected to want. I learned how to take up space quietly, without needing to explain myself to anyone. That's a big change from who I was before.

As I look ahead, I plan to stay in Japan and continue my degree at Temple University Japan. I'm also continuing to study Japanese, aiming for JLPT N3 proficiency by the end of the summer. Improving my language skills will help me engage more fully with the community and eventually work in a bilingual environment. My long-term goal is to go into international law, focusing on issues like human rights, migration, or climate justice. I want to use my education and lived experiences to advocate for those who don't have access to legal protection or representation.

This scholarship helped make that path possible. It gave me the financial support to study in Japan, but more than that, it permitted me to imagine a different kind of life, one that's not tied to limitations or fears. It made me feel seen in a way I hadn't before. Being a Watanabe Scholar wasn't just about academics. It was about being trusted to take a risk and grow from it.



**Asumi Yamamoto**

*University of California, Los Angeles (Degree-seeking)*

The community I found at UCLA changed my path, but what has been even more meaningful is realizing that I have now become part of someone else's starting point. After years of being the one asking questions and figuring things out, I now find myself in the role of the person others turn to. This past year, something truly special happened. My older sister, who works as a pharmacist in Japan, decided to attend the same language school I once studied at and later interned at. She had always supported me from afar, cheering me on through every hurdle.

But this time, I was the one guiding her. Inspired by how much my study abroad experience shaped my life, she began studying English again. Her goal is to better serve foreign residents in Japan's healthcare system by making it more accessible and welcoming. She wants to become a pharmacist that patients from any background can feel safe speaking to. Helping her begin this journey was one of the most emotional full circle moments I have ever experienced. I showed her how to choose a school, prepare for a visa, find housing, and get mentally ready for life in a new country. It made me realize just how far I have come, not only in distance, but in who I am. And it did not stop with my sister. Little by little, more people from Japan began reaching out to me for advice, some through mutual friends, others through social media. Many were interested in studying abroad but did not know where to start.

So I began hosting online seminars for students and professionals who were curious about studying overseas. I walk them through everything I once struggled with such as how to research schools, understand the visa process, find housing, prepare for cultural adjustments, and build a support system after arriving. Now, I meet with students regularly to answer their questions, ease their fears, and help them believe that this dream, no matter how far away it feels, is truly possible. I never imagined I would be running information sessions from my bedroom in Los Angeles, but here I am, guiding others through the same doors I once walked through with shaky hands. I help some students apply to schools or fill out visa documents, just like I did for my sister. In a way, it feels like I have become a bridge between Japan and the United States not only in distance, but in experience and heart. I know how scary it is to leave everything behind and start fresh in a place where the language, customs, and systems feel unfamiliar. I know how lonely it can feel at first. That is why I try to be as honest and encouraging as I can.

Thank you for making this journey possible. I will always carry the Toshizo Watanabe Study Abroad Scholarship Program in my heart, not just as something I received, but as a legacy I hope to continue and pass on. Because of this scholarship, I was able to stay in school during moments when it felt impossible. I was able to find my purpose, lift others as I grew, and become someone who now supports others with the same care and encouragement I once received. The impact of this scholarship reached far beyond me. It reached my family, my community, and now the future students I guide every day.



**Bao Calvin Cao**

*Waseda University – California State University International Program (Exchange Program)*

Personally, the opportunity to study in Japan challenged me to leave the familiar behind and truly test my independence and adaptability. Japan is a country of contrasts—traditional and modern, reserved and expressive—and navigating those complexities helped me mature in subtle but important ways. From daily tasks like navigating public transportation or handling bureaucratic procedures, to more emotional challenges like loneliness or self-doubt, I found myself learning to become more patient, observant, and flexible.

Academically, Waseda University was a really inspiring place to be. My classmates were smart, curious, and many of them had lived abroad or spoke multiple languages. Talking with them made me realize how much more there is to know about the world. I thought I was globally aware, but being there made me realize how limited my perspective had been. In a way, I felt like a “frog in a well,” as the Japanese saying goes—I didn’t know how big the world really was until I stepped out of my usual environment.

Studying in Japan was definitely different from studying in the U.S. Classes were more self-directed—professors gave us the tools, but it was up to us to take the lead in our learning. Group discussions were more quiet and polite, but when students did speak up, what they said was often really thoughtful. Outside of class, I learned a lot just by being in different places and talking to people.

Being part of the Watanabe Scholars Virtual Program was a really valuable part of my study abroad experience. Even though we were all in different locations, the online meetings gave us a sense of community and helped me realize I wasn’t going through the challenges of studying abroad alone. It was encouraging to hear from other scholars who were adjusting to life in Japan just like I was. The leadership training, especially hearing from speakers involved in U.S.-Japan relations and career development, made me think more seriously about how I could build a future that connects both countries. It was also nice just to meet other students with similar goals and experiences. I appreciated the mix of professional guidance and personal stories—it made the scholarship feel less like a transaction and more like a network I could grow with.

Overall, being a Watanabe Scholar has meant having the chance to grow into the kind of person I want to be: someone who is open, adaptable, curious, and connected across cultures. I’m incredibly thankful for the support and the opportunities this program gave me, and I hope to give back in the future by supporting others who want to follow a similar path.

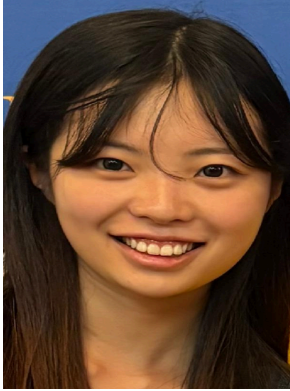


**Cassidy Mullineaux**  
*Kansai Gaidai University (Exchange Program)*

Being able to study in Japan for a full semester has intrinsically changed not only the way that I view the world, but myself. Thanks to the Watanabe Study Abroad Scholarship, I have a bright future laid out ahead of me, and have been able to make considerable progress towards both my short-term and long-term goals. The Watanabe Scholars Virtual Program, the 2024 Conference in Tokyo, and of course the wonderful staff of the U.S. Japan Council and Watanabe Scholars Program have been so instrumental in preparing us for success and cementing the connections that will help us to flourish down the line. It also can't be understated how much these resources have helped to ensure success in our individual study abroad programs. For me personally, I was able to do well and focus on my classes because of how organized the Watanabe Scholars Virtual Program was and how many tools and resources we were given. It is my hope that the next group of applicants (and eventual scholars) gain as much experience and have as much fun as I did studying abroad.

Since coming to Japan, the entire country has captivated my attention in a way I didn't think myself capable of. From the language, to the cooking, to the art, everything seems to spawn a new interest. Growing up with ADHD, I've always had a million interests, but they never hold my focus long enough to make any real progress. Being in Japan and completing my fifth course in Japanese here has begun to really shift that mindset for me. I have real, tangible progress, knowledge, and capabilities to show now. And reflecting on this, I can no longer see myself as someone limited by disability or mental trappings, but rather somebody who can pursue a goal to its end. And I have plans to continue my education following my study abroad experience, both in a casual and academic setting.

I am still pursuing fluency in Japanese, which I intend to achieve through self study and tutoring as-needed. And that fluency will open up a world of professional possibilities to me. But even beyond professional opportunity, I envision a world for myself in which I can read the books I've seen lining the shelves for months in Japan, where I can understand Japanese news and other media in its untouched, untranslated form, where I can comprehend the full breadth of a work because I am intimately familiar with its contexts and every turn of phrase which has no English equivalent to be translated into. Right now, I can do exactly zero of those things with any level of confidence. But in only 4 months, I can understand so much more than I could before. And in another 4 months, I will surely have an even broader scope of understanding. Studying abroad has opened up my world to so many possibilities, ones that logic previously held only existed for others, and never for me.



**Chihiro Komiya**  
*University of Pennsylvania (Exchange Program)*

My year at University of California, Berkeley in the United States, made possible as a Watanabe Scholar, was a period of immeasurable value, challenge, and self-discovery in my life. I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to the U.S.-Japan Council and the Watanabe-Endowed Scholarship for providing me with this precious opportunity. While there were several gaps between the expectations I held before my departure and the reality I experienced, every moment contributed to my significant growth, both as a person and as a student. In this report, I will detail the lessons I learned, the difficulties I faced, and the impact this journey has

had on my future.

Academically, my greatest gain was studying Business and Computer Science in the United States, a global hub for these fields. The different perspectives and educational approaches, especially the discussion-based classes that demand proactive student participation, were incredibly stimulating. This environment reinforced the importance of articulating my own opinions while actively listening to others.

This study abroad experience fundamentally reshaped my future ambitions, making them clearer and more passionate. Before leaving, I had a vague dream of "bringing healthcare to people around the world." However, the reality I witnessed overseas dramatically sharpened the focus of that dream. I was shocked to learn in conversations with my international friends that Japan is perceived by many as a "country in decline." This perception was painfully illustrated at the local supermarket. I saw Japanese food products, a category where Japan should excel, being pushed to the corners of the shelves. In their place, the most prominent displays were filled with "Japanese food" skillfully marketed by Korean companies. At that moment, witnessing this, I felt a strong sense of crisis and frustration that Japan's superior products were not being properly communicated to the world. This experience connected directly with my interest in healthcare. I realized that Japan's world-class medical technologies and pharmaceuticals could suffer the same fate—their value unrecognized globally, failing to reach the people who truly need them. It was then that my dream took a definitive shape. My goal was no longer simply to deliver healthcare, but to strategically and powerfully deliver Japanese-originated medical care and technology to the people of the world. I am now convinced this is my mission. I intend to fully leverage the proactivity, resilience in the face of adversity, and multi-faceted perspective I gained during my study abroad to achieve this goal.

For me, being a Watanabe Scholar means much more than just receiving financial aid. It means being given "wings to take on the world" and the opportunity to grow by overcoming challenges. I will carry this pride and gratitude with me and continue to strive to become a person who can contribute to society. Once again, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for this incredible opportunity.



**Chii Kojima**  
*Mount Holyoke College (Degree-seeking)*

As I've spent more time at Mount Holyoke College, I've come to realize just how important this community is to me and how precious it is to study here. The warm environment, where everyone is willing to listen to your voice and ideas, and where professors always believe in your potential, has not only deepened my interest in plants but also allowed me to explore a wide range of academic fields.

This spring, I rejoined the Japan Culture Club as Treasurer and helped organize our first- ever Japan Night. Planning such a large-scale event was both challenging and rewarding. We welcomed around 100 students and community members to our celebration of Japanese culture, which included performances and festival-style game booths. Many students told us it was the best cultural event they had experienced on campus. I'm grateful to have worked with such an amazing team to share our culture with the Mount Holyoke community and to help make the event a great success. Next semester, I will lead the club as Chair, and I'm excited to organize more cultural events on campus and share Japanese culture with even more members of this community.

I also joined a new lab to pursue an independent research project focused on plant spatial modeling, which helped me further develop my data analysis skills. I'm truly grateful for the opportunity to work with my supervisor on ecological niche modeling, which helped me better understand my academic and research interests. In addition, the Plant Biogeography class I took this year clarified what I want to pursue as a researcher.

This growth led me to my current summer position at the Biological Field Station (BFS) of SUNY Oneonta. In addition to assisting with lake monitoring and learning how to maneuver a boat, I am working with Dr. Mairi Meehan and Dr. Dan Stitch to examine macrophyte composition in Otsego Lake. Collaborating with researchers and faculty at BFS has further solidified my goal of becoming an ecologist. I plan to apply to PhD programs in the US this fall to study the distribution of native and invasive plants in response to environmental change.

I'm also incredibly thankful for the opportunity to participate in the Virtual Leadership Training. I learned about Japanese American history, something I had known very little about before. Learning how Japanese Americans fought to regain their rights reminded me of the importance of speaking up and never giving up. As I prepare to graduate from Mount Holyoke College next semester, I know there will be challenges ahead, but I will carry the lessons I've learned with me as I face an uncertain and ever-changing world.



**Chikako Inoue**  
*Grinnell College (Degree-seeking)*

My study at Grinnell College and the support from the Watanabe scholarship supported my back and encouraged me to go forward pursuing my passion in research. This encouragement shaped my future vision beyond my optimism to think that I can do anything with my passion but in a sense it gives me what is best and possible with my current position. My experiences in this academic year has challenged and enriched my view on how inequality is systematically produced from social construction and policies. For example, I took the class about the cinemas of disability last semester, which added a new layer to examine the intersectionality that reinforces the systemic pathologization and criminalization of the disabled people. Reading materials and class discussion with peers gave me insights into how systems and policies like ones regarding social welfare creates boundaries among people to create a pathologized, disposable group of people. As I intended, taking such classes that are not directly related to the core of my research yet are connected on a larger scale has strengthened the foundation of my understanding about the globally permeating system that negates the humanity of some groups of people. In combination with the fall semester when I studied Asian-European's anti-colonialist solidarity movement and European feminism, my study abroad experience in the United States throughout this academic year has uniquely challenged my views from different angles and consider different approaches to my research, such as Asian migration, generational trauma in Asian migrant community and their healing, and Japanese colonialism. My growth has also been supported by the program hosted by the Watanabe team such as the virtual leadership training. Though three people on the panel have different lives in different sectors, their principles to pursue their passion and learn from different culture rather than reject it, which led them to their current paths, inspired me to think about "how I can do what I want to do" in negotiation with "what I can do with the resource that I have."

As I have a privilege to study in the United States for my bachelors degree, I am truly thrilled to share my experience with others in Japan. First, my Japanese friend who transferred from Grinnell to Brown University and I are planning to start a dialogue program to share our lived experience studying abroad in the United States. Here, I aspire to mentor younger generations in Japan to think about their future and pursue their passion. Second, I am truly excited to share my travelling journey starting with my travel fellowship and onward. For my project supported by the fellowship, I will create a series of blogs and the ArcGIS map project that I plan to share to the public. By establishing those digital scholarships and recording my experiential knowledge, I would like to not only share my experience studying abroad in the United States but also suggest the possibility of your future through studying abroad.



**Elliot Mast**  
*Sophia University (Exchange Program)*

Tokyo was an amazing city to live in, with so much to do, but adjusting to life there was a bit of a challenge. Unlike America, the big cities in Japan are incredibly condensed which means everything feels smaller than back at home. While I definitely came to appreciate these differences throughout my time in Japan, adjusting to my small dorm room, rush hour trains, and a lack of walking space wasn't necessarily easy. However, adjusting was worth it. Being able to get anywhere in the city with Tokyo's incredible public transit allowed me to explore so much of the city on my own and with others. I learned quickly that being open to uncomfortable situations was the best way to get the most out of my time abroad.

The school that I attended, Sophia University in central Tokyo, is an incredibly diverse school with lots of international students. I got to meet lots of people from many different countries, and I also got the opportunity to meet many Japanese students. It's a lot smaller than what I'm used to back home, but that also made me feel more connected to campus than back home. Through the school, I was also able to go on a trip to Hiroshima in order to see the Peace Memorial Museum and Peace Memorial Park. In addition, we were also able to attend a high school cultural festival being held by one of Sophia's partner schools. This trip was one of my favorite memories of my time in Japan, both for the incredible perspective on the destructive power of nuclear weapons the park gave me, and for the unique experience of the cultural festival.

Studying abroad also made me realize the importance of beginning to actively think about the future. Being around so many people, and hearing the perspectives of those I can't back home, was often inspiring. It motivated me to want to improve and be a better version of myself. While I'm sad to leave Japan, this motivation also makes me excited to return to my home university and begin to consider the future. I will graduate next Spring and my intent afterwards is to go to law school. In between, I'm hoping to take a gap year to potentially pursue JET (The Japanese Exchange Teaching Program) or some kind of service opportunity. I would like to use my experience to bring an empathetic solution to problems. I hope to dedicate my life to that goal, even if I'm not quite sure where my values, built in part by my time abroad, will take me.



**Emu Suzuki**

*University of Minnesota, Morris (Degree-seeking)*

Looking back on my three years of studying abroad at the University of Minnesota Morris, my experience was filled with hectic moments, struggles, joy, friendships, tears, gratitude, and growth. To be honest, it still doesn't feel real—I often feel like I'll be back on campus for another semester. Time flew by, especially during the academic year when classes, homework, work, and research consumed my weeks. I didn't even feel like I was graduating until I put on my cap and gown. Walking down the graduation aisle, memories came flooding back. These years were packed with unforgettable experiences and friends I'll miss dearly. I truly believe that coming to Morris was the best decision I've ever made. There are three core experiences that shaped my study abroad: PAL (Peer Assisted Learning), Research, and Friendships. I'll reflect on each of these and share how they helped shape who I am today.

From my second year onward, I lived with two American friends who became the most important people in my life. Before that, I had never lived with anyone outside my family, so it was a completely new experience. When I thought about a future roommate, their names and faces came to mind naturally. I truly believe that if we hadn't lived together, we wouldn't have become as close as we did. It didn't take long for us to reach the level of comfort where we could talk about anything—or sit in silence and feel completely at ease. I'll never forget the late-night conversations before exams, laughing during lab frustrations, or just doing daily life together. Having a friend like them means the world to me. I never imagined I'd meet someone so special when I came here. I especially admired their way with words and how they expressed themselves. They helped me feel seen and valued. It took me five years to recover from depression and finally come to the United States. For a long time, I felt inferior because my journey took longer than others'. But now I believe it was all meant to be—because it led me to meet someone I'll cherish for a lifetime.

I am deeply grateful to the Watanabe Scholarship not only for the financial support but also for the Virtual Program. The Young Professionals Panel was especially impactful—it allowed me to hear from alumni and gain real insight into life after studying abroad. It inspired me to stay motivated and keep aiming high. My study abroad experience became an irreplaceable part of my life. I've grown so much academically, emotionally, and personally. I now believe that even when the path is uncertain or longer than expected, it can still lead to something beautiful.



**Jeremy Giles**

*Kwansei Gakuin University (Exchange Program)*

Before taking my first Japanese class, I never thought I would learn a second language. Being raised in the United States, I was only occasionally exposed to any language other than English, namely Spanish. I learned Spanish briefly in high school, but that was only due to the requirements of a second language from my school curriculum. Once I decided that I would be studying Game Design and Development in college, I started to evaluate the value of understanding Japanese, as a large sector of global game development is located in Japan. I chose to take the Introduction to Japanese course at my university, with no intention of actually learning more than the basics. However, after taking the time to learn the basics of the language, I became enthralled with the Japanese language and culture. I continued to take more advanced classes, but I started to reach the limits of what can be learned in a classroom.

Now, as I return home in less than 2 weeks, I have realized that not only did my study abroad experience provide the aforementioned benefits, it also gave me the opportunity to become friends with people who I never would have met otherwise. By living with a host family, I have become very close to my host parents, who have supported me throughout my entire experience. By attending events and stepping outside of my comfort zone, I have made many friends from all over the world. In addition to the many Japanese friends I have made, my closest friends are from Germany, Latvia, Sweden, and Taiwan, all countries that I have never had the chance to visit. Before my study abroad, due to a combination of worry and lack of interest in leaving the US, I never would have visited any of these places. Now, I can't wait to get the opportunity to visit my new friends in their home countries.

When I return to my home university in August, I am taking multiple steps to share my experiences and acquired knowledge with other students. Firstly, I have accepted a job offer to become a Japanese Language Tutor for my university. With this part-time job, I will be able to assist students with their classes, while also providing them with the resources and methods that I learned in Japan. Additionally, I will also be starting a Japanese Conversation Club, of which I will be the President. Through this club, I hope to fill the missing gap that I experienced during my studies, which was not having a supportive space to build up my confidence and speed when speaking Japanese. Since the university courses are purely focused on grammar, vocabulary, and kanji, speaking and listening tends to be neglected. Once I arrived in Japan, I found that I was terrified of not being able to understand people when they speak to me, and that I didn't know how to respond in a natural way. However, after practicing (and making mistakes) often, I slowly became more confident when speaking Japanese. By establishing a club that pushes others out of their comfort zone, and encourages people to make mistakes, I hope to make the process easier for future study abroad students. Finally, I will also be collaborating with my university's study abroad office to act as an advisor for future study abroad students. I hope that I can help resolve any anxieties or questions that they may have, before they depart. Having experienced the best parts of studying abroad, as well as making quite a few mistakes, I believe that passing that knowledge and advice on to the next generation is very important.



**Gota Akagari**

*University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (Degree-seeking)*

Studying in the United States as a Watanabe Scholar has been a life-changing experience that shaped my academic and professional goals. My time at Lake Forest College gave me new passions through studying Urban Studies and broadened my perspective both inside and outside the classroom through collaboration with other students from all over the world. This diverse learning environment encouraged me to grow not just as an international student, but as a well-rounded global individual. Through hands-on learning in Chicago, participation in cultural events, and valuable insights from the Watanabe Scholars Virtual Program, I gained practical knowledge and a clear vision to pursue a career that supports global communities. My academic journey in the U.S. as a Watanabe Scholar has significantly contributed to my development and shaped my aspirations for lifelong learning.

My experience in the United States impacted my academic pursuits and long-term career objectives through my engagement with Urban Studies. Two semesters ago, I began studying Urban Studies in earnest. This deepened my passion for contributing to community development through organizations such as NGOs in the future. One of the most influential aspects of my learning was taking courses on the history of urban development and environmentally sustainable land use. These classes were not limited to theoretical learning; I had the invaluable opportunity to visit active construction and redevelopment sites in downtown Chicago. These site visits included interviews with professionals working at companies involved in such urban projects. This gave me practical insights that I could never have acquired through textbooks alone. It also allowed me to understand the complexities and challenges of modern urban development. These experiences helped me realize that I want to further explore urban development by studying public policy. While the past year has given me a foundation in urban planning from the perspective of private enterprise, I now hope to learn how government institutions and public-sector strategies can contribute to sustainable and inclusive city-building. I plan to focus my studies on how public policy can shape better urban environments in ways that support environmental justice, social equity, and community well-being.

Additionally, I would like to sincerely thank Mr. Watanabe for his generous support of my study abroad. Thanks to his contribution, I was able to pursue my studies in the United States, grow academically and personally, and connect with inspiring friends, professors, and professionals from around the world. This experience has opened up new possibilities for my future and given me the confidence to pursue my goals. I am truly grateful for the opportunities I have received through the Watanabe Scholarship and will always carry the lessons I have learned with me.



**Haruka Abe**

*University of Washington (Exchange Program)*

Studying abroad has been nothing short of a life-changing experience for me. I have always dreamed of experiencing a different culture and academic environment, and thanks to the Watanabe Scholarship, that dream came true in the United States. On a personal level, this experience gave me the opportunity to reflect on my privileges, values, and fears. Growing up, my family faced financial challenges. There were a lot of times when we relied on social support, such as living in a mother-child shelter or receiving meals from foster families. These experiences made me deeply aware of the importance of education and human connection. However, I never imagined that one day, I would be able to study abroad, learning about social justice and human rights in an entirely different country.

Participating in the Watanabe Scholars Virtual Program was a meaningful part of my study abroad journey. The three-part program allowed me to connect with other Japanese students studying in the U.S., which made me realize that I was not alone in facing the challenges and excitement of studying abroad, such as language and cultural barriers. Through the sessions, I reflected on my growth and shared experiences with other scholars. It was comforting and inspiring to hear from others who were going through similar struggles, whether it was adjusting to life abroad, communicating in English. The program also reminded me of the responsibility I have as a Watanabe Scholar, not only to learn for myself but to share those experiences with others and contribute to building mutual understanding between Japan and the U.S.

This past year has made me more grateful and reflective than ever before. I realized how many invisible supports made my journey possible, scholarships like Watanabe, my mother's care, and the countless people who helped me along the way. I also recognized the power of education to change not only my circumstances but also how I see the world. Whether through late night study sessions or volunteer work, I have grown more resilient, curious, and socially conscious. This year, I will be entering my final year at Aoyama Gakuin University. Until then, I plan to focus on job hunting while continuing to immerse myself in reading. My time abroad reminded me how books, whether academic or personal, can be tools for understanding others, solving problems, and expressing ourselves. I hope to deepen that habit as I prepare for the next chapter of my life.



**Haruna Nakamura**  
*Drake University (Exchange Program)*

Academically, my English improved significantly. I made it a personal goal to present in every class session and give speeches in front of large audiences, even when I was nervous. These efforts helped me gain confidence not only in my language skills but also in my voice. I learned how to organize ideas quickly, read the room, and express myself clearly—even if I didn't always find the perfect words. More importantly, I discovered both my strengths and weaknesses. One of my greatest strengths is a strong will to keep improving, no matter how many times I fall. Even as the only Japanese student in most of my classes, I actively sought out opportunities to connect with American students. There were moments I felt isolated in group conversations due to language or cultural gaps, but I never gave up. I stayed true to myself and tried to expand conversations from my unique perspective.

Before my exchange, I had a deep insecurity related to my chronic condition, spina bifida. I used to hide that part of me. But in the U.S., I found a culture that embraces self-expression and diversity. I began to see my condition not as a weakness, but as a part of my identity. Participating in the TOMODACHI Story Jam helped me accept and vocalize my experience. Sharing my story in English—and hearing the stories of others—was eye-opening. It reminded me that there are allies all over the world, and that when we speak up, we give others the courage to do the same. In a Multicultural Communication class, I created a humorous presentation about the cultural differences between Kansai and Kanto. My classmates enjoyed it so much that I received the highest score in the class. This experience taught me how powerful it is to celebrate our uniqueness, and that being different can be our greatest strength.

Studying in the U.S. exposed me to diverse values and global perspectives. I learned how to lead group projects, present in front of large audiences, and contribute actively in discussions. American students seemed eager and enthusiastic in class, which made me enjoy learning even more. Since I was one of only two Japanese students on campus, I spent most of my time with local friends. While cultural and value differences made me feel lonely at times, I adapted and learned how to build friendships across cultures. Many of these friendships remain strong, and we still talk regularly even after I returned to Japan.

Being a Watanabe Scholar was more than financial support—it was the catalyst that helped me find strength in my identity and purpose in my journey. This experience taught me that my differences, including my disability, are not limitations but sources of connection and power. Through every challenge and every achievement, I discovered my ability to lead, to adapt, and to inspire others by being true to myself. I now carry a strong desire to work in international exchange and help build a more inclusive, understanding world. To me, being a Watanabe Scholar means believing in your voice, embracing who you are, and using your story to bridge cultures. I am proud to be part of that legacy—and I will carry it with me into everything I do.



**Hitomi Nakamura**

*Mount Holyoke College (Degree-seeking)*

In my college, there is a system called alumni pairing, where international students can have an alum as someone to take care of them while being in the US. Students and alums get paired based on information such as the student's interests and the alum's occupation or hobbies. Fortunately, I have gotten one of the best alumni as my pair, and they have helped me so much when I was struggling with my roommate or the language barriers.

I realized that studying abroad would not lead me to a clear path but makes me even more lost by expanding my perspective. I had been interested in bioethics since before the fall semester began, and one of my goals for this study abroad was to deepen my knowledge of bioethics. Therefore, I took one class each in the fall and spring related to bioethics, and I learned something completely different from what I had imagined from both classes.

I took "Reproductive Rights and Justice" in fall as I was interested in prenatal testing and abortion from the disability right perspective. However, what the class reminded me of was how ignorant I was about abortion and the terrible state of abortion laws in Japan. When I was in Japan, I attended a very conservative, Christian school. Because of this, I had naturally internalized pro-life values. It took watching documentary-style videos and reading many articles on abortion to realize how much a woman's independence is threatened when their choice to have an abortion is restricted by law. What I learned in this class was so unexpected and surprising that I now want to study more about reproductive rights. In April this year, I attended a conference on reproductive rights. I was particularly impressed by the session on reproductive rights of sex workers. In Japan, sex work is treated as something to be hidden, and the rights of people who do sex work for a living are rarely discussed. That is why I was shocked to see sex workers openly come out in front of the audience and tell their stories. I would love to keep learning about reproductive rights and justice during the other three years at Mount Holyoke College.

I think one of the best things about liberal arts college is that they give us time to dive into the world filled with unexpected events and get lost with peers. Comparing myself a year ago to where I am now, I can see that there has been a huge change in my thinking. However, I feel as if all the ideas I have had regarding the disability movement and bioethics that I have been interested in have fallen apart and I have to start building them all over again from scratch. To be honest, I am full of anxiety. But it is also true that I love my university and am very much looking forward to studying in that environment for the next three years. I am sure I will have many more worries, but I will try to believe in myself.



**Jaylin Liggins**  
*Aoyama Gakuin University (Exchange Program)*

Overall, my study abroad experience in Japan was very transformative. It would be hard to choose one experience to focus on because so many of them have had a great impact on my growth, not just with my ability to comprehend Japanese, but as a future leader too. With that being said, I don't know where to start with my journey because there were many beginnings and ends, moments of doubt and confidence, periods of loneliness and community that I can draw from.

Before going to Japan, I made a bingo board full of things I wanted to do while I was studying abroad so there were events I expected to do, but in the best way possible, life doesn't always go as planned. One of the moments that stood out to me was when I wanted to check off seeing the Japanese countryside off my bingo board and I decided randomly one day after getting notified that my class was canceled to visit Lake Ashinoko. It's a beautiful lake that is surrounded by mountains in the Japanese countryside of Hakone.

Most of the trip was pleasant bus rides up and down a mountain of beautiful trees that had leaves of golden, crimson, and verdant hues. The bus passed hot spring towns and rivers on the way up the mountain which was expected given Japan's natural reserves of hot springs, but what I didn't expect was the smell. Once the bus rode closer to the peak of the mountain the bus began to smell of eggs. The closer the bus approached the stronger the smell, but it all made sense at the summit. It was the place I wanted to go to before studying abroad in Japan, but I didn't think I was going to be able to see it because it was too far away from where I lived. It was the place where people could try charcoal eggs that were made black by the sulfur inside the mountain. From the summit I could see Mt. Fuji too, it was wonderful. So wonderful in fact that it inspired the location of the short story I was writing while studying abroad and am now editing for publication. This was only one fun unexpected detour in a country full of them.

For winter break, I traveled to Hokkaido and explored the region. I spent Christmas Eve and Christmas there. If Tokyo is a titan of industry then Hokkaido is a small rural snowglobe. Excusing the bad metaphor, I think Hokkaido is a very charming place connected by convenient underground tunnel systems. I stayed at a capsule hotel in Sapporo and tried Mos Burger for the 1st time. I went to the National Ainu Museum and really enjoyed catching the small local train lines to different areas. Later in my trip, I went to an aquarium in a neighboring town called Otaru, and the bus ride there really put into perspective how little it snows in Maryland. I think Hokkaido was by far my favorite prefecture in Japan.

Without a doubt, this experience has made me want to pursue learning other languages as well so that is why I decided to start learning Spanish during my senior year of college. Afterwards, I want to spend time traveling in Spanish-speaking countries like Spain to interact with the culture and learn more.



**Jillian Fitzgerald**

*Temple University, Japan Campus (Degree-seeking)*

The flight from Florida to Tokyo is about sixteen hours. A distance so far feels like you're entering a whole new world. The people are different, the food is different, the culture is different, everything feels new and exciting. It was a big leap to take, but I'm glad I did it. Having an opportunity to study abroad has been one of the most eye-opening experiences of my life. I would do it all over again if I could!

Honestly, it took a while to adjust to my new life in Tokyo. The biggest tribulation I had was trying to balance my schoolwork and brand-new social life on top of the shock of trying to assimilate into a new culture. When the fall semester first started, I tried to involve myself in school as much as I possibly could. I went to school events, joined clubs, and talked to people in my classes. Nonetheless, the process of making friends was still quite slow. I found myself stuck in a cycle of talking to people once, exchanging socials, and then never speaking again. Starting from scratch taught me how much I needed to get out of my comfort zone to grow as a person. Once I started to take the initiative and text people to hang out first, I started to build stronger connections in my life. Slowly but surely, I formed my own support group. Throughout my time in Japan, I've been able to travel and explore with new friends, which made things a little less lonely!

During winter break, I travelled to Takasaki with one of my friends and we decided to participate in a daruma making workshop at Daimonya. Throughout the workshop, we learned all about daruma and their symbolism of resilience and good luck. I decided to buy a golden daruma with my name inscribed on it, whose golden color was supposed to be extra lucky for passing exams. When I got home, I decided I was going to retake the class now that I had additional luck to help me out. I signed up for the course again with a different professor and drew in the daruma's left eye with the goal of passing the class with at least a B. When the spring semester started, I spent at least three to four hours a day studying for my math class alone. After countless hours of notes, homework, and practice problems, I can proudly admit that I passed the class with an A+, one of the highest scores in the class. The joy I felt while drawing in my daruma's right eye was immeasurable!

Studying abroad has been a life-changing experience. It has taught me resilience as well as being content with discomfort. The things we want don't come at an easy price, but rather we must put in active effort to inch towards our goals. Slow and steady wins the race! I've learned that such advice applies to all aspects of life, not simply academic or career-wise. I'm glad that I can reflect back on my experience and say that I've become a better person. While abroad, I've become a lot more outgoing and friendly. It may have been out of necessity, but I'm glad to have changed, nonetheless. Moreover, being a Watanabe scholar has meant everything to me. Without this scholarship, I would never have been able to even step foot in Japan, let alone experience a whole new world the way I did. Looking back, I know this journey has not only expanded my horizons but also given me the courage and gratitude to keep striving for a future without limits.



**Jonah Nguyen-Conyers**  
*Temple University Japan Campus (Degree-seeking)*

Studying in Japan has been one of the most valuable experiences of my life. I'm not just here as an exchange student—I am pursuing my full undergraduate degree in International Business at Temple University Japan Campus (TUJ). This decision has completely reshaped my academic, professional, and personal path. Being in Japan has allowed me to grow in ways that would have been impossible otherwise.

Through TUJ, I've had the chance to immerse myself in Japan beyond the classroom. The process of adjusting to daily life—navigating a new city, managing finances, balancing work and study—has been a learning experience in itself. From studying Japanese to securing a part-time job, every step has helped me lay down roots and create a sustainable life here. One year into my time in Japan, I already feel a deep connection to this place. I plan to stay for at least two more years to finish my degree, and possibly beyond.

One of the most significant areas of growth I've experienced is in my professional development. Before coming to Japan, I hadn't spent much time seriously thinking about my long-term career. I was mostly focused on academics and saving money. However, the Watanabe Scholarship opened new doors for me. With the financial support it provided, I was able to attend conferences and networking events that introduced me to professionals across industries— particularly in the finance and international business sectors.

Living abroad also gave me a broader perspective on what's possible for my future. Being surrounded by ambitious, globally-minded classmates at TUJ has pushed me to dream bigger. My peers and I regularly have conversations about our career goals, aspirations in Japan, and where we see ourselves after graduation. These everyday conversations have helped shape my own thinking. I've started to envision a career where I contribute to strengthening U.S.-Japan relations—through business, policy, or education.

Ultimately, the Watanabe Scholarship didn't just help me afford school—it changed my life trajectory. It gave me the confidence, space, and support to take control of my future. It helped me move from surviving to thriving, from wondering to planning. I still face challenges, of course, but I now face them with tools and support I didn't have before.



**Kairi Mano**  
*Rice University (Degree-seeking)*

I would like to begin by thanking the U.S. Japan Council and The Toshizo Watanabe Study Abroad Scholarship Program in supporting me in my study abroad this school year. It has meant a lot to be free of some financial burden and the stresses that it comes with. Being able to pursue my academic and professional passions carefree was extremely fulfilling, and helped me land both a dream job and scholarship from the university for the coming semester. As for my future plans, due to complications with my student visa and CPT work authorization for some of the opportunities I have been getting professionally, I had to switch my main course of study from Sports Medicine to Sports Management, which I will continue to pursue into next year along with my minors in Statistics and Data Science. I also plan to continue work with the MLB into the beginning of next semester.

This scholarship term was a very important one in my career, as through this school year abroad, I was able to cement my dreams and career goals, as well as build a strong foundation for the start of my career. Initially, vaguely knowing that I wanted to work in the sports industry, I did not have a clear path or area of work in sports that I wanted to pursue. However, this year working as a photographer and videographer for my university's athletics department has really cemented my love for these two creative mediums, and my passion for storytelling through a visual format. I was able to further pursue this through an internship I successfully achieved with the MLB, where I have been working since March as a photographer and videographer, capturing and documenting the stories of various athletes and teams throughout the MLB for use in social media.

Academically, it has also been a gratifying semester, continuing to pursue my minor in Data Science and Statistics has been a fulfilling experience with many challenging but rewarding courses that nourish me with knowledge that intrigues me. Getting access to one-of-a-kind resources, especially for Data Science projects, has been amazing and another reason why this study abroad opportunity has been very special for me.

Overall, this Study Abroad experience has not only provided me with the opportunity to experience a drastically different culture from the one I grew up in and was accustomed to, it has also provided me with one-of-a-kind experiences that were unique to this country (working for the MLB). It allowed me to discover my passions and set my sights on a career goal that I can work towards over the remaining 2 years of my university life.



**Katherine Padilla**

*Waseda University (Exchange Program)*

Coming to Japan in September, the weather was still sweltering and I had no clue what to expect from studying abroad in Japan other than taking some Japanese classes and hoping for classes that would apply to my major. I was worried I wouldn't be able to make any friends, not just Japanese friends, but friends in general since I knew I was entering the highly diverse campus of Waseda University. Thankfully, in the few weeks before school officially started in October, I was able to make a few close friends who were also from different parts of California. Through one of those close friends who I still keep in touch with, she introduced me to a hobby called "Cafe Meguri" or roughly translated into English, "Cafe Hopping."

Studying abroad has given me the opportunity to find out who I am with confidence and to figure out the types of people I like to be around, those who make me feel safe, loved, appreciated, and even those who make me realize my life values and morals in good and bad ways. To all the people I've been lucky enough to meet, I am so grateful for being able to connect with people from all over the world through studying abroad in Japan. Now, I can see myself traveling to Europe or other parts of Asia not just for leisure, but to catch up with a lifelong friend in their home country. Looking back on when I first came to Tokyo, I find it interesting how I integrated my daily life with my school life. I find myself studying at cafes more than libraries, unlike back home. Another thing I found funny is how I came to understand the complaints of Japanese people who live in Tokyo and having to deal with tourists. After using Shibuya station and Shinjuku station so often, I understand the annoyance.

If I were to give any other advice to future scholarship recipients, one would be to step outside of your comfort zone and say yes to potential fun travel plans, but also be realistic. Study abroad still includes studying, but that doesn't mean it is all study or all play. I think finding a balance between the two is most important in acclimating to a new environment. My way of adapting was finding a hobby, which was Cafe Meguri. I surprised myself a lot this year by saying yes a lot more than I usually do, and it landed me trips to Yamanashi to see Mt. Fuji, Hiroshima, and even South Korea! Through all those unexpected trips I even ended up finding myself a loving partner, something I wasn't remotely thinking about when I first came to Japan. Saying yes to a lot more travel plans than I was used to brought about surprising trips, new experiences, and even new relationships.

I am just filled with gratitude everyday I'm in Japan and I have the opportunity to afford living at a dorm in the heart of Tokyo. I am able to represent a bridge between America and Japan in a way that fosters understanding on a local level, and with the several other connections I've made in Japan with other international students, being a Watanabe scholar means having support from all around the world as long as you are brave enough to accept it.



**Kazunori Fukuhara**

*Harvard Graduate School of Education (Degree-seeking)*

Coming to the States for my Masters degree meant a lot for my academic journey. By being in Japan until high school, I've seen what education looks like here and decided to study education in the UK so that I can get newer ideas and see the innovation happening. However, the UK had limited innovation, where its education system was somewhat similar to that in Japan. I started a student society dealing with Education Technology (EdTech) in the UK, inviting individuals from industry and schools to discuss the emerging technology in the UK, but realized the market and the field was not that big in the UK. This was my struggle, where I believed in the potential of technology in education but it was something not addressable unless I leave this country. That was the time I decided to leave Japan or the UK to dive deeper into the center of technological innovation - the silicon valley. With the support from the Toshizo Watanabe Study Abroad Scholarship Program, I had the privilege to explore the latest education and technology trends. Unlike what I felt in the UK, the education-related initiatives happening at Stanford were very innovative, where every non-tech professor is also aware of the latest trends and provides valuable insights into the emerging technologies. I gained a lot of comrades who are interested in solving the education-related problems with the latest technology, where I was always alone to tackle these issues back in Japan or the UK.

When I was in the UK, I only worked on the courseworks and did not do research or any outside course activities, where I realized I was missing a lot in terms of practical experience, where things I learnt in classes were not directly applied to any work aside from internships. However, I am able to do several research and teaching roles at Stanford. One of the best things I found about Stanford that couldn't have been gained in Japan or the UK is that, if you crave, there are plenty of available opportunities. At Stanford, there is ample research happening, where if we seek for opportunities, professors try to match us with some appropriate research or project, which helps us develop a lot outside of courseworks. Out of my slight interest, I started working on a research project and then it expanded to more research and roles that I never would have expected. This kept me busy and I also learnt a lot about what it means to do research. From this experience, my future aspirations have changed a bit, where I now see myself proceeding to PhD after finishing my Masters program, where I was always more interested in the industry side. Expanding on my PhD aspiration, my immediate future plan is to apply for the PhD program in the field of Education Data Science where I want to study the capabilities of large language models in simulation student behaviors in the classroom. I plan to publish my current research to conferences and journals, where this would be my first step in the journey of becoming a researcher.



**Kenshin Noguchi**  
*DePauw University (Degree-seeking)*

Balancing a demanding course load, engaging in research, participating in extracurricular activities, and managing personal responsibilities tested my resilience, time management, and adaptability. However, it was also a year of immense growth. I was able to deepen my academic knowledge, strengthen my leadership skills, and cultivate meaningful relationships with many new peers. Despite the challenges, this year has shaped me into a more capable, confident, and determined student, and I am grateful for the support that have carried me through.

While I spent the bulk of my academic year studying, I was able to travel to California during spring break, where I met with several of my high school friends from Japan. Many of them have already visited each other throughout the years, but I was the only one who has not had the opportunity to travel back to Japan and see my longtime friends. So, during the winter of 2024, we planned to meet up in California for spring break and I had a wonderful trip spending quality time together. Whether we were playing games, making late night runs to the gas station, or throwing the football in the backyard, we enjoyed each other's presence and I felt like I made up for time I was not able to be with them for.

Participating in the Watanabe Scholars Virtual Program was a complementary experience to my academic and cultural experiences in the U.S. The program not only connected me with fellow scholars across Japan and the U.S., but also deepened my understanding of the Japanese American experiences and the vital role this community has played in shaping the U.S.-Japan relations. Learning about the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II through Densho's Stories and Matthew Weibly's lectures on the redress movement and the work that the Japanese Americans Citizens League does was especially impactful. It reminded of the importance of preserving memory, confronting injustice from the past and present, and advocating for civil rights. Currently, we can observe how leaders continue to bridge cultural divides through business, education, and public service and that has reinforced how essential these relationships, such as the USJC, is. Finally, I was inspired, but also reassured, by the Young Professional Panel, where I heard honest reflections of postgraduate transitions and the many different plans they took to get to where they are now. As a rising senior, the discussions we had have supported me in navigating my decision as to what I want to pursue after obtaining my undergraduate degree.

Being selected as a Watanabe Scholar has been an incredibly meaningful experience. The scholarship has not only supported my ability to pursue my education financially, but has also given me the confidence to engage in opportunities that have shaped who I am. To future Watanabe Scholars or anyone considering studying abroad, my biggest piece of advice to you is to stay open to discomfort, new relationships, unexpected changes, and new experiences. Studying in a different country is not always easy, but those challenges will teach you just as much as all the successes you will experience. So say yes to spontaneous trips, go to campus events, and ask questions especially when you are unsure.



**Marine Takeuchi**

*California State University, Fullerton (Degree-seeking)*

The 2024-2025 academic year has been a valuable opportunity for me to reflect on my career path. As a Watanabe Scholar, I diligently pursued my studies with a strong awareness of the learning opportunities afforded to me. While my study abroad experience was very meaningful, it was unexpected how challenging it would be to find a community that truly fit me during my time at university. Beyond academics, the area I focused on most during my student life was expanding my social circle. In the fall semester, when many new students typically come in, I actively participated in student organizations that interested me. Even if I did not have friends to join with, I would go alone and, despite my nervousness, proactively tried to have conversations with new people. However, after a while, I realized that many people, especially international students from other countries, tended to only interact with those they already knew and primarily stuck with people from their own country. While I did manage to make some wonderful friends with whom I could have fun, even overcoming language barriers, my social life at university was completely different from what I had imagined.

The study abroad experience has significantly impacted both my academic pursuits and career objectives. Academically, it has solidified my interest in cross-cultural psychology, the relationship between workplace and human behavior, and I am now considering pursuing a Master's degree in the field of Industrial and Organizational Psychology and research opportunities focused on workplace management. Professionally, my time abroad has highlighted the importance of adaptability, cultural intelligence, and global communication in any career path. I am now actively seeking internships that involve customer/client relationships, cross-cultural communication, or roles that utilize my Japanese language skills, particularly within the human resources, marketing, or consulting sectors. The exposure to different cultures has also made me more open to international career opportunities in the future.

Being a Watanabe Scholar has meant far more than just receiving financial support for my studies. It has meant being part of a distinguished community that values global understanding, cultural exchange, and academic excellence. The scholarship provided me with the freedom and confidence to fully immerse myself in my international experience without the added burden of financial stress. Furthermore, interacting with friends from various countries provided me with a deep sense of responsibility to actively contribute to global society. I am incredibly grateful for the trust and belief the Watanabe Scholarship has placed in me, and I am committed to upholding its values in my future endeavors. I plan to share my experience with others back home through several avenues. I intend to create a blog or social media series documenting my journey and offering tips and mentor incoming students who are considering international study. I plan to share the significant differences between university life in Japan and the U.S. I believe that sharing my firsthand accounts, both the success and the challenges, will provide valuable insights and inspire others to embark on their own global adventures.



**Mei Oguma**  
*University of Washington (Degree-seeking)*

My first year at the University of Washington (UW) has been nothing short of transformative. I believe I have grown both personally and academically, and I hope that this final report reflects the depth of my experiences, the challenges I have overcome, and the gratitude I feel for the opportunities I have been given.

Outside the classroom, I fully immersed myself in the pre-med community. Since I had not been able to participate in many pre-med activities during high school, I joined nearly every pre-med club on campus during autumn quarter. I earned certifications in Stop the Bleed and Adult First Aid/CPR/AED, and won second place in a Mock ER competition held by the UW Chapter of the American Medical Student Association. In winter quarter, I became more intentional with my time. I stepped up as Board Secretary, in addition to my role as Director of Marketing, for Simply Neuroscience, deepening my involvement in science communication. I also focused on the UW Surgery Interest Association (SIA), through which I gained valuable experiences, such as speaking with cardiothoracic surgeons and practicing suture techniques, that brought me closer to the clinical side of medicine. By spring quarter, I was able to secure a position on the SIA board as Media Chair, helping to lead events such as a sheep heart dissection and suturing clinic. All of these experiences not only broadened my skill set but also reaffirmed my excitement for pursuing a career in healthcare.

Over spring break, I had the privilege of shadowing at the Quincy Valley Medical Center in Quincy, Washington, through the UW Health Care Alternative Spring Break program. It was my first exposure to rural healthcare from the provider's perspective, and the experience has provided me with many invaluable insights. For a full week, I shadowed healthcare professionals from 8 AM to 5 PM across several departments, including emergency medicine, wound care, primary care, and physical therapy. Rather than being just a "fly on the wall", I was invited into active learning, which I really appreciated. They talked me through their clinical reasoning in real time, encouraged me to ask questions during patient encounters when appropriate, and even gave me the opportunity to try dry needling under supervision, which made the experience especially meaningful and engaging.

Starting in the upcoming academic year, I am excited to begin conducting research at Seattle Children's Hospital under Dr. Michael Portman, who leads one of the few research labs in the nation dedicated to Kawasaki Disease. This opportunity is especially meaningful to me, as I experienced a near-missed diagnosis of the condition in my early childhood. I look forward to contributing to a deeper understanding of its pathophysiology and supporting efforts toward improved diagnostic and treatment strategies.

I experienced steep learning curves and personal challenges, yet I overcame them through resilience and the invaluable support of my peers. I am especially grateful to Mr. Watanabe for his generosity, support, and belief in the potential of us scholars. This experience would not have been possible without the scholarship program. Thank you.



**Midori Shimabayashi**  
*Seattle Pacific University (Degree-seeking)*

The 2024-2025 academic year was full of growth, learning, and self-discovery. In this final report, I would like to reflect on my experiences as a Watanabe Scholar, the lessons I learned during my time abroad, and my future plans as a special education teacher. I am deeply grateful to the Watanabe Scholarship team for allowing me to pursue this opportunity and for helping me connect with other Japanese students studying in the United States.

Throughout the past academic year, I focused heavily on coursework related to special education. These courses helped me expand my knowledge and refine my teaching philosophy. I was able to develop close relationships with my professors and peers as well. One highlight of the year was volunteering at the Experimental Education Unit at the University of Washington, where I worked with preschool and kindergarten students in inclusive classrooms. This hands-on experience showed me how inclusion can be implemented through intentional strategies, collaborations, and communications. It deepened my belief in the importance of inclusive education and gave me concrete tools to use in my future classroom. In addition to my academic work, I worked in my university's theatre costume department, helping design and create costumes for musicals and plays.

Although I had no prior experience in theatre, this unexpected opportunity gave me a chance to express myself creatively and collaborate with students from diverse artistic backgrounds, such as theatre production, dance, and music. Their passions and creativity reminded me of the importance of staying curious and open to new experiences, even if they are outside my comfort zone. Another meaningful experience was organizing and presenting a Zoom lecture for students at Toyama University in Japan who are studying special education. I shared what I have learned in the US about inclusive practices, classroom strategies, and education systems. Preparing and delivering the presentation was very rewarding, and I learned how to structure my thoughts, speak with clarity, and tailor my message to a Japanese audience. This experience inspired me to continue sharing what I have learned with educators in Japan and to foster more interactions between professionals in both countries. Looking ahead, I hope to use social media to share my experiences and insights more broadly. I believe that accessible communication about education, especially special education and applied behavioral analysis, can help build more inclusive learning environments around the world.

My time as a Watanabe Scholar has been a turning point in my life. I've grown as a student, as a teacher-in-training, and as a person. I've had the chance to learn from mentors, challenge myself with new experiences, and begin building the future I envision. I am excited to begin student teaching this fall and take the next steps toward becoming a compassionate and skilled special education teacher. Thank you again for supporting my journey. I look forward to the day when I can give back to the community and empower others through my work and experiences.



**Miku Nagai**

*Western Carolina University (Degree-seeking)*

Receiving the Watanabe Scholarship and studying in the United States has been one of my life's most meaningful and transformative experiences. My time at Western Carolina University gave me not only the opportunity to deepen my academic and professional skills but also to explore who I am, what I care about, and how I can contribute to both Japan and the United States in the future. I graduated in May 2025 with a degree in Computer Information Systems and Finance, and I now feel more confident than ever in the goals I've set for myself.

The support I received through the Watanabe Scholarship allowed me to concentrate on my studies without overwhelming financial pressure. That freedom allowed me to reflect deeply on my identity, strengths, and next steps. I discovered a passion for language education—specifically for spreading the Japanese language and culture globally—and I am determined to combine my technical knowledge with that passion to make a meaningful impact in the field.

Being a student and a tutor at Western Carolina University gave me a unique perspective. As a Supplemental Instruction (SI) leader and Japanese tutor, I supported peers in their learning journeys, many of whom were studying Japanese for the first time. These sessions were not just about grammar or vocabulary but about building confidence, curiosity, and community. I used technology to help make the material more accessible, which taught me how creativity and empathy are essential in education.

This experience deepened my appreciation for the Japanese language and revealed the many challenges that learners face, especially when studying a language different from their own. It also gave me hands-on teaching experience that will directly support my academic and professional goals. More importantly, it showed me how rewarding it can be to guide and encourage others, especially when they feel unsure or overwhelmed.

Living in the U.S. brought many opportunities for cultural discovery, but it also came with challenges that helped me grow as a person. One of the most complex parts was adjusting to a different communication style. In Japan, people often value silence and indirect communication, but in the U.S., students are expected to speak up, share opinions, and express themselves clearly. At first, I found this intimidating. I hesitated to raise my hand in class or join group conversations, afraid that my English wasn't good enough or that I would say something wrong.

Participating in the Watanabe Scholars Virtual Program helped me reflect on the broader meaning of being a scholar and cultural ambassador. Through the three-part program, I connected with fellow scholars, learned about their unique experiences, and considered how to represent Japan respectfully and authentically. The program reminded me that we're part of a much larger effort to build understanding between Japan and the U.S. and that we each play a small but meaningful role in strengthening that relationship.



**Minami Shiiba**

*Cascadia College (Exchange Program)*

When I first arrived in the U.S., I realized how little I actually understood. I couldn't follow casual conversations between native speakers, couldn't respond in full sentences, and even struggled to understand road signs. In my first few college classes, I sat silently, unable to join in discussions. While others spoke quickly and confidently, I couldn't catch what was being said, let alone contribute. I felt like I had suddenly lost all the English I had learned in Japan. Back in my home country, being able to use English had always felt like an advantage. But here, I quickly realized it was just the bare minimum. I wasn't ahead—I was simply at the starting line. That reality hit me hard. I began to feel discouraged and isolated. I questioned whether I was even capable of surviving this environment. But I also knew I hadn't come all this way just to give up.

As I became more confident in using English, I started looking for ways to challenge myself outside of the classroom. One such opportunity came during winter break. During winter break, I had the opportunity to attend the VISION Conference—a four-day event that brought together about 1,000 international students and the people who support them from all across the United States. The conference was hosted by a Christian organization, so many of the workshops and discussions focused on spirituality, faith, and personal reflection. Even though I'm not Christian, I found the experience incredibly meaningful and thought-provoking. What stood out to me the most was the diversity of people I met. Some participants knew a lot about Japan, while others had never met a Japanese person before.

Talking to people who were already familiar with Japanese culture helped me discover positive aspects of my own country that I had never noticed. But honestly, the most eye-opening moments came from conversations with people who knew nothing about Japan. For example, when I introduced myself and said that Japanese is my first language, someone asked, "Do your parents also speak Japanese?" At first, I was surprised. Of course they do—I'm Japanese. But then I realized that this reaction came from my perspective as someone raised in a very homogenous society. In many cultures, having a different first language from your parents is normal. That simple question made me realize how often I assume my own experience is "normal," when in fact, it's just one version of normal. This small but powerful moment reminded me to stay open—to different backgrounds, different ways of thinking, and different definitions of what's "usual." It was one of the most valuable lessons I've learned so far.

None of these experiences would have been possible without the support of the Watanabe Scholarship Foundation. Thanks to this scholarship, I was able to step into a completely new environment, face challenges I had never imagined, and grow in ways I never expected. I am truly grateful for the opportunity to learn—not just academically, but as a person—through this journey.



**Miyako Semba-Norwalk**  
*Nanzan University (Exchange Program)*

Starting in September of 2024, I began the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity studying abroad in Japan. This was something I had been aiming for since I was a child, so I was well-researched and fairly well prepared heading into it. The arrival was smooth and I was able to get settled into the academics right away, but the social side, however, posed a bit more of a challenge. I arrived in Japan knowing no one, and after the first day or two after arriving, I remember being afraid that this experience would just be a lot of time by myself while seeing others have the time of their lives together on social media. However, I made a promise to myself not to let fear dictate my experience. I pushed myself to stay outside of my dorm room as much as possible, to not be afraid to start conversations, and to say “yes” to every invitation. That mindset changed everything. I built a community of friends who I had unforgettable adventures with and proved to myself that I have the ability to make Japan a place I can call home.

Emotionally and socially, I’ve changed significantly. I’m far more comfortable now with meeting new people and putting myself in unfamiliar situations. Before studying abroad, I would hesitate to go out alone or join a group of people I didn’t know very well. Now, I actively seek out new experiences and enjoy the thrill of discovering new places and building new friendships. I’ve become more adventurous and learned to trust myself more. I also learned to appreciate solitude—not as loneliness, but as a privilege of time to work on myself in my personal goals. I would be lying if I said it wasn’t difficult, as I often have a fear of missing out. It took self-reflection and patience, but now as I interact with people and spend time with myself, I can feel the results. Because of this study abroad, I am so much more lively in conversation, more secure in who I am, and more set on my goals.

Professionally, I am considering opportunities that would allow me to work in Japan, whether through international companies, language exchange programs, or even graduate studies. One program I am particularly interested in is the JET program. My mother is a high-school Japanese teacher, and many of her students have participated in the program and have recommended the experience. Although I have not officially decided exactly what I want to do after my senior year of college, the confidence I gained through this study abroad has opened up possibilities I once felt too uncertain to pursue. I now know that I can live abroad, build a supportive community from scratch, and maintain meaningful connections with people from a variety of backgrounds. It is a huge advantage in any global career path, and it’s one I’m eager to build upon.

Studying abroad changed me in more ways than I can count. It reconnected me with my heritage, expanded my worldview, deepened my academic and professional aspirations, and gave me the tools to be more confident and more open. It reminded me that even when something is scary, it can also be exactly what you need to grow. I will always be grateful for this experience and wouldn’t have been able to have it were it not for the Watanabe Scholarship. I am endlessly thankful, and I hope that many more students like me get the chance to create their own stories abroad, full of adventure, friendship, and self-discovery.



**Monako Nozue**

*University of North Carolina at Charlotte (Exchange Program)*

My dream is to develop the private aerospace industry and create a society where everyone can travel to space with ease. To achieve this, I believe that it is necessary to become a global talent who is well-versed in both engineering and business, equipped with the knowledge to work across various industries and capable of generating great demand in society. With this vision, I decided to study abroad.

I chose the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNCC) in the United States as my study destination. My reason for selecting this university was that I was inspired by innovators like Elon Musk and Steve Jobs, who created new value for society and I thought that American education and culture might hold some of the keys to their success. UNCC is known for its strong engineering program, and since Charlotte is a business town with many industry-academia-government collaboration programs, I believed it was the ideal place for me to study.

Throughout my classes in the U.S., I was most impressed by the emphasis on “output.” Presentations and reports were highly structured, and class discussions were central to the learning process. Thinking independently, expressing opinions, and receiving feedback provided valuable opportunities to deepen my understanding.

Through this study abroad experience, I directly encountered engineering and business in the U.S., and I am now deepening my knowledge in both fields to prepare for my future in the space industry. In engineering, I am currently a senior conducting my graduation research using the "NanoTerasu" synchrotron radiation facility at Tohoku University to analyze materials at the nano level. My goal is to find materials that can be used more cost-effectively and durably in space environments. I also continue PR activities for the Mars rover project I joined in my sophomore year. I promote regional development through space by engaging local media and rotary clubs, and I aim to connect with international teams and companies to co-host events and fundraise, utilizing my study abroad experience.

Finally, I really appreciate the many valuable opportunities I got through this scholarship. I will continue to value the connections I made through the Watanabe Scholarship, including those with the USJC community and fellow scholars. By attending alumni events, I hope to contribute to strengthening U.S.-Japan relations.



**Nikki Khong**  
*Tohoku University (Exchange Program)*

When I first landed in Japan one year ago, it was terrifying, exciting, and everything in between. But after a year, I can firmly say that it's become a place I consider home. This year I have learned more about myself, both personally and academically, more than I ever imagined I would. As someone who had never lived abroad before, let alone lived by myself, this year taught me to be independent. It taught me to be flexible, to be open-minded, to be daring, to be humble, and more than anything, to be curious.

This year has truly shown me how much bigger the world is beyond my hometown back in the United States. I also never expected how much I would enjoy building friendships with people from completely different backgrounds. Some of my closest friends this year were people I would have never crossed paths with if I had stayed home. While a year ago I never imagined I was capable of living abroad, I now feel excited about all the possibilities the world has to offer. There are so many opportunities to explore, learn, and grow, both personally, culturally, and academically. I am now much more open to a future where I take on more opportunities abroad.

Academically, I feel incredibly fortunate to have spent my year at Tohoku University, where I was able to work on biochemistry research for metabolism in cancer cells under some of the leading experts in the nutritional biochemistry field. This experience not only deepened my scientific knowledge, but also helped me build real-world lab skills that will be essential for my future. I learned how to navigate experimental design, troubleshoot unexpected results, and present research findings in a clear and confident way. I also experienced what it's like to be a researcher in an international environment. Coming from the United States, I was nervous at first about whether I could keep up or contribute meaningfully in a research setting where there were language barriers and cultural differences. But I quickly learned that science is truly a global language. Through teamwork and patience, I was able to collaborate with other scientists and gain insight into how research happens across cultures.

Being a Watanabe Scholar this year has been one of the best experiences of my life. Having the chance to study and live in Japan gave me the opportunity to meet so many amazing people, see incredible places, and learn both academically and personally. I've grown in scientific knowledge, confidence, and curiosity about the world. The richness of this year has taught me so much about myself and what I'm capable of. I am forever grateful to the Watanabe Foundation and USJC for making this incredible year possible. I hope that future scholars take full advantage of this opportunity, because it is truly a life-changing experience that leaves you with lifelong memories, skills, and friendships.



**Reycajen Magbulos**  
*Aoyama Gakuin University (Exchange Program)*

During the Spring 2025 semester, I had a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to study abroad at Aoyama Gakuin University (AGU) in Shibuya, Tokyo. These past couple of months have been a pivotal part of shaping my personal, academic, and career experiences and goals.

Studying abroad greatly contributed to my personal growth by allowing me to improve my cross-cultural communication skills. In my dorm, I have been part of an amazing community with Japanese and other international students. We've shared about our own cultures while also learning about each other's cultures through discussions about our cultural similarities and differences, food, and music. AT AGU, I have been able to become friends with Japanese and international students through my classes and school events like the Meet Up Cafe. We often hang out, travel, and have lunch together. Being able to meet and make friends with people from various parts of Japan and around the world has expanded my global perspective and made me more appreciative of Japanese culture and my own culture as a Filipino-American. Most recently, I was invited to be an alumni speaker at the Japan International Cooperation Center's (JICE) reunion party to represent the TOMODACHI Kakehashi Program and spoke about my experience in Japan as a Watanabe Scholar to professionals and alumni from Europe, Asia, and North America.

Furthermore, I became more independent, resilient, and confident by stepping out of my comfort zone and prioritizing my physical and mental health. This was the first time since I started college where I didn't work to pay for my educational expenses or financially support my family, which was such a privilege to experience. I had a lot more free time than I did back home so I started taking solo trips to different parts of Tokyo, and trying new restaurants and cafes where I could practice speaking Japanese. I also had more time to rest and reflect which helped me process new experiences and feelings better, learn more about myself, and become more confident.

Mahalo nui loa to the U.S.-Japan Council, Mr. Toshizo Watanabe, and Toshizo Watanabe Study Abroad Scholarship Team for this life-changing study abroad experience. It has been an honor being a Watanabe Scholar and I hope to continue being a global citizen who acts as a bridge between the U.S. and Japan.



**Rina Matsuo**

*University of California, San Diego (Degree-Seeking)*

During my time as a Watanabe Scholar, I had the extraordinary opportunity to spend several years studying abroad at the University of California, San Diego. This experience has profoundly shaped my academic interests, professional aspirations, and personal growth in ways I could never have fully anticipated when I first arrived. In this report, I would like to share a detailed reflection on my studies, the unexpected challenges and meaningful discoveries I encountered, my evolving plans for the near future, and the lasting impact this journey has had on who I am today.

I am especially grateful for the opportunity to intern at Bristol Myers Squibb, one of the world's leading pharmaceutical companies. Working within such a dynamic and innovative environment has allowed me to see firsthand how industrial approaches to research and development can be more time-efficient and resource-stable compared to academia. This internship has also given me a clearer vision of my long-term goal of founding my own biopharmaceutical or bioengineering company in the future. Since mid-June, I have been involved in research exploring how specific genes influence the mitochondrial apoptosis pathway. My work has included a variety of experimental techniques, such as transient and stable transfection, protein purification using gravity columns and affinity chromatography, and advanced analysis methods including Western blotting, flow cytometry, and biolayer interferometry. I have found this area of protein synthesis and cellular analysis deeply engaging, and I am currently preparing both a poster session and a final research report, which will be my second official scientific presentation to a professional audience. I am genuinely excited about the opportunity to share my findings and gain feedback that will further strengthen my skills as a researcher.

Looking back, I can say with complete honesty that I have changed dramatically over the course of these three years. This period has been the most significant and formative chapter of my life so far, and I am proud of the progress I have made. There were moments when I felt overwhelmed, discouraged, or isolated, but the support and encouragement of the people around me helped me continue moving forward and ultimately become the person I hoped to be.

Being a Watanabe Scholar has been a profound and life-changing experience. The virtual program and leadership development sessions introduced me to passionate, inspiring students whose accomplishments and determination motivated me to keep growing. Listening to their stories about why they chose to study abroad, what they have achieved so far, and how they envision their futures gave me new perspectives and renewed energy. I feel fortunate and honored to have been selected for this scholarship and to have had the chance to learn from so many exceptional peers.



**Rinna Shingaki**

*State University of New York at Geneseo (Degree-seeking)*

At the beginning of my life in the U.S., everything was a bit of a struggle, but over two years, I gradually built up a place where I felt belonged. This year, in particular, was when I was able to reduce the burden of my part-time job and focus more seriously on my academics. As a result, I was able to achieve a 4.0 GPA in both the fall and spring semesters, and I feel confident that I was able to further my studies. In academics, I had a cycle of not only engaging in a daily routine of preparation and review but also helping my classmates to further my understanding. One of the things that I particularly enjoyed was a mock accountant project in my accounting class. In this project, I could experience the process of preparing books and submitting financial statements, assuming the work that an actual accountant would perform. It was a semester-long assignment that required us to acquire practical skills rather than just an understanding of theory, and as I worked together with my classmates, I also became aware of the importance of teamwork and leadership.

Additionally, living in a different culture and environment gave me a clear picture of what I lack and what my strengths are. Now, I feel that I have a stronger sense of responsibility than before and have naturally acquired the awareness to take advantage of even small opportunities. I have learned that when you jump into a new environment, you cannot just wait for others to accept your presence. One of the most significant benefits of my experience was the realization that new relationships and possibilities can be created only by proactively working on my own and getting deeply involved in various things.

Through this scholarship, my life took a major turn. With the financial burden lifted, I was able to focus on my academic and future career development, which in turn allowed me to find my way to the next stage of my life at the University of Wisconsin- Madison. This experience was not just a college experience in a different country, but the foundation for shaping my life.

I have gained so much through this scholarship. Above all, the fact that I was able to devote myself to my studies without worrying about finances has been a great support for me both in terms of my grades and my mental health. I was also able to open the door to the next stage of my education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison through this scholarship's help. This scholarship has certainly changed my life as I move step by step toward my dream. With gratitude in my heart, I will continue to work hard and one day be able to return this favor to someone else. Last but not least, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all those who have supported me during this past year.



**Rion Saito**  
*University of San Diego (Exchange Program)*

Attending USD, a small liberal arts school, broadened my perspective towards education. Taking classes such as entrepreneurship, marketing, and business administration gave me a sense of how communication is interconnected across different fields. The small class sizes allowed me to connect more deeply with both professors and classmates. I met several professors who became my mentors, especially Professor Thomas Herman from my journalism class. Professor Herman taught me how to write journalistically and foster a curiosity about every topic. When I lean toward the subjective side of writing, he often reminds me to “not be a cheerleader,” advising me to remain neutral and not act as a publicist. He taught the class “accuracy, accuracy, accuracy,” nothing more than being accurate is important in journalism. There were times when I felt uncertain about my path. Although I speak English fluently, the education in Japan didn’t prepare me enough for classes full of native English speakers. I felt this most in journalism and public speaking classes, where everyone else seemed to complete assignments or deliver speeches effortlessly. Meanwhile, I had to write and delete, practice repeatedly, and start over again. Professor Herman guided me through the basics of journalism; visiting his office hours once at the beginning of the semester turned into a weekly meeting, where I received everything from practical advice to casual conversations. In the moments of self-doubt, I remembered the encouragement of my two exchange student friends from China and Brazil; they always reminded me to take pride in accomplishing every small task in a foreign country. I realized that the people around me kept me motivated and understood the privilege of experiencing life in a foreign country, away from my family and friends, as I navigated the chaos with my new friends.

Being introduced to new cultures was like seeing a new part of the world; the world is so much bigger than the US and Japan. There is a strong emphasis on learning English in Japan, often said that ‘learning English can unlock the world.’ After my experience abroad, the truth is: to a certain extent. There are so many languages to learn to unlock new connections. As an exchange student in the US, we all communicate in English. But I realized that once I learn their language, there will be so many more cultures that I can unlock. This realization deepened my appreciation of what each culture brings to the table. It also reminded me to consider global contexts when conducting research regarding intercultural communication. The field of communication in Japan often focuses on the US-Japan relations, which is plausible since the US is the pioneering country for communication studies. However, I hope to research on a global scale with different cultural frameworks to understand intercultural communication.

I am grateful to have had a chance to study abroad at the University of San Diego, and I hope to continue pursuing international education in the future. I came to San Diego without knowing anything and no connections, and left with a full heart. As someone who studies communication, the people I met and the new cultures I discovered are something that I will cherish. My highlight of the exchange year is the people who helped me grow to become more than just a ‘someone.’ Once again, I would like to thank Mr. Toshizo Watanabe, the scholarship team, USJC, and most of all, all my friends and family. Life goes by, and life moves on. Here’s to the future.



**Risako Sho**

*American University (Degree-seeking)*

First of all, spending two and a half years in the U.S. was enough to convince me that physically being abroad is a crucial element of studying abroad, even though technology has enabled flexible access to academic resources like lectures and discussions from all over the world. Although you can learn a lot from online courses, living in the country and having a heart-to-heart connection with local people offers a deep understanding of the place beyond comparison.

Learning about the history and experiences of Japanese Americans at the Watanabe Scholars Virtual Program is a good example. Surrounded by the cherry blossoms gifted from Japan in Washington, D.C., and many students and professors who express interest and love for Japan, it had been hard for me at first to think about the time when there was persecution against Japanese Americans just because they had roots in “Enemy country,” reinforced by an Executive Order. But it is fascinating and encouraging to see how the patient and persevering effort towards mutual understanding enabled the U.S. and Japan to become allies, and *tomodachi*, which is a remarkable transformation from a hostile relationship decades ago.

Second, one of the key factors that shaped my experience studying abroad in the U.S. was my time as the President of my student organization. Throughout my final academic year at the American University (AU), I’ve been working hard to become a bridge between different cultures and countries, creating a new community in AU to connect people who have an origin in, interest in, and love for Japanese culture. Blessed with amazing friends who shared the same ideals as myself, I created the Japanese Cultural Exchange (JCX), a student organization with the vision of creating a community of Japanese students, Japanese American students, and everyone interested in Japanese culture to promote intercultural exchange among its members. My teammates and I chose “Exchange” as our organization’s name because we wanted to make this new community not an exclusive club based on ethnicity but one where people’s shared interests could become a gateway to cultural exchange. This vision became increasingly important as we felt the global wave of growing inwardness, discrimination, and intolerance against people with different backgrounds and beliefs, as we constantly witnessed both in the U.S. and the world. During my term as the President, I contributed to JCX becoming a flexible platform that offers interactive learning opportunities for students to experience Japanese seasonal traditions, contemporary culture, and history in depth in collaboration with various members and faculty.

Overall, the final year of my studying abroad became the most important year of my life because I was able to find pricelessly valuable things in my life such as my love and passion for Japan and connecting it to the U.S. and to the world, things I seek in my jobs, and most importantly, the wonderful friends who I couldn’t have met otherwise. I wouldn’t change those treasures of my life for anything. Thanks to my experience of studying abroad, I was able to discover who I am and how to live my life.



**Taniya Newson**

*International Christian University (Exchange Program)*

I have known about my interest in Biology and Japanese since entering high school and declared both as majors at the start of my sophomore year. Unfortunately, as the schedules for my majors conflicted in my junior and senior years, I had to prioritize one over the other. I concentrated on biology and my speaking ability deteriorated, I forgot grammar and vocabulary, and I began to feel that the effort and time I had spent studying Japanese was wasted. I started to wonder if I had lost interest in Japanese. Before coming to Japan, I considered whether I should give up on Japanese. I decided to study abroad during the last semester of my undergraduate studies since I had completed all the biology courses required for graduation in the semester before my last, it would be a good opportunity to see my host family after several years and attend a Japanese school, and truthfully, I did not want to spend another semester at my college. Leading up to my study abroad I had severe doubts about the relationship Japanese would possess in my life but through all the experiences I had in Japan, my passion for the Japanese language and culture returned to me.

I was able to study abroad at ICU using my university's study abroad program. Because there are only a few students in this program, and almost all of them are enrolled at Middlebury, students generally get to know each other through Japanese classes and other Japanese-related activities on the college campus. I hadn't studied Japanese for two years, so I didn't know anyone in the program, and I was unsure whether I could enjoy studying abroad. Contrary to my doubts, I met many wonderful people and made many friends in Japan. While there, I joined the swimming club and went scuba diving in Yokohama to get scuba-certified for a research project at Middlebury. Despite some uneasiness, I only enrolled in classes taught in Japanese, one being my first philosophy class. Although timid and apprehensive, I participated in a language tutorial program to meet with Japanese students to practice and improve my speaking. I visited temples, went out to eat and drink, played in arcades, partook in the nightlife, and had friends visit me from the US. I visited my host families in Nagoya and Gunma and was delighted to discover we still had a strong relationship despite not seeing each other for more than five years.

I was constantly surprised by the generosity and kindness shown by people I met while living in Japan. On rare occasions, I had minor worries about being a Black American in Japan before I departed, but those worries quickly dissipated. Regardless of the location, be it the city or a small rural village, I experienced friendliness and compassion. If I got lost people guided me to my destination, although I have poor Japanese speaking skills people still engaged and communicated with me in Japanese. I remember a specific scenario where I was about to get off the train and dropped my wallet causing the coins to scatter on the ground. Multiple people came to my aid and helped me collect the money, while another held the door so I wouldn't miss my stop. I encountered welcomeness and charity throughout my entire stay and strived to repay what I received. I think genuinely being willing to embrace the culture, appropriately emulating the behaviors observed, respecting the spaces and people, and exuding positivity, it is more likely that you can form lasting relationships and experience the kindness I received from those I encountered in Japan.



**Yoko Tsukamoto**

*University of Hawai'i at Manoa (Exchange Program)*

One of the most unexpected and rewarding experiences during my study abroad was taking a course on Philosophy for Children. Although I had not anticipated encountering this field during my time overseas because my major was not philosophy but history, it turned out to be one of the most impactful parts of my academic experience. The University of Hawai'i is one of the leading academic centers for Philosophy for Children. I had the unique opportunity to enroll in a class that explored its foundational theories and practices.

Philosophy for Children is an educational movement that encourages philosophical inquiry among young children and people of all ages through dialogue and collaborative thinking. It was fascinating to learn how even elementary school students can engage with deep philosophical questions when given the right tools and environment. The course emphasized respect, the value of each participant's voice, and "not being in a rush" — principles that resonated deeply with me and challenged my previous assumptions about education.

My study abroad experience not only deepened my academic understanding but also significantly broadened my worldview. Living and studying in a different cultural and institutional context allowed me to reflect critically on my home country, Japan, and identify areas that need improvement.

Many of the accomplished individuals I met, including professors and Young Professional Panelists, emphasized the importance of reflection and self-care. Their stories, combined with the support I received from my professors, family, friends, and the Watanabe scholarship team, gave me the courage to make an intentional choice for my well-being. After much thought, I decided to take a leave of absence for the upcoming semester. This will give me time to recover physically and mentally, reorganize my thoughts, and consider my goals without the pressure of immediate achievement.

Being a Watanabe Scholar has meant far more to me than financial support—it has been a transformative and empowering experience. One of the most meaningful parts was participating in the Young Professional Panel organized for scholars. These sessions offered not only a space to reflect on my future goals but also an opportunity to connect with peers from diverse backgrounds and hear from professionals active on the global stage.

Being part of the Watanabe Scholar community gave me a renewed sense of purpose and reminded me that I am not alone in navigating the challenges of pursuing a global career. This experience has left a lasting impact on both my personal growth and professional aspirations.



**Yuki Fukasawa**

*Diablo Valley College (Degree-seeking)*

When I first set foot in the U.S. as a 17-year-old Watanabe Scholar, I was filled with anticipation, hope, and a little fear. Most of my classmates were older, and everything—from the language to the culture to the school system—was new to me. Studying abroad had always been a dream, but I did not know exactly how much it would shape me—not just academically, but personally, emotionally, and even spiritually. Looking back over this past academic year, I can confidently say it has been one of the most transformative experiences of my life.

One of the classes that had the most impact on me during my study abroad was my math class. At first, I found it difficult to adjust. The academic environment, the fast-paced lectures in English, and the unfamiliar cultural norms made me feel unsure of myself. However, my math professor was incredibly kind. Even when I struggled to express myself clearly, he never made me feel embarrassed. He patiently guided me, checked in with me after class, and always encouraged me with a smile. His support gave me the confidence to keep going, even on days when I felt lost.

Feeling supported made me want to give back. I thought, “If someone helped me when I was struggling, maybe I can be that person for someone else.” That is when I decided to become a math tutor. At first, I was nervous—English is not my first language, and I didn’t know if I could really help others. But I quickly learned that tutoring is not just about having the right answers—it is about empathy, listening, and guiding others with patience. Helping students understand math and watching their confidence grow became one of the most fulfilling parts of my week. It also helped me grow as a communicator, a teacher, and a learner.

Participating in the Watanabe Scholars Virtual Program was a meaningful part of my scholarship journey. It was encouraging to realize that, even though we were in different locations and studying in different fields, we shared many of the same challenges, hopes, and dreams. One of the most memorable parts of the program was learning more about Japanese American history and identity. As someone who was born and raised in Japan, I had not deeply understood the experiences of Japanese Americans—how their lives have been shaped by both cultures, and how they continue to preserve and honor their heritage. This perspective helped me reflect more deeply on my own cultural identity and what it means to live between cultures. It also reminded me of the importance of empathy, inclusion, and shared history.

Overall, the program made me feel like I was part of a larger community. It wasn’t just a scholarship—it was a shared mission. Meeting the other Watanabe Scholars made me feel supported, inspired, and proud to be part of something bigger than myself.

# Photo Collage





