

FALL '24 STUDENT INTERVIEWS - TOKYO, JAPAN

Q: What is one thing you learned about yourself while abroad?

Isaiah: I really had to work consistently to push myself out of my comfort zone— whether that was language learning or getting to know people. I learned to be a little uncomfortable. This was exhausting, so making time for myself was important. I found it rewarding to put myself in new situations while abroad that I otherwise wouldn't feel comfortable. In hindsight, those were true moments of growth.

Leslie: My experience was about learning while being in an environment that was unfamiliar. I had to learn how to be comfortable with being the minority in Japan. In my own country, I'm the majority. I had a tendency to stick with other international students because we had a shared experience of living abroad, but I learned to become comfortable with the uncomfortable. I immersed myself in different clubs such as soccer and dance to practice my Japanese language. It was a lot of trial and error, but that made my experience super fulfilling. What I put into the experience is what I got out of it!

Q: Describe a day in your life while abroad. What did your daily routine look like?

Isaiah: On days that I had morning classes, I would get up around 7-7:30 am and head to the train at 8 am. My commute was an hour total with walking. My classes were in the business district of Tokyo. I usually ate lunch at the cafeteria on campus because it had good prices. My go-to meal was curry rice, Japanese style. It was 500 yen, about \$3.50.

If I had evening classes, I would stay on campus. There was a local cafe called Shiru that was free to Keio students and had products to take. After my evening class, I would do the same commute home and make dinner. I tried to cook Japanese food; curry was super easy and I could make it in bulk on the weekends. I'm a mushroom enthusiast and there were ten types of mushrooms in the grocery store that I couldn't find in the US. I also would make yakisoba (fried noodles) that came in a packet, so it was easy to throw in veggies and protein for a quick dinner.

In my free time, I would go on runs on a trail by the river that was near my dorm or take a walk. I also enjoyed going to the onsen (public bath) with my local friend.

Leslie: I would wake up at 6 am so that I could catch the express train that skipped stops. My commute was an hour and thirty minutes. Because of that, I would spend the whole day on campus. I often went to a cafe that was free for students which became my GFC; I made friends with the staff there too! My latest class was at 7 pm. Sometimes I had sports practice after, but if not, I would take the packed train home during rush hour. Then I would cook dinner, do school work, and go to sleep. I got into a routine and I found my own place while abroad. In my free time, I tried to be a part of the community as much as possible. So for me, that was sports or day trips with friends.

Q: What was your favorite food from your host country?

Isaiah: I went to an onsen that had a restaurant connected to it. There, I had a set meal that had a rice bowl with chicken and yuba. Yuba is the film of soy milk. It was my favorite along with ramen. You can get good ramen everywhere in Japan.

Leslie: My favorite food was tempura which is just fried food. It was my total comfort food. There was a restaurant next to my student dorm that stayed open late, so I went there often. I became close with the owners and they knew my order. I really miss the food and the people!

Photo by Isaiah Davidson



Q: What fascinated you the most about your host culture?

Isaiah: I took a class on Japanese religion at Allegheny. It was interesting to go and see the shrines and temples, and experience a different side of Japan. The spiritual and religious structures look really old and are just mashed in with the newer Tokyo infrastructure. It was a neat architectural dichotomy.

Leslie: What fascinated me most was the relationships that I formed in Japan. People have this notion that Japanese people are distant and that friendships take months to form. For me, the majority of my friends were Japanese. It was all about taking the initiative to set up a new relationship. Once I opened up the floor, a whole river of conversation followed. I found that Japanese people were super receptive to forming relationships, so I put myself out there and immersed myself in the culture.

Q: How did the academics differ from Allegheny? What about the class structure or new perspectives?

Isaiah: I had a lot more classes, eight in total, but they were two to three credits each. My language classes were one credit, but those were the most work-intensive; I enjoyed those ones the most. The workload was lighter because classes only met once a week. However, it was hard to remember things from the last class. I wasn't a huge fan of this structure. Plus the class time was an hour and a half long.

Leslie: The academics were pretty different. At Allegheny, it is easier to build close relationships with professors because the classes are smaller. At Keio, my classes were mostly lecture-based with more students and the dynamic was different. I had nine different classes in both English and Japanese. Some of the classes were centered on discussion, such as the Human Trafficking course I took.

Q: What did you wish you had packed? What did you wish you left behind?

Isaiah: I wish I could have packed my bike! I love to cycle. I was able to buy a used bike in Japan and sell it when I left. Also, more English books, because it was hard to find a good book selection. I'm not a fan of digital books. I tried to read Japanese children's books and I had to look words up. Once I developed a vocabulary bank, it was a lot easier.

I would have left behind all of my warm clothes because it was super hot and humid while I was there from mid-March to mid-July. I could have brought more breathable, light clothes.

Leslie: I wish I could have packed more snacks and comfort food. I did have dinner dates with my friends where we shared food from our respective home countries.

I would have left behind more of my clothes. I went to Tokyo with two suitcases and left with four!



"This photograph [left] captures my feelings about Japan, as this is the image I would see every day before crossing the street to attend Keio University, and it serves as a reminder of how far I have come to fulfill my dream of studying here."

-Leslie Briseño '25

"Some of my best memories are from my travels to the countryside. My girlfriend and I stayed at a ryokan (traditional style inn) far north of Tokyo. I took this picture [right] on our way to a local restaurant where we got tempura ramen and cold soba noodles."

-Isaiah Davidson '25

