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JET Program ALT in Gunma Prefecture

I first entered UC San Diego as a very uninspired, disinterested STEM major. As a member of Eleanor Roosevelt College, students were required to complete four quarters of language or a single quarter of language on top of relevant completed material from high school. Although I had taken three years of Spanish as a high school student, I wasn't terribly interested in continuing that. So, essentially, I had the opportunity to choose between embarking on a new adventure for four quarters or crossing a small requirement off the list with a single quarter of Spanish. Like many Americans my age, my childhood was filled with Japanese media like Pokemon and Yu-Gi-Oh. So, I ultimately decided that I should jump into something new with learning Japanese, something I thought was merely for fun and wouldn't have a greater impact on me in the future. In truth, it was one of the best decisions I ever made and ultimately helped me transition to majoring in political science and minoring in Japanese Studies.

I think something that really moved me about the Japanese language courses was that it was obvious that everyone wanted to be there. In the 10 series, many people are in the language courses for casual study because they like Japanese pop culture, but even then, you can feel how passionate everyone is about learning more about Japan. The environment was so welcoming and friendly that I felt I could study for the sake of enjoyment and not for achievement. I'd also like to give special shoutouts to Professor Tokuda, Professor Mochizuki, and Masaki-Sensei for being so supportive of me since I began my Japanese language journey.

Language courses aside, I also thoroughly enjoyed the range of history, political science, and literature courses offered as well. Actually, the most memorable experience for me was enrolling in the six-week UC San Diego Global Seminar program in Kyoto where I took courses on Japanese Religion and Spirituality. Studying abroad is magical for most people, but it was especially exciting to be able to put what I had learned in class into practice. It was also a huge deciding factor for me in whether to pursue the JET Program after university.

I feel as though I owe a great debt to the Japanese Studies department for helping me realize what I really wanted and then preparing me accordingly. When I first moved to Japan in 2021 as a member of the program, I couldn't believe how well I was able to navigate my new environment. Although there were definitely learning curves and new terminology I didn't know, the foundational aspects of what I was taught through the program in both language and cultural courses were wildly important in helping me settle in. While I work primarily at an elementary school and junior high school in Gunma Prefecture, I also have the privilege of working with the local prefectural government as part of a grassroots internationalization group. It has been one of the greatest joys of my life to be in a position where I am constantly engaging in community-building work, and it has also been one of the greatest achievements of my life to be able to do so while also speaking Japanese.

My message to you is to follow what brings you the most joy. If you have interest in a career related to Japan, don't be afraid to reach out to your professors. They are great resources and will be more than happy to assist you as they did for me. Don't give up on the language, even if it's overwhelming at times. That's where the real learning begins! Good luck!