

Preparing Japanese University Students for Study Abroad

日本人学生のための留学準備

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Abstract. Cultural differences can impede the ability for Japanese international students to adjust to new academic environments at overseas universities. The inability to adjust can hamper an international student's academic performance and may result in failure. Academic failure among international students increases dropout rates and lessens the external efficiency of the educational system. Although overseas institutions have a responsibility for establishing safety nets for international students, the universities in Japan also have a responsibility to prepare students adequately for the study-abroad experience. Since pre-departure orientation programs can facilitate the cultural-adjustment process for Japanese students going abroad to study, this paper will begin by discussing the inherent challenges for Japanese international students and then explain how pre-departure orientation programs can minimize the negative aspects of a prolonged cultural-adjustment period.

Keywords: Japanese international students, study abroad, cultural adjustment, lingua-culture, edu-culture

要約: 文化的な相違により、日本の留学生の海外の大学の環境への適応が妨げられる可能性がある。環境へ適切に適応できないことは、留学生の学問上の成果におけるマイナス要因となり、落第・失敗の結果に結びついてしまうこともある。学問上の成績における不首尾は、脱落率の増加に結びつき、しいては教育制度の効率性が損なわれる結果ともなる。海外の教育機関には留学生向けのセーフティネットの構築の義務があるが、日本の大学においても同様に、学生が海外で研究活動を行うにあたっての十分に準備をさせる責任があるといえる。「出発前のオリエンテーション プログラム」には海外で勉強をする学生の文化面での適応を促す役割が期待され、本文書は日本の留学生が持っている内在的な問題点について議論することから始まり、「出発前のオリエンテーション プログラム」が文化面での適応期間における負の要因をいかに最小化しうるかについて説明している。

キーワード: 日本の海外留学生、海外における学問、文化面での適応、言語上の文化、教育上の文化

“They are Travellers newly arrived in a strange Country, of which they know nothing; we should therefore make Conscience not to mislead them.”

Some Thoughts about Education John Locke 1632-1704

Introduction

The Japanese Ministry of Education’s recent figures indicate that the number of students studying abroad has dropped from the highs of nearly 80,000 in 2004 to approximately 67,000 university students currently attending schools in 32 countries. Although the most popular destinations for Japanese university students attending overseas institutions are Europe and North America, there are increasing numbers of students choosing to go to schools in East Asian countries. Approximately one-third of Japanese study-abroad students are in East Asia (MEXT, 2011a). These numbers may suggest an attitudinal change about international study for the current generation of college-goers; however, universities and the Japanese government are taking measures to promote overseas study “to meet the growing needs for the society to become more internationally oriented” (Tanikawa, 2011). Many colleges and universities in Japan are recommending and even requiring a semester abroad as a prerequisite for graduation (Tanaka and Ellis, 2003). Furthermore, the Japanese government is encouraging more students to study abroad by spending nearly 2 billion yen a year in scholarships for overseas study. The current government program has a goal of sending 300,000 Japanese students and workers abroad by 2020 (MEXT, 2011b). These measures are representative of the growing importance that corporate recruiters are placing on overseas experience when considering who they will hire each year.

With the promotion of study abroad programs comes the responsibility to establish support systems that can facilitate the success of students going overseas. Although it may be the students’ responsibility to produce and learn, colleges and universities that accept international students assume an ethical responsibility to insure those students have a reasonable chance of success. Likewise, institutions and government programs that encourage students to study abroad have an ethical responsibility to prepare those students for the challenges of living and studying in a foreign country. Learning in a different culture and language makes the needs of foreign students unique compared to those of domestic students. This handicap puts international students at a disadvantage from the start. In order to minimize this disadvantage, universities that encourage their students to spend a semester or more abroad should establish pre-departure programs

that can prepare students for both the adjustment of living in a new cultural and the challenge of studying in a new academic environment.

For several decades, host universities have had a growing concern about the ability to provide adequate support for the cross-cultural problems that international students experience upon arrival (Wan, Chapman and Biggs, 1992). To address those concerns, many institutions have established language support programs, supplemental instruction for core courses, mentoring systems and learning communities to benefit international students. However, there is a paucity of home-country universities enrolling students in pre-departure preparation programs. This should be a concern because the academic success of Japanese students going abroad to study in a new educational environment depends on how quickly they are able to develop intercultural communicative competence as well as academic environment awareness. Therefore, this paper will first discuss the inherent challenges for Japanese international students and then explain how pre-departure preparation programs can minimize the negative aspects of a prolonged cultural-adjustment period.

Cultural Adjustment Challenges for International Students

The inability to adjust to a new culture has definite negative psychological effects on the individual that may result in academic failure or sociological problems. A prolonged cultural-adjustment period can cause foreign students to drop out of institutions before completing a program or take considerably longer to complete programs than domestic students. Even though data on retention rates of international students are not as available as enrollment statistics, Tompson and Tompson (1996) suggest attrition rates are high. It is reasonable to assume that study-abroad students have considerable adjustment stress because they are making the transition into a completely different educational environment while trying to adapt to life in a new country. The reduction in the efficiency of an institution to graduate foreign students diminishes both the social and private rates of return that can come from the academic success of students.

Like all students, international students have many pressures and anxieties during their college years. Language and cultural differences magnify these problems making them particularly severe and possibly affecting classroom performance (Sandhu and Asrabadi, 1994; Coleman, 1997). Cultural differences result in what Furnham and Tresize (as cited in Furnham, 1997) refer to as typical problems of life in a foreign culture. This category includes social isolation, language problems, understanding

norms, rules and regulations, accommodation difficulties, homesickness, racial discrimination, dietary restrictions, financial stress and loneliness. Findings by Tompson and Tompson (1996) suggest these are international students' most difficult adjustment areas. Manifestations of stress due to lack of cultural adjustment can include sleeping and eating disorders, alcohol and drug abuse, or common depression (Charles and Steward, as cited in Coleman, 1997). Brislin adds to this list by suggesting that irritability, excessive concern with health, distrust or hostility towards members of the host culture, and lowered work performance are common symptoms of culture shock that international students often experience (as cited in Parr, Bradley and Bingi, 1992).

Cultural Adjustment and the Need for Pre-departure Orientation

Cultural adjustment refers to the process of learning about another culture in order to function successfully enough within that culture to attain one's goals. The cultural-adjustment period is the length of time it takes an individual to learn or acquire the behavior necessary to achieve his or her objectives. The amount of time it takes for a person to adjust to living in another culture varies due to differences in personalities, personal characteristics and personal experiences in the host country (Kagan and Cohen, 1990; Wan Chapman and Biggs, 1992).

Researchers have used the terms "social distance" (Schumann, 1976; Brown, 1992) and "cultural distance" (Babiker, Cox and Miller as cited in Wan, Chapman, and Biggs, 1992; Landis and Bhagat, 1996) to refer to the extent that a student's home culture differs from the predominant culture of the host country. Schumann's hypothesis (1976) suggests that the greater the cultural distance between two cultures the greater the difficulty the learner will have in learning the intricacies of communicating effectively in the target culture's language. Other researchers (Furnham and Bochner as cited in Nash, 1991; Pedersen, 1991; Wan, Chapman and Biggs, 1992) take this hypothesis a step further and postulate that the greater the cultural distance the more difficult the cultural adjustment. As an example, Japan and the Korea have very similar cultural and linguistic aspects so the cultural distance is minimal, but Japan and America have significant differences so the cultural distance is much greater. Therefore, Japanese international students would likely have greater difficulty adjusting to student life in the USA than they would to adjusting to student life in Korea.

Hence, the primary goal of pre-departure orientation programs is to shorten the period of cultural adjustment for students attending foreign institutions and to bridge the gaps of cultural distance. Awareness building can prepare students for many of the “shock” incidents and events that they may encounter in the first months abroad. This preparation can be pivotal in ensuring Japanese international students maximize the benefits of their study abroad. What pre-departure orientation programs can do is reduce the severity of the crisis stage in the U-curve of adjustment.

Variations of the U-curve Hypothesis

One of the earliest theories of cultural adjustment comes from a study done by Lysgaard (1955) on 200 Norwegian Fulbright travel grantees that had spent time in the United States. Lysgaard concluded that the data revealed evidence of certain stages of adjustment. The introductory stage is characterized by the initial euphoria that a sojourner feels when first arriving in another culture. During this period most of the contact the sojourner has with host nationals is superficial. As time passes, the novelty wears off and the sojourner begins to feel anxiety for a number of reasons. Perhaps, as the sojourner seeks more profound personal relationships with host nationals, language problems arise which lead to frustration, confusion, misinterpretations and loneliness. After a period, the sojourner may learn to cope with the adjustment problems, make friends, and become integrated into the community. So the U-curve hypothesis represents a high initial feeling of adjustment followed by a low and then ending in a high as the sojourner adapts to the new environment. The three phases of the U-curve have become typically described as contact, conflict, and adaptation (Pedersen, 1991).

Five years after Lysgaard’s study, Oberg (as cited in Nash, 1991) coined the term “culture shock” and described how people abroad pass through four phases of cultural adjustment. These begin with feelings of optimism and elation in a Honeymoon Stage which may last from several days to half a year depending on how demanding activities in the new culture are for the sojourner (Oberg as cited in Church, 1982). This is followed by a Crisis Stage in which the sojourner develops hostile or stereotypical feelings toward the host culture and fraternizes more with other sojourners. If the sojourner becomes more communicatively competent in the host language and is able to better get around in the new culture, then that person will begin the Recovery Stage. Finally, the sojourner may reach the Adaptation Stage and be able to function in the new environment with minimal strain or anxiety.

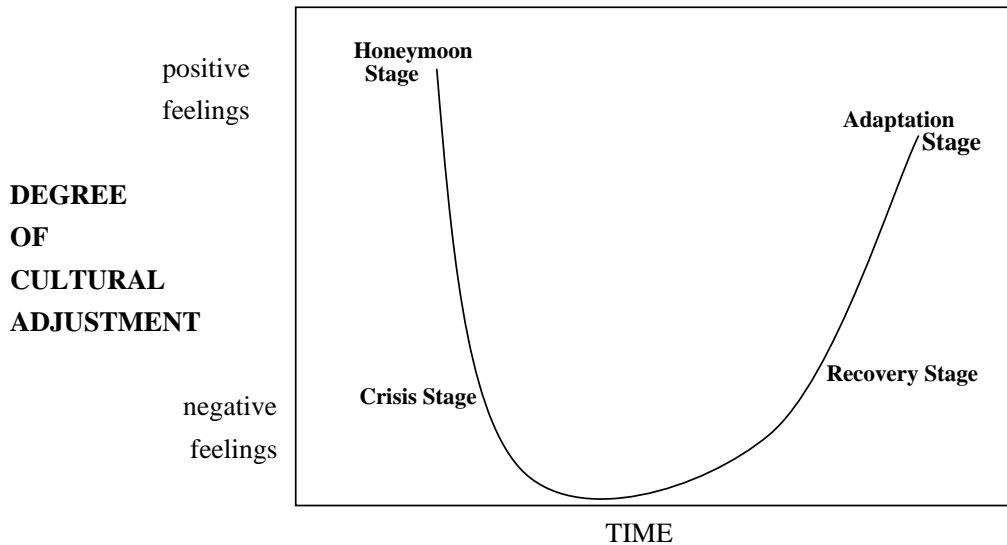


Diagram I: Oberg's Four Phases of Cultural Adjustment Juxtaposed with the U-curve.

Possible Effect of Pre-departure Orientation on the U-curve

A particular event can become a push that moves the adjustment process in one direction or the other. An event regarded as successful or positive by the sojourner could initiate momentum toward more progressive adjustment, while a failure or perceived negative event may retard the adjustment process. Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) described how perceived negative events could preclude a sojourner's progress toward the recovery stage, thus frustrating the possibility of an upturn in the U-curve:

Obviously if a sojourner develops a strong antipathy towards his hosts, this will tend to produce a similar reaction on their parts and a vicious circle of antagonistic feelings emerge—a result contrary to an explicit goal of cross-cultural exchange programs (pp.44-45).

Some researchers (Pedersen, 1991; Cushner and Brislin, 1996) refer to important positive or negative events as critical incidents. Pedersen (1991) describes a number of critical incidents that occurred among international students and were documented to use for role simulations to teach peer counseling. These included critical incidents involving making friends, dorm life, language problems, host family, sex roles, isolation, sponsorship, grades and money problems. Cushner and Brislin (1996) provided over

one hundred scenarios of critical incidents that occurred during cross-cultural experiences. Such scenarios can be used as cross-cultural training in pre-departure orientation for study-abroad programs. Such cross-cultural training will prepare students for extensive interactions with members of other cultures and for life in a second culture.

In using the U-curve as a heuristic device to understand the cultural adjustment of Japanese students enrolled in foreign education institutions it is important to illustrate some possible deviations from the U-curve. One possible deviation would be a situation in which the individual moves to a culture unwillingly or with some reservation. Perhaps, a student who has been pressured to study outside Japan by his or her parents and as a result is melancholy about leaving friends behind would fit this description. It could be postulated that such an individual might experience high levels of anxiety even before entering the new culture and have a very negative outlook about the future in the new culture. These negative feelings could increase upon arrival, thus negating any Honeymoon Stage feelings of excitement or euphoria. That individual's U-curve would appear to look like a flat line showing low levels of cultural adjustment. If, in time, the individual were to get used to the new culture, then the graph of adjustment process over time would start to look more like a J-curve than a U-curve. Other examples of Japanese international students that could fit in this category are graduate students who have left their wives and children back in Japan or freshman students who were unable to pass the entrance exam for a Japanese university and decided to study abroad as a last choice.

Additional variations of the U-curve that may be applicable to Japanese international students are illustrated in Diagram II. This diagram shows some examples of how a Japanese student's cultural-adjustment process might be graphed over time. It is not so important to determine which student fits which curve, but rather what causes the ups and downs in any variation of the U-curve. By identifying the factors that push the curve up or down, educators and policy makers can better plan pre-departure orientation programs that will facilitate the beginning of the adjustment process for study-abroad students. In this way, the U-curve can be used as a heuristic device.

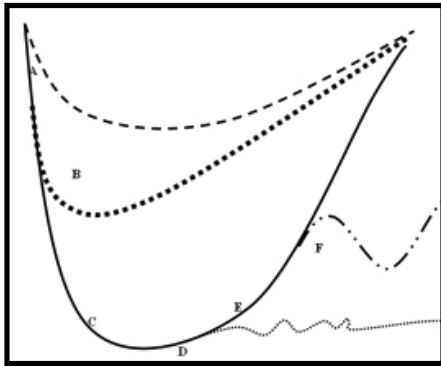


Diagram II: Variations of the U-curve (English, 1998)

- Lysgaard’s U-curve
- Vicious circle of antagonistic feelings
- . - . - . Relapse/ambivalence of cultural expectations
- ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ Early support from host culture friendships/early awareness of challenges
- - - - - U-curve with previous cross-cultural experience

In Diagram II, point A designates the end of the sojourner’s Honeymoon Stage. The individual is becoming frustrated about the cultural differences. Language differences are more pronounced as the individual begins to need more than just superficial contact with people. Point B represents the beginning of an early recovery. This could result from the formation of a friendship network that has been successful in making the individual part of the community. Point C could represent a crucial point where the individual needs some positive feedback and encouragement to start a recovery. Without some kind of success at this point, the individual may become melancholy about the sojourn and reject the host culture. Any antagonistic feelings about the host culture may cause the sojourner to seek out the company of compatriots. A compatriot friendship network could provide some support to initiate a recovery for the individual. However, if those compatriots were also malcontents, then negative feelings toward the host culture could snowball, precluding any possibility for recovery as is represented by the line going through point D. Point E represents a critical incident that had a positive result and depicts a favorable change in attitude toward the host culture. Point F exemplifies a critical incident with a negative result that leads to a relapse, which is

manifested in increased negative feelings about the host culture or additional disillusionment about the sojourn experience.

The pro-active argument in favor of initiating pre-departure orientation programs is visible in Diagram II at Point B. Pre-departure orientation can prepare students mentally, academically and socially so there is greater probability of an early recovery; thus, minimizing the impact of negative incidents by maximizing the understanding of the cultural-adjustment process. The need to build students' awareness of the cultural adjustment challenges becomes more obvious when examining some of the specific challenges that Japanese international students have.

Specific Challenges for Japanese International Students

Cultural variations in communication styles can result in a lack of understanding the host country's lingua-culture. For Japanese students, cultural differences create communication hurdles. Differences between the host country's language and Japanese can hamper communication in social and academic environments. For example, the lingua-culture of Japanese allows for ambiguity and indirectness, but the lingua-culture of English prefers explicitness and being straightforward. The use of intuition is prevalent in Japanese communication, whereas communication in English requires more verbal clarity. Japanese speakers also tend to avoid disagreement and asking direct questions. English speakers accept disagreement and ask many direct questions (Cortazzi as cited in Tudor, 1996; Nishida, 1996).

In Japanese, emotional messages, negative criticism, self-defense and refusals are often difficult to express in word so they are communicated with non-verbal signals. These signals include faint eye movements and facial expressions, moderate body language signals and pauses or silences. Long silences as a form of non-verbal communication can be interpreted as expressions of truthfulness, social discretion, embarrassment, and defiance (Lebra as cited in Nishida, 1996). Japanese international students who have been conditioned to use these non-verbal communication cues all their lives could send messages to peers or teachers in their host culture that will be misconstrued. Such periods of silence, for example, might be interpreted as rudeness, lack of understanding or apathy.

The way people use verbal communication to serve their needs also differs greatly. The results of one study that compared persuasive strategies of Americans and Japanese (Neuliep and Hazleton, 1985) found methods used to gain compliance vary greatly

between Japanese and American cultures. The Americans in this study preferred promise and positive expertise as strategies for persuasion, whereas the Japanese preferred strategies that included explanation, direct request and deceit. Barnlund and Yoshioka (1990) found that ways of apologizing differ between Japanese and Americans. Japanese prefer to apologize directly without explaining their actions. Americans, on the other hand, prefer to offer explanations for their acts. The possibility of communication difficulties resulting in ambivalent feelings about living in a new culture necessitates pre-departure awareness building of lingua-culture nuances for students preparing to study abroad.

Another area in which Japanese international students have adjustment challenges is in regards to the differences in educational environments between Japan and students' host countries. These edu-culture differences could preclude Japanese international students from fully understanding the expectations and evaluation system of their host institution. For example, the learning habit of doing rote memorization to pass an exam could also explain why some Japanese students are able to score high on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), but are unable to communicate effectively enough to succeed academically. Spack (1997) documents one case of a Japanese student that epitomizes this dichotomy in a longitudinal ethnographic study. Although her subject had scored very high on the TOEFL test, she was unable to write assignments that represented college level quality.

All international students bring unique characteristics and habits that are products of educational socialization. It is likely that a study-abroad student will rely on cultural assumptions inconsistent with the expectations of their host-country counterparts. They are likely to use strategies and skills that have been successful in their native language and culture but inconsistent with the academic norms of their host country (Reid, 1992). Reid offers the following as examples:

The freshman composition essay that is highly philosophical and generalized instead of being highly specific and personalized as the professor expected; the political science paper that has elaborate language and irrelevant materials that do not address the point; the research paper that has been copied from one or two sources.

Problems like these are not the result of a student's lack of understanding the target language but rather the lack of being familiar with the culturally accepted conventions

of academic prose. In order to succeed academically international students must learn the norms of the host country's edu-culture. Therefore, the need to learn the code is essential for success in a new academic culture (Agar, 1994). This accentuates the need for pre-departure orientation programs to build students' awareness of the expectations of their host country's academic environment. It is essential that students receive as much information as possible—prior to their departure—about what they will need to do to succeed academically once enrolled in a program abroad.

The argument thus far has been that the cultural differences between Japan and the host countries in communication styles and formal schooling create a cultural distance. This cultural distance makes it more difficult for Japanese international students to adjust to the new academic environment of their host educational institution; therefore, this could result in attrition or poor academic performance. However, once overseas, social integration becomes an important variable that can help to bridge the cultural distances. Therefore, a Japanese international student's ability (or lack of ability) to establish positive friendship networks may be a crucial factor in whether or not the student will have an early recovery during the adjustment process. Increased social interaction can affect the cultural adjustment positively and minimize the downward dip in an individual's U-curve.

Bochner et al. (as cited in Furnham, 1997) offer a functional model for a longer-term perspective of international students' friendship networks. They identified three types of common social networks among most sojourners. The primary network is monoculture. It consists of close friendships with fellow countrymen and provides the support and environment where groups can express their ethnic and cultural heritages. Bicultural relationships between sojourners and host nationals form the secondary friendship network. These ties may be with host nationals that demonstrate some kind of authority such as teachers, advisors, counselors or officials. Relationships with significant host nationals have the function of assisting sojourners with their professional or academic goals. A third, or multicultural friendship, network provides companionship for recreational activities or relaxation.

The monoculture network of co-national friendships is necessary for easing the process of cultural adjustment, but could also hamper the process if an individual became too reliant on the compatriot friendships. Bochner et al. (as cited in Furnham, 1997) claim that the co-national bonds are of vital importance to international students. Although conflicting research exists, Alexander et al. (as cited in Pedersen, 1991) found contact with co-nationals to be an important factor in helping international students

cope with cultural differences. Pedersen (1991) adds that co-national friendship networks also tend to be the most immediate and readily available. Language development can be closely related to the amount of interaction with members of the host culture. Without sufficient interaction with native speakers, second language acquisition may take place more slowly causing a prolonged period of cultural adjustment.

Social interaction involves making friends and socializing with host culture students so such interaction should help to improve international students' communicative ability in the target language as well as better their understanding of the lingua-culture. Group acceptance and positive attitude about living in a new culture lead to increased input and interaction which are necessary to acculturate and increase levels of fluency (Brown 1992; Schumann as cited in Gass and Selinker, 1994). For international students, cultural adjustment support systems or friendship networks can provide an environment for social integration or social interaction to take place. Social support and social networks of foreign students can reduce stress and facilitate cultural adjustment by providing the individual with informational, emotional and moral support (Furnham, 1997). Therefore, the earlier students can begin building their social networks, the earlier their recovery from the crisis period in the cultural-adjustment process. This reasoning adds further support for pre-departure orientation programs in which students not only learn the importance of social integration, but they also begin interacting with other students through social networking internet sites. On-line groups for study-abroad students can provide prospective sojourners with social support and friendship networks prior to departure.

Policy Recommendations

If the Japanese Ministry of Education along with colleges and universities promote study abroad programs for students, then it is reasonable to implement policy that will benefit those students going overseas to study. Such policy should be in the form of structured pre-departure orientation programs that build students' awareness of what to expect in terms of living in a new cultural and studying in a new academic environment. This can facilitate the adjustment process and enhance the likelihood of greater success for those Japanese students attending foreign universities. The programs should focus on three specific areas: 1) Building awareness of lingua-culture; 2) Building awareness

of edu-culture, and; 3) Building awareness of how to minimize the negative effects of cultural adjustment.

Government-sponsored cross-cultural training that involves teaching cross-cultural communication strategies will help benefit prospective study-abroad candidates. This training can be available for students prior to departure in several possible formats. First, counselors can hold one-day to three-day workshops at select locations for students to attend. This training can be made available during the winter and summer breaks from university classes to coincide with probable departure schedules. Secondly, the material from the workshops can be uploaded to the internet so it is readily available for students unable to attend workshops. This idea is similar to what some western universities have already begun to do for the international students they expect to attend their institutions. One of the best examples of this is the on-line pre-departure orientation that the Monterey Institute of International Education holds for the study-abroad students enrolling in their programs. Some of the online events are interactive so students can take part in live communication with counselors, advisors and other students prior to arriving at their host institution.

The content of the cross-cultural training workshops should first focus on the cultural-adjustment process. It is important to build students' awareness of the various stages for cultural adjustment so they will more fully understand their own feelings once they beginning living in a new culture. This can diminish feelings of ambivalence and stress during the anomic period. Content for the workshops should also include the teaching of communication strategies that can familiarize sojourners with the lingua-culture nuances of the host country. This training should cover survival language and non-verbal communication. Furthermore, it would be advantageous to raise awareness of Japanese lingua-culture nuances that could easily be misinterpreted by members of the host culture. This may help study-abroad students communicate more effectively and avoid problems and stress that can result from misconstruing verbal and non-verbal messages. Here, too, specific examples and role play videos can be uploaded on the internet for easy viewing.

In addition to cross-cultural training that can help students understand the intricacies of lingua-culture, it is important for pre-departure orientation to include information about the host institution's academic environment and strategy building for success. This phase of the pre-orientation could be held in co-ordination with the host institution, if possible. The content for this phase can include sharing of information about the host institution's expectations for students as well an explanation of the academic support

systems that are available for international students at the host institution. It should also include some type of academic language training that will focus on writing and presentation skills. Building a student's awareness of the host institution's edu-culture prior to departure can help an international student avoid falling into a deep crisis stage due to overwhelming "edu-culture shock."

A third aspect of pre-orientation programs should focus on helping students to begin building friendship networks so they already have some social support systems available at the time of their arrival. This phase in the pre-orientation is on-going and can run con-current with the other two phases. Basically, social-networking sites can be established for Japanese international students. These sites can provide updated information about specific countries and universities. The sites can be a forum for prospective students to interact with compatriots that have studied at, are studying at, or will be studying at the same institutions. Therefore, the sites should encourage the exchange of information that can familiarize students with their host institutions policies and expectations as well facilitate the building of friendship networks upon arrival in the host country. Additionally, students with study-abroad experience can help to counsel prospective students more effectively by providing them with the lessons learned from personal experience. These perspectives from study-abroad *senpai* can be guidance to help prospective students develop realistic academic goals. The advantage of such pre-departure orientation through social networking is inline with the positive effects of social interaction and learning communities within academic environments that help to shorten the cultural-adjustment period and increase international students' chances for success.

The ultimate goal of pre-departure orientation programs is to prepare students adequately for the new cultural and educational environment that they are about to enter. Pre-departure orientation programs can provide students with an experience that decreases the severity of the crisis stage of adjustment and curtails a lengthy anomic period. The benefits of pre-departure orientation programs is obvious from various studies that have indicated prior overseas knowledge or experience, exposure to media sources in the host country, partaking in activities that promote social interaction, approval of family and friends, and self-satisfaction with academic progress as factors that can determine retention for international students (Mizuno, 1998; Cabrera, Nora, and Castaneda, 1993).

Conclusion

Cultural differences can fetter the ability for Japanese international students to adjust to the new academic environments at overseas universities. The inability to adjust can hamper an international student's academic performance and may result in failure. Academic failure among international students increases dropout rates and lessens the external efficiency of the educational system. If colleges and universities in Japan are going to continue to encourage students to go abroad so graduates can compete for jobs in a global market, it would be beneficial to create equitable policies that increase the chances for academic success of those students. Pre-departure orientation programs can heighten students' awareness of what they can expect once they begin studying in a new country. That heightened awareness may help to ease the adjustment process and thus provide students with a greater chance of academic success.

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