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Developing Talent in English Speaking Countries

Though it is not widely known, the Inter-University Center is a unique educational institution that has played an extremely important role for a half century in deepening the understanding of Japan abroad, particularly in English-speaking countries.

More than 1,000 graduates of the Center went on to become professors in universities in the U.S. and other countries throughout the world; many have also served as Japan experts in numerous other fields including law, business, government, and journalism.

Established in Tokyo in 1963, the Center received an invitation from the City of Yokohama in 1987 to relocate to its current location at Minato Mirai. It is managed by a partnership of fifteen universities from all across the United States, with its administrative headquarters at Stanford University.

Offering advanced Japanese language instruction to students who are primarily native English speakers, the Center has a ten-month program that runs from September to June and a six week summer program. The Center enforces a strict “No English” policy, and students are expected to speak in Japanese only, even when making small talk and jokes. While they are enrolled they experience full Japanese immersion.

This year there are fifty-six students, and nearly all of them are graduate students at American universities. The selection process is very competitive, and they must demonstrate proven excellence in both their area of specialty and in Japanese language fluency.

The goal of the center is to produce students who can effectively use Japanese at an advanced level that is equal to that of educated Japanese adults so that they can successfully pursue their various fields of employment and education in Japan.

As opposed to most university study abroad programs, which place emphasis on experiencing foreign culture, the Center’s exclusive focus is on mastery of advanced Japanese, and that is why students choose to attend.

In 2009, there were many comprehensive surveys of Japanese language learning abroad, and the majority of them demonstrated that in North America interest in Japan remains as high as ever.

For example, according to research done by the University of Minnesota Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition, in North America there are 872 colleges and universities and 548 elementary, middle, and high schools with Japanese language programs. These numbers exceed those schools with Chinese language classes (699 and 353, respectively). On the other hand, almost all of the programs are restricted to beginning and intermediate level Japanese language instruction, and there are very few

institutions for advanced level instruction. This situation is hardly different from when the Center was established fifty years ago.

Since the Center was established, Japan's situation has changed tremendously, but its relationship with the countries of North America continues to be of great importance. Moreover, recently the world's understanding of Japan is greatly influenced by research and analysis written in English.

From the field of diplomacy, science, economics, and sports, in every facet English is the de facto standard international language. If Japan is to be properly received, it is not enough to simply produce Japanese people who are fluent in English. The existence of foreigners who can receive information in Japanese, understand it correctly, and accurately communicate it in English will undoubtedly become more and more critical.

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(translated into English by Aragorn Quinn, IUC Class of '07-'08)