I taught English in Japan from 2008 until 2012 through the JET Program.
I had many wonderful experiences!
Thanks to the MIIS Waseda Exchange program, three years later, I was able to return to Japan!
Study
Studying at Waseda was an interesting experience. In nearly all of my classes, I was the only person from the US. Due to this, I was able to benefit by engaging in discussion with students from Japan and absorb many new ideas.

At MIIS, professors will often ask for the insight of foreign students if the subject material directly involves their home country. At that point, the class will then turn their attention to that individual, who is now solely responsible for providing an explanation of their home country’s status or position.

I had never experienced this responsibility or pressure before. However, while at Waseda, I found that anytime the US was mentioned, the professors would automatically single me out and ask for my opinion. For example, in my International Law and Organization class, I was frequently called upon to explain the rational for unilateral US policies which were detrimental to the UN. So, not only did I learn from the perspective of others, but I was given the opportunity to share knowledge and insights from my home country as well.
Gymnastics
Since my classes were conducted in English, I had to seek other avenues for Japanese practice. My solution was to join the Waseda gymnastics team. Through this opportunity, I was able to improve my Japanese conversational ability and make many new friends.

The training schedule was rigorous. We practiced five times a week for four hours. The team was also very talented. One member is the number one vaulter in Japan and a reserve on the National Team, while four or five others were on the under 21 National Team. As a beginner, I was clearly outclassed by my teammates, yet they were very kind and supportive. By the end of my training, I was able to perform both front and back flips.

In addition to training and language practice, I also had the pleasure of going on a volunteer trip with the team. We went to Fukushima, one of the areas damaged by the 2011 earthquake, and held a gymnastics training clinic for one of the schools there. Although I wasn’t able to contribute much in the way of gymnastics expertise, the children had a wonderful time playing with me.
During my time in Japan, I was able to experience many elements of traditional Japanese culture. My favorite was the autumn festivals in rural Japan.
Homestay in the countryside
During Oshogatsu, a Japanese holiday during New Years, I was able to do a homestay with a family I knew from my days in the JET Program.
Homestay Activities: Cherry Blossoms
Homestay Activities: Sightseeing
Homestay Activities: Jiu-jitsu Training
Reunion with Old Friends
Trip to Shizuoka Prefecture with Japanese Friends
We went to famous “Onsen” (hot spring) towns, castles, temples, a wasabi farm, and a waterfall.
Exploring Tokyo
Japanese Food!
Ramen & Tsukemen
Good old fashioned American Hamburger with a Japanese twist!
Closing Comments
Studying as an exchange student was a wonderful experience. Being in an unfamiliar, dynamic environment was challenging at times but allowed me to view the world from a different perspective. It was a thrilling environment and every day was a new adventure. This immersive experience not only enhanced my knowledge academically, but linguistically and culturally as well.

As I mentioned, I previously lived in Japan working as an English Teacher. However, I lived in a small town of approximately 5,000 people. Living in Tokyo was big a transition and it allowed me to experience a completely different side of Japan that I had only glimpsed before.

During my stay, I was able to make many new Japanese friends and reunite with old ones. However, one of the things that struck me the most was the MIIS network. While in Japan, I was able to meet with five different MIIS alumni. This reminded me that no matter where I go in the world, chances are, a friend or colleague is not far away!
The MIIS Waseda Exchange was an amazing experience and I would highly recommend it or one of the other similar programs MIIS offers. If you’d like to participate in a program like this, I would advise you to coordinate early with your academic advisor. As a dual degree student, I was able to work this into my schedule, but only because I started planning for it my first semester.

The End!