



A Campus of the University of Wisconsin Colleges

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Press Release



the group – students, mentors,
teachers, staff



David Ababio (L) &
Takumi Toyomura



Rachel Feltes (L) &
Sawoul Moon

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***UW-Richland hosts Japanese students:* Wisconsin teens learn as 24/7 cultural ambassadors**

What's it like for a teen to be a cultural ambassador?

For the 14 Wisconsin students involved in the UW-Richland Youth for Understanding Japanese Program, it means working on nouns and prepositions, verbs and tongue-twisters, answering many questions and patiently explaining language and everyday life.

"I love it," said David Ababio, a soon-to-be high school junior from Platteville. In fact, he enjoyed the experience enough to return for his second year as a mentor to Japanese high school students preparing for their high school exchange year in the United States.

Ababio and the other Wisconsin teens served 24/7 in a 10-day program held July 27 – August 5 on the University of Wisconsin-Richland campus. The Wisconsin mentors each worked closely with a small group of Japanese high school students—eating meals, living in UW-Richland student housing, going to English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, and generally being there to answer questions and explain.

"The greatest challenge," he said, "is finding a way to help them fully understand what to expect. They started out excited but not confident." He finds satisfaction in helping them feel more comfortable.

His long-time interest in Japanese culture and language attracted him to the program last year. “The greatest satisfaction,” Ababio said, “is forming the bonds of friendship. I’ve kept in touch with students who were here last year. I enjoy helping all the students, not just my group. You find you have more in common than you think.”

For Rachel Feltes, a high school student from Viroqua, the program was a new experience. “This has been really fun for me,” she said. “It’s hard to explain in words. I’ve enjoyed learning about Japanese culture. It can be difficult to explain to them the meaning of (English) words. I like the challenge of it. One night, we compared US and Japanese versions of the same fashion magazine. Theirs is backwards—compared to ours—and in kanji. We talked about the different ways they do things—like laundry.”

With only a brief 2010 vacation in Hawaii as her experience of the USA, Sawoul Moon, from Tokyo, prepared for a year as a student in Michigan. “I enjoyed the (UW-Richland) program so much. Every single American mentor and teacher is so kind. They use easy English words and I can ask if I don’t understand.” Moon said that cultural learning takes place all the time, just chatting during lunch, for example.

Richland Center and UW-Richland are for most of these Japanese students their first experience of the United States. Moon said, “It’s so much different from Tokyo. I prefer the nature here.”

While many activities—classes, games, programs, a dance—were held on campus, the group explored and experienced the community, too, during a bowling party, a family picnic and a shopping trip American style. Richland Center High School teacher Todd Ostrander provided a sample history class so the students could benefit from experiencing a typical high school class.

“The warm welcome in the community was appreciated,” said Jessica Laeseke, program coordinator. “Our ESL teachers and program staff were creative and enthusiastic. Our teen mentors did a fantastic job. Everyone worked together to prepare the 53 students for their high school exchange experience.”

In addition to Ababio and Feltes, Wisconsin mentors for the 2011 program were:

Hattie Bestul, Middleton;
Stephanie Cooper, Richland Center;
Hannah Crary, Richland Center;
Joey Deverell, Viroqua;
Nick Hefty, Platteville;
Addie Korb, Richland Center;
Kate Krofton, Richland Center;
Tiffany Lange, Platteville;
Melissa Maring, Bloomington;
Nico Medina, Menomonee Falls;
Morgan Seifert, Muscodia; and
Alex Watson, Highland.

For more information about UW-Richland Japanese program, including ways for area teens to participate next summer, visit the ["Summer Youth Programs"](#) section of the campus website at richland.uwc.edu/ce or call the Continuing Education Office at (608) 647-6186, Extension 227. ###