From West to East

GPS alumni share their experiences living and working in Japan and the lasting impact that their time at the school has had on their lives

The UC San Diego School of Global Policy and Strategy (GPS) is well known for its Pacific focus, allowing students to specialize in career tracks that cater to many regions – one of which is Japan.

Japan has the third-largest economy in the world, and when students commit to a regional focus on Japan, their course of study features an intensive, policy- and business-oriented language component, providing students the structure to pursue a wide number of careers that help them live and work in Japan. Students can begin networking while still pursuing their graduate degree through the student organization Asameshikai, which brings together students, faculty and professionals who are interested in the Japanese economy, politics, language and culture.

Many alumni who focused their studies on Japan have not only thrived in dynamic careers while living and working in the country, but have also maintained a strong connection to each other. GPS News caught up with a number of alumni to share their stories of life in Japan today.
Gary Bremermann

Gary Bremermann (MPIA ‘91) is a Tokyo-based recruiter who specializes in recruiting bilingual advertising and marketing professionals for international firms in Japan.

From left to right, David Moore (‘91), Steven Howard (‘91), Marifel Verlohr (‘91), Yoshito Sakakibara (‘91) and Gary Bremermann (‘91) at a small gathering in Tokyo when Verlohr was visiting from Atlanta. | Photo courtesy Gary Bremermann

“This is my 20th year in recruitment and I feel really fortunate to have a job I enjoy and in which I get to meet a lot of interesting people,” Bremermann said.

Bremermann was living in Japan when GPS (then the Graduate School of International Relations and Pacific Studies, or IR/PS) was founded in the late 1980s. He heard about the program through an unlikely source.

“It was before the public Internet and email wasn’t very widespread then, so I found out about the school because my mom, who lived in San Diego and wanted me to spend more time at home, sent me a Union-Tribune article about the program,” Bremermann said. “I was intrigued and liked the idea of getting an advanced degree focused on Japan from a great university in my hometown. I also liked the visionary and pioneering aspect of the school.”
At IR/PS, Bremermann focused his study on international management courses, which he said helped him in his career in a number of ways.

“IT gave me a solid toolkit of strategic thinking skills, quantitative analytical skills and a greater understanding of how policy impacts business,” he said. “It also was a valuable opportunity to build relationships with a very diverse group of people – some who have become lifelong friends, and some connections which have led to substantial business opportunities.”

Bremermann said the alumni network has been invaluable to him since returning to Japan.

“As a recruiter, having a high-value network of people that know you and trust you is one of the most critical elements of success. Having the shared experience of graduating from GPS is an instant common bond that leads to meaningful conversations and the development of deeper relationships over time,” he said. “I have had the pleasure of directly getting fellow alums great jobs here, and alums have also been super helpful to me in connecting with their networks to identify high performers for career-making opportunities. In addition, fellow alums have become clients where I then help them hire talented individuals to work for them.”

Bremermann loves his life in Tokyo and has lived in the same neighborhood for the last 22 years – Machiya in Arakawa-ku, about 15 minutes away from the heart of Tokyo (Otemachi/Marunouchi).

“It’s worlds away in atmosphere as it’s considered to be part of the older downtown city ‘shitamachi,’ and it’s a working-class traditional neighborhood
known for its small manufacturing/industrial artisans,” Bremermann said. “I love my neighborhood and the entire city of Tokyo. I tell friends and family that it never gets old or boring living here and, even after all these years, I’m still discovering new places to wander around, delicious restaurants or food stalls, fun bars and places of historical significance. Every day is an adventure.”

Miwa Naito

Miwa Naito (MIA ’19) is a more recent graduate who now works as a consultant at the Business for Social Responsibility (BSR), where she is mainly engaged in the area of business and human rights in Japan and overseas. A couple of months ago, she moved from Tokyo to Kamakura-city, Kanagawa.

“I like the nice beaches, beautiful temples and open minded people here,” she said. “One of my favorite places is Inamuragasaki Park, where you can see Mt. Fuji if the sky is clear!”

Naito decided to pursue a degree at GPS after some experience in the business world.

“After working at a private company and NGO in Japan and Sri Lanka, I realized better project planning and impact measurement skills are necessary to improve
the project quality,” Naito said. “And, more importantly, I just wanted to live on
the West Coast!”

Naito said one of the most invaluable parts of her experience at GPS was the
overwhelming support she received from both the school’s Career Services team
as well as GPS alumni.

“GPS Career Services guided me from job searching to networking and through
the final interview preparation,” she said. “Without their presence, I don’t think I
could have gotten the job offer! My GPS life developed my resilience, too. It is not
easy to adapt to a new working culture and way of working and meet expectations
immediately when you shift to a new career. But my experience at GPS made this
easy.”
She added that GPS alumni also inspired and motivated her to achieve her career goals and fondly remembers how two nice GPS alumni warmly welcomed her at an alumni gathering just after finishing Prep.

“I was so nervous and concerned about school life, but I felt like I belonged to the GPS community after this,” she said.

Bryan Green

Bryan Green (MPIA ’07) is a man who wears many hats – he currently holds multiple jobs, including author of the book “Make the Leap,” a lecturer at Tohoku University, the COO of the U.S.-based startup apparel company Go Be More and the director of Ignite Sendai, a group that seeks to boost foreign entrepreneurship in northern Japan.

Green decided to pursue further education at then-IR/PS after looking for Japan-focused degree programs.

“I had been living in Japan for three years, was engaged to my future (and current!) Japanese wife and was trying to decide what to do that could better prepare me for a life and career tied to Japan,” Green said. “I chose to attend
IR/PS because I liked the balance between politics, economics and business, and I felt I would benefit from learning more in all three areas."

After graduating, Green got a job in consulting in Silicon Valley, and after two years, he was tipped off by a former classmate working at Apple that there was an opening on her team.

“Attending IR/PS got me both of those jobs,” Green said. “The first company hired me to help create a Japan-focused division, and my degree helped me to stand out. My job at Apple came about through the network I created at the school.”

Green worked at Apple for seven years, which allowed him to save enough money to quit and pursue his other passions, such as starting his own company and writing a book. He said he continues to draw on the core concepts he learned at GPS to drive his life and work.

“In a bigger picture, a lot of where I put my energy today is in helping people to pursue whatever goals they have,” he said. “The coursework and toolbox we learned at GPS is great if you want to enter a specific job, but I’ve found the core concepts are applicable to anything you do in life.”

Green and his family have lived in Sendai, a city of about a million people in the northern Tohoku region in Japan, for about two years.
“Previously I lived in Italy for two years, and before that London, England,” Green said. “We’ve put a large emphasis on travel and experiencing different cultures. We chose to move back for a few reasons, but primarily because my daughters were 6 and 8 at the time and we wanted them to really understand Japanese and to know their grandparents.”

Green said what he likes best about Sendai is its proximity to nature, despite its size.

“I can go running and be in rice fields or near forests in five minutes,” Green said. “It doesn’t feel big.”

Green again was able to rely on both his training and the GPS alumni network when he was working to put together the first Ignite Sendai conference, an annual conference that highlights foreign entrepreneurship in Japan.

“I had just moved to Sendai and didn’t know anyone,” he said. “We don’t have any other GPS grads in this city, but I knew Gary Bremermann in Tokyo from email chains, etc. I reached out to him, and he was a huge help in getting me introduced to speakers and helping me to establish myself here in Japan.”

Bremermann also hosted a discussion panel during the conference, Green said.

“We ended up pulling off a great event and I owe a lot of that to Gary, because the hardest part was getting started,” Green said. “He opened a lot of doors for me and mentored me to success.”

Yoshito Sakakibara
Yoshito “Yoshi” Sakakibara

Yoshito “Yoshi” Sakakibara (MPIA ’92) currently works in Tokyo as an investment director at a financial service startup company. He is responsible for investment advisory and agency business. Previously, he spent 24 years of his career at financial institutions including Salomon Brothers, Goldman Sachs, Merrill Lynch and J.P. Morgan.

“As it is a small firm, I take on roles of corporate planning and branding as well as operation management, too,” Sakakibara said. “We provide placement and IR services for cross-border financial investment opportunities as an agent of asset managers, bridging between asset managers and asset owners, particularly in areas of alternative investment fund products.”

Sakakibara also teaches at a university as an adjunct lecturer in international economics and internationalization of companies, as well as business models and management. He said he got interested in international relations as an undergraduate, and after taking classes at GPS, he gradually became more attracted to topics of macroeconomics and international economic relations.

“While I am no good at mathematics, I think I kind of liked numerical analysis of economics more than conceptual analysis of politics,” Sakakibara said. “That said, I do believe that qualitative analysis is extremely important in economics and that we should not be blindly dependent too much upon rigorous quantitative outputs for any economic judgment.”
Sakakibara’s first job after graduating from GPS landed him in the financial industry as a junior economist at Salomon Brothers in Tokyo – forming the foundation of his career, he said.

“I would say that everything I do now goes back to this very trigger,” he said.

One of his goals after graduating was to work in an English-speaking environment in Japan – a skill he cultivated during his time at GPS.

“I believe the interdisciplinary course offerings of IR/PS were key to my reasonable success as an economist and an investment professional in the financial industry,” Sakakibara said.

When Sakakibara moved back to Japan in 1992 and began working in Tokyo, there were only a handful of GPS graduates in the area. He recalls that there was a small but dedicated group of alumni initially, which started to fade as these people left Tokyo.

“As I personally wanted to keep the alumni network, especially with those I
shared the time together in San Diego, including ICAPs (then one-year program participants), I began to try to establish the Japan alumni chapter in a more solid way,” he said. “Even though I volunteered to become the president of the chapter, I knew that I wouldn’t be able to manage the chapter activities by myself. So I asked several people to be actively involved in the management, which I set as the condition of my becoming the president.”

Sakakibara and fellow alumni then prepared the chapter bylaws, solidifying the formal chapter. He went on to serve as president for four years. He said he hopes those early efforts contributed to the ongoing closeness of GPS alumni in Japan. He also gives a lot of credit to the chapter leaders that followed him, along with the GPS student group Asameshikai, organized in conjunction with Professor Ulrike Schaede.

“It is always good to be back in this network for fun, good feelings, as well as interesting and inspiring news with people you have something in common with,” Sakakibara said. “The network you have is extremely critical for both your career and life. The IR/PS and GPS network is such a great resource with a pool of incredible talent – you cannot underestimate its importance.”
Steven Howard

Steven Howard (MPIA ’91) works as the senior legal counsel in the Asia Pacific region for Fiskars Group, Finland’s oldest company with a diverse range of consumer goods brands.

Howard has lived in Japan for a total of 18 years since 1987, interrupted by four years in California, four years in Hawaii and seven years in Singapore.

“I’ve lived in Tokyo now longer than any other single city in my life, so it is home,” Howard said. “Tokyo is an amazing city where even after being here so many years, I still see and experience new things all the time – those ‘only in Japan’ experiences.”

Howard said he was initially drawn to IR/PS while seeking international relations graduate programs.

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Steven Howard, Bill Lai (GPS ’91), Yoshi Sakakibara and David Moore met for a meal when Lai visited Japan in Sept. 2018. | Photo courtesy Steven Howard
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“I was intrigued by this new school at UC San Diego that combined international relations, business and language courses into one degree,” he said. “I thought that such a well-rounded program would prepare me for many possible opportunities as, at the time, I was not sure in which direction I wanted to go.”
Howard said he remembers that on the first day of his Comparative Policy Environments course, he and his fellow students were told that the course and the program as a whole were meant to give them the skills to be able to assess situations on the ground quickly across this diverse region, and that upon completion of the degree they would be equipped to use those skills to advance their own career goals and employers’ goals.

“I truly believe that has been the case for me - I use the business, international relations and language skills every day,” Howard said. “Even though I’m legal counsel, a large part of my role is understanding the business goals of the group and the local teams across this very diverse region, from Japan, Korea and China down to Australia. My time and training at the school contributed immensely to that.”

Howard said many of the alumni from IR/PS’ first years have been getting together off and on for close to 30 years.

“I must give credit to Gary Bremmerman, as he has done a great job of keeping up ties and arranging events, including when the dean, professors or students are in town,” Howard said. “Recently some of us from the class of 1991 had not one but two virtual reunions. Even though I had not seen some classmates since graduation, the bond is so strong that it did not feel like 30 years had passed. We had a great time reminiscing about our time at IR/PS and sharing how our lives have developed since.”

Howard also said Japan alumni are happy to add new alumni to the fold.

“We also welcome more students and recent graduates and are always available to meet and give what advice we can and hopefully introduce them to interesting opportunities or others to meet with as they explore their post-GPS journey,” he said.

**Samuel Gordon**

Samuel Gordon (MPIA ’99) is an international tax partner for Deloitte Tohmatsu Tax Co.
“I am the global leader for financial services within particular subject matter areas, including transfer pricing, and I serve as lead tax partner for a couple of global financial services firms,” Gordon said.

As an undergraduate at UC Berkeley, Gordon studied the economic development of Northeast Asia, which is how he first heard about GPS.

“Through my program, I encountered Chalmers Johnson, who was associated with early days of the school,” Gordon said. “This sparked my initial interest in IR/PS as a graduate school option.”

During spring break in 1990, a friend who was attending UC San Diego’s medical school allowed him to stay at his apartment, and he was able to take advantage of San Diego’s unique geographic location.

“In between trips to Tijuana and Rosarito, I took a tour of then IR/PS, which is now GPS,” he said. “I decided it was a place for me, and I made my way back to GPS in 1997 to pursue an MPIA degree.”

Like many alumni, Gordon echoed the sentiment that his time at the school equipped him with invaluable skills.

“It sounds quaint, but my time at IR/PS really did give me a toolkit that has
helped me with the nexus of international tax, finance and bilingual negotiations involving governments, multinational corporations and organizations like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD),” Gordon said. “In my line of work, the balance of policy or legal analysis, financial analysis and industry expertise sets the best global advisers apart from the rest, and the school has given me an edge.”

Gordon has now lived in Japan for about 21 years and currently resides in Tokyo with his wife, Tomoko, and his two children, Noah and Zachary.

“Surprisingly, jazz is the ‘theme music’ to Tokyo, and I am a huge jazz fan,” he said. “From our base, the rest of Japan is so accessible. We visited Hokkaido this summer and Kyoto this fall this year, despite the COVID-19 crisis, and we expect to get back to our regular jaunts to the Japan inland sea area, including Ehime and Hiroshima, soon.”

Gordon said that his best friend in Tokyo is a member of the GPS community, and that he sees other alumni regularly.

“One of our favorite things to do is catch up at an izakaya, where the discussions inevitably provide a window to fascinating people’s lives and interests,” Gordon said. “I feel lucky to be grounded in my adopted hometown with GPS alums. I hope I provide the sense of connection for new alums as they establish themselves professionally and socially in Japan.”