

FACTORS INFLUENCING JAPANESE WOMEN  
TO CHOOSE TWO-YEAR COLLEGES

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## Abstract

Two-year colleges in Japan have traditionally absorbed the major portion of female college entrants due at least partially to long-held gender stereotypes: women are to prepare themselves for marriage and homemaking at a two-year college. Recently, Japanese women began to explore selfhood outside the traditional realm of motherhood and womanhood. The purpose of the present study was to investigate whether traditional gender stereotypes continue to influence the decision of Japanese female students as to whether to pursue a two-year college education. A sample of 214 Japanese female students currently enrolled in a two-year college participated in this study. The 18-item survey questionnaire was developed to examine factors perceived influential by Japanese women on their decision to choose a two-year college. The items were adopted based on a review of literature pertinent to gender-roles and women in higher education in Japan, and the government surveys on Japanese women's life course plans. This study employed SPSS for analyzing the data collected through the survey questionnaire. Factor analysis extracted three factors: *Traditional Gender Expectations*, *Career and Marriage* and *Career Interests*. Students in this study ranked *Career Interests* highest, followed by *Traditional Gender Expectations* and *Career and Marriage*. The results suggest that women's choice of two-year college was based first on their concern for job and financial security, second for marriage and family and third for the dual goals of pursuing both a career and marriage and family. While women in the present study uphold traditional roles, building career and financial independence are stronger reasons for their college choice. Two-year college administrators and faculty need to carefully consider the factors underlying women's decision to choose a two-year college, and evaluate whether the role of two-year colleges is satisfactorily meeting the expectations of contemporary women.

## Introduction

### *Background*

The Japanese two-year college was established as a part of educational reconstruction plans during the post-World War II occupation, between 1945 and 1952 (Harada, 1993). Under the guidance of the American Education Mission, the multi-track technical colleges in pre-war Japan, which emphasized different types of practical training, such as agriculture, mining and commerce, were integrated into a new single post-secondary education system and were given the status of two-year colleges. In 1951, there were 149 two-year colleges throughout Japan. But by 1965, along with unprecedented economic growth and a growing population, who had aspired to post-secondary education since the end of World War II (Yamada, 1995), the number of two-year colleges had increased to 369 (Ministry of Education 2008). The number of two-year colleges continued to grow, and there were 598 two-year colleges in the peak year of 1996 (Ministry of Education, 2008).

Japanese two-year colleges, *in theory*, do not exclude male students. However, *in practice*, numerous two-year colleges admit girls mostly, and very few boys. While 90% of male college entrants went to four-year colleges, more than 50% of female college entrants pursued a two-year college education before 1996 (Ministry of Education, 2008). A remarkable 90% of the entire two-year college student population was female (Ministry of Education, 2008). In 1996, the enrollment rate of women at four-year colleges (51%) surpassed that of those at two-year colleges (49%). Since that time, the number of female college entrants advancing to four-year colleges has increased. Today,

78% of female post-secondary education entrants go to four-year colleges, while 22% go to two-year colleges (Ministry of Education, 2008).

“*Tandai banare*” (the decline in popularity of two-year colleges) became a buzz word in the Japanese mass media in the late 1990s, along with the prediction that very few students would attend a two-year college, and that Japanese two-year colleges might become extinct (Sakai, 2006). Faced with the need to at least maintain and hopefully further increase their student enrollment, the demand for research into the relevant factors affecting a woman’s decision to choose a two-year college has been growing among administrators and faculty at two-year colleges. What are the underlying factors that have influenced the choice of Japanese female students who are currently attending a two-year college? Little is known about this, due to the dearth of research on the subject. The present study attempts to identify factors perceived to be important by Japanese female students in their decision to choose a two-year college.

#### *Factors Underlying Two-Year College Attendance by Women*

Existing literature on Japanese women’s choice of two-year colleges, although limited, suggests that factors stemming from gender stereotypes may lead Japanese women to choose a two-year college. Gender stereotypes are a set of values, behaviors and roles deemed socially and culturally desirable for members of their gender (Sadker and Sadker, 2003). Boys and girls learn gender stereotypes through multiple channels, including family, peer groups, and school, and choose a certain type of educational and career path accordingly. Gender stereotypes are products of culture (Sugihara & Katsurada, 2002). In Japan, Confucianism contributed to the development of gender

stereotypes. Confucianism delineates a hierarchical social structure and different roles to be performed by the two genders. A man is to be a chief and a woman should obey her father, husband and son and serve them devotedly. The image of the ultimately ideal woman was portrayed in terms of the domestic sphere of home and family.

The domestic role assigned to women shaped the view of the goal of women's education. The general public believed that girls should learn practical feminine skills, such as sewing and nursing, in order to become good caretakers of their husband and children, instead of pursuing academic education. That belief eventually translated into the official view of the goal of women's education known as *ryosai kenbo kyoiku* (good wife and wise mother education) in pre-World War II Japan (Fujimura-Fanselow, 1995; Inoue, 2001). The purpose of *ryosai kenbo kyoiku* was to teach a woman morals, correct behavior, household economics, and the nursing of children, rather than to impart to her academic knowledge.

The ideology of *ryosai kenbo kyoiku* persisted in post-war Japan, and influenced women's choice of two-year colleges, as summarized in the following four points. First, many two-year colleges adopted *ryosai kenbo kyoiku* as their primary mission and developed a female-oriented curriculum comprised of Home Science and related subjects, to prepare young women for marriage and homemaking (Amano, 1997). Two-year colleges became specialized in their education of women, earning the nickname, *hanayome gakko* (bride-training school). A diploma from a two-year college, thus, was viewed as a good marriage credential that would enhance a woman's marriage prospects (Fujiwara-Fanselow & Imamura, 1991; Harada, 1993; Kambayashi, 1981). Second,

society at large expected that a good girl should live with her parents while in school and until she married, so that she could stay away from seductions and temptations that would possibly harm her marriage prospects. The location of two-year colleges corresponds to that social norm. Most two-year colleges are located in middle or small sized cities throughout Japan. Their convenient location enables women to commute from home in pursuit of postsecondary education without breaking the social norm (Amano, 1997; Fujiwara-Fanselow & Imamura, 1991; Starobin, 2002). Third, perceiving marriage as their ultimate goal, Japanese women tended to marry in their early twenties and to quit their jobs after working a few years (Harada, 1993; Kambayashi, 1981). Given their expected short span of employment after completing college, many parents did not see the benefits of a professional and academic education at a four-year college for their daughters and were reluctant to finance a four-year college education for them (Kambayashi, 1981). Thus, two-year colleges were seen as a convenient way of providing cost-effective postsecondary education for women whom otherwise would not have an opportunity for college education (Amano, 1997; Fujiwara-Fenslow, 1995). Lastly, the duration of education at a two-year college was deemed ideal for women. The basic principle underlying a two-year college education is that women do not need the same level of education as men. Academic excellence carries rewards in life for men, but it renders women the image of *namaiki* (arrogant and snobbish) (Fujiwara-Fanselow & Imamura, 1991; Okano & Tsuchiya, 1999). Since Japanese men tend to be intimidated by the thought of marrying a woman with equal or higher academic credentials, many

women viewed “half-university” education at a two-year college as ideal, equipping them to become the wife of a professional man with a four-year college education.

Recently, Japanese women began to explore selfhood outside the traditional realm of motherhood and womanhood (Sugihara & Katsurada, 2002). Young Japanese women feel that they are entitled to pursue their own careers and child-free activities, such as hobbies and going out with friends, other than marriage and motherhood (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2007; Nomaguchi, 2006).

According to a recent Government report by The National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (2007), almost 50% of single women, aged 18 to 34, indicated that they would have no plan to marry within one year. The average age of first marriage for Japanese women has increased from 25.0 years old in 1980 to 27.8 years in 2005.

And the average number of years of waiting for their first child after marriage increased from 1.61 years, in 1980, to 2.09 years in 2005. The number of married women working outside the home increased from 49.4%, in 1980, to 71.6% in 2005 for those aged 25 to 29, and from 46.5% to 61.6% for those aged 30 to 34. Given these new life styles, different from the traditional gender-roles among Japanese women, it is expected that Japanese women’s choice of a two-year college education is now unencumbered by gender stereotypes, as addressed in past research. However, little is known about this due to the absence of research on the subject. The present study investigates underlying factors that influence the college choice decision of Japanese women who are currently attending a two-year college.

## Purpose

For a sample of 214 Japanese female students currently enrolling in a two-year college, the present study investigates whether traditional gender stereotypes continue to influence the decisions of Japanese female students on a two-year college education. The present study addressed the following questions:

1. Do Japanese women still choose two-year colleges, encumbered by the traditional gender stereotypes?
2. Do Japanese women choose two-year colleges for different reasons other than the traditional gender stereotypes?

## Method

### *Participants*

The Participants were first-and second-year female students enrolled in a two year college in a medium-sized city, located in the western part of Japan. The college is co-educational, but it offers academic programs, including business administration, early childhood education and music, which are considered traditionally appropriate for women. A total of approximately 270 male and female students are currently enrolled in the college, but about 260 students (90%) of the student body are female. Two hundred fourteen female, 82% of the female students at the college participated in this study.

### *Instrument*

The 18-item survey was developed to examine factors perceived influential by Japanese women on their decision to choose a two-year college. The items were adopted

based on a review of literature pertinent to gender-roles and women in higher education in Japan, and the government surveys on Japanese women's life course plans (Amano, 1997; Fujiwara-Fanselow, 1995; Fujiwara-Fanselow & Imamura, 1991; Harada, 1993; Inoue, 1992; Kambayashi, 1981; National Institute Of Population and Social Security Research 2006; Starobin, 2002; Sugihara & Katsurada, 2002). There are five response alternatives provided for each item, with differential weights assigned as 1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= neutral, 4= agree, and 5= strongly agree. Higher scores indicate a greater significance for the item measured.

### *Procedure*

The survey questionnaire and an answer sheet accompanied by a cover letter were mailed to the Director of Administrative Office of the participating two-year college, who then distributed them to faculty members. The cover letter explained the purpose of the study and provided the necessary instructions for completing the questionnaire. The instructions included the following points: (1) participants should respond anonymously, (2) there are no right or wrong answers, and (3) participants should choose only one answer for each question. The faculty members distributed the survey questionnaires, as well as answer sheets for the students to complete at home. The participation in the survey questionnaire was voluntary. Upon completion, students returned the answer sheets to the faculty members. They were then mailed back to the researcher by the end of May 2006 for statistical analysis.

### *Data analysis*

This study employed SPSS for analyzing the data collected through the survey questionnaire, and performed the following statistical analyses:

1. To examine a factor structure of the survey, exploratory factor analyses were performed.
2. To examine internal consistency and the reliability of scores for each of the factors, alpha coefficients of internal consistency were calculated.
3. To further examine internal consistency reliability, item-subscale correlations were calculated for all of the 18 items.
4. The mean scores and standard deviations for each item, as well as for subscales, were calculated. These scores were then rank-ordered, from the highest mean scores to the lowest ones, to determine what items and factors significantly influenced participants' college choice.

## Findings

### *Factor Analyses*

In order to group individual survey items into meaningful categories, the SPSS was employed to perform exploratory factor analysis. A principal component analysis with a varimax rotation extracted 3 factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, collectively accounting for 60% of the total variance. The eigenvalue was 7.68 for Factor 1, 1.71 for Factor 2, and 1.36 for Factor 3. In order to achieve a definitive interpretation of the factor, items with moderate or high factor loading ( $>.60$ ) (Dawson and Dennis. 1997) were

considered for naming the factor, leaving a total of 14 items. Items 1, 2 and 4 loaded on Factor 1. Items 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 12, and 15 loaded on Factor 2. Items 11, 13, 16 and 17 loaded on Factor 3. Table 1 shows the principal rotated factors with loadings.

Table 1. Factor Analysis of Three-Factor Solution (N=214)

	I	II	III
1	.75		
2	.81		
4	.72		
5		.74	
6		.82	
8		.78	
9		.75	
10		.74	
12		.67	
15		.74	
11			.73
13			.61
16			.62
17			.78

Factor 1 was named *Traditional Gender Expectations*. This factor includes three items associated with *rayosai kenbo kyoiku* and represents the traditional mission of two-year colleges: preparing women to become a good mother and a wise wife and at the same time to become a cultured person. Factor 2 was named *Career and Marriage*. This factor includes 7 items. Two items, “Two-year colleges address women’s needs and interests” and “Two-year colleges enhance opportunities for marriage” should at a glance

belong to the *Traditional Gender Expectations*; however, they did not. Other items in the same category relate to women's interest to acquire leadership skills and independence and to further their education into the four-year colleges and universities. All together they suggest that women do not necessarily choose career over marriage or vice versa. Rather, they pursue dual goals of career and marriage. Factor 3 was named *Career Interests*. This factor includes items associated with the advantages of a two-year college which facilitate personal goals, and represents the educational missions of two-year colleges in recent years: assisting women to master knowledge and skills in their chosen professional areas, to enhance their marketability and to gain financial stability.

Table 2 shows intercorrelations of scores on the three factors of the survey and internal consistency reliability estimates. Intercorrelations among the three factors ranged from .37 to .54. The highest intercorrelation of .54 occurred between *Career and Marriage* and *Career Interests*. The internal consistency estimates of reliability for each factor were as follows: *Traditional Gender Expectations*, .80; *Career and Marriage*, .91; *Career Interests*, .72. Item-subscale correlations showed that all items are more closely related with scores on their respective factors than with other factors.

Table 2. Intercorrelations of Scores on the Three Factor Subscales with Internal Consistency Reliability Estimates in Diagonal Parenthesis (N=214)

	I	II	III
I	(.80)		
II	.37*	(.91)	
III	.46*	.54*	(.72)

Note 1: \*. Correlation is significant at the .001 level (2-tailed).

Note 2: I (*Traditional Gender Expectations*); II (*Career and Marriage*); III (*Career Interests*).

*Factors Influencing Choice of a Two-year College*

Table 3 presents the mean and standard deviation of scores on each of three subscales in descending order. They were: *Career Interests* (M = 3.41, SD = .87); *Traditional Gender Expectations* (M = 2.86, SD = .94); and *Career and Marriage* (M = 2.31, SD = .85)

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations of Individual Items and Factors (N=214)

	M	SD	$\alpha$
<i>Career Interests</i>			
Two-year colleges offer academic courses of interest to me.	3.77	1.21	
Two-year colleges allow me to learn specialized and professional level course content over a short term.	3.55	1.09	
Two-year colleges help graduates become financially independent quickly.	3.19	1.18	
Two-year colleges help open up opportunities for better jobs in specialized areas.	3.13	1.25	
Factor Total	3.41	.87	.72
<i>Traditional Gender Expectations</i>			
Two-year colleges help me become a more cultured person.	3.46	1.08	
Two-year colleges prepare me to become a good mother.	2.60	1.13	
Two-year colleges prepare me to become a good wife.	2.51	1.13	
Factor Total	2.86	.94	.80
<i>Career and Marriage</i>			
Two-year colleges help women cultivate greater self-sufficiency and independence.	2.52	1.10	
Two-year colleges address women's needs and interests.	2.51	1.10	
Two-year colleges are more conducive to learning for women.	2.45	1.12	
Two-year colleges prepare me to advance to specialized courses upon graduation.	2.35	1.04	
Two-year colleges prepare me to advance to four-year colleges and universities.	2.23	1.04	
Two-year colleges help women learn leadership skills.	2.15	1.00	
Two-year colleges enhance opportunities for marriage.	1.98	0.99	
Factor Total	2.31	.85	.91

From items of *Career Interests* “Two-year colleges offer academic courses of interest to me” (M = 3.77, SD = 1.21) ranked highest, followed by “Two-year colleges

allow me to learn specialized (professional level) course content over a short term” (M = 3.55, SD = 1.09), Two-year colleges help graduates become financially independent quickly (M= 3.19, SD = 1.18) and “Two-year colleges help open up opportunities for better jobs in specialized areas” (M= 3.13, SD = 1.25). *Traditional Gender Expectations* and *Career and Marriage* were not rated as high as *Career Interests*. Individual items within these categories were also ranked low, except for one item from *Traditional Gender Expectations*: “Two-year colleges help me become a more cultured person” (M = 3.46, SD = 1.08). The least important item for each category was as follows: “Two-year colleges prepare me to become a good wife” (M = 2.51, SD = 1.13) (*Traditional Gender Expectations*); “Two-year colleges enhance opportunities for marriage” (M = 1.98, SD = 0.99) (*Career and Marriage*).

## Discussion

The traditional roles of women are still upheld to certain degrees by women in the present study; however, their concerns for building career and financial independency are stronger reasons for their college choice. Students in the present study chose a two-year college primarily for their concerns for a job and financial security. For them a two-year college is a place to acquire skills and knowledge required of their career choice in a relatively short time, thus securing financial independency in their immediate future. This finding can be explained by the Japanese social environment.

First, the Japanese government promulgated the Equal Employment Opportunity Law in 1986 to secure equal employment opportunities for women (Japan Association for

Women's Education, 2009). The 1986 law was revised in 1997, and prohibits discrimination against women at all stages of employment practice, from recruitment until retirement. This law influenced the employment practice in society. Both the public sector and private companies gradually extended job offers to women in order to comply with the law (Ogasawara, 1998). As employment opportunities for women increased, social expectations that used to discourage women from pursuing their interests outside home life changed. Japanese society at large began to encourage women to become part of the regular work force, along with men. Popular magazines for women, as well as television programs, portray *shigoto ga dekiru jyosei* (achieving women at work place) as an ideal image of the new age woman. Women in the younger generations were born after the enactment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law and grew up with new gender expectations. The strong career aspirations of students in this study may reflect this social context.

Second, the Japanese economy has been in a long recession since the burst of the economic bubble in the early 1990's, and with the ensuing economic constraints women's economic role increased. Japanese society traditionally expects that the man should be the primary or exclusive breadwinner for his family. As the Japanese economy continued to deteriorate, however, Japanese women needed to shoulder part of the breadwinning responsibility to supplement their husband's income, and continued to remain in the labor force after their marriage. Comprehending the current Japanese economic climate, students in this study may feel that they need to develop their ability to earn good incomes through a two-year college education so that they can financially help

their husbands in the future.

Finally, Japanese society attempts to create a workplace culture which encourages women to remain in the labor force after marriage and childbearing. Traditionally, Japanese women have been expected to care for their husbands and children. Caring for her family is a 24/7 job, demanding a wife's devotion of time and energy to family life. Many workplaces, thus, used to customarily practice *kotobuki taisya* (marriage retirement) and to discourage women from continuing to work after marriage and childbearing. Women with professional aspirations ended up leaving their careers and staying at home, due partially to this practice. As has been noted, the Japanese government introduced policies in past decades, including The Equal Employment Opportunity Law which prohibits discrimination against women at all stages of employment practice, from recruitment through retirement. Business firms now consider reducing overtime work hours for their male and female employees who have younger children, and are developing rehiring systems after childbearing. Students in this study are career-minded, expecting that such a work environment may help them continue to remain in the labor force after marriage and childbearing

The findings of this study reveal that students chose a two-year college according to their career aspirations. This finding, however, may not necessarily mean that they completely denounce *ryosai kenbo kyoiku* at a two-year college. Students rated *Traditional Gender Expectations* second highest. Although the employment environment and women's roles in Japanese society have changed in past decades, social expectations do not change rapidly. Many cultural and political conservatives continue to hold

traditional gender expectations. Women should be submissive, sensitive, caring and fulfill their obligation as wives and mothers. Men should be self-reliant, assertive, successful and wage earners for their families. Women who attempt to find their self-worth outside of family life tend to become targets of criticism by cultural and political conservatives. Men who married such women tend to be ridiculed for having wives who lack traditional feminine characteristics. Japanese women rank second highest worldwide in their approval of traditional gender-role ideology (Inoue, 1992). Students in this study may thus be cognizant of the fact that traditional gender expectations continue to persist in Japanese society, and may be conforming to these expectations.

Students in this study ranked *Career and Marriage* least as a factor influencing their decision to choose a two-year college. Students in this study do not view two-year college as a stepping stone to success in career and marriage in the future; preparing for advanced education, learning work place demeanor considered important and also enhancing their marriage prospects. They seem to be pessimistic about the feasibility of pursuing the opposing roles of becoming successful in business and becoming married. This finding is understandable, given the persistent gender expectations in society, as noted above. Although Japanese society at large has become tolerant toward women's participation in the labor force, to date women are expected to become primary caretakers for family when they become married. When women pursue a career, they, explicitly and implicitly, are told that their careers should not interfere with their roles as wives and mothers (Katsurada and Sugihara, 2002). No matter how much Japanese women aspire to a career, they are expected to pursue their career aspirations within the boundary of

gender expectations. Having a full family life and a successful career still seems a big challenge for Japanese women. Students in this study may feel the same, and express little interest in enhancing their career and marriage prospects by attending a two-year college.

### Conclusion

The present study has yielded some insights into underlying factors that influence the college choice decision of Japanese women who attend a two-year college. Japanese female students choose a two-year college education based on their expectations that two-year college courses are practical and helpful for career development. The nick name accorded to two-year colleges, *hanayome gakoo* (bride-training school), does not seem to be suitable anymore in current society. Japanese female students having career aspirations does not necessarily mean that they are only interested in advancing in business and being freed from traditional gender expectations. They are still very mindful of traditional gender expectations and feel ambivalent about pursuing both career and marriage.

The findings call for cautious interpretation for two reasons. First, this study involved a single institution. The findings of this study, thus, may not be generalized to apply to students attending other two-year colleges. Second, the survey used in this study may not include a comprehensive inventory of items associated with the college choice of women. Choosing a college is one of the most important decisions a student makes, given the influence of their choice on their subsequent life course. The survey items

relate to the traditional gender expectations and other opposing items taken from the literature. It is reasonable to speculate that there exist reasons for women's college choice other than those reflected in the survey items. Despite its limitations, the present study opens a window to the development of a framework for identifying factors perceived to be influential by Japanese female students who choose to attend a two-year college. As the college-age population decreases in Japan, the competition for prospective students among colleges will become intense. It is imperative that two-year college administrators and faculty understand the dynamics of the process of two-year college choice by women, so that they will be able to evaluate efficaciously whether their educational goals and curriculum satisfy contemporary women's interests. In so doing, they will be better equipped to design effective recruitment plans and marketing practices for attracting students and surviving in a competitive market.

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