Four students from Middlebury College participated in an intensive, four-week service-learning program in Japan over the summer that took them from the busy city streets of Tokyo to the quiet, rural community of Tennyumura. Two students from International Chinese University and four students from The Chinese University of Hong Kong joined the program.

The group of ten students came from different countries, academic disciplines and varying levels of Japanese proficiency. Despite their differences, they all engaged in service activities such as planting soybeans, clearing blueberry patches, teaching in elementary classrooms and interacting with elderly Japanese people.

"If we’ve ever been to any country other than Japan, the cultural differences can be vast, compared to our American communities and community members it’s not a shared experience," Mullins said. "What is service? Do we have a shared understanding of service within this group?"

"It was not until Yoshino took us to one of her preconceived notions of service that she began to understand," Mullins explained. "I didn’t realize how much of an impact I would have on the community – I still get updates via Facebook about the soybeans we planted."

Mullins explained that spending time in Tennyumura was important because the town is struggling with an aging population. Fifty-eight percent of the population is 65 years or over, a percentage that older residents do not spend a lot of time around younger people. While Yoshino questioned whether or not spending time with host families benefited the community, she later realized that the elderly residents loved talking with the galokkujin, or ‘foreigners,’ and hearing about their lives outside of Japan.

"Both Mullins and Yoshino enjoyed playing ‘gate ball’ – a game similar to croquet – with residents. After the game, those residents laughed along with service-learning students at how games and sports unite people regardless of their culture or language.

Students also participated in service projects in Tokyo where they facilitated classroom activities and helped out with after school programs. In one school, the Japanese children taught the daigokujin (college students) how to play with traditional Japanese toys.

"It was a wonderful mutual learning opportunity," Mullins said. She described how the Japanese elementary school students loved sharing their culture’s customs and traditions with their ‘teachers,’ who then reciprocated with games from their home countries.

When asked about the activity, Yoshino laughed and said, "I thought it was cute. None of us, the college kids, knew how to play with the toys and the kids really enjoyed interacting with us."

The four Middlebury students who participated in the program were set apart from the other eighty applicants Mullins said she hopes to continue the program but is unsure of its future. The One Middlebury Fund, a one-time grant administered by the Office of the Provost dedicated to strengthening interactions between various Middlebury programs, the College’s Japanese Studies department and the Center for Community Engagement’s cross cultural fund originally covered all the expenses. The one-time nature of the funding, however, means that the program may not continue.

"The question we kept looking at was, ‘What is service? Do we have a shared understanding of service within this group?’

I hope people walk away from the events having gained at least a small sense of the vast beauty of the universe."