

# RICHARD J. SAMUELS

## IUC '78

Richard J. Samuels traveled to Japan for the first time as a college senior because his original plan to study in India had been abruptly cancelled. He later returned to Japan with his wife, Debra, on a Fulbright scholarship. Today, he is a preeminent authority on Japanese politics and East Asian security affairs, but looking back on his prodigious career, Samuels says that “it all started with two 20-year-old Jewish kids from Brooklyn on an adventure.”

Samuels graduated with an A.B. in Political Science from Colgate University, an institution he believes was “far ahead of the curve organizing study-abroad programs and recognizing the need for global citizens.” In addition to his senior year homestay, Samuels studied Japanese for one year with noted linguistics scholar and Japanese language educator Eleanor Jordan of Cornell University. He then went on to earn an M.A. from Tufts University and took a Ph.D. from MIT -- both degrees in Political Science.

He discovered the IUC in 1977 while in Japan on his Fulbright award. At the time, he felt his Japanese to be “woefully inadequate” to support a wife and 5-month old son. “It was a horrible moment for me personally,” he recalls. However, Caroline Atsuko Yang, head of the Fulbright office in Tokyo, put Samuels in touch with Delmer Brown, then resident director of IUC, who offered him a spot in the program though classes had already begun a week earlier. “I’ll never forget the generosity of those educators,” Samuels says. “I can’t imagine what I would be doing today without their support.”

When Samuels returned to the U.S. in 1980, “Japan loomed very large on the horizon, particularly for engineers at MIT.” In his role as Faculty Consultant for the MIT Industrial Liaison Program, he observed that visiting Japanese engineers had thoroughly read research papers written in English. At that point, “the light bulb went on,” Samuels recalls, recognizing the need for American engineers to



learn Japanese “to achieve parity at a moment when Japan seemed threatening.”

Starting with a \$1,000 budget for postage and photocopying, Samuels began MIT’s Japan Program in 1981, and remains its Founding Director. The program of applied international studies has nurtured generations of scientists and engineers knowledgeable about Japan, and inspired similar internship programs for China, Germany, Israel, Brazil, and other countries where technology looms large.

Today, Samuels is Ford International Professor of Political Science and Director of the MIT Center for

International Studies. In 2005 he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He has served as chairman of both the U.S. panel of the U.S.-Japan Conference on Cultural and Educational Exchange and the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission. He is one of only three scholars -- Japanese or foreign -- to have authored more than a single scholarly monograph recognized by the Nippon Foundation as one of the top “one hundred books for understanding contemporary Japan.” In recognition of his significant contributions to scholarship about Japan and the promotion of U.S.-Japan relations, Samuels was awarded the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold and Silver Star, in November 2011.

Samuels is currently writing a book on the policy consequences of the March 2011 disaster in Tohoku. He believes that U.S.-Japan relations remain strong, with a “high level of trust,” exhibited by the people of both countries, particularly as displayed after the catastrophe when the U.S. military and American donors worked so closely and effectively with the Japanese government and its citizens. He also characterizes the IUC as “the premier institution for Japanese language instruction -- there’s none better,” he claims. “Students come deeply committed, leave well-trained, and remain active and engaged.”