

20 Years of Davis Anime Club

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As the end of the school year approached, the officers of Davis Anime Club began to debate dissolution.

There weren't enough applications for club leadership next year. None of the current officers had the time or inclination to continue on. The president had quit via public post on Facebook more than a month before.

It all seemed hopeless. Davis Anime Club (DAC, as members affectionately call it) has been running for almost a quarter century, longer than most of its members and any of its officers had been alive. Anime, or Japanese animation, has enjoyed an American popularity boost in the last fifteen or so years. Once a niche interest, anime has now gone mainstream, with Japanese shows broadcast on American television channels like Cartoon Network and conventions like AnimeExpo in LA, which boasted an attendance of 100,420 in 2016, and DAC was primed to take advantage of the cultural moment.

Anime club meetings usually consist of screening different anime, an episode a week, until the end of the quarter, with a half-hour break for activities and trivia games on Wednesdays. Any given show's popularity and quality are variable: anime is a medium, not a genre, and though DAC tries to provide a good balance between genres and target demographics (much of anime, for example, is divided between *shoujo* for young girls, *shounen* for young men, *josei* for adult women and *seinen* for adult men), no one show can please everyone.

At the beginning of the school year, DAC's first meetings had filled Wellman's largest lecture halls, more than a hundred students packed into the point that there was standing room only. There are 968 members on its Facebook group, two percent of a campus of thirty-four thousand. A few years back, DAC even had its own convention.

Now, attendance was fluctuating at twenty or thirty students a week, and none of them seemed inclined to invest their time into leadership. Could this be the end?

In UC Davis parlance, DAC is categorized as a social club, as opposed to a professional/academic or cultural association. It is the third-largest of its kind on campus, following only the Ski or Snowboard club, which is characterized more by wild parties than a great love of winter sports, and the League of Legends club, based around a popular video game.

Though perhaps not as resume-worthy as the Human Rights Journal or Student Physicians for Social Responsibility, Davis Anime Club is no slouch when it comes to activities. It has two-hour meetings both Wednesday and Thursday, and events almost every weekend: karaoke, ice skating, various festivals.

The club officers, student volunteers elected every spring for one-year terms, run it all: arranging rides to Woodland and Sacramento for faraway events, organizing an anime club-only student mentor/mentee program and reaching out to other student organizations, members of the administration and, on one memorable occasion, the Japanese consulate. The president in particular is responsible for the direction and often atmosphere of the club, taking on tasks that, for whatever reason, other officers cannot complete.

“DAC was pretty much literally the main thing I cared about when I was in Davis,” said Brian Wu, president from 2009 to 2011, “So I just poured all my time into it.”

For many students, devoting that much time to a hobby can be a struggle. Many of the officers have part-time jobs or internships, or demanding majors with a lot of coursework. Officers studying engineering and other STEM fields, for example, find themselves having to choose between their obligations to the club and preparing for organic chemistry. Some feel awkward and uncomfortable putting “anime club” on their resume: despite anime’s increasing popularity, there’s still a lingering perception that it might be perceived as strange.

With the amount of work that DAC demands, it isn’t surprising that it’s struggling to find new officers. The average college student in the United States graduates with over \$30,000 in student debt, and, as financial aid and scholarship budgets shrink and the job market grows ever more precarious, students face immense pressure to devote themselves to resume-building activities or part-time jobs. What is surprising is that despite the massive amount of work involved, despite the conflicting demands of jobs and internships and a high GPA for grad school, despite the lack of cultural and institutional support that bolsters culture- and academics-focused student organizations, DAC has had enough students every year willing to dedicate their lives to anime to sustain itself for over twenty years.

Something about anime compels devotion. Back in 1992, when Davis Anime Club was first founded, anime was so hard to find that devotees had to rely on bootlegged VHS tapes and Laserdiscs shipped internationally from Japan. Fans would search far and wide for their favorite shows, often translated and subtitled from by other fans, fueling a black market where fans would buy, sell and trade their favorite shows. One look at the old anime club Usenet group reveals desperate requests to borrow or buy a tape of the next season of a show.

“I spent \$900 on an LD player while in college,” says John Kilpatrick, founder and first president of Davis Anime Club, “Which was insane for a college student to do.”

The first iteration of anime club was built out of necessity: there was no other way for many members to watch anime, and so they had to congregate at physical screenings. As time went by, technology progressed, and anime grew in popularity, however, DAC became less essential.

“A lot of the people who attended showed up just to watch. They would quietly find a seat, watch the shows, then leave immediately after they ended,” says Anthony Dingman, president from 2005-2006, “Over the years, even the laziest fan could find and download the shows on their own, so only the people interested in the social aspect kept coming. The club shrunk despite our efforts to spread the word, incorporate more social activities, and otherwise add value.”

“I started watching anime as an elementary school kid, borrowing VCR tapes from the public library of Sailor Moon and Cardcaptor Sakura,” says Esha Patel, current president of anime club. Truman Williams, the president prior to Esha in 2015, also had easy access to anime in elementary school, watching whatever shows were available on television. Many other students of their generation grew up on Hayao Miyazaki’s Studio Ghibli films. Seven out of eight current anime club officers are of East Asian descent, and many remember their parents showing them Japanese anime tapes and DVDs, dubbed or subtitled into different languages.

Access has only increased since then, with the advent of streaming services like Funimation and Crunchyroll (where a former Davis Anime Club president, Miles Thomas, works), as well as a plethora of illegal streaming sites. Shows today are often simultaneously broadcast in Japan and overseas, and the streaming giant Netflix has begun to fund the production of certain anime as well.

So if anime is readily available to stream whenever someone wants, why do students still come to DAC? It certainly isn’t the shows. Though DAC attempts to screen current shows that members may not have watched yet, many of the anime are from a year or two years ago, which means that members can stream the entire series if they so choose, without waiting for DAC’s once-a-week screening schedule. Furthermore, not every show is well-liked: some are so unpopular that members will arrive late and leave early so as to miss them, and because of the diversity in anime genres, a member who likes quiet, subtle character dramas may not enjoy the bombastic action-adventure comedy screened right after.

And yet, despite the fact that they technically don’t need to, that they could instead watch at home in their pajamas with a bowl of popcorn, students still fill the rows in DAC and try to give back to the club as well, volunteering to act as student mentors (or “senpais”, as the club calls it, referring to the Japanese word for upperclassman), drive people to faraway Sacramento for karaoke, and design T-shirts, banners and posters for free.

“I am certainly still friends with DAC people,” says Anthony Dingman, “One of my best friends met his now-wife at DAC, and I was the best man at their wedding. Two of the more important members of the club got together during their time at Davis and got married after graduating; I was lucky enough to be invited to their wedding as well.”

Different alumni all share similar stories: getting married to someone they met in anime club, sharing a drink with old friends whenever their paths cross, and regular reunions at Fanime, the largest anime convention in the Bay Area, or DAC's Thanksgiving event, the one club event in the year that alumni are allowed to attend.

One common DAC complaint among the officers' group is that people "find their friends and leave", ceasing to come to anime club once their social groups and bonds have already formed. However, that doesn't change the fact that anime club is where they find their friends, navigating a campus of 35,000 to find a place where they belong.

Despite the president and officers' worry, when the applications for officer came up, DAC received enough applications that they had to hold elections to determine who would be best for the positions. DAC's passion won out, and though the club may again face challenges in the future, it will at least survive another year—or maybe twenty.