Role of the University in Community Development from a Student’s Perspective: Case Study of Meimai Housing Complex

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At the Meimai-Lab

At the Meimai-Lab, many students of the University of Hyogo (UH) engage in volunteer activities for revitalizing the Meimai Housing Complex (or Meimai for short) community. Located in Meimai in the suburbs of Kobe, it is one of the first so-called “new towns” established in the 1960s. It is now among the oldest surviving “new towns” with a rapidly aging population. Student volunteers participate in various weekly activities and special events like Christmas festivals, etc., under the supervision of Prof. Katoh and Prof. Wada. When the elderly participants show their appreciation, students feel a sense of indescribable accomplishment. We did not have a good relationship with the residents in the beginning-- they often asked us what we are doing in Meimai. In time, we got to know each other better and they tell us that they are glad to sit and talk with young students. Most of the elderly residents are retired professionals who live alone with no one to talk to. I think student volunteers have a potentially significant role to play in Meimai community revitalization.

University Social Responsibility (USR):

The University of Hyogo (UH) has an ideal research environment (e.g. facilities, information access, etc.) funded by taxpayers of Hyogo Prefecture. Thus, UH has a social responsibility to fulfill in its academic and research programs. The Meimai-Lab was established in 2008 in order to manage social responsibility and research. UH faculty involvement in Meimai-Lab makes it possible for specialists to participate in community development. Many problems arise in the actual conduct of activities to fulfill University Social Responsibility and the UH realizes a greater need to maintain a good symbiotic relationship with the Meimai community.

Research and Social Service Activities:

UH volunteer activities at Meimai-Lab are divided broadly into two categories: research and social service activities. The former is essential to justify our presence at Meimai, while the latter is necessary in designing an effective and mutually useful research environment.

Our main research activity is the Meimai QOL (quality of life) survey assessment. The aim of this survey is to support urban policy by first gaining an understanding of the present situation. While working at Meimai, we notice that the residents do not seem to know each other. The survey gives us an opportunity to examine this hypothesis. For this reason we paid careful attention to residents’ responses regarding their life history and satisfaction. In Meimai’s rapidly aging community, this survey is expected to provide inputs for formulation of policies concerning enhancement of infrastructure, etc.

With respect to social service activities, last year we organized the World Expo of Housing

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Complexes (held in Meimai in October 2010) to promote interest among residents in community development by introducing various approaches to regional revitalization both inside and outside Japan. UH students participated in the conference while organizing other related events.

In Meimai, allocation of the UH’s resources for research and social service projects is important for effective implementation, and in turn UH needs to report/disseminate project results. However, without the support of the residents we would lose an ideal research environment. Therefore, social service is a major concern for the University.

Responding to the Needs of An Aging Society: Student business support zone

In 2009, elderly people comprised 35 percent of Meimai’s population. Public finance constraints are insurmountable but I think that the situation can be considerably improved through community development. Meimai, however, was developed mainly for housing; and has limited commercial and public amenities. Thus, the pull effects for new people to move into Meimai are weak, magnifying the aging effects. For this reason Meimai is in need of human resources capable of developing and implementing incentive mechanisms for Meimai’s sustainable community development.

We think therefore that Meimai should be made into a student business support zone (SBSZ). A SBSZ is made up of a consortium of universities, local and business communities that plan and implement activities in Meimai aimed at sustainable community development. For instance, on one hand, the UH dispatches Business Administration students to participate in local community events. In return, the local community can offer students apartment housing at discounted rates. In the same way, the local communities may also lease office space at a discount to UH graduates who wish to start businesses in Meimai. In return, the business makes a profit and contributes to the Meimai revitalization program. Plans such as these that efficiently utilize available resources (UH students, residential/office space in Meimai, seed capital for companies) are what Meimai needs to resuscitate the flow of resources in the community. I think several students look forward to helping in Meimai’s community development activities.

However, there are many difficulties in building a SBSZ. First, there are few financing schemes for enterprising students in Japan. Second, student venture start-ups and angel investors are rare in Japan; and finally, mixed reaction of residents regarding entry of new people (students or people from other parts of Japan). Though there are several “outsiders” who are deeply involved in local revitalization efforts, Meimai is currently veiled in an atmosphere of reluctance and uncertainty. I think that, rather than letting other people do things for them, Meimai residents should wisen up and realize that cooperating in community development now will reap benefits of sustainable community living for all residents in the future.