

Department of Agri-food and Environmental Policy

Regional Planning Course

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The distinctive feature of the Regional Planning Course, run by the Department of Agri-food and Environmental Policy (formerly the Department of Agricultural Economics), is the foundation of sociology. In short, sociology is the study of natural law in social relations; in other words, relationships between individuals and relationships between society and individuals. The major premise is that there is not only an economic motive, but also a social motive in human behavior. Sociology looks for the social meaning of human behavior, which is regarded as a matter of course or as the characteristics of individuals, such as why people work (or do not work) hard, why people believe in a specific religion, why people want to purchase an expensive bag of a expensive brand, why teachers behave in the manner expected of teachers, why students behave in the manner expected of students, and the meaning of “the manner expected” itself.

Another feature of the Regional Planning Course is that students find out various problems facing local communities, including communities in cities, agricultural villages and suburbs, through field surveys, and devise solutions for the problems themselves. A field survey in an agricultural community is compulsory for the Department of Agri-food and Environmental Policy courses. We have also held a village check workshop in Motegi-machi, Haga-gun, Tochigi Prefecture for the last two years, and sell farm products at the Ikumeisai university festival, in cooperation with the villagers.



Photo 1

A workshop is a method devised for the smooth progress of a series of processes that are required for residents to establish the ideal village, and include revealing problems, devising and implementing solutions by the residents themselves. Workshops attract a great deal of attention as a way to obtain the agreement of local communities and to change the current excessive dependence on municipal government and public undertakings.

In the village check workshop, held in Motegi-machi, in August 2008, thirteen students were divided into four groups and toured the village with the villagers (Photo 1). Motegi-machi is a typical village that lacks flat land and it is no longer possible for farmers in the village to have a livelihood based merely on farming. They used to grow tobacco leaves



Photo 2



Photo 3

and konjac, but both declined because of imports and heavy falls in price of these farm products, and village farming was further damaged by the government's policy of reducing the acreage under rice cultivation. Four groups worked to devise ways to use the abandoned agricultural land, which continues to increase year on year. Local people have pinned their hopes on the students, saying "we want unfettered ideas from young people". However, it was not so easy for students to respond to their expectations. Students devised interesting ideas: growing chocolate vine trees, opening a cafe (which uses local vegetables and fruits), selling rice under a brand name and cultivating eel and carp, etc., and introduced their ideas to the villagers and the village government using posters with illustrations (Photos 2 and 3).

Even on the one point of abandoned agricultural land, after seeing the dense bamboo groves tangled with creepers of weeds, and hearing problems directly from the local people, students felt desperate to devise a solution.

Through sales of farm products at the Ikumeisai university festival, we became aware that there is a considerable demand for Japanese radish complete with the leaves and whole Chinese cabbages in the city (at least during the festival in Ikuta Campus). At the Ikumeisai, in November 2009, a stall was set up to have a smart atmosphere, and was named "Marché Ichida", and all of the vegetables and citrus fruits from Motegi-machi were sold out (Photo 4).

I succeeded to the course from the predecessor four years ago and have marked graduation theses only for two academic years. Two features of my course, namely "sociology" and "learning through field surveys", are obvious from the following graduation themes.



Photo 4

“The development process of urban agriculture -- the case of Yokohama City”, “Coexistence of a shopping street and a large shopping mall”, “Mentally disabled people and agriculture -- the case of Nerima-ku”, “A study of suburbs -- from the viewpoints of the residents of Tama New Town”, and “A modernological study of contemporary young people’s fashion”.

From April 2010, the course name will be Environmental Sociology. In addition to the previous study, students will investigate the requirements to stimulate interest among many more people in agriculture and farming communities, and for people to become aware of the problems in agriculture and farming communities, and to become involved in agriculture, including finding out why people have not been able to do so sufficiently, focusing on so-called multifunction of agriculture and agricultural land such as landscape, recreation and biodiversity, by comparing with the conditions in the EU and Germany, which is my special field.

For more information, please visit the website at <http://www7a.biglobe.ne.jp/~chiikikeikaku/>.