

Tradition of Manufacturing Town “Sumida” Meets Wisdom of University

Aiming to Boost Area via Industry-Academia-Gov’t Alliance

Photo: Sumida City Office

By Takehide GUNJI

TOKYO’S Sumida City and Waseda University agreed on Dec. 25 last year to renew for five years their “agreement on comprehensive projects in a region-university alliance” and announced it at a joint press conference (photo). The original accord concluded in December 2002 was the first of its kind in Japan.

I would like to discuss here the possibility and prospect of regional partnerships involving industry, academia and government in the future by introducing some of more than 80 alliance projects that both sides undertook jointly up to the day the agreement was renewed.



1. Sumida: Town Brimming with Regional Resources

Sumida is the town where a new broadcasting tower due to become Tokyo’s fresh landmark will be constructed. Sumida is situated in the eastern part of the capital, and although it is only about 5 km from the heart of the metropolis, it still retains strong signs of the culture and atmosphere that have continued uninterrupted since the Edo period (1603-1867), as represented by “shitamachi” (old downtown communities) in the Mukojima and Kyojima districts in the city and by the traditional wrestling of “sumo.”

Sumida is the place where Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), the master painter and wood engraver Japan boasts to the world, spent most of his life. It has a population of about 230,000 and a land area of 13.75 sq. km, relatively small in terms of size among Tokyo’s 23 wards (cities). It also is an area where diverse types of industry centering on manufacturing are concentrated. There are more than 4,000 small back-street factories, including those related to fashion such as textiles and leather goods, machinery and metal workshops such as plating, press and molding, and factories linked with printing, paper, rubber and plastics.

Sumida is a town overflowing with amusing back-alley landscapes, machine sounds from small and midsize manufacturing shops, and nostalgia and peace of mind interwoven by the human kindness of “shitamachi.”

2. Industry-Academia-Gov’t Alliance in Sumida Having No University

Even though a variety of regional resources exist in Sumida, “something” is missing in the area. In fact, Sumida is the only one among the 23 wards without any university or other institutions of higher education. However, that situation led some people in the city to harbor a sense of crisis and to think about forming an alliance with a university outside Sumida in an attempt to produce the same effect as having a university located in the area.

The Sumida City Office and Waseda University in Shinjuku City (another Tokyo ward) concluded the comprehensive alliance agreement on Dec. 24, 2002, and this had a significant impact on neighboring cities and other municipalities across the nation. It was because the agreement not only marked the establishment of cooperation with an out-of-town university but also extended beyond the conventional scope of cooperation usually limited to a few fields such as the development of industry and academic cooperation, like in many alliances concluded so far elsewhere. The agreement was epoch-making in that it had substantial content geared toward setting up collaboration in every possible field for regional development, including the promotion of culture, town development and the nurturing of human resources.

3. Alliance Projects Born out of Concept of Liberal Arts

Joint undertakings by Sumida and Waseda University designed to realize the objectives of the comprehensive alliance agreement have unfolded in various quarters, including the promotion of industry and culture, town building, and human resource development. The distinctive feature of the projects involving industry, academia and government is that they center on those which do not require intermediation of intellectual property such as patents and technology. They have been highly evaluated as unique even from a nationwide perspective. I would like to introduce the following as some examples.

(1) University resources active through “local management seminar”

Under the guidance of Prof. Shinichi Tomonari of Waseda’s Graduate School of Environment and Energy Engineering, a seminar has been organized, likening the Sumida area as a whole to a campus in an attempt to propose measures to invigorate it through students’ field work. Twenty-five seminar students comprising those from different faculties and grades come to Sumida to spend about a year, encountering a variety of residents ranging from managers and employees of smaller businesses and primary/middle school students to elderly people. The seminar is epochal in that the participants unfurl projects to activate the region from their viewpoints as

Photo: Sumida City Office



Students engage in field work as part of a "local management seminar."

university students while deepening interaction with local people. Their activities cover a broad spectrum. Typical examples so far include joint product development by students and local businesses, publication of a youth-oriented booklet, and production of a cable TV program on regional exploration with middle school students.

(2) Liberal arts students cooperate with town factory with singleness of purpose for "management innovation"

An exemplar successful project – the first case in the industry field – was crystallized also by liberal arts students who grappled with the question of management innovation. First of all, 30 students learning corporate management in Waseda's Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies – equivalent to the level of earning a master of business administration (MBA) degree – stayed in close touch with a company in the city for three months to study it as part of the management class for fiscal 2003. They thoroughly discussed with the company's operator all problems pertaining to running its factory, including finances, work process control, personnel management and marketing, and also held discussions with each employee. They later presented a set of proposals on improving operations to management. Thereafter, some students continued to stay for practice and verification of the proposals. Consequently, the company realized remarkable results in its ratio of pretax profit to sales six months later, which soared past 25% from the previous level of around 2%.

(3) Sending out culture, nurturing human resources

The office of Prof. Satoshi Miyazaki of the Graduate School of Japanese Applied Linguistics is wrestling with ways to cope with the symbiosis of multicultural. He has come up with a unique theory that "the ranks of foreign *sumo* wrestlers are proportional to their knowledge of the Japanese language." He has held enlightening seminars on communication in Japanese and on symbiosis for foreign residents in the region. Also, he has been operating a project dubbed "the subject of Sumida" since 2003 in an effort to send out information on the attractiveness, history and culture of the Sumida region as a subject of learning.

In the area of nurturing human resources, a venture business originating from Waseda University has developed and implemented advanced education programs such as entrepreneurship targeting primary and middle school students within Sumida. Furthermore, he has been operating since fiscal 2005 a "juku" private school on employment and business start-ups, the first of its kind in the nation. In addition, Sumida City Office staffers are dispatched to the university's Okuma School of Public Management and the municipality accepts Waseda University undergraduates for internships. Thus alliance projects in the field of human resource development are steadily taking root.

Photo: Sumida City Office



A scene from an entrepreneurship education program for primary and middle school students in Sumida City.

4. Creating next-generation type of industry-academia-gov't alliance based on local features

We believe that the examples of the industry-academia-government alliance introduced thus far have materialized and proved successful because of Sumida's regional characteristics. It could probably be said that the Sumida-type alliance of industry, academia and government, focused on interaction among people, has steadily brought about positive changes, though little by little, to city residents and businesses by capitalizing on the kind of "shitamachi" spirit unique to the Sumida region, and has yielded a new current of local revitalization.

Japan is in the 20th year since its era name was changed from *Showa* to *Heisei*. The environment surrounding the region has become further complicated and its originality is increasingly challenged. If the ideal of an industry-academia-government alliance is to collaborate among the three parties toward their common objectives, there is no denying that the administrative system – or government – has had a high profile. For the alliance to assimilate itself genuinely into the region and for its projects to become sustainable undertakings for regional promotion in the future, it is necessary for local businesses and residents representing "industry" and for research organizations (including universities) representing "academia" to take the initiative independently. And we believe it important that "government" devote itself to the role of a "coordinator" to connect the objectives, prospects and resources, among others, of "industry" and "academia." The creation of a collaborative mechanism permitting industry and academia to become two self-propelled wheels could be the most important subject for industry, academia and government to press ahead with their alliance in the future.

We would like to appeal from Tokyo's "shitamachi" Sumida for a next-generation type of industry-academia-government alliance that will emerge from the foundation of mutually reliable relations and common awareness between regions and universities. **JS**

Takehide Gunji is Chief of Alliance of Industry, Universities and Government, Commerce and Industry Department, Sumida City Office.