

From Strangers to Community Builders: The Role of University Students in Regional Engagement and Tourism Promotion

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Abstract

This study aims to clarify the impact that volunteer events managed by university students from outside the region have on interactions with local residents and tourism promotion. Using the "Hirose River Utilization Promotion Project" implemented in Maebashi City, Gunma Prefecture in 2025 as a case study, analysis was conducted through interviews with six participants. As a result, the extraordinary spatial experience and active involvement of students were highly evaluated, and it was confirmed that they would increase their motivation to participate in the community in the future. In particular, the planning and management by university students brought new perspectives and vitality to the area and was favorably received by local residents. It was suggested that collaboration between universities and communities has the potential to encourage a reevaluation of local resources and a change in resident awareness.

Keywords: Strangers, Regional Engagement, Regional Revitalization, Volunteer Events, Local Resources, Tourism

1 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to clarify how university-sponsored events in which university students from outside the region are actively involved promote interaction with local residents and what impact they have on promoting tourism and revitalizing the region's economy. In this study, authors use the example of the "Make the most of the Hirose River! Riverbed Cleaning + Open-Air Drafting Room" initiative hosted by Maebashi Institute of Technology to examine the effects of local events organized by universities on community interaction and revitalization. As of April 2025, Maebashi City, like the rest of the country, is facing serious social issues of rapid population decline and aging. The population of Maebashi City has declined from its peak of 341,000 in 2000 to about 320,000 in 2025, and is projected to fall below 270,000 by 2045 [1].

The main causes of population decline include the decline in births due to the declining birthrate, as well as the "social decline in population" where young people move to urban areas to continue their education or get a job, and do not return to their local area. This leads to a shrinking workforce within the region, a decline in commercial and industrial activity, and ripple effects such as the difficulty of maintaining public services. On the other hand, the ageing of the population is also progressing noticeably. In 2015, the aging rate (proportion of the population

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aged 65 or over) was 27.1%, but is estimated to reach 30.9% in 2020 and 32.7% in 2025 [1]. Furthermore, the aging rate is expected to exceed 41% by 2045, and as the presence of elderly people in local communities increases, the development of living infrastructure such as nursing care, medical care, transportation, and housing, as well as the creation of support systems, will become important policy issues [1].

Thus, the changes in the population structure in Maebashi City will have a major impact on the vitality and sustainability of the region. In particular, the decline in opportunities for interaction within the region and the weakening of the local community could lead to the isolation of residents and stagnation of the local economy. For this reason, there is a need for collaboration between various entities, including universities, local organizations, and companies, to take measures to make effective use of local resources and encourage young people to settle in the region, as well as new initiatives for revitalizing the region through collaboration between local residents and external talent. Student-led events can bring fresh perspectives and lasting connections, offering new value to the community. Such efforts should be strategically integrated into regional policies addressing demographic challenges. Recent statistics show that tourism in Gunma Prefecture, including Maebashi City, is recovering, with significant increases in visitors and spending [1][2]. While Maebashi sees many day-trip visitors, efforts are underway to attract more overnight guests and international tourists.

As mentioned above, Maebashi City, which has the second largest population in Gunma Prefecture, is also experiencing a declining birthrate and aging population, just like other regions in Japan, and the sustainability of the region is an issue. In order to realize regional development through tourism, it is essential to have an acceptance system for the entire local community and collaboration among diverse human resources. In local events, volunteers play an important role in creating opportunities for interaction and managing them, and in particular in events hosted by universities, the active involvement of students is central. In the case of Maebashi City, many of the participating students are from outside the region, so they bring unusual perspectives and new values to the area, providing fresh stimulation to local residents. This participation by young people from outside the area can be a model that can be applied nationwide as an effective means of contributing to the revitalization of local communities. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine how the management of a volunteer event by university students from outside the area promotes interaction with local residents and has an impact on the revitalization of tourism and economic activity in the area.

2 Literature Review

Based on Nakajima's [3] research on migrant entrepreneurs, this study discusses the possibility that "strangers" from outside the region can become actors in regional revitalization. Through life story interviews with migrant entrepreneurs in Higashikawa, Hokkaido, Nakajima sheds light on the practices of entrepreneurs who develop their lives and work rooted in the local community, and evaluates them as beings who bring new perspectives to local culture. The possibility that such "strangers" can contribute to regional revitalization is consistent with the creative city theory of Landry [4] and Florida [5], which points out that the influx of creative talent promotes regional innovation. Akasaka [6] also pointed out the need to view strangers in a relationship through the concept of "foreigners." Shikida et al. [7] also focus on the process by which strangers build relationships with the local community while utilizing local resources.

University students can also be considered "strangers" who stay in the area for a certain period of time. Many of the students who are based around the university are from outside the area, and continue to be present in the area through a continuous cycle of students graduating and enrolling. According to Tajima [8], the volunteer experience of junior college students is an opportunity to increase their awareness of contributing to the community, and many students expressed a desire to participate again. Also, Masui [9] analyzed the community activities of university students in Takikawa City, Hokkaido, and noted the ripple effects that the reevaluation of community resources and building relationships with local residents had on both students and the community.

There are many studies in English-speaking countries that show the effectiveness of community activities by university students. Beehr et al. [10] compared students who participated in mandatory volunteer activities with those who participated voluntary volunteer activities and reported that the latter tended to have a stronger sense of belonging to the university and stronger intrinsic motivation. This indicates that volunteer activities are deeply connected to students' motivation to learn and their self-efficacy. Similarly, Gruber [11] points out the importance of community engagement in higher education and discusses the significance of libraries and educational institutions promoting collaboration with the community. In particular, it has been reported that educational activities that contribute to the community in the form of service learning contribute to improving students' civic consciousness and learning outcomes. Moreover, Haski-Leventhal et al. [12] investigated the multifaceted effects of student volunteering at Australian universities and revealed that volunteering is beneficial for students, universities, and NPOs from the perspective of psychological contract. In addition, Koekkoek et al. [13] also conducted a literature review on collaboration between universities and local communities, and summarized the significance of universities' contributions to the community from the perspectives of "mutual benefit," "spatial connections," and "institutional support." Finally, Wondimu and Admas [14] found that in an empirical study at Gondar University in Ethiopia, the main motivations for student volunteering were intrinsic reasons such as "wanting to learn" and "wanting to contribute to society." In addition, a particularly large number of students are involved in the fields of disability support and social welfare, and the two-way effect of student growth and community contribution through volunteer activities has been confirmed.

As described above, community activities by university students have educational and social significance, while also functioning as an entity that encourages the reevaluation of local resources and relationship building from the perspective of strangers. Their activities should not be merely temporary, but should be noted as a new model of human resource circulation that enables sustainable regional regeneration. This study offers a new perspective and contribution that has been lacking in existing research by analyzing how university students from outside the region can be involved in local revitalization through the planning and management of local events from the perspectives of "strangership" and "sustainable local relationships."

3 Method

3.1 Details of Local Events Hosted by the University

Maebashi City, Gunma Prefecture, where this study was conducted, is located in the northern part of the Kanto region, almost in the center of Gunma Prefecture, and as the prefectural capital, it plays a central role in administration, economy, and culture. The Hirose River runs through the

city, penetrating the urban area, and is a regional asset that has long been loved as a natural resource that is deeply rooted in the lives of its citizens [2]. Maebashi City is the prefectural capital of Gunma Prefecture, but it faces the challenges of population decline and an aging society. Maebashi Institute of Technology, located in Maebashi City, is a public university established in 2005, and is characterized by its engineering education, focusing on architecture, civil engineering, and design. In particular, it places great emphasis on collaboration with the local community, and actively develops educational programs that teach practical solutions to local issues [15]. The event that is the subject of this study is the "Hirose River Utilization Promotion Project," which was held on Sunday, March 30, 2025. This project is organized by Hirose River Utilization Promotion Project (Maebashi Institute of Technology), and is sponsored by Maebashi City Urban Development Corporation, JR East Maebashi Control Center, Maebashi Institute of Technology, NPO Redesign Management Institute, and Hirose Riverside Green Mizubering Protection Association, with Sada Construction and Hirose Riverside Green Youth Corps participating as cooperating organizations.

This year, in addition to the cleanup activities, an experiential event was held on the Hirose River based on ideas proposed by students in Maebashi Institute of Technology. Particularly noteworthy was the "Open-Air Drafting Room" booth exhibited by laboratories and related parties at Maebashi Institute of Technology. This was set up as a place for free expression and interaction using the riverbed space, and its purpose is to create an opportunity for participants to sense new possibilities for the Hirose River through an extraordinary experience [Figure 1]. The main subject of this study was "Memories of the 'Riverbed' of the Hirose River," which was planned and implemented by the author and students in the laboratory. Many families came along and enjoyed the creative experience in the extraordinary space of the riverbed of the Hirose River in the center of the city, creating a place for interaction between local residents and outside participants [Figure 2].

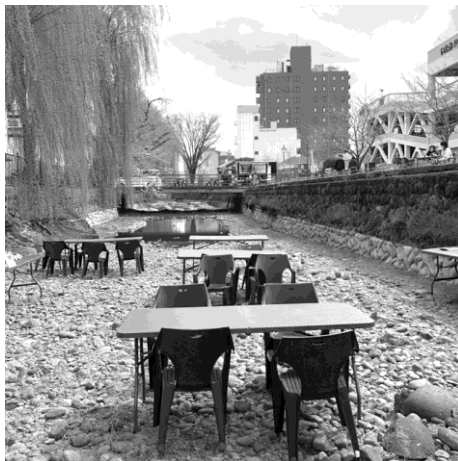


Figure 1



Figure 2

This event, which utilizes the local resource, the Hirose River, is also an effort to reevaluate natural resources located in the center of the city. The creative activities in the extraordinary space of the "drafting room on the river" are an attempt to combine local resources with an educational perspective.

3.2 Data Analysis at Local Events

In this study, a semi-structured interview survey was conducted on six participants at the "Hirose River Utilization Promotion Project" held on March 30, 2025. Participants were selected by approaching event attendees to ask for their cooperation, and six people who agreed were surveyed. The survey subjects' attributes were ages between 30's and 60's, gender split of half male and half female, three families and three individuals, all living in Maebashi City. Participants included people of child-rearing age, and the fact that opinions were obtained from multiple generations and diverse standpoints demonstrates the inclusive nature of this event. In the interview items, four questions were used in the semi-structured interview survey of this study, since previous research has pointed out that interactions between university students and participants have a positive effect on both parties: (1) Have you ever participated in a local event before? (2) What impression did you have of participating in this event? (3) Do you want to participate in local events in the future? (4) Please feel free to state any other opinions or impressions you may have. The interviews were conducted at the venue, and the recorded utterances were organized verbatim, then classified and summarized by theme.

4 Results

The results of the interview survey revealed that many of the event participants "had never participated in a local event like this before." Four out of six participants answered that they had never participated in a local event before, with motives such as "I saw a flyer by chance and became interested" or "I found out about it while passing by." On the other hand, two participants who answered that they had participated in local events before said, "I have participated in events in Maebashi City or Takasaki City in the past," suggesting that they continue to have an interest in their local area.

All participants had positive reactions to their impressions of the event. Many participants mentioned their fresh surprise at the extraordinary spatial experience of "going down to the bottom of the river," and showed strong interest in the activities that took place in a place that is usually out of reach. In addition, participants with children commented that "the children were engrossed in the experience" and "it was good that they could draw and touch freely," indicating that the event also functioned as a place for parent-child interaction and creative experience. In addition, there was a high evaluation of the human aspects, such as "it was a homely and warm atmosphere" and "the student staff treated us with care," and satisfaction with the event management was also high.

When asked about their intention to participate in future local events, all six participants clearly answered that they would like to participate. Among them, many positive responses included "I want to continue supporting this event because it's my hometown" and "I want to continue participating if the content is enjoyable for my children," and the event experience was an opportunity to increase interest in local activities. In particular, there were comments that they felt close to the Hirose River, a local resource.

In the free-response section, there were multiple voices of praise and gratitude for the university students' management. Comments such as "It's great to see young people working for the community like this," "I'm grateful that we can experience it for free," and "The whole town

feels depressed, but these events bring brightness" suggest that the event was not just entertainment.

The above results clearly show that this event was a fresh and meaningful experience for the participants, and that local residents have a positive interest in the community collaboration efforts of university students.

5 Discussion

As this study revealed, the majority of participants answered that it was their first time participating in a local event, which indicates that local events function as an opportunity to create contact with new residents. Participation in this event was seen through accidental contact, such as "I visited for the first time after seeing a flyer" or "I became interested while passing by." It is particularly noteworthy that the temporary use of the riverbed as a public space for the event venue attracted the participation of people who usually have little interest in local activities.

It is believed that "the experiencing something out of the ordinary" played a major role in the participants' uniformly positive impressions. The special space of the riverbed is separated from the everyday context, making it easier for participants to experience freshness and surprise. In particular, parent-child participants highly evaluated the experience that was linked to their children's creative activities, suggesting the effectiveness of local events from an educational perspective. On the other hand, another major feature of this project is that the event was run by university students from outside the area. Many participants commented that they were impressed by young people working for the community and that the students' attitudes were impressive, making it clear that the community contribution activities of university students are viewed positively by local residents. To make the analysis results clearer, the following are excerpts of representative comments. For example, "The students were kind and I wanted to participate again" (woman in her 30s) and "My child was engrossed in it. He said he wanted to do it again at home" (man in his 40s). These comments suggest that local residents have a positive view of interactions with young people from outside the community.

It is extremely important for universities to not only function as educational and research institutions in the community, but also to play the role of a "hub of exchange" that mediates social capital, which is extremely important for the sustainable development of local cities. In addition, free responses such as "thankful that I could participate for free" and "I liked being able to interact directly with students" indicate that the low psychological and economic hurdles of the event were one of the factors that increased participant satisfaction. The development of such conditions is an essential element for the continued development of community events, and should be fully considered in future management.

From the above, it was shown that university-sponsored volunteer events provided new stimulation for local residents and promoted a sense of belonging to the community and rediscovery. Furthermore, such events are not just a measure to revitalize the community, but also have significance as a "place to build relationships" that reweaves relationships between cities and people, between generations, and within and outside the community. It will be necessary to consider the continuity and development potential of these efforts, as well as how to institutionalize their incorporation into the local community.

6 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to clarify how a volunteer event run by a university promotes interaction with local residents and how it affects tourism promotion and economic revitalization in the region. As a result, many of the participants surveyed were participating in a local event for the first time, and they expressed fresh surprise and high satisfaction with the activities in the "river bottom," an extraordinary space. Participants with children had many positive opinions about both the educational and entertainment value of the event, confirming that it functioned as an opportunity for intergenerational interaction. Such activities encourage new valuation of local resources and have a certain significance as part of regional revitalization.

However, this study has some limitations. First, the number of survey subjects was limited to six, and the lack of diversity in the attributes and positions of the participants limits the generalizability of the results. This study is an exploratory pilot study, aiming to obtain a qualitative understanding of early reactions to a local event. Second, because the survey was conducted on a single event, the continuous effects and actual impact on the local economy could not be fully verified. No quantitative evaluation was conducted on tourism promotion or economic impact, and the conclusions of this study are merely tendencies based on qualitative data. This study did not obtain quantitative data on tourism promotion or economic ripple effects, and the discussion at this stage is based on the participants' sensory and subjective reactions. Therefore, the conclusions of this study do not show a direct causal relationship to tourism and the economy, but focus on the change in the awareness of local residents. Future issues include continuous observation of multiple events, conducting questionnaire surveys of more diverse participants, and measuring the specific effects on the local economy. As mentioned above, volunteer events organized by university students have the potential to promote interaction with local residents and bring new perspectives and values to the region, and are expected to develop further in the future as a means of revitalizing local cities.

Acknowledgement

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the event participants who cooperated with us by filling in questionnaires and participating in interviews. We would also like to thank the event organizers, sponsors, and local companies and organizations that cooperated with us.

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