

Universities learned the lesson of cult mischief, get proactive

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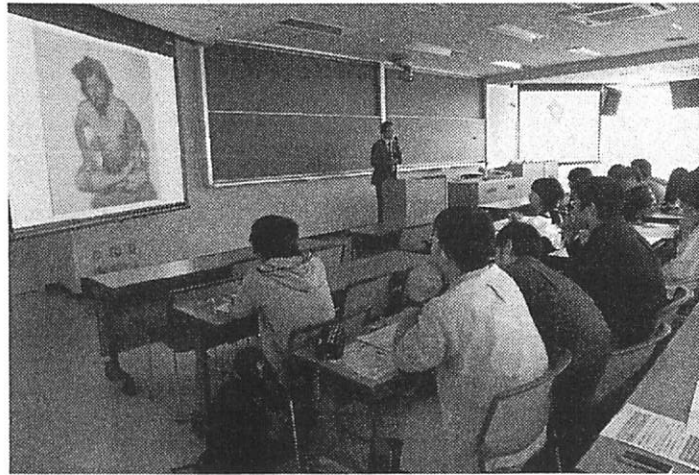
Toshiyuki Tachikake, an associate professor at Osaka University, pointed to a close-up picture of a man and asked his class of first-year students if they knew who the figure was. Only a few, perhaps about 30 percent, raised their hands.

The person projected on the screen was Shoko Asahara, the infamous Aum Shinrikyo founder who is on death row for masterminding the 1995 sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway system and other crimes.

The students' response reflects how memories of heinous incidents involving cults — even Aum, the worst of the lot — are gradually fading away and how the older generation has failed to educate young people about what happened.

Tachikake's class in early May was part of a compulsory course on various aspects of college life for incoming students at Osaka University. While also covering problems such as alcohol and drugs, Tachikake and his colleagues devoted a significant portion of the course to the dangers of cults.

"It's a university's social responsibility to prevent (students from being recruited into) cults," Tachikake says, while stressing



Life lesson: Associate professor Toshiyuki Tachikake, displaying a photo of Aum Shinrikyo founder Shoko Asahara, lectures first-year students about the dangers of cults during a class at Osaka University in Toyonaka on May 12. KYODO

that attention is paid to ensure freedom of religion.

Osaka University, some of whose graduates were among the highly educated members of Aum involved in the sarin gas attack in Tokyo and another in Matsumoto, Nagano Prefecture, in 1994, is known for being one of the colleges that began tackling the issue of cults early on.

But even though cults' recruiting efforts on university campuses made headlines in the past, many students today appear to be unaware of this danger.

Even today, so-called religious groups continue to recruit students by initially identifying themselves as campus sports, music or volunteer clubs.

"There are many camouflaged groups out there," said Tachikake. "The problem is that they do not follow the rules of communication and fail to disclose accurate information (about their activities)."

At Taisho University, a Buddhist school in Tokyo, religious scholar Tatsuya Yumiyama told some 100 students in his introductory course on religion:

"You're probably thinking only weirdos join cults. Well, you're wrong.

"You may think that a 'sempai' (senior student) with high aspirations gives you a helping hand and prays for you, and with 100 percent good intent," said Yumiyama, a professor known for his research on Aum and expertise on the relationship between young people and religion. "But that is illegal soliciting."

To illustrate how often it is the most serious-minded students who fall prey to the repeated cycle of cult recruiting, he told the class of a case in which a university student joined a such a cult out of admiration for a sempai and ended up having to quit school.

At the same time, Yumiyama stressed the importance of learning about true religion.

He said many students told him after the class that they now realize how wrong they had been to think they would not be deceived by cult members.

Kenji Kawashima, president of Keisen University, a Christian women's school in Tokyo, warns that cults have grown increasingly sophisticated in their recruiting tactics.

For example, cultists passing themselves off as members of volleyball or other sports clubs

will rent and host activities in gyms at public elementary schools to give their targets a false sense of security, Kawashima said.

Also, as universities have stepped up measures against cults, recruiters have shifted to younger marks — high school students. Of particular interest are those preparing for their university entrance exams.

Cult members typically approach such students as they cram for their tests in coffee shops and other public places, he said.

Kawashima, a former pastor, said the shock from the Aum incidents prompted him to look into cult activity in Japan. He and others founded a nationwide network of universities to address the problem. It now numbers about 150 schools.

He said his conviction that religious belief is important weighs heavily when he considers that students, aspiring to do good in society and thinking seriously about their futures, have been drawn into cults, where they have suffered both psychologically and financially.

"I believe that had they not been taken into the cults, they would have been promising and talented members of society," he said. "It's a tough job, but one worth doing."