

# Bridging the Gap between Town and Gown: Role of Librarians in Community Service Initiatives

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## Abstract

**Purpose-** The purpose of this paper was to review related literature on community service initiatives, benefits and the involvement of librarians in Community service programme with a focus on the University of Port Harcourt Community Service programme. This review was also undertaken to establish a link between the Community Service programme and purposeful librarianship.

**Methodology-** Related literature was reviewed on involvement of academic librarians in community service programmes/initiatives in Universities with a focus on University of Port Harcourt community service programme.

**Findings-** Community service programmes and initiatives play an essential role in linking students with host communities and provide the opportunities and prospects for the development of entrepreneurial skills. This paper highlighted the benefits of community service activities to all the stakeholders. It also exposed the problem of little or non-involvement of librarians in community service initiatives. This problem is more pronounced in Nigeria where librarians of all categories are not involved.

**Originality-** This is a baseline review as no such paper has been written on this topic. Thus, it provides the basic information needed for further studies in this area.

**Keywords.** Community Service, Impact, University of Port Harcourt, Sustainable growth

## Introduction

Information as a tool is the bedrock of sustainable growth and development in every society. The University community as the hallmark of knowledge and development ought to impact positively on the improvement of the standard of living of its neighbouring communities through a mutual

and symbiotic relationship. In an attempt to bridge the knowledge and developmental gap and enhance peaceful co-existence between the University and its host communities, various community service programmes are initiated by most Ivory Towers in a bid to improve the lives of host community members. Heiset and Wolverton (2009) described Ivory Towers as institutions and places where students are often kept busy with

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academic course work and may have neither the time nor opportunity to learn about the community in which they live. Albertson et al. (2014) noted that the classroom is often isolated from real world concerns, and it may prove difficult for students to assess the value of skills learnt in that environment alone. Community partnership activities provide students the opportunity to apply classroom skills beyond a synthetic classroom setting. Thus, administrators of academic institutions to seek ways of linking students with their local communities.

The importance of community service programme lies in the expectation that these institutions would design programmes and activities that should improve the quality of lives of the citizens. Community Service is defined as services, including direct services, planning and applied research, which are identified by an institution of higher education through consultations with community leaders. It is designed primarily to improve the quality of life for community residents and to solve problems relating to the needs of these residents on such issues as health care, child care, education, literacy training, welfare, social services, public safety, crime prevention and control, transportation, recreation, housing and community improvement. Secondly, it aims to provide participating students with work-learning opportunities, relating to their educational or vocational programmes, or goals (US Code Title 20, sec. 1070c-4, 2009). For Anechka (2008), the main reason for community service is to put forth better surroundings that may benefit the host community.

Another concept that is synonymous with community service is service learning, which Heiselt and Wolverton (2009) defined as a teaching and learning method that combines community service with academic instructions as it focuses on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility. The authors equally observed that service learning programmes involve students in organized community service that addresses local needs while developing the students' academic skills and community commitment. According to Albertson *et...al.* (2011), service learning is a way of including current students in community and outreach that has the potential to complement classroom lessons with hands-on activities while providing opportunities for critical thinking and high-level analysis. Service learning enables a connection between academic objectives and community needs, thus providing the link between "Ivory Tower" (Institutions of Higher Learning) and the neighbouring communities. Some of the key benefits of service learning include enhanced students' skills and increased understanding of the community and their needs.

Community service involves activities and programmes that are conscientiously designed to forge a symbiotic relationship between institutions of higher learning and the host communities. Students who participate in the community service projects develop skills for self reliance and lifelong learning, while the communities have some of their problems solved through these initiatives. The major concerns of any University are teaching, learning and research. Librarians, in like manner, provide relevant and innovative resources and services to support these activities. Consequently, community service programmes cannot be effectively be implemented without the involvement of academic librarians.

The Community Service Brochure of the University of Port Harcourt (2007) listed some of the viable projects to include farming, road maintenance, landscaping, laying of seating and footpath slabs, carrying out health outreach programmes on such issues as basic hygiene, nutrition, malaria, immunization, HIV/AIDS pandemic, screening for hypertension and breast cancer. Some other projects listed include planting of trees to prevent erosion and to serve as shades, making and placing sculptural pieces in public places, cutting grass, clearing drainages and disposing of garbage, and staging play productions to sensitize the community on the grave danger and implications of such antisocial phenomena as cultism, hostage taking, vandalism of public utilities among others.

It is noteworthy that the University of Port Harcourt Community Service programme does not have a systematized *modus operandi* as projects are chosen at the whims of programme Directors and haphazardly executed by students who merely wish to meet University requirements to earn grades. Even the tools and equipment used for such projects are often poorly developed. Also, a lack of documented evidence of the successes and challenges of the programme poses a serious problem. This may be due to the fact that librarians who are information professionals are not included in the design of the programme. The consequence of this trend is that the objectives of the programme are defeated. There is virtually no literature on academic librarians' involvement in Community Service programmes especially in Nigeria. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to review related literature on community service initiatives and benefits as well as the involvement of librarians in Community service initiatives with a focus on the University of Port Harcourt Community Service programme. The review was also undertaken to establish a link between Community Service Programme and purposeful librarianship.

### ***Patterns of University of Port Harcourt Community Service Programme***

University of Port Harcourt is a third generation Federal University which is situated in the Niger Delta Region in the South South Geo-Political Zone of Nigeria. Established in 1975, its motto is "For enlightenment and self reliance." It has introduced the Community Service Programme as a veritable instrument for the propagation of self-reliance, the promotion of dignity of labour and the fostering of harmonious co-existence among students and community members (Community Service Brochure, 2007). The University of Port Harcourt has always identified education as a key tool in forging a bridge between town and gown (the concept of ivory tower and the host community) so as to forestall the elitist educational system which distances staff and students from the realities of the local environment and by implication, their people (Community Service Brochure, 2007). The Community Service Brochure of 2007/2008 academic session captured the thoughts of the founding fathers of the University of Port Harcourt, on the need to "involve staff and students of the University in the problems of urban and rural communities through practical participation in community service consistent with and as an integral part of their education.

There are five major communities surrounding the University of Port Harcourt namely: Choba, Alakahia, Rumuekini, Rumuosi and Aluu. The residents are mainly peasant farmers and petty traders, majority of who fall into the low income bracket. There is poverty, disease and deprivation in these host communities. The level of ignorance is abysmally high and this may have occasioned the callous and barbaric lynching of four University of Port Harcourt students on October 5, 2012 in Omuokiri, Aluu (a dastardly act popularly referred to as the 'Aluu Four Killings'). In order to emphasize the importance of this course, it was made a University-wide credit earning course which is a requirement for all 200 Level students in the University. It is domiciled in the College of Health Sciences and in each of the Faculties but co-ordinated centrally by a Director. The students from each department organize themselves and embark on a project led by a class representative and departmental coordinators as supervisors. However, the level of commitment on the part of the students has not been commensurate with the expected goals and achievements. Thus, being a credit earning course, students are more interested in fulfilling the course requirements rather than striving to acquire the essential practical skills.

The overall objective of the programme was improvement of the standard of living and minimizing University/host community conflict, thus contributing to the human capacity development. In order to give effect to its practical realization, the University Senate set up an ad-hoc committee made up of faculty representatives and departmental coordinators to prepare a working document for execution of the Community Service programme for consideration. The library and its staff were not included. McCook (2000) commenting on the non-inclusion of librarians in National

initiatives geared towards reducing poverty and empowering people to develop skills and resources to rebuild their communities stated that reading the documentation of these National initiatives with a librarian's eyes, it is impossible not to take note of the many problems identified, for which the skills and expertise of a librarian might well be part of the solution. Also, Herther (2008) suggested that academic libraries play a more central role in providing service learning opportunities in their communities. This buttressed the importance of involving librarians from the initial planning for successful and result oriented outcomes of such initiatives.

### **Challenges in University of Port Harcourt Community Service Programme**

Some of the major problems identified in the University of Port Harcourt Community Service Programme include:

**Lack of Documentation:** There is scarcely any documentation on the programme of activities/projects executed by students. For example, the programme has been in existence for over 35 years without formal documentation. Although in 2007, a brochure was produced which was the first document in the history of the Community Service Unit, this brochure is not enough documentation for this all important University-wide programme involving over 4,000 students in each academic session. Thus, the programmes are carried out haphazardly without a foundation to build upon as a result of a lack of documentation.

**Inconsistency:** There is inconsistency in the execution of the projects which makes sustainability impossible. For instance, if a group of Year 2 students sets up a pineapple farm in one of the communities and this is not followed up by subsequent student groups, the farm ceases to exist due to a lack of continuity and sustainability.

**Non-inclusion of Librarians:** The non-inclusion of librarians in the planning of the Community Service Programme is a serious omission. While recommending the involvement of librarians in planning community initiatives or projects McCook (2000) noted that by participating at the outset in planning and visioning, librarians will be at the table and in a position to identify opportunities for the library and its services to provide solutions to community and campus challenges.

**Lack of Commitment:** There is lack of commitment on the part of lecturers and students. Majority of the students do not show adequate commitment in the execution of the projects and choose the easy way out by embarking on irrelevant projects. For example, purchasing and donation of sundry items such as fans, air-conditioners and water dispensers rather than embark on viable projects. This is at variance with the aims and objectives of the programme. Also, lack of dedication and commitment by the course representatives and coordinators is also a major challenge which leads to improper supervision of the projects.

### **Role of Academic Librarians in Community Service Initiatives**

In extolling the important role of academic librarians, Cubberly (1996) and Wolverton and Heiselt (2010) observed that as a faculty member they are expected and encouraged to be a positive force in the Library, in the University, and in the Community. Librarians are urged to be more proactive by playing a dominant role in providing solutions to community problems and needs. Cawhorne (2003) suggested that it is necessary for librarians to be proactive, to initiate collaboration, and to be willing to leave the library building itself and be actively involved in the greater community. Kranich, *et al.*, (2014) opined that our unique power to bring people together, build community and reposition the library as a more relevant and significant partner on campus

demonstrates how academic libraries can turn outward and fulfill their promise to transform communities.

Traditionally, librarians are trained to be versatile in all fields of knowledge. Their role entails the provision of information resources for teaching, learning and research for scholars in all subjects and disciplines. As academics, librarians' primary role is to ensure that the impacts of services and activities are visible and felt at the Faculty, University and at the Community levels. At the Faculty level, librarians are expected to play the role of providing innovative and transformative services and resources to enhance teaching, learning and research activities, create awareness on the availability of these resources and services and encourage their use to improve the quality of research outcome. Also, librarians are expected to participate at faculty and academic board meetings to sensitize faculty members on library activities. At the University level, librarians are expected to be involved in committees and in students' orientation programmes; teaching the use of library and information literacy, and participation in other University-wide activities. Still in the library, the librarians are also expected to organize the resources in the appropriate format and make them user friendly and create an enabling environment for library patrons. Librarians as information specialists should be involved in Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) and information repackaging.

At the community level, academic librarian role will include advocacy and outreach activities as well as environmental scanning to identify the needs of communities on developmental challenges in relation to economics, health and the environment. These identified needs form what librarians present to faculty members who design community service programmes. The librarians are also expected to document and disseminate relevant information that will ensure successful execution of these projects. Such documentation forms the data bank of information for consultation. The academic librarian equally liaises with the Community Service Programme Directors to identify viable projects and collaborate with the instructors on curriculum development and course guide to improve the course content and ensure acquisition of entrepreneurial skills that will be mutually beneficial to the communities and students. For Albertson *et al.*, (2011), community engagement involves facilitating and fostering mutually beneficial and complementary alliances with community based partners.

### ***Benefits/Prospects of Community Service Programmes***

Since its inception as a third generation Federal University in 1975, the University of Port Harcourt was the first among other Universities in Nigeria to integrate community service into its curriculum. Each year, all 200 levels (about 4000 students) engage in a variety of community service outreach activities. The University of Port Harcourt Community Service Programme has become a model for other institutions and communities. For example, Igbinedion University, situated in Okada, Edo State, Nigeria, has, in the past, sent a delegation to understudy the University of Port Harcourt model. The novelty of this programme has created collaboration between the academia and rural communities in the search for meaningful growth and development. Hayes and Cuban (2001) noted that one collaborative community service project proved to be fruitful for engaging students in their community and for fostering participatory civic attitudes. One major impact of the community service programme is the capability to inculcate in graduates necessary practical knowledge and entrepreneurial skills to be self-reliant upon graduation in order to face the challenges of unemployment prevalent in the country. Others include: enhanced student skills, increased understanding of communities and their needs, developing skills for self-reliance and lifelong learning. The far-reaching multiplier effect on students who would replicate such community projects initiatives in other parts of the country is unquantifiable. Community service strengthens a symbiotic relationship that encourages dialogue on mutual issues affecting host communities and the University. University of Massachusetts reported that the University active-

ly engaged with town officials and community members on issues of mutual concern affecting the quality of life in its neighbourhoods (University of Massachusetts Community Impact Report, (2013).

## **Methodology**

Related literature was reviewed on involvement of academic librarians in community service programmes/initiatives in Universities with a focus on the University of Port Harcourt Community Service Programme.

## **Discussion**

From the review of related literature, it was revealed that no study has been carried out in the area of community service and academic librarians' involvement in Nigeria. Hence, there are no local baseline studies. The non-inclusion of academic librarians in the activities of community service is more of a serious problem in Nigeria than in developed countries. There are some sensitizations as scholars have carried out studies on community service initiatives and its impact on communities. Generally, community service activities are being executed without the involvement of academic librarians even though public librarians are more involved in some cases.

The University of Port Harcourt Community Service has been in existence for almost forty years, yet there is no formal documentation of projects and activities so far executed. Thus, there are no follow-up on projects executed. This makes continuity and sustainability difficult. The paper has also observed that there is a lack of commitment and dedication among students and staff. Although students embark on projects, much is still left to be desired in terms of physical structure to show the practical outcome. There is a lack of proper monitoring and supervision from course coordinators and representatives of projects and activities assigned to students. Consequently, projects are carried out haphazardly and are neither followed up on nor completed.

## **Conclusion**

This paper highlighted the benefits of community service activities to all the stakeholders. It also exposed the problem of little or non-involvement of librarians in community service initiatives. This problem is more pronounced in Nigeria where librarians of all categories are not involved. For instance, University of Port Harcourt, which is the first among Nigerian universities to mount this programme and has operated it for over 35 years, but has never involved librarians. This is a serious oversight; librarians' participation is crucial for successful realization of the objectives of the programme. Librarians with their professional expertise could liaise and collaborate with lecturers on curriculum development and implementation of projects. Such community initiatives should arouse the interests of students on the need of community involvement that will enable them imbibe the culture of good citizenship. When this is achieved, some prevalent societal vices such as cultism, armed robbery, communal clashes and vandalism will be eradicated or drastically minimized. Librarians as information professionals would assist in documenting and mapping out community needs and in packaging relevant information while also providing course guides for effective execution of community projects, thus truly forge the needed bridge between town and gown.

## **Recommendations**

The study recommends the following:

- Librarians should be actively involved in the activities and programmes of community service.

- Students, the public, the University, the Community and Librarians stand to gain from the programmes.
- The curriculum should be re-evaluated and redesigned to suit the objectives of the programme, and more importantly, the projects should be properly supervised and implemented for effective outcomes.
- In order to bridge the gap between town and gown, the projects should to give rise to the establishment of a functional Community Service Centre with a library that would serve as a databank for all community service programme initiatives and activities. The centre would be dedicated to children from the neighbouring communities for conscious interaction and harmonious co-existence. It is expected that moving them from their locale to the Ivory Tower would help instill a strong reading culture in these young minds. This will be the first of its kind in any University in the entire nation. Also, the Community Information Resource Centre would equally be expected to metamorphose into a strong advocacy programme that would instill a strong reading culture among the children of these communities.

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## Biographies



**Dr Susan N. Umeozor** obtained a B.A. in Psychology 1985 from North Carolina State University, Raleigh and a Masters in Library Science (MLS) 1987, from North Carolina Central University, Durham, USA. Among other publications, she is the author of “Human Resources, User Education Marketing Strategy, and Students’ Use of Library Services in Some Nigerian Federal Universities” published in *Library Philosophy and Practice* (University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2013). This article has garnered over 290 downloads. She is currently the Head of Public Services at Donald E.U. Ekong Library, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

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Dr. Helen is currently the medical librarian, College of Health Sciences, University of Port Harcourt. Among other publications, she coauthored, “The Changing Role of Academic Libraries: A Focus of Five Higher Institutions in Nigeria” in the *International Journal of Educational Organization and Leadership*.

Her hobbies include travelling, watching documentaries, listening to music and meeting people.