



STUDENT CENTRE AND THE CONCEPT OF LEARNING COMMONS

INTRODUCTION

Student Centre is a building or facility dedicated to students 'activities at a college or university' (Vocabulary.com Dictionaries). Student centers (or Student Unions as called in the United States of America) have always been a vital part of campus environments as they cater for all kinds of socio-cultural activities of students. They are devoted to students' recreation and socialization but equally serve faculty, other campus staff, Alumni and even visitors alike. These Centres in some cases also augment learning activities and learning environments.

The Rivers State University being a higher institution thus requires a functional and responsive students' Centre to serve as a hub for students' activities on campus. Although there is an existing students' Centre at the Rivers State University, it has presented itself to be inadequate both in programming and operation. It was built when the University was much smaller and has since become inadequate to meet the needs of modern Students' Centres.

It is a common trend for Universities and colleges world-wide, when presented with this scenario to embark on expanding, retrofitting or

even building a whole new project depending on the desired need to be met with the Centre.

The campus hub for social and recreational activities at the Rivers State University has since left the current location of the existing student centre, thus contributing to its inefficiency. This clearly highlights and strengthens the need to properly remodel and create a functional student hub.

Students' Centres have come a long way since their introduction to campus communities, however, it is worthy of note that recorded history shows the earliest ones came to light in the early 19th century. Their history is defined by the significant contributions from early institutions in the UK and also to the advancements from the institutions in the United States of America. —The earliest college unions were student debating societies in English universities|| (Butts, 1967).

Emesiobi (1993) observed that —the concept of students' centre in the world was nurtured as a result of the birth of students' unionism||.

They have since evolved to become major pulls and iconic structures for old students, intending and new students, sometimes involving significant investments as noticed in the trends of contemporary students' Centres, world-wide.

Importance of Students' Centres

According to Lawal (2016), —having a student center for campuses are important as they tend to become very important to student life by providing a center where clubs and organizations come and meet, and do activities||. This brings students together and builds a community on campus, having a community on campus will make the school thrive. Students' Centers for campuses play vital roles in everyday students' life. They are in-fact the community Centres of their respective campuses thus need and importance of functional and responsive students' Centres cannot be over emphasized.

They contribute to their campuses specifically in the following ways:

- a. Provide a proper community Centre for the campus.
- b. Encourage greater interaction among students by providing spaces for them to meet, share, work and learn together.
- c. Encourage relaxation and recreation.
- d. Encourage active living through sports and games facilities
- e. Provide students with the opportunity to develop their leadership skills through students unionism

- f. Provide students with a strong identity of their alma-mater.
- g. Provide a proper —*first stop point*|| for new students.
- h. Provide a space for gathering for large students' events
- l. Accommodate off-campus and commuter students during off lecture periods.
- j. Provides facilities for students' provisions and convenience shopping
- k. Cater for a wide range of extra-curricular needs of students

Students' Centres as Campus Community Centres

According to Poecker (2014), the student Centre is the heart of a university. It brings students, faculty, and prospective students together, providing them with a so-called snapshot of the university and at the same time offering them a welcoming sense of community. The era of the students Centre being just a venue for meetings are long gone and its nature has continued to change and expand. Similar to the way that the community Centre functions, it embraces diverse needs and provides a wide range of facilities and performs multiple functions.

According to Butt (1967) —It is a lounge, dining room, information center, student club headquarters, reading room, art gallery, workshop, theater, music room, forum, game room, dance and party center, public relations agency, student office building, outing center, radio studio, ticket bureau, post office, conference headquarters, and book store. It may provide all of these facilities, or part of them, or perhaps still others but all brought together in one place so that physical proximity does its part in furthering a sense of community||

If a student's Centre is to respond effectively to the needs and interests of a college population at leisure, it is expected to become genuinely a community centre. The most successful unions are those that function as the effective community centers for the general campus.

Activities at Students Centres

The activities at Students Centres can be grouped under seven (7) major sub-heads. These include: Political, Recreational, Socio-Cultural, Educational, Economic activities, Alumni services and Students affairs services / students centre management.

1. Political Activities

Political activities are a main feature Students Centres as they come mainly as student unionism and association meetings. These are done through the activities of the students' union governing body as they will

actively seek to provoke and secure positive change in the policies and practices of colleges and universities. The opportunity and possibility of acquiring leadership qualities are also provided for here. These can come in the form of political debates, political campaigns (geared towards advancing students' education in the broad sense), students' welfare programs etc.

Students' unions will typically play host to dozens of equally active clubs and societies, host vigorous and controversial debates and publish vibrant and provocative student media. In representing the interests of students, students' unions will also often come into contact with politicians at many levels, legislatures, public authorities and agencies. They may also seek to raise issues which affect the interests of students in the public consciousness to achieve public support. This kind of activity may be inherently political in character||. (NUS connect, UK, 2104)

There is no doubt that student unionism is desirable in Universities nowadays with authorities expecting and encouraging mature and responsible leadership from members of the student union executive.

2. Recreational Activities

Recreational activities are those that are geared towards improving the physical being and mental wellness of the students and are purely for leisure purposes. They could come in the form of physical exercises and

sports or more relating games. They help the students reduce stress and feel

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more energized and alert, making it a lot easier to focus on studying, writing, completing assignments or lab work, and preparing for exams.

Recreational activities at the students centre can include swimming, board games, gym facilities, net, bat and racket games, music and dance clubs, physical combat games and clubs, league games and sports, climbing walls, etc.

3. Socio-cultural Activities

The term Socio-Cultural refers to the combination or interaction of social and cultural elements relating to the different groups of people in society and their habits, traditions, and beliefs.

Socio-Cultural activities for the campus community are designed to increase awareness and understanding of diverse identities and to help students learn, connect, and become leaders on campus and more aware of the outside world. All this is done in recognition of the multi-ethnic and sometimes, racial diversity of the university or college. It also celebrates and promotes gender equality. The student centre helps create the opportunities for these interactions.

Examples of socio-cultural activities include language activities, cultural events, concerts, conferences and lectures, trips, camps, theatre, exhibitions, festivals etc.

4. Educational Activities

It is important that students Centres and college unions are aligned explicitly to the academic visions of the institution they support, as such, a major function of Student Centres is to augment academic learning on campus. It is expected to do so through encouraging co-curricular activities like seminars, workshops, trainings, presentations, etc. It also provides opportunities and spaces for group leanings, group and private study rooms, e-library, information clubs etc. When properly designed and constructed, student centers can make lasting and fundamental impressions to experience of students.

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5. Commercial Activities

Commercial activities that are geared towards meeting the everyday basic needs of the campus community as mostly incorporated to the students Centres. These activities come in a variety of forms like retail shopping, restaurants and eateries, convenience stores, bookshops, coffee shops, retail banking, halls and spaces for rents etc. This part also takes care of bus and taxi ticketing for commuter students and post office services.

These services contribute financially to the upkeep of the facility.

Alumni Services

A well planned and designed Students centre usually signifies the strength and glory of its alumni, thus giving an esteemed image to the school. It is a common practice to have alumni offices in students'centres to cater for alumni services. These offices are manned and utilized by the alumni association and presents an opportunity for the current students to learn and be inspired by their predecessors. They also function in keeping past and present students connected and reconnected to their alma-mater.

Students Affairs Services / Students Centre Management.

The university or colleges usually have representations in students'centres to attend to students affairs. This is so as the students centre becomes the first port of call for new students. They attend to

queries on accommodation for students, basic forms and data issues, admission issues, students financing, bursary and scholarships and other general students' welfare issues.

These offices are usually headed by a director of students' affairs and could be partly staffed by students who work there part-time.

They also manage the day-to-day running of the centre.

Current trends in Student Centres; Why responsive Students' Centres?

The nature of the Student Centers has continued to change, and expand. Spaces are being continually assessed and conceptualized in order to meet the rapidly changing needs of the campus community. Buildings are now purpose designed in conformation to the schools image and mission. Students Centre facilities must thus, constantly adapt and evolve to accommodate an increasingly diverse student population, new forms of technology, and additional services. Spaces must be created that not only accommodates today's needs, but also address yet unknown needs.

With the advent of the internet and web soft-wares, the average 21st century student is very technology savvy. This has turned the known usual ways of socialization and interaction upside down. In other words, there is less turn towards physical contact for communication and more towards technological provisions like social networking sites and programs. The use of technologies in these interactions and other

recreational purpose like gaming is very high. Thus contemporary students Centers must take into cognizance these developments to be able to be responsive to the needs of the generation of students for which it is being designed. You observe current students Centres providing spaces or provisions for WLAN access zones, computerized gaming rooms or mobile gaming consules, chat rooms etc as means of recreation and interactions other than static meeting rooms and gathering areas. This is further emphasized by Knell & Latta (2006) who buttressed that the current trends on many college and university campuses that impact Students Centres include a larger percentage of minority, international and non-traditional students on campus, a need for more flexible academic schedule, and greater demand for and use of technology.

Poecker (2014) puts it that "One thing is for certain, student union buildings all over the world will continue to evolve and change as time progresses'. What the universities need to keep in mind is that their student union building is often the first building that prospective students set foot in. If they want to boost enrollment, they need to keep improving the student union as time goes on with the latest and greatest forms of technologies and student activities. 17

The Concept of “Learning Commons”

The Learning Commons concept is a flexible and responsive approach to helping students focus on learning collaboratively. It expands the learning and interaction experience, taking students and educators into virtual spaces beyond the walls of the classroom or even the institution as a whole.

According to the Canadian Learning Commons Network; learning commons|| can be described as a central facility that provides the space, technology and services to support interactive learning. These spaces can include areas for group work, individual study spaces, instructional rooms, computer pool, multi-media labs and soft seating areas, etc. Services may include reading, learning, writing, library research, numeracy, and academic advising support for students; instructional development assistance for faculty, and technology and media support services for both students and instructors.

The Architecture, furnishings and physical organization are particularly important to the character of a learning commons, as spaces are often designed to be rearranged by users according to their needs. This presents a comfortable space where students can discover, create, and collaborate with peers. A collaborative physical and virtual environment that invites and ignites participatory learning and inspires students to be more productive and successful

Why “Learning Commons”?

The contemporary student is one bombarded on all fronts by the digital reality of information communication technology. He is offered information beyond then lecture hall at his fingertips. Research has shown that students have the natural abilities to use and easily adopt emerging technologies. Mobile devices offer them communication and entertainment but still, they need to learn how these devices can be used to enhance knowledgeable learning and critical thought. That is where —Learning Commons|| come in. It enables students flow with change and learns transferable skills in order to function efficiently and successfully in our world today and in the future.

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Students thus need to be critical consumers of information, capable decision makers, innovative problem solvers, effective communicators and learn transferrable skills that will give them the capacity to function effectively in their chosen fields.

—A Learning Commons thus becomes the physical and virtual catalyst where inquiry, imagination, discovery, and creativity come alive and become central to growth — personal, academic, social and cultural.|| (OSLA 2010).

Benefits of “Learning Commons”

- (a) Learning commons promote global and cultural understanding as students collaborate with their local and broader community.
- (b) Learning commons emphasize active and collaborative engagement and encourage the co-creation of knowledge.
- (c) Learning commons promotes more efficient use of technology for creation and sharing of knowledge.
- (d) Learning commons enable twenty four (24) hours access to resources and shared collaborative space for all students.
- (e) Research shows improved student achievement and literacy development for students who have access to quality learning commons.

Characteristics of “Learning Commons”

Wendell Brown, a design architect and project manager with Earl Swenson Associates, Nashville, offers ten (10) characteristics of successful learning commons.

(a) Flexible area with movable, soft furniture that can interface with technology so that students can create their own spaces.

(b) Open area that is inviting to students.

(c) Available food, preferably café style with coffees, juices, sodas, light snacks or sandwiches

(d) Late hours

(e) Available marker boards for brainstorming

(f) Help desk

(g) Private, acoustically separate spaces for tutoring and counseling

(h) Outdoor space with patios or verandas

(i) Available seminar rooms/study rooms

(j) Ample, available power for recharging mobile devices 1

“Learning Commons” furniture

As noted earlier, the Architecture, furnishings and physical organization are particularly important to the character of learning commons. Spaces are designed as technological interface spaces with flexible areas and movable soft furniture to be rearranged by users according to their needs. Some examples of furniture for learning commons are shown below.



Collaborative Spaces

Source: <http://ideas.demco.com>, 20th Dec, 2017



Collaborative spaces





Collaborative Adjustable Furniture with Device Charging Points



Soft and Adjustable Furniture

The “Learning Commons” concept and application to Student Centres

The concept of —learning commons|| has proven to be effective in getting students to collaborate and interact. It can be applied to Student Centers in the following ways: -

a. Flexible use of Spaces

General spaces should be made as flexible as possible. Activities can be alternated and furniture made to be flexible with the activities.

b. Informal Furniture

Informal furniture has been proven to make spaces feel casual and relaxing. The furnishing should be such that users would get a very calm feel in the Student Centre, encouraging relaxation and interaction.

c. Introduction of Collaborative spaces

Collaborative spaces like documentary alcoves, presentation corners etc. should be encouraged in Student Centers. This will help the students improve their presentation skills, ultimately improving education.

d. Introduction of IT to spaces

Spaces in the Student Centre should be made to be compliant with the contemporary IT trends so as to give students access to wider knowledge and ultimately also enjoy the benefits of free internet services

The Existing Students Centre at the Rivers State University, Port Harcourt

Designed by Dar-Al-Handasah Consultants shair and partners, Beirut, Lebanon, the existing student union (Centre) at the Rivers State University is a pre-fabricated concrete structure that was built in the mid-1990s. It was actually designed in 1975 to offer student centre services for the then new 31 campus site. It is a two (2) level building design and is located in close proximity to lecture halls and engineering workshops in the heart of the university lecture halls arrangement.

Its distinctive features are Its massive roof canopy that covers round the entire structure that forms an eave of over two (2) meters, Its two (2) grand stairs, Its structural grids of massive columns and beams, Imposing entrance foyer that gives a clear view to the space provisions of the centre and an Impressive air circulation and light penetration through the entire building by virtue of the openness of its plan.

Current Facilities Available

- a. Secretariat offices for students' union government.
- b. Union conference room
- c. Cafeteria
- d. Open terraces for students use

- e. A bank (formerly a T.V room)
- f. A snacks bar (formally a billiard room)
- g. Photo-copying / documents room (formerly a cards room)
- h. Convenience shop (formerly a Ping-Pong room)

Facility's Merits

- a. Impressive movement and circulation plan.
- b. Its open façade gives it a welcoming form.
- c. Open terraces provide for the integration of outdoor leisure sitting and interactions.
- d. Its wide grand stairs are suitable for large number of users and also provides for casual sitting.
- e. Impressive air circulation and light penetration through the entire building by virtue of the openness of its plan.

Facility's Demerits

- a. As stated before in the project justification section of the work, the location of this Centre is a major disadvantage. It is too far from the students hostels, thus making after lecture period usage not very feasible.
- b. Its size is a problem as it is too small for the current student population.
- c. Facilities provided are very limited and do not meet contemporary students' Centre standards.
- d. It does not have sufficient outdoor ground / space for outdoor recreational activities.



Entrance view of the RSU students' center



conference room

Conclusion

This research work has looked at the importance and contributions of student centers to students' lives on campus and the contemporary recreational need of students. It also looked at the inadequacies of the current student center at the Rivers State University and the general students' perception of the facility.

The concept of learning commons was used as a possible approach to resolving this issue. The use of free flowing spaces as against rigid coordination for particular activities, the introduction of soft and adjustable furniture that could be arranged to suit activities and the introduction of E-zones that provide free Wi-Fi networks that would afford students the opportunity to not use their mobile devices for interaction and socialization alone but to have them contribute to their access to knowledge and information.

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