

Does the Promotion of Leisure Reading Still Exist in Academic Libraries? A Closer Look of Reading Programs in Philippine Universities

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Abstract: This exploratory study examined the status of reading programs of top Philippine universities cited in the 2023 Times Higher Education World University Rankings, including universities with 'reporter' status. Specifically, the researchers uncovered whether academic libraries still provide programs encouraging reading in their communities. If they are providing such programs, what strategies did they employ, and what are some lessons learned that other academic libraries could learn from them? If reading programs are not apparent, will they still be considered in future library programming? This research will be significant to library managers and programming librarians as they can reflect on and evaluate their current library programs, specifically reading programs, as they navigate the post-pandemic future. The research will remind them of the libraries' critical role in creating a nation of responsible and analytical readers. The findings of the study will also benefit the library and information science professional associations and partner organizations related to reading advocacy for them to develop evidence-based programs and find solutions to issues surrounding reading program initiatives in academic libraries.

Keywords: promotion of reading, leisure reading, academic libraries, university libraries

1. Introduction

Libraries champion the importance of reading in the quest for individual's holistic development and society in general. Though school and public libraries are crucial in co-developing with educators on acquiring an individual's reading skills from early childhood to school age, academic libraries are also expected to keep the momentum. Reading is 'central to the activities of an academic library,' and without it, the reason for being of the latter will be undermined (Durant & Horava, 2015). Dewan (2019) also emphasized that higher education institutions should focus on producing lifelong learners and readers.

Received: 12.10.2023 Accepted: 27.11.2023
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ISSN 2241-1925



Strengthening reading skills corresponds to promoting critical thinking and writing skills, comprehension, vocabulary, and grammatical development. Thus, being an effective and literate individual is the product of frequent reading, and it does not happen by chance, as reading is an acquired skill, not an innate one (Dewan, 2016, 2019; Durant & Horava, 2015). Literature provided pieces of evidence on the benefits of reading, in particular– leisure reading. Scholars reiterated how reading fosters skills for individual academic advancement and the success of a democratic society (Gladwin & Goulding, 2012; Sievert et al., 2018). Aside from academic benefits, leisure reading also offers a means for relaxation and increased well-being (Hurst et al., 2017; Dewan, 2023).

Despite the evidence surrounding the advantages of reading, few library leaders believe that leisure reading is not part of an academic library's mission and are unwilling to promote such programs in their libraries (Elliot, 2009). Brookbank et al. (2018) elucidated in their study that there is a 'pervasive perception' among academic librarians that leisure reading is beyond the scope and mission of their libraries and that the popular reading collections in their respective libraries are rare. This was intensified by academic workload and stress among college students, resulting in insufficient time or inclination for leisure reading (Elliot, 2009; Gladwin & Goulding, 2012). However, a concern was raised regarding the university transition of students who have not fully developed a reading culture and have weak critical thinking skills (Reisz, 2016, as cited by Hurst, 2017). The same holds true at one of the universities in Indonesia, where Muslem et al. (2017) reported that the critical thinking skills of second-year undergraduate students are insufficient. In situations like this, one cannot diminish the fact that academic libraries could assist the university in solving the issue by advocating and promoting the power and influence of reading in creating a more literate society– as studies have shown that literacy is 'the lynchpin and cornerstone of a thriving society' (Dewan, 2016).

Gladwin and Goulding (2012) found that scholarly literature on leisure reading is highly concentrated in the perspective of university libraries in the United States. In the Philippine setting, there needs to be more literature that explicitly explores reading programs and initiatives in libraries and university libraries. Thus came the motivation for this paper. This exploratory study's central theme is examining the status of reading programs of top Philippine universities cited in the 2023 Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings, including universities with "reporter" status. Specifically, the researchers intend to uncover whether academic libraries still provide programs encouraging reading in their respective communities. If they are providing such programs, what strategies did they employ, and what are some lessons learned that other academic libraries could learn from them? If reading programs are not apparent, will they still be considered in future library programming? For the purpose of

this study, 'reading program' is defined by the authors as library initiatives, activities, and programs that aim to promote and encourage the culture of reading, particularly leisure reading.

This research will be significant to library managers and programming librarians as they can evaluate, recalibrate, and improve the library programs, specifically reading programs, as they navigate the post-pandemic future. The research will remind them of the libraries' critical role in creating a nation of responsible and analytical readers. The findings of the study will also benefit the library and information science (LIS) professional associations and partner organizations advocating for reading to develop evidence-based programs and find solutions to the challenges underlying the promotion of leisure reading in academic libraries.

2. Methodology

This exploratory study employed a descriptive research design in a highly qualitative approach using virtual one-on-one structured interviews. Study participants were selected using purposive sampling and met the criteria set forth by the researchers— university library directors or programming librarians in Philippine universities included in 2023 THE World University Rankings. The researchers selected universities included in the THE ranking as they deemed they were the best of their kind and could provide more insights to the discussion. The researchers generated the country list from THE World University Rankings website.

The main instrument used by the researchers was an expert-validated structured interview module composed of two sections— Section A: Demographic Profile, converted into an online form to facilitate easy access, and Section B: Discussion Guide. Section A covered data on the study participants and their institutions' details, such as institution type, location, and library budget. Section B incorporated the facilitators' welcome remarks, introduction, and instructions to the study participants. Additionally, Section B covered the interview flow, starting with the opening question, transition, and two sets of guide questions. The first set of questions (Set A) targets study participants whose libraries have active reading programs, and the second set (Set B) was for those with no reading programs.

The data gathering commenced when the target respondents were asked to read and complete the informed consent form and the participant information profile. The virtual one-on-one interview was held in a Zoom Meeting on four different dates in April 2023 to accommodate the time availability of each study participant. The eight sets of interviews lasted 6 hours and 47 minutes. The researchers transcribed the virtual interviews to facilitate recollection, data familiarization, code formulation, and identification of recurring themes. In order to interpret the meaning behind each respondent's views, knowledge, and experiences in reading programs, the collected data was carefully organized and

analyzed by the researchers using the reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) of Braun and Clarke (2021). RTA combines both the qualitative research values and subjective skills of the researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Its six-phase process for data engagement was observed: (1) data familiarization and note-taking, (2) systematic data coding, (3) generating/conceptualization of initial themes, (4) developing and reviewing themes, (5) refining, defining, and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. The researchers uploaded the manuscript to plagiarism checker software to ensure originality.

3. Results and Discussion

Of the 1,799 universities in 104 countries, only four Philippine universities made it to this year's list. Six other Philippine universities were labelled under 'reporter' status. According to Times Higher Education (2023), universities with 'reporter' status are active participants in the ranking process and have not been ranked this year as they failed to meet the criteria. For this study, the 10 Philippine universities– which made it to the list and those under reporter status– are invited to participate in the research. Eight of the ten identified universities joined, while the remaining two did not participate and respond to the email invitation. Six respondents are university library directors/chief librarians, two are section heads, and nearly all have more than five years of involvement with library programming activities (Table 1).

Table 1
Demographic Profile of the Study Participants

Institution	Pseudonym	Designation	Years involved in library programming
University Library A	Amelia	Chief Librarian	More than five years
University Library B	Bianca	Chief Librarian	More than five years
University Library C	Cristine	Library Director	More than five years
University Library D	Daniel	Section Head	More than five years
University Library E	Ella	Library Director	More than five years
University Library F	Fatima	Section Head	1 to 2 years
University Library G	Grace	Library Director	More than five years

University Library H	Heidi	Chief Librarian	More than five years
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State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) are the affiliations of the majority, and the rest are from private higher education institutions. More than half of the said institutions were located in Luzon (5), followed by Mindanao (2) and Visayas region (1). Five university libraries confirmed that they have an existing reading program, and three have none.

Regarding financial resources, six responded that they have more than 3,000,001.00 PhP budget, but they are allocated for something other than reading programs. Only two university libraries mentioned having specific budget allotments for reading programs (Table 2).

Table 2
Profile of the University Libraries

Institution's Pseudonym	Institution Type	Geographic Location	Total library budget (for the recent Academic Year)	Availability of Reading Programs	Budget allotted for reading programs
University Library A	Private Higher Education Institutions	Luzon	Over 3,000,001.00 PhP	not available	No budget allotment
University Library B	State Universities and Colleges (SUCs)	Luzon	500,001.00 - 1,000,000.00 PhP	available	Below 50,000.00
University Library C	State Universities and Colleges (SUCs)	Mindanao	Over 3,000,001.00 PhP	available	No budget allotment
University Library D	State Universities and Colleges	Luzon	Over 3,000,001.00 PhP	available	No budget allotment

	(SUCs)				
University Library E	State Universities and Colleges (SUCs)	Mindanao	Over 3,000,001.00 PhP	not available	No budget allotment
University Library F	State Universities and Colleges (SUCs)	Visayas	2,500,001.00 - 3,000,000.00 PhP	available	No budget allotment
University Library G	Private Higher Education Institutions	Luzon	Over 3,000,001.00 PhP	available	50,001.00 - 100,000.00 PhP
University Library H	Private Higher Education Institutions	Luzon	Over 3,000,001.00 PhP	not available	No budget allotment

3.1. Academic Libraries and Reading Programs: Strategies and Models

From the collated and analyzed data, the researchers deduced clarification from the previously mentioned research questions. The study findings revealed that the identified libraries actively provide reading programs in their respective communities within and outside the university setting to continuously promote literacy, love for reading and introduce library services. Table 3 shows the reading program models observed by the five university libraries that initially confirmed the availability of such programs. The top on the list are collection-centered programs, which primarily emphasize the promotion and provision of reading materials in printed and electronic form, regardless of topic, as long as the academic community member finds joy in reading such material. Respondents who indicated this model focused more on book displays, book exhibits, acquisition of recreational materials, book buffets, use of book carousels, and the usual reading list production for university faculty members. Books included in the exhibits are usually local titles to promote the Filipiniana collection and Filipino culture in general. Filipiniana materials are a collective term for all books, pamphlets, periodicals, and other publications, manuscripts, and non-book materials about the Philippines (Medina, 2010). One university

library termed their new acquisitions display *Today's Read*– for books, *Today's Headline* – for magazines and newspapers, and *Today's Journal*– for journal publications.

Table 3.
Reading Programs of Top Philippine Universities (multiple responses, n=5)*

Reading Program Models	Total Number of Coded Responses	Percentage of Coded Responses
Collection-centered programs	10	29%
Interactive activities	9	26%
Indirect ways	6	18%
Patron Rewards Program	5	15%
As part of Community Outreach	4	12%
Total Comments Around Themes	34	100%

*Based on 2023 THE World University Rankings.

Second on the list are interactive activities commonly observed in celebration of National Book Week, which happens annually every November. Some programs cited under this category include quiz bees, book review games, poster-making, scavenger hunts, book fairs, ‘bookmazing’ (combination of the words ‘book’ and ‘amazing’) races, reading photo contests, and book character fashion shows. One library featured a cultural game to promote their local city’s culture while dressed in Filipiniana attire. Another university library focused on reading and wellness, while others focused on book talk, which allowed their academic community members to interact and immerse themselves in meaningful conversations with the invited authors.

Next off are indirect ways of reading promotion. One library mentioned that they seek to promote library use and reading during regular library coordinator meetings. Additionally, two universities mentioned utilizing the library as a venue for tutorial sessions in reading and other academic subjects and

designated a leisure reading area. Fourth on the list are patron rewards programs relating to extrinsic and intrinsic motivations. Respondents mentioned that they award 'Book Reader of the Year,' 'Lucky Library User,' and 'Book Borrower of the Month' for both students and employees. Incentives and prizes in the form of chocolates, tokens, and certificates were also given out, mostly from their pocket, sponsors, and sometimes, donations from different college departments.

Finally, most university libraries correlate their reading program to outreach programs through book donations and storytelling sessions for children and out-of-school youth. Researchers noticed that this model was the first to be mentioned by the respondents, though not cited as the top-most observed program. It is also noteworthy to highlight that one university library explicitly mentioned that many of their reading programs are not standalone– it is seamlessly integrated into their existing library initiatives programs, which indirectly promote the culture of reading.

3.2. Strengths of Libraries with Active Reading Programs

Apart from exploring each reading program, respondents identified the strengths of their reading programs. Table 4 summarizes the key themes that emerged from the interviews, starting with recognizing the valuable contribution of library personnel in the program implementation. Study participants commend the library staff's creativity, attitude, and expertise of the library staff, as well as emphasize the importance of cooperation and teamwork for the success of a program. Likewise, the successful implementation of the reading programs mentioned above will not transpire without the help and support of partners and collaborators within and outside the university. For them, building a solid and vast network of linkages is essential.

Table 4
Identified Program Strengths of Libraries with Active Reading Programs
(Multiple responses, n=5)

Key Themes	Total Number of Coded Responses	Percentage of Coded Responses
Library Personnel	6	29%
Strong Community Partnerships	5	24%

Availability of Funding	3	14%
Accessibility of Reading Materials	3	14%
Perception on Libraries	3	14%
Technological Tools	1	5%
Total Comments Around Themes	21	100%

Three recurring themes that received the same ranking accentuated the availability of financial resources, a vast collection of leisure reading materials in print and e-format, and the impact of having institutional solid support and good standing from the academic community:

“One of our strengths is institutional support. When they hear ‘library’ [department], they do not question us because they know that we are always organized.” – Grace, personal response, April 2023

Another respondent shared:

“For the reading programs, and even all library initiatives, we do anything just to promote the library... Just to let the community know that we play a significant role in their academic life. I do not want to hear them say that we were never part of their student life. ” - Cristine, personal response, April 2023

Lastly, one respondent quoted the advantage of having technological tools in carrying out their current programs.

3.3.Challenges and Lessons Learned

Every library program is susceptible to challenges. In the planning and implementation stages of a reading program, the most common theme that surfaced from the series of interviews is organization/community-related concerns (Table 5). This theme subsumes the challenge of expanding reach, encouraging faculty participation, sustaining engagement, and piquing the interest of the program’s target audience. To resolve this challenge, respondents recognized the need to maintain a well-laid-out plan with specific target objectives to serve as a roadmap. In the issue of reach and participation, partnerships with internal and external stakeholders coupled with constant

communication and coordination are seen as a panacea. Not only does it help ensure support and attain program success, but it also assists in bringing more returns like resources and expertise, increasing community impact, and opening opportunities for development (Dorr et al., 2005). Although many libraries grapple with program engagement and participation, other libraries find strength in it:

“Community coordination and collaboration is strong on our end. It is our strength.” - Bianca, personal response, April 2023

A respondent stressed that user assessment surveys could help to deeply understand their target audience's needs and expectations from the reading program. In addition to assessment surveys, the respondents see an initiative to touch base with target partners, i.e., the student government body, as a workaround.

The second most cited hurdle is force majeure events. These are uncontrollable incidents and phenomena such as the Covid-19 pandemic, class suspensions due to typhoons, acts of God, and acts of man. A few measures observed by the respondents include last-minute adjustments and contingency plans. The third challenge concerns programming-related issues encompassing program sustainability, consistency, logistics, the audience's short attention span, and the absence of assessment and evaluation procedures. The researchers noted the lack of continuity of reading programs because of the absence of a well-laid-out plan, organizational changes, and the attitude of implementing a program for the sake of completing one. One respondent highlighted the significant role an evaluation tool could play in the program's betterment:

“There should be an evaluation mechanism for both the participants and the organizers to validate if the program objectives were achieved or not. And that is what we are lacking at the moment; that is why I could not conclude the degree of impact of our programs.” – Grace, personal response, April 2023

Moreover, while 14% of the study participants previously stipulated that financial resources are their strength, it was also perceived as a challenge due to limitations in funding:

“We have funding, but we see it as a weakness, too. We are still performing well regardless of the budget, but we feel that we could do more if given a bigger budget. For example, last February 2, we could only accommodate two storytelling sessions for two classrooms. However, if we have an additional budget, we could accommodate more [attendees].” – Bianca, personal response, April 2023

Financial constraints in libraries are here to stay, and Ashiq et al. (2021) urge libraries to advocate collaboration, indigenous resource building, and searching for budget alternatives like public-private partnerships, contacts with the corporate sector, and according to Gladwin and Goulding (2012)– public libraries. Similarly, Elliot (2009) and Brookbank et al. (2018) cited budget as the main barrier to reading promotion. Study participants solved this problem by shelling out from their own finances, utilizing library fines and penalties, seeking out sponsors and suppliers for in-kind donations, and the future plan of requesting additional funding from their mother organization. When asked if their administration would be open to extending additional funding, one respondent asserted:

“Yes, I think so. So long as you provide the information about where the budget will be used. Then, yes, the administration is very supportive of such activities at the library.” – Amelia, personal response, April 2023

For staff-related issues, two key ideas have resurfaced: (1) inadequate staff vis-a-vis work overload induced by accreditation preparations, building renovation, and concurrent library activities; and (2) lack of knowledge and training on library programming and project management. The same categories were evident in the study of Elliot (2009). Response to the lack of staff is resolved– even though it may take time, by requesting additional staffing. One respondent shared that they now request an additional three to four librarians and library support staff to concentrate on other library programs that have not been given attention, i.e., reading programs. Another potential solution to the staff-related problem, as Elliot (2009) suggested, is to seek help from library volunteers and student interns. Gladwin and Goulding (2012) also recommended organizing training sessions on the concept of recreational reading targeted to the library personnel to promote the topic and foster staff confidence in such matters. They also suggested explicitly adding detailed information on the job description of the employee responsible for promoting leisure reading.

Table 5
Identified Challenges of Libraries with Active Reading Programs (Multiple responses, n=5)

Key Themes	Total Number of Coded Responses	Percentage of Coded Responses
Organization/Community-related concerns	11	38%

Force majeure events	7	24%
Programming-related issues	4	14%
Limited financial resources	4	14%
Staff-related concerns	3	10%
Total Comments Around Themes	29	100%

Correspondingly, the three study participants who mentioned that reading programs are not apparent in their libraries identified three major barriers that prevented them from implementing one (Table 6). First are staff-related concerns, which entail inadequate personnel, as one respondent emphasized:

“The ratio now is one librarian and one staff in every unit library. Implementing a reading program at this point is not ideal as our core functions will be compromised, and we have regular accreditation-related tasks. Allocating funding for reading programs is not yet on our plan.” - Ella, personal response, April 2023

This concern is further exacerbated by intangible factors of (1) banality– the challenge of inciting innovation and creativity among library staff, (2) incongruity with the library leader’s target library goals and focus, (3) transition period in work, and few of the respondents recently got promoted to their current position.

The next hindrance is organizational and community-related concerns. Like libraries with active reading programs, expanding reach and increasing participation was a roadblock to those without reading programs. Several of them are heavily focused on fulfilling their role in the instruction, extension, and research– academic reading over leisure reading. For them, the academic library is more in support of the research and curricular offerings of the library. Like libraries with active reading programs, those with no reading programs indicated financial constraints as a barrier to producing a reading program in their libraries.

Table 6
Identified Challenges which Prevented Libraries from Implementing Reading Programs (Multiple responses, n=3)

Key Themes	Total Number of Coded Responses	Percentage of Coded Responses
Staff-related concerns	10	59%
Organization/Community-related concerns	6	35%
Limited financial resources	1	6%
Total Comments Around Themes	17	100%

According to the respondents, through this study and the conversation during the data-gathering process, they were able to reflect on the current situation of their reading programs. Undeterred by the challenges, the study participants specified their plans for implementing reading programs:

1. Aside from additional requests for funding, they realized that a regular budget review must be conducted, and an additional 10% of the total cost as a contingency response should be done.
2. Strengthen and integrate reading into the library's community engagement thrust.
3. Widen network and collaboration with internal and external partners.
4. Revive and revamp reading programs that could pique the interest of university students and employees, as reading programs are not only for school-age children. Start thinking outside the box.
5. Revisit their "mobile library" project and the goal of establishing a book club for college students.
6. Update the library's physical space and allocate a quiet zone portion for silent reading.
7. Benchmark other libraries' best practices in cultivating the love for reading.
8. Acquire additional recreational reading materials.

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6. Update the library's physical space and allocate a quiet zone portion for silent reading.
7. Benchmark other libraries' best practices in cultivating the love for reading.
8. Acquire additional recreational reading materials.

4. Conclusions

Successful library programs—in general, and as described by the study participants—must meet their target goals and objectives facilitated by well-trained personnel through engaging and sustainable means and backed with solid administration support. Likewise, an ideal reading program for them equates to creative and collaborative programs with interaction and engagement at the center and must respond to the problem of learning poverty.

The following conclusions were drawn from the precedent findings to respond to the initially defined research questions. First, the researchers affirmed that the promotion of leisure reading among the identified Philippine university libraries is apparent. Most of them implement reading programs in a collection-centered model, followed by interactive activities and some indirect ways of reading promotion. Researchers discovered that the study participants are not initially aware that they are offering reading programs, as the examples they cited during the interview showed that it is embedded in their existing library initiatives, which indirectly promote the culture of reading. Therefore, reading programs do not necessarily have to be a standalone program. Although the majority of the respondents have a strong leaning towards the provision of reading programs in the academic setting, a number are still hesitant due to several reasons, such as a focus on fulfilling the role in the instruction,

extension, and research over leisure reading; and the notion that reading programs are intended for school-age children, out-of-school youth, and public libraries.

The listed challenges in implementing reading programs were familiar regarding library programming. In fact, Ashiq et al. (2021) pointed out that many of the current setbacks encountered by academic libraries were similar to those identified two decades ago. Facing challenges allows organizations to build resilience and improve current processes. Despite the hurdles presented, all study participants— regardless of whether they have active reading programs or not, recommended and considered the continuous and sustainable integration of reading programs in the current and future library programs. They acknowledged the learning crisis the country is facing and how reading could assist in alleviating the said problem.

This research is not without limitations. First, this study only centered the discussion on the reading programs of top Philippine universities without considering other types of academic libraries. Second, the dynamics between the research participants and the facilitators may or may not affect the information they shared in the discussion. The researchers also noticed that while the research participants were given the liberty to select what schedule would fit with them, one respondent had an unexpected thing to attend to, thus affecting the expected duration of the interview. As this paper focuses only on the university libraries, the researchers recommend triplication of the study but with the university students, faculty members, and staff—including librarians, as the target respondents to get a holistic view, where all stakeholders were given a chance to participate and voice out their viewpoints. An additional number of university library respondents may also give a different perspective.

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