

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Enhancing Academic Staff Engagement in Community Service: A Case Study of the College of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Gondar

Aemero Asmamaw Chalachew^{1*}

Abstract

This study assessed the level of academic staff engagement in community service at the College of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Gondar, and implemented interventions to enhance participation. Employing an action research design, data were collected from 53 academic staff through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Baseline findings revealed low formal engagement, with 45.28% of participants reporting no involvement in institutional community service projects. Key barriers operated at three interconnected levels: personal (limited motivation, heavy workloads, and a “publish or perish” incentive structure that disregards community service in promotion), administrative (rigid budgetary processes, delayed fund disbursement, and vague evaluation criteria), and infrastructural (vehicle shortages, unreliable internet, and inadequate workspace). Notably, many staff provided informal, self-directed community support outside formal frameworks, indicating untapped civic commitment. A multi-component intervention comprising leadership consultations, ICT improvements, and intensive proposal development training was implemented. Post-intervention evaluation showed measurable improvements in both the quantity and quality of community service proposals submitted. The study concludes that enhancing engagement requires simultaneous reform across personal capacity-building, administrative streamlining, equitable resource allocation between research and community service, and integration of community engagement into academic promotion criteria. Sustained institutional commitment beyond localized interventions is essential for transforming community service from a peripheral obligation into an authentic pillar of academic life.

Keywords: Academic staff engagement, community service, action research, Ethiopian higher education

Introduction

The contemporary university is increasingly defined not only by its core missions of teaching and research but also by a “third mission”: to serve as an engaged anchor institution that contributes to the betterment of its local and global communities. This tripartite role has become integral to the identity and pedagogy of higher education institutions worldwide, repositioning them as vital catalysts for socio-cultural, economic, and political progress. Within this context, the agency of individual academic staff is paramount; they are the

1

Department of Psychology, University of Gondar, Ethiopia

*Corresponding Author email: Aemero.Asmamaw@uog.edu.et/asmamawam@gmail.com



This journal is licensed under a creative common Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0. It is accredited to the University of Gondar, College of Social Sciences and Humanities.

DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.20372/erjssh.v13.i2.5>

primary architects of the learning environment and bear a responsibility to intentionally construct a safe, respectful, and supportive space that fosters both student success and civic responsiveness (Donnelly & Flynn, 2021). While teaching styles and institutional expectations may vary, it is universally recognized that an authentic commitment to community engagement is essential for enriching student learning and realizing the university's public mandate.

The intellectual foundations of this engagement mission were laid by scholars such as Ernest Boyer, who radically redefined academic scholarship to include the scholarship of application and engagement as core faculty responsibilities (Boyer, 1990). Building on this, a growing body of literature has emphasized the central role of faculty in translating the abstract ideal of engagement into a meaningful, partnership-based process (Koliba, 2007). Over the past two decades, significant scholarly attention has been devoted to defining, structuring, and rewarding this work, revealing a complex landscape of activities that vary across academic disciplines (Lunsford & Omae, 2011; O'Meara et al., 2011). This dominant discourse, however, has largely focused on formal, institutionalized models, particularly university-community partnerships and service-learning pedagogy (Demb & Wade, 2012). A significant gap remains in the literature regarding the less formalized, yet equally vital, expressions of engagement—specifically, the personal commitment, volunteerism, and individual agency of faculty members that operate outside of structured institutional programs (O'Meara, 2011).

The benefits of robust community engagement are well-documented, creating reciprocal value for both the institution and its partners. For colleges and universities, engagement is linked to higher student satisfaction and retention rates, a deeper institutional commitment to the curriculum, and the creation of new opportunities for collaborative research and publication (O'Meara et al., 2011). Concurrently, communities gain access to valuable human resources, an infusion of new energy and perspectives, and strengthened relationships with local institutions that can help address persistent social challenges. Recognizing this synergy, a holistic, systems-thinking approach is essential one that moves beyond fragmented efforts where universities and community entities operate in isolation. Instead, a positive leverage structure must be built through mutual communication and the identification of hidden linkages among multiple stakeholders, transforming potential redundancy and dispute into comprehensive and cooperative action (Yahui Fang, 2016).

Despite these established benefits and the rhetorical commitment to a “third mission,” a troubling disconnect often exists between institutional discourse and the lived reality of faculty members. At the College of Social Sciences and Humanities (CSSH) at the University of Gondar, initial observations suggest that the current level of academic staff engagement in community service is perfunctory, lacking the authenticity and empowerment necessary to create meaningful impact. This problem manifests not as a complete absence of activity, but rather as a contrived system where participation may be driven by compliance rather than genuine scholarly and civic commitment. Understanding

the specific nature of this disconnect is a critical prerequisite for fostering a culture where engagement is intrinsically motivated and deeply embedded. This study, therefore, seeks to move beyond a simple measure of participation to critically assess the lived experiences of academic staff as they navigate the process of community service. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does academic staff at the College of Social Sciences and Humanities engage in the community service process, from initiation and design to implementation and evaluation?
2. What are the key institutional and personal challenges that hinder, and what untapped possibilities exist for, academic staff seeking to engage multiple stakeholders in a collaborative community service process?

Justification

In Ethiopia, the establishment and expansion of public higher education institutions have been intrinsically linked to national development priorities and, by extension, to the communities these institutions are mandated to serve. The Ethiopian Higher Education Proclamation (No. 1152/2019) formalizes this social contract by legally obligating universities to design and implement community service initiatives that address both national and local priority areas (Negassa & Adamu, 2025). This legislative framework fundamentally repositions community service from a peripheral, voluntary activity to a core, non-negotiable pillar of academic work, on par with teaching and research. The fulfillment of this institutional mandate, however, is entirely dependent on the active and authentic participation of individual academic staff members a condition that current evidence suggests is not being met.

Research conducted within the Ethiopian higher education landscape has already established that a significant gap exists between the mandated expectation of faculty engagement and the actual level of participation in community service projects. This gap has been attributed to a range of systemic factors, including persistent organizational barriers, inadequate institutional support structures, and communication breakdowns between universities and their surrounding communities (Negassa & Adamu, 2025). These findings confirm that the problem is not merely a matter of individual faculty motivation but is embedded within institutional systems and practices. However, while this prior work has been instrumental in identifying the existence and broad causes of the engagement deficit at a national level, it has largely treated Ethiopian universities as a homogenous entity, offering generalized findings that do not capture the specific dynamics operating within distinct institutional units.

The present study is justified by the critical need to move beyond these broad diagnoses and investigate the nuanced, context-specific realities of a single academic unit: the College of Social Sciences and Humanities (CSSH) at the University of Gondar. The CSSH

represents a uniquely significant site for investigation. By its very disciplinary nature housing fields such as social work, sociology, governance, and cultural studies the College carries a direct and immediate mandate to engage with pressing social issues. A superficial or contrived engagement within this College is not simply an institutional failure; it represents a fundamental misalignment between the scholarly identity of its disciplines and their operational reality. Studying this specific setting allows for a deep, qualitative exploration of how engagement is understood and practiced (or not practiced) within the everyday working lives of faculty, revealing the micro-level processes, departmental cultures, and local barriers that national-level studies inevitably overlook. Furthermore, this study offers a unique contribution by shifting the focus from merely identifying barriers to uncovering latent possibilities for authentic engagement. While acknowledging the documented challenges of organizational barriers and communication gaps, this research is designed to simultaneously explore the untapped opportunities, motivations, and local resources that exist among academic staff and within the community-university interface at the University of Gondar. This dual focus on challenges and possibilities is essential for moving beyond a deficit-based analysis toward generating actionable, solution-oriented recommendations that are grounded in the specific context and co-created with the stakeholders involved.

The significance of this inquiry is therefore threefold. For the University of Gondar, the findings will provide context-specific evidence to inform targeted interventions that move beyond generic mandates toward fostering a genuine culture of engagement at the College level. For academic staff, the study creates an opportunity to voice their lived experiences, constraints, and aspirations, thereby contributing to a more supportive and empowering environment that benefits both their professional development and personal fulfillment. Finally, for the broader Ethiopian higher education sector, this study offers a methodological and analytical template for conducting institution-specific engagement research that can inform evidence-based policy implementation beyond one-size-fits-all directives. Without such localized, solution-focused inquiry, the legislative mandate for community service risks remaining an unfulfilled aspiration, marked by performative compliance rather than meaningful, reciprocal partnership.

Objectives

The overarching objective of this study is to enhance the authentic engagement of academic staff in community service at the College of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Gondar. Specifically, the research intends to:

1. Assess the level of academic staff engagement in community services before and after intervention.
2. Identify the major institutional, professional, and personal challenges affecting academic staff engagement in community services.

3. Develop contextually appropriate strategies to address the identified barriers and strengthen the conditions that enable meaningful academic staff participation in community services.
4. Implement and evaluate an effective intervention designed to enhance academic staff engagement in community services.

Material and Methods

Study Design

This study employed an action research design, selected for its dual commitment to generating context-specific knowledge and implementing practical solutions within the very setting being studied. Action research is a systematic, cyclical process of inquiry that involves practitioners actively investigating their own practice to understand problems and bring about meaningful change (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). This design was particularly appropriate for the present study because the research aimed not only to assess the level of academic staff engagement in community service but also to collaboratively design and implement an intervention to enhance that engagement. The action research process followed four interconnected phases: 1) Planning, which involved initial reconnaissance to identify the problem, a review of institutional documents, and the design of the intervention; 2) Action, entailing the implementation of the intervention designed to address identified barriers; 3) Observation, consisting of systematic data collection before and after the intervention to monitor changes in staff knowledge, attitudes, and practices; and 4) Reflection, involving the analysis of findings and formulation of recommendations for future institutional practice. To strengthen the evidence generated during the observation phase, the study incorporated a pre-post assessment component measuring knowledge, attitudes, and skills (KAS) related to community service. This integration of quantitative measurement within an action research framework provided a structured means of evaluating the intervention's immediate outcomes while remaining grounded in the participatory ethos of the design.

Study Area

The study was conducted at the University of Gondar, specifically within the College of Social Sciences and Humanities (CSSH). The University of Gondar is located in the historic city of Gondar, approximately 175 kilometers north of Bahir Dar, the capital of the Amhara Region, Ethiopia. While the university traces its origins to 1954, the CSSH was formally established as an autonomous academic unit in 2009. At the time of this study, CSSH was the second-largest college within the university in terms of faculty size, program diversity, and student enrollment. Over fifteen years, the college expanded from four initial departments offering only undergraduate courses to encompass 18 departments and 11 coordination offices. The college currently delivers 22 Master's

and 12 PhD programs through regular, extension, and summer enrollment streams. This institutional complexity and disciplinary diversity made the CSSH an information-rich setting for investigating the multifaceted nature of academic staff engagement in community service.

Study Participants and Sampling Procedures

The study involved academic staff drawn from all 18 departments within the CSSH. To ensure both representativeness across disciplines and the inclusion of participants with relevant experience, a multi-stage sampling strategy was employed. In the first stage, all 18 departments were included to ensure college-wide representation. In the second stage, three academic staff members were purposively selected from each department based on the following criteria: a) a minimum of two years of employment at the university, ensuring familiarity with institutional expectations for community service, and b) willingness to participate in all phases of the action research process, including the intervention. This resulted in an initial sample of 53 participants though it should have been 54. This happen because one participants has not avail himself for the intervention.

The sample size was determined by the practical requirements of the action research design. Action research prioritizes depth of engagement with a manageable number of participants who can be meaningfully involved in the cyclical process of planning, action, observation, and reflection. Three participants per department provided sufficient diversity of perspectives while remaining logistically feasible for the collaborative intervention activities that formed the core of the action phase. For the qualitative component, a subset of 12 key informants was purposively selected from the 53 participants, ensuring representation across academic ranks, disciplinary clusters, and levels of prior community service involvement. These key informants participated in semi-structured interviews to provide deeper insight into the challenges and possibilities surrounding engagement.

Data Collection Tools and Procedures

Three distinct data collection methods were employed, each aligned with specific phases of the action research cycle and designed to ensure methodological triangulation.

Questionnaire. A self-developed, structured questionnaire was designed to assess participants' knowledge, attitudes, and skills (KAS) related to community service. The knowledge domain assessed understanding of institutional policies, mandates, and the conceptual foundations of community engagement. The attitudes domain explored perceptions of the value, relevance, and personal significance of community service. The skills domain examined self-reported competencies in areas such as project design, community partnership development, and evaluation. To ensure the validity of the instrument, the questionnaire was reviewed by a panel of three experts in community

engagement and higher education research, who assessed the relevance, clarity, and comprehensiveness of each item. Revisions were made based on their feedback to improve content and face validity. Subsequently, a pilot test was conducted with 10 academic staff members from a different college within the university who were not part of the main study. The reliability of the KAS scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, yielding coefficients of 0.82 for the knowledge subscale, 0.79 for the attitudes subscale, and 0.85 for the skills subscale, all exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70 (Taber, 2018). The questionnaire was administered at two time points: during the planning phase (pre-intervention baseline) and again during the observation phase (post-intervention), allowing for a systematic comparison of changes attributable to the intervention. The instrument also captured relevant socio-demographic characteristics including academic rank, years of service, and disciplinary background. The use of a pre-post questionnaire was integral to the action research design, providing a structured means of observing shifts in the very domains the intervention sought to influence.

Document Analysis. During the planning phase, a systematic document analysis was conducted to establish the institutional context and baseline status of community service engagement. This involved a review of: a) community service project proposals submitted by CSSH academic staff over the preceding three academic years, to assess longitudinal trends in the volume and nature of proposed activities, and b) institutional guidelines, strategic plans, and incentive structures related to community service, to understand the formal policy environment. This analysis informed the identification of gaps between institutional expectations and actual practice, directly feeding into the design of the intervention.

Semi-Structured Interviews. During both the planning and reflection phases, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 purposively selected key informants. The interviews served two purposes. First, during the planning phase, they explored the nuanced factors influencing academic staff engagement, including perceived institutional barriers, personal motivations, and the nature of communication between the college and community stakeholders. Second, during the reflection phase, follow-up interviews were conducted with six of the original key informants to solicit participant-driven evaluations of the intervention and to identify emergent solutions and recommendations. This qualitative component ensured that the action research process remained grounded in participant voices and experiences, consistent with the participatory principles of the design.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was tailored to the nature of each data source and aligned with the reflection phase of the action research cycle. Quantitative data from the pre- and post-intervention questionnaires were entered into SPSS Version 20. Descriptive statistics, specifically frequencies and percentages, were computed to summarize participants' KAS

levels at both time points and to identify patterns of change. Results are presented in tabular format to facilitate comparison. Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and document analysis were analyzed using thematic analysis. Transcripts and notes were systematically coded to identify recurring patterns and themes related to barriers, facilitators, and participant-generated solutions. These qualitative findings were used to contextualize and interpret the quantitative results, ensuring that the reflection phase produced a holistic understanding of the intervention’s process and outcomes.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the College of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Gondar, which is the authorized body for reviewing research involving human participants within the College. Prior to data collection, all potential participants received a comprehensive written and verbal explanation of the study’s purpose, the nature of the intervention, the voluntary nature of participation, and the expected time commitment. The principles of confidentiality and anonymity were strictly emphasized: no personally identifying information was attached to questionnaire responses, and pseudonyms are used in reporting qualitative findings. Voluntary oral informed consent was obtained from each participant before their involvement, and participants were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without any negative consequences to their employment or professional standing.

Results

Socio-demographic Characteristics of Participants

A total of 53 academic staff members from the College of Social Sciences and Humanities participated in this action research study. Table 1 summarizes their socio-demographic characteristics, which provide essential context for understanding the composition of the faculty and their baseline engagement with community service.

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of study participants

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent (%)
Age	27–40	17	32.07
	> 41	36	67.92
Sex	Male	45	84.9
	Female	8	15.09
Educational Background	BA/BSc Degree	3	5.66
	MA/MSc Degree	39	73.58
	PhD	11	20.75
Participation in community service projects	Yes	19	35.84
	No	24	45.28
	No response	10	18.88

The majority of respondents (67.92%) were above the age of 41, indicating a relatively senior faculty profile. A pronounced gender disparity was evident, with male staff comprising 84.9% of participants compared to 15.09% female representation. Regarding educational qualifications, the largest proportion of participants (73.58%) held MA/MSc degrees, while 20.75% held PhDs and 5.66% held BA/BSc degrees. Most notably, when asked about their involvement in community service projects, nearly half of the participants (45.28%) reported no participation, compared to 35.84% who indicated some involvement.

Pre- and Post-Intervention Knowledge, Attitudes, and Skills (KAS) Assessment

To evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention, participants' Knowledge, Attitudes, and Skills were assessed using a structured questionnaire administered before and after the intervention. Table 2 presents the comparative analysis of pre- and post-intervention mean scores.

Table 2. Pre- and Post-Intervention KAS Mean Comparisons (N=53)

KAS Domain	Pre-Intervention Mean	Post-Intervention Mean	M e a n Difference
Knowledge	2.87	3.52	+0.65
Attitudes	3.12	3.78	+0.66
Skills	2.43	3.15	+0.72
Overall KAS	2.81	3.48	+0.67

Note: Scores are based on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Very Low, 5 = Very High).

The results demonstrate improvement across all three KAS domains following the intervention. The overall KAS composite score increased from a pre-intervention mean of 2.81 to a post-intervention mean of 3.48, representing a mean shift of +0.67. Among the three domains, Skills showed the most considerable improvement, increasing from 2.43 to 3.15 (+0.72). Knowledge improved from 2.87 to 3.52 (+0.65), while Attitudes increased from 3.12 to 3.78 (+0.66). The Attitudes domain achieved the highest post-intervention mean score of 3.78, indicating a positive shift in participants' civic motivation and perceived value of community service. These findings suggest that the action research intervention contributed to moderate improvements in academic staff capacity for community service engagement across all measured domains.

Level of Academic Staff Engagement in Community Services

The findings revealed a consistently low level of formal engagement in institutional community service projects among academic staff. As indicated by the baseline questionnaire and document analysis, the majority of faculty members had not participated in any formally funded community service initiatives. This low participation was attributed to several interrelated factors.

First, a notable information asymmetry was identified: some staff members were simply unaware that the university allocated dedicated budgets to fund community service projects, pointing to gaps in internal communication and dissemination of institutional resources. Second, among those who were aware of funding opportunities, many lacked the motivation or skills to develop well-organized, competitive project proposals. Third, even when staff invested effort in proposal development, a structural selection issue emerged whereby submitted projects failed to secure funding. This suggests either a misalignment between proposal content and institutional selection criteria, or the effect of limited overall funding relative to demand.

Despite these formal participation gaps, a significant finding was that many academic staff reported providing self-directed, volunteer, and informal professional support to their communities outside of institutional frameworks. While these efforts indicate an underlying spirit of civic commitment, they remain invisible to university monitoring systems and are neither supported nor recognized through formal channels.

In contrast to the low baseline participation, the document analysis revealed a progressive historical increase in the number of staff engaged in community service projects. A comparison of institutional reports from 2014 and 2019 demonstrated growth from 36 to 53 participants respectively. This upward trend was attributed to the launch of “Mega Research and Community Service Projects” initiated by the Office of the Vice President for Research and Community Services at the University of Gondar. The Mega Projects initiative was specifically designed to incentivize faculty participation by providing substantial funding, encouraging multidisciplinary collaboration, and creating competitive yet inclusive pathways for large-scale, community-focused proposals. By reducing fragmented competition for limited resources and fostering a collective approach, the initiative succeeded in expanding the overall availability of financial support and increasing documented participation.

Major Challenges Affecting Academic Staff Engagement in Community Services

The study identified a range of interconnected challenges that collectively impede academic staff engagement in community service. These challenges operate at three distinct but interrelated levels: personal, administrative, and infrastructural.

Personal-Level Challenges: Motivation and Morale

For many academic staff, community service was perceived as an optional supplement rather than a core professional duty. This perception was not simply a matter of individual disposition but a rational response to the institutional incentive structure. Promotion and salary increases were reported to be almost exclusively tied to teaching loads and research publications, with community service carrying negligible weight in performance evaluations and career advancement. Consequently, faculty logically directed their energy toward activities with tangible career benefits. This “publish or perish” dynamic was compounded by chronic understaffing in many departments, which resulted in heavy teaching loads that left little time for community engagement. Furthermore, low academic salaries forced some staff to seek supplementary income through side employment, further reducing the time and energy available for voluntary community projects. Finally, the absence of proper orientation and mentorship for newly hired staff meant that junior faculty rarely internalized community service as an integral part of their professional identity.

Administrative and Financial Challenges: Bureaucratic Barriers

Even among motivated faculty, rigid administrative and financial systems often acted as barriers rather than enablers. Budgetary processes were characterized by lengthy approval delays and inflexible spending categories, meaning that by the time funds were released, project opportunities had often passed. This “funding friction” was exacerbated by vague and inconsistent evaluation criteria for community service. Unlike teaching, which is assessed through student feedback, and research, which is measured through publications, community service was frequently evaluated through superficial, checklist-based criteria that lacked clear impact metrics. Additionally, the fragmentation of the college into numerous small departments led to a dilution of resources, with multiple small budgets competing for the same limited funding pool. These departmental concerns made it difficult to launch the kind of large-scale, multidisciplinary projects that community needs demand.

Infrastructural Challenges: The Physical and Digital Divide

Material and logistical constraints further hindered community engagement. Community service activities frequently take place in rural or remote locations, yet the university faced a chronic shortage of vehicles, with available transport typically reserved for administrative and teaching purposes. Unreliable internet connectivity and a lack of modern software hindered project management, proposal submission, and stakeholder communication, effectively isolating faculty from the communities they were meant to serve. Finally, many academic staff worked in overcrowded, shared offices without dedicated spaces to meet with community partners or plan interventions, reinforcing a sense of the university as disconnected from the public it is mandated to serve.

Intervention Plan, Implementation, and Evaluation

Intervention Plan

Recognizing that academic staff engagement in community service is significant for both the university and the broader community, a multi-component intervention was designed based on findings from the preliminary data collection phase (document analysis, interviews, and baseline questionnaire). The intervention targeted the three primary challenge domains identified: administrative and financial barriers, infrastructural deficits, and personal capacity gaps. The major intervention components and their corresponding sub-activities are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Major Intervention Plan and Sub-Activities

Major Intervention	Sub-Activities	Timeline	Resources Required	Expected Outcomes
1. Consultation with the Community Services Coordination Office and Deans	Presenting the identified problems and contributing factors to the College Dean and Community Services Coordinator	June–August 2021 (Two half-day consultative meetings)	Meeting hall, presentation materials (LCD projector, laptop), printed reports, stationery, refreshments	Increased leadership awareness of key bottlenecks; administrative commitment to support reforms; agreement on action points and follow-up mechanisms
	Sending official letter documenting ICT-related problems	July 2021 (First week)	Official communication letter, documented list of ICT problems	Formal recognition of ICT constraints; initiation of institutional dialogue
	Open, solution-focused discussion	August 2021 (One full-day workshop)	Workshop materials, flip charts, facilitation guide, documentation support	Development of short-term action plan; strengthened collaboration between college leadership and Community Service Office
	Maintenance and system improvements	July–September 2021	Technical personnel, maintenance budget, spare parts, ICT equipment	Improved internet connectivity and ICT functionality; enhanced staff capacity to prepare proposals and communicate with communities

3. Intensive Training for Academic Staff	Pre-intervention questionnaire administration	September 2021 (Week 1)	Survey questionnaire (printed/digital), data collection and analysis tools	Baseline data on staff perceptions and challenges; identification of training needs
	Training preparation	September 2021 (Week 2)	Training manuals, facilitator, venue, projector, stationery, logistical budget	Well-structured training program tailored to identified gaps
	Training delivery	September 2021 (3-day intensive training)	Facilitators, training hall, LCD projector, printed handouts, refreshments, certificates	Improved knowledge and skills in community engagement; increased motivation and collaboration
	Post-intervention questionnaire	Immediately after training (End of September 2021)	Evaluation forms, data analysis tools	Measured improvement in awareness and motivation; feedback for future improvement; evidence of training impact

Implementation of the Intervention

The intervention was executed systematically across three phases. The first phase involved an open discussion and consultation with the College Dean and the Community Services Coordination Office. This meeting, held at the Dean's office with all relevant stakeholders present, proved highly productive and solution-oriented. Specific actions were agreed upon, including a reorganization of the proposal submission timeline and the development and modification of community service guidelines. These changes were endorsed by the Dean, department heads, the coordinating office, and other university officials.

Building on this initial success, the second phase involved consultation and open discussion with the Information Communication Technology Directorate of the University of Gondar. These discussions directly addressed ICT-related concerns raised by academic staff during the preliminary data collection. An agreement was reached to enhance overall system maintenance and increase the number of technical assistants working within the college.

The third phase addressed the personal and skill-based factors affecting engagement. An intensive two-day training session was conducted for academic staff, focusing on three core areas: community service proposal development, university community service guidelines and policies, and use of the electronic project submission portal. Despite some attitudinal challenges encountered during the training, post-training assessments indicated that the

sessions were highly successful in improving participants' knowledge and skills.

Evaluation of the Intervention

Following the implementation of all intervention components, a systematic evaluation was conducted using observation, document analysis, and interviews with relevant stakeholders. The researcher closely monitored the activities and outputs of academic staff as they developed and submitted community service project proposals during the 2021. academic year. Both the number and quality of submitted proposals were assessed anonymously, and post-training interviews were conducted with participating academic staff.

The evaluation revealed a noticeable overall improvement in academic staff engagement in community service projects, as reflected in both the quantity and quality of proposals submitted. However, the findings also indicated that sustained and scaled improvement requires more intensive, university-wide investigation and coordinated, nation-based solutions that extend beyond college-level interventions. The improvements observed, while encouraging, represent an initial step in what must be a sustained institutional commitment to embedding community engagement within the academic culture.

Discussion

This study confirmed a significant gap between the institutional mandate for community service and the actual engagement of academic staff at the College of Social Sciences and Humanities. The finding that a majority of participants had not engaged in formal, institutionally funded projects, despite the legal obligations set by the Ethiopian Higher Education Proclamation, reveals a fundamental misalignment between policy and practice. Importantly, however, the absence of formal participation did not indicate a complete absence of community-oriented activity. Many staff reported providing self-directed, voluntary support outside institutional frameworks, suggesting that a reservoir of civic commitment exists but remains unrecognized and unsupported by existing university structures. This disconnect was compounded by information asymmetry, where staff were simply unaware of available funding and submission processes a gap that the consultation and training interventions sought to close.

The challenges driving this engagement deficit operated at three interconnected levels. At the personal level, a "publish or perish" incentive structure, heavy teaching loads, and low salaries led faculty to rationally deprioritize community service, which remains largely unrewarded in promotion and performance reviews. At the administrative level, rigid budgeting processes, delayed approvals, and vague evaluation criteria created bureaucratic barriers that frustrated even motivated staff. At the infrastructural level, shortages of vehicles, unreliable internet, and inadequate workspace imposed material constraints on the ability to plan and execute community-based projects. The study's

multi-pronged intervention—combining leadership consultations, ICT improvements, and intensive training on proposal development—was designed to address these layers simultaneously. The post-intervention increase in both the number and quality of proposals submitted indicates that such an integrated approach can yield measurable improvements.

Despite these encouraging outcomes, the study's limitations, including its single-site focus and the short-term nature of the post-intervention evaluation, warrant caution in generalizing the findings. Sustained change will require institutional commitment beyond isolated interventions, particularly the integration of community engagement into formal reward structures and career advancement criteria. The experience of the CSSH demonstrates that while localized action research can diagnose context-specific barriers and catalyze initial progress, a broader, university-wide and ultimately nation-based strategy is essential to transform community service from a peripheral expectation into an authentic, valued pillar of academic life.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study confirms that the challenges undermining academic staff engagement in community service at the College of Social Sciences and Humanities are multidimensional, spanning personal, administrative, financial, and structural domains. These interconnected barriers collectively weaken participation and prevent community service from fulfilling its mandated role as a core pillar of academic life alongside teaching and research.

At the personal level, limited motivation and competing workloads significantly hinder meaningful engagement. Faculty members burdened by heavy teaching and research responsibilities often treat community service as a secondary obligation rather than an integral professional duty. This dynamic is compounded by weak collaborative cultures and insufficient skills in developing competitive project proposals, which further reduce both the quantity and quality of community outreach initiatives. Addressing these challenges requires targeted capacity-building interventions such as training in proposal development, project management, and the developmental significance of community engagement that can foster intrinsic motivation and a shared sense of responsibility among academic staff.

Administrative and financial barriers, however, represent the most systemic impediments to participation. The study revealed that allocated community service budgets are often insufficient to cover basic operational costs, while rigid disbursement procedures and lengthy approval delays create additional frustration. Critically, scholars involved in major community service projects frequently receive little or no financial benefit, leading to demotivation. This is further exacerbated by a stark funding imbalance: research projects

command substantially larger budgets than community service initiatives, sending an unmistakable institutional signal about where priorities lie. Faculty respond rationally to these incentives, channeling their energy toward research where both funding and professional rewards are greater. Rectifying this requires not only reforming financial management systems to remove bureaucratic bottlenecks but also establishing greater parity between research and community service funding allocations.

Finally, the issue of career advancement lies at the heart of the engagement deficit. When promotion criteria heavily emphasize research publications while according minimal weight to community service, faculty have little institutional incentive to invest in outreach activities. Perceiving community engagement as peripheral to career progression, academic staff rationally deprioritize it. A fundamental reassessment of promotion frameworks is therefore essential, one that integrates community service as a legitimate, measurable, and valued component of academic evaluation. In sum, strengthening community engagement demands a comprehensive and coordinated approach that simultaneously addresses personal motivation, reforms financial and administrative systems, ensures equitable resource allocation, and embeds community service meaningfully within academic reward structures. Only through such integrated reform can community service realize its transformative potential as a catalyst for both institutional renewal and national development.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Strengthen personal motivation and capacity through targeted training. The University Community Service Office, in collaboration with the College of Social Sciences and Humanities, should design and deliver ongoing consultancy and capacity-building programs for academic staff. These programs should focus on raising awareness of the developmental significance of community engagement, strengthening proposal-writing and project management skills, and fostering a collaborative culture that reduces isolation and encourages joint initiatives. By linking community service to both professional growth and societal impact, such training can cultivate deeper intrinsic motivation and a stronger sense of purpose among faculty.
2. Reform administrative and financial systems to remove barriers to participation. University leadership should critically review and revise the existing financial management framework governing community service. Specific measures should include streamlining fund disbursement procedures to eliminate delays, introducing meaningful financial incentives or honoraria for scholars who lead major community service projects, and ensuring that allocated budgets are sufficient to cover operational costs. Such reforms would directly address the demotivation caused by the current

perception that community service offers significant effort with minimal institutional support or personal benefit.

3. Establish equitable resource allocation between research and community service. The substantial disparity between research funding and community service budgets must be addressed as a matter of institutional priority. The university should work toward a more balanced distribution of resources, ensuring that community service initiatives are funded at levels that enable meaningful, sustained engagement rather than token participation. Equitable funding would signal institutional commitment and reduce the rational incentive for faculty to focus exclusively on research at the expense of community outreach.

4. Integrate community engagement into academic promotion and reward structures. The university must reassess the weight assigned to community service within its promotion and career advancement criteria. Clear, measurable indicators of community engagement contributions should be developed and formally recognized alongside research and teaching achievements. By providing tangible recognition and incentives for meaningful community service, the institution can elevate its perceived legitimacy and encourage faculty to embrace it as a core, rather than peripheral, dimension of their academic identity and professional responsibility.

References

- Boyer, E. L. (1990). *Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate*. Princeton University Press, 3175 Princeton Pike, Lawrenceville, NJ 08648.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Creswell, J. W., & Guetterman, T. C. (2019). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (6th ed.). Pearson.
- Demb, A., & Wade, A. (2012). Reality check: Faculty involvement in outreach and engagement. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 83(3), 337–366. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2012.11777247>
- Donnelly, R., & Flynn, P. (2021). The intentional construction of a safe, respectful, and supportive learning environment: A faculty responsibility. *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice*, 21(10), 55–67.
- Ethiopian Higher Education Proclamation No. 1152/2019. (2019). Federal Negarit Gazette of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.
- Foster, K. M. (2010). Taking a stand: Community-engaged scholarship on the tenure track. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*, 3(2), 20–30.
- Inman, P., & Schütze, H. G. (Eds.). (2010). *The community engagement and service mission of universities*. Leicester: Niace.
- Koliba, C. J. (2007). Engagement as a scholarly practice: The role of faculty in service-learning and community-based research. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 11(3), 87–102.
- Lunsford, C. G., & Omae, H. N. (2011). An examination of the factors that shape the engagement of faculty members and academic staff. *Innovative Higher Education*, 36(5), 343–358. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-011-9179-7>
- Negassa, D. Z., & Adamu, A. Y. (2025). Faculty Perceptions of Community Service in Ethiopian Higher Education: A Case Study of Addis Ababa University. *International Journal of African Higher Education*, 12(1), 55–81.
- Nicotera, N., Cutforth, N., Fretz, E., & Thompson, S. S. (2011). Dedication to community engagement: A higher education conundrum? *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*, 4(1), 37–49.

- Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>
- Meara, K., Sandmann, L. R., Saltmarsh, J., & Giles, D. E., Jr. (2011). Studying the professional lives and work of faculty involved in community engagement. *Innovative Higher Education*, 36(2), 83–96. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-010-9159-3>
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. (1999). The response of higher education institutions to regional needs. OECD Publishing.
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. (2001). Cities and regions in the new learning economy. OECD Publishing.
- Taber, K. S. (2018). The use of Cronbach's alpha when developing and reporting research instruments in science education. *Research in Science Education*, 48(6), 1273–1296. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11165-016-9602-2>
- Yahui Fang. (2016). Building a positive leverage structure between universities and communities through a systems-thinking approach. *Higher Education Studies*, 6(4), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.5539/hes.v6n4p1>