A Systematic Review of Student-Centered Leadership in University

Mary Joy M. Capito, MAEd

Leyte Normal University Northwest Samar State University

ABSTRACT

This systematic review explores student-centered leadership (SCL) within universities and higher education institutions (HEIs), analyzing 65 relevant local and international studies published over the past 10–15 years. The review identifies five major themes: transformational leadership in student organizations, ethical leadership and governance, student engagement and empowerment, mental health and inclusive leadership, and leadership development programs in HEIs. Findings show that student-centered leadership enhances academic and social outcomes, promotes ethical behavior, and improves institutional responsiveness. The review highlights gaps in local implementation and proposes a framework for integrating student-centered leadership into institutional development strategies.

Keywords: Student-centered leadership, higher education, university student leadership, governance, systematic review

INTRODUCTION

Student-centered leadership (SCL) in universities redefines traditional leadership structures by positioning students not merely as recipients of education but as co-creators of institutional policies, learning environments, and community outcomes. It acknowledges students as essential stakeholders whose voices and actions directly influence university operations, academic priorities, and community engagement initiatives. By involving students in shared governance and decision-making processes, SCL fosters a more democratic and responsive educational ecosystem.

Globally, scholars have underscored the transformative role of student leadership in shaping inclusive, innovative, and socially conscious institutional cultures. Robinson (2011) emphasized that student-centered leadership enhances relational trust and academic success by focusing leadership efforts on improving teaching and learning outcomes. Dugan and Komives (2007) further argued that leadership development rooted in active student participation contributes to civic responsibility, personal growth, and a stronger commitment to social justice.

In the Philippine context, SCL is increasingly institutionalized through mechanisms such as Supreme Student Governments (SSGs), university-wide student councils, and leadership training programs integrated into co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. Studies by Alih et al. (2022) and Cordero (2022) illustrate how student leaders actively participate in budget consultations, academic committees, and program evaluations—reflecting a shift toward participatory and values-driven leadership in higher education institutions (HEIs). This evolving leadership landscape highlights the potential of SCL to advance inclusive governance, transparency, and student empowerment in both academic and administrative spheres.

Despite its growing prominence, the practice of SCL remains inconsistent across institutions. Some universities provide strong support systems and leadership development frameworks, while others treat student leadership as symbolic rather than substantive. This fragmentation calls for a comprehensive synthesis of how SCL is conceptualized, operationalized, and evaluated in varying contexts.

Thus, this systematic review aims to consolidate empirical, theoretical, and practice-based literature on SCL to establish a cohesive understanding of its principles and outcomes. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Identify prevailing leadership models in student-led university governance, including transformational, ethical, and participatory frameworks;

2. Determine the effects of student-centered leadership on academic engagement, social inclusion, and institutional responsiveness; and

3. Explore both enabling factors and persistent barriers to implementing SCL practices across diverse higher education settings.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework of Student-Centered Leadership (SCL) in universities, illustrating how five core themes interact to support inclusive and responsive institutional leadership. At the center is SCL, which repositions students as active partners in shaping educational policies, governance, and community engagement. The framework is supported by two foundational inputs—Transformational Leadership and Ethical Governance. These elements emphasize the importance of visionary leadership, motivation, transparency, and accountability as essential drivers of a student-centered environment. In turn, effective SCL leads to critical outcomes such as Student Empowerment and Mental Health and Inclusivity. These outcomes highlight the role of student voice, agency, psychological safety, and inclusive practices in cultivating leadership capacity among diverse learners. At the base of the framework is Leadership Development, which integrates the principles of all four themes and ensures the continuity and sustainability of student leadership through structured training, mentorship, and institutional support. Overall, this model encapsulates the dynamic and interconnected nature of student-centered leadership, offering a strategic guide for universities aiming to foster transformative and equitable learning environments.
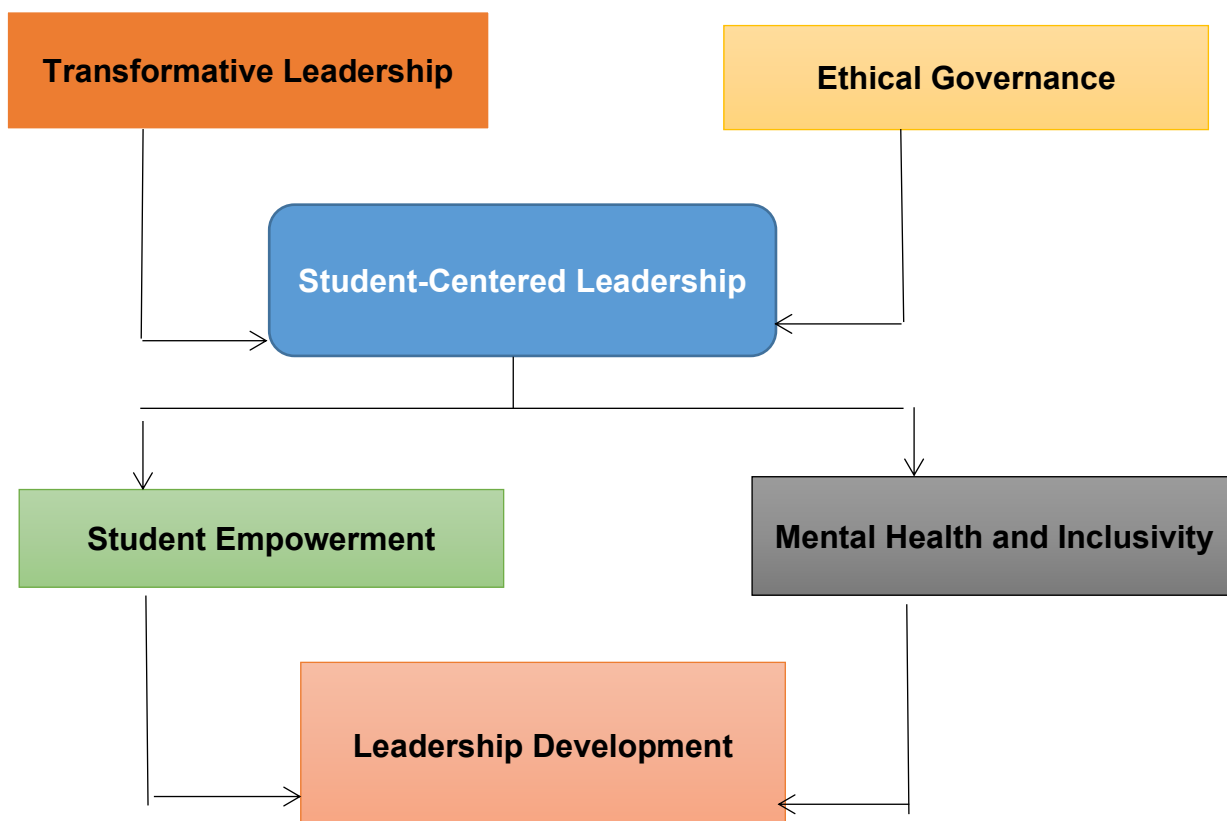

Figure 1. Systematic Review of Student-Dent-Centered Leadership of University

METHODS

This study followed the PRISMA framework (Page et al., 2021), which provides a structured process for conducting systematic reviews. It guided the researcher in identifying, screening, and selecting the most relevant studies on student-centered leadership (SCL) in universities. A comprehensive search was conducted across

academic databases including Philippine e-Journals, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Scopus using keywords such as "student-centered leadership," "university," and "higher education," combined with Boolean operators.

Studies were included if they were published between 2010 and 2025, written in English or Filipino, and focused on SCL in higher education. Eligible sources included peer-reviewed articles, dissertations, conference papers, and institutional reports. Studies limited to K–12 or lacking empirical data were excluded.

From an initial 103 records, 87 full texts were assessed, and 65 studies met all criteria. These were analyzed using thematic analysis, where coding and matrix techniques were used to group findings into themes such as leadership models, student outcomes, and institutional strategies. This process provided insights into how SCL is practiced and its impact in university settings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The systematic review highlights five key themes in student-centered leadership (SCL) in universities. Transformational leadership promotes shared vision, motivation, and personalized support, increasing student engagement and organizational commitment. Ethical and participatory governance emphasizes accountability, transparency, and fairness, strengthening trust and collaboration. Student engagement and empowerment are fostered through inclusive participation, helping students develop leadership identity and soft skills. Mental health and inclusive leadership address student well-being by promoting psychological safety and reducing burnout. Lastly, leadership development programs in higher education institutions enhance student competencies when structured, inclusive, and well-evaluated, preparing students for real-world leadership roles.

Theme 1: Transformational Leadership in Student Organizations

Transformational leadership in student organizations is grounded in a compelling vision, motivation, and individualized support. Leaders who articulate a clear, collective purpose and demonstrate enthusiasm can energize peers and foster strong commitment to organizational goals (Coscia, 2018; Baula & Baysa, 2020; Bhardwaj et al., 2025). Studies on collegiate clubs confirm that members respond positively to leaders who exemplify transformational qualities such as inspiration and shared vision (Aguba & Janairo, 2021).

Beyond motivation, transformational student leaders often act as mentors, providing personal support, recognizing individual needs, and developing members' potential (Komives et al., 2005; Tillapaugh & McGowan, 2019). This personalized approach cultivates a sense of belonging and enhances self-confidence, leading to more engaged and empowered members (Krause, 2022).

Empirical evidence strongly supports the influence of transformational leadership on student engagement. For instance, one study found it explained up to 67% of the variance in organizational commitment (Tillapaugh & McGowan, 2019). Student officers who exhibit transformational behaviors—such as enabling others to act or inspiring a shared vision—consistently demonstrate stronger leadership practices (Komives et al., 2005), positioning them as effective role models and catalysts for organizational success.

Theme 2: Ethical Leadership and Governance

1. Integrity and Accountability in Student Governance Ethical leadership in universities centers on integrity, accountability, and a strong moral compass in decision-making. Student leaders who act with transparency and honesty set the tone for good governance practices within student councils and organizations (Navia & Nasser, 2021). Upholding ethical standards—such as fairness in allocating resources and accountability for one's actions—builds trust among members and other stakeholders (Bush, 2003). Leadership frameworks such as the Social Change Model of Leadership explicitly promote values of congruence, commitment, and citizenship (Lemana et al., 2024).

2. Transparency, Trust, and Participatory Governance Transparent decision-making and inclusive, participatory processes form a second sub-theme of ethical leadership in universities. Ethical student leaders foster open communication, involve members in governance decisions, and ensure accountability mechanisms are in

place (Rabanes & Mayuga, 2024). This openness and fairness in leadership practice is crucial for building trust (Krause, 2022). Participatory governance can increase members' ownership of initiatives and confidence in their leaders (Navia & Nasser, 2021). In the Philippines, Rabanes and Mayuga (2024) found that female student leaders prioritize fairness and collaborative decision-making, which contributes to improved student trust and engagement.

3. Preventing Misconduct and Fostering an Ethical Culture Emphasizing ethical leadership is also critical for preventing misconduct and fostering a culture of integrity. Unethical practices like hazing have been shown to undermine group cohesion (Ngare, 2022). In contrast, ethical student leaders actively discourage such behaviors and instead promote respect and safety (Rabanes & Mayuga, 2024). Ethical leadership training is a powerful strategy for misconduct prevention and fostering civic virtues in student leadership (Bhardwaj et al., 2025).

Theme 3: Student Engagement and Empowerment

1. Participative Leadership and Active Involvement Student engagement in universities is often catalyzed by participative leadership. Campus studies affirm that student clubs and organizations provide a sense of belonging and opportunities for engagement (Alih et al., 2022). Research has shown that involvement in student organizations is linked to leadership potential and skill development (Astin & Antonio, 2016). Such strategies lead to higher attendance, enthusiasm, and retention in student organizations (Lagrazon & Juan, 2022). International literature supports this finding, with Astin and Antonio (2016) highlighting how engagement shapes leadership identity across varied cultures.

2. Amplifying Student Voice and AgencyEmpowerment of students, giving them voice and agency is a critical sub-theme in student-centered leadership. Effective student leaders create channels for their peers to express ideas, concerns, and creative solutions (Yabut, 2018). In the Philippines, universities have a history of student activism and advocacy, unleashing their leadership potential (Alih et al., 2022).

3. Outcomes of Engagement and Personal Development High levels of student engagement and empowerment yield significant personal and academic development benefits (Komives et al., 2005). Students who are deeply involved in leadership roles or organization activities tend to develop a host of transferable skills and attributes (Coscia, 2018). Internationally, Komives et al. (2005) identified leadership identity development as a key outcome of such involvement, while in the local context, Igbal et al. (2023) observed that engagement boosts confidence and academic motivation in Southeast Asian learners.

Theme 4: Mental Health and Inclusive Leadership

1. Supporting Student Well-Being through Leadership Student-centered leadership in universities increasingly recognizes mental health and well-being as key priorities. Student leaders are often well placed to promote positive mental health among their peers, given their close peer relationships and influence on campus culture (Arellano, 2022). Internationally, Neal (2024) highlighted the role of spiritually grounded leadership in supporting student well-being. These initiatives reflect how student leaders act as catalysts for mental health programs (Brenner et al., 2020).

2. Inclusive Leadership and Sense of Belonging Inclusive leadership is a critical factor in promoting mental health and a sense of belonging among diverse student populations. Inclusive student leaders ensure that all individuals feel valued and included in campus activities and decision-making (Ngare, 2022). Inclusive leadership fosters psychological safety and bolsters mental and emotional well-being (Sipahioglu, 2024). International research by Sipahioglu (2024) and regional data from Ngare (2022) both affirm that inclusive environments are foundational for emotional resilience.

3. Burnout Risks and Building Resilience in Leadership Roles Student leadership roles carry significant pressures. A notable sub-theme in recent studies is the risk of burnout among student leaders and the importance of resilience-building (Arellano, 2022). Experts recommend that schools empower a sense of personal achievement and promote resilience through mentoring and support systems (Brenner et al., 2020).

Theme 5: Leadership Development Programs in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

1. Curricular and Co-Curricular Leadership Training Approaches Eis have developed a variety of programs to cultivate student leadership. Some universities offer credited leadership courses or minors in leadership studies, while others run workshops, retreats, mentoring programs, and service-learning projects (Eastern Visayas State University, 2021; Bhardwaj et al., 2025). In the Philippines, programs led by Samar State University (2022) focus on leadership in community-based student activities.

2. Effectiveness and Outcomes of Leadership Programs Formal leadership development programs are effective in enhancing students' leadership knowledge and skills. Meta-analyses report gains in knowledge and behaviors from these initiatives (Kuchinke et al., 2022). Multi-institutional data also support the developmental gains from combined leadership education and practice (Dugan & Komives, 2007).

3. Monitoring and Evaluating Program Outcomes Despite their effectiveness, many leadership development programs need improved evaluation mechanisms. Scholars recommend using pre- and post-tests, 360-degree feedback, and simulations to assess program outcomes (Kerimbayev et al., 2023). In the Philippine context, Eastern Visayas State University (2021) advocates for evidence-based tools in assessing the real-world impact of training programs.

4. Ensuring Inclusivity in Leadership Development Opportunities Inclusivity is a vital consideration in leadership programs. Without intentional efforts, programs may not engage underrepresented groups (Daley & Baruah, 2021). Inclusive programs provide equitable access and reflect student diversity (Samar State University, 2022), aligning with the global push for gender-responsive and equity-focused training initiatives (Daley & Baruah, 2021).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section presented the study's conclusions and recommendations. It highlighted key themes in student-centered leadership and offered strategies to strengthen leadership practices and support systems in higher education institutions.

Conclusion

This systematic review confirms that student-centered leadership (SCL) in university settings is a dynamic, multifaceted process that strengthens institutional culture, fosters personal growth, and enhances academic outcomes. The analysis of 65 studies reveals five central themes: transformational leadership in student organizations, ethical leadership and governance, student engagement and empowerment, mental health and inclusive leadership, and leadership development programs in higher education institutions. Each of these areas contributes uniquely to the formation of competent, ethical, and empowered student leaders.

Transformational leadership was shown to inspire vision, build strong interpersonal connections, and increase organizational commitment. Ethical governance emerged as a key driver of transparency and trust, with participatory models promoting collective responsibility. Student engagement and empowerment positively influenced academic persistence and leadership identity development. Mental health and inclusive leadership addressed the emotional well-being and belongingness of students, ensuring leadership opportunities are accessible and supportive. Finally, structured leadership development programs particularly those inclusive and evidence-based—demonstrated strong outcomes in shaping capable and socially responsive leaders.

Despite these strengths, significant challenges persist. Burnout, inequities in participation, and inconsistent program evaluations were noted. There is also a continuing need to integrate digital technologies meaningfully and ensure leadership development is adaptive and inclusive across diverse learner contexts.

Recommendations

Based on the thematic insights of this review, the following are recommended:

1. Universities should embed transformational leadership training by prioritizing mentorship, communication, and vision-crafting skills in co-curricular activities and academic courses.

2. Institutions must institutionalize ethical leadership policies by adopting transparent and inclusive governance practices in student organizations, guided by values such as integrity, fairness, and social justice.

3. Support for mental health and resilience should be strengthened by establishing wellness programs, mentoring networks, and peer-support systems to protect student leaders from burnout while promoting inclusive participation.

4. Expanding opportunities for student voice is essential by actively including students in university decision-making bodies and policy dialogues to foster ownership and empowerment.

5. Universities need to monitor and evaluate leadership programs by implementing multi-modal assessment strategies beyond self-reports to capture behavioral changes and long-term impact.

6. Inclusive access to leadership opportunities must be ensured by developing targeted programs for underrepresented student groups, including women, minorities, working students, and first-generation college-goers.

7. Finally, higher education institutions should strengthen community and digital partnerships by collaborating with external organizations and utilizing digital platforms for real-world leadership applications and global competency building.

8. Future research should explore longitudinal studies to assess the sustained impact of student-centered leadership practices. Additionally, investigations into digital leadership, student leadership in hybrid learning environments, and culturally nuanced approaches to inclusive leadership can offer deeper insights into evolving university governance models. Exploring these areas would significantly contribute to refining student-centered strategies in diverse higher education contexts.

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