

Evaluating the Impact of Organizational Participation on Leadership Development Among Vocational College Students in China

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ABSTRACT

The study uses the KEIB (Knowledge, Emotion, Intention, and Behavior) model to investigate how participation in organizations influences leadership development among vocational college students in China. The study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional design with a sample of 563 students from various vocational institutions. A structured questionnaire recording the four dimensions of leadership development: knowledge, emotional engagement, intention to lead, actual leadership behaviors was used to collect data. The study further concludes that, holding other things constant, higher knowledge about organizational functions is associated with higher incidence of leadership behaviors, and that emotional engagement affects students' intentions to be a leader. Furthermore, both higher intention scores and higher willingness to take leadership roles. The study however underscores the active contribution of organizational environment, mentoring and the commitment of an individual to the development of leadership.

Key Words: KEIB model, Knowledge, Emotion, Intention, Behavior, Organizational Participation, Leadership Development, Vocational Colleges, Leadership Knowledge, Emotional Engagement, Leadership Intention, Leadership Behavior, Mentorship, Co-curricular Activities, Leadership Readiness, Transformational Leadership Environment, Self-Efficacy, Student Employability

Introduction and Background of study

In China's vocational education system, leadership development is becoming as important as technical skill training. Educational institutions face growing pressure to prepare students not only with practical expertise but also with leadership skills essential for thriving in collaborative, fast-evolving workplaces (Lv, Wu, & Shouse, 2022). This shift aligns with national priorities emphasizing innovation and stronger ties between industry and academia. Policies now call for cultivating "comprehensive talent," with leadership seen as a critical factor for employability and lifelong learning (Jie, 2024).

However, traditional classroom instruction alone does not sufficiently develop these leadership skills. Student organizations provide crucial opportunities for leadership learning through hands-on experiences such as event planning, conflict resolution, delegation, and decision-making (Zhang et al., 2018). Participation in these activities strengthens communication, critical thinking, and emotional resilience—key qualities needed for leadership growth in vocational settings (Shaw, 2017; Ding & Ye, 2021).

Despite this, many vocational students have limited access to meaningful organizational involvement. Research shows that active participation boosts students' self-efficacy and motivation, which in turn supports their readiness and effectiveness as leaders (Li & Kim, 2021; Huang, 2020). Moreover, structured engagement fosters a culture of peer collaboration and shared responsibility, replicating real-world professional environments (Tang, Wareewanich, & Yue, 2023). This gap between the recognized importance of leadership and the insufficient opportunities for practical development represents a key challenge for vocational education in China.

The KEIB Model:

To evaluate leadership development through a Chinese lens, this study adopts the Knowledge, Emotion, Intention, and Behavior (KEIB) model developed by Li Xiayan (2016). The KEIB model offers a culturally grounded framework that reflects the holistic, moral, and behavioral values embedded in Chinese education. It breaks leadership development into four dimensions:

Knowledge: Students' understanding of leadership and organizational functions

Emotion: Emotional engagement, satisfaction, and connection with organizational activities

Intention: Willingness and motivation to take leadership roles

Behavior: Actual leadership actions taken within organizational contexts

This framework allows educators and researchers to move beyond Western-centric models and assess leadership development within China's educational and cultural system (Xiaoqing & Sukumaran, 2024).

Research Questions

This study aims to explore the effect of student organizational participation on leadership development among vocational college students using the KEIB model. The following questions guide the investigation:

What is the level of vocational college students' participation in organizational activities?

How does participation affect students' leadership knowledge and understanding of organizational dynamics?

How does emotional engagement in student organizations influence students' intention to lead?

What is the relationship between students' leadership intention and their actual leadership behaviors?

How do varying levels and types of organizational participation impact the knowledge, emotion, intention, and behavior dimensions of leadership development?

Research Objectives

To measure the level of vocational college students' participation in organizational activities.

To assess the impact of organizational participation on students' leadership knowledge and understanding of organizational dynamics.

To evaluate the influence of emotional engagement within student organizations on students' intention to lead.

To examine the relationship between students' leadership intention and their actual leadership behaviors.

To analyze how different levels and types of organizational participation affect the knowledge, emotion, intention, and behavior dimensions of leadership development.

Scope and Significance of the Study

This study focuses on vocational colleges in China, where leadership development has traditionally taken a back seat to technical and occupational training. Universities have been incorporating leadership education into different channels, but vocational institutions still do not have a structured framework for the cultivation of leadership in the student (Lv et al., 2022). Through a culturally rooted analysis of how participation in student organizations affects leadership development, this study adopts the Knowledge, Emotion, Intention, and Behavior (KEIB) model. It focuses on active leadership practice vs inactive skill acquisition; it provides a total picture of student growth encompassing psychological readiness and behavioral engagement (Li & Kim,

2021). These findings are expected to assist educational administrators and policy makers to design student-centered development programs that combine co-curricular engagement with leadership development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Leadership Development in Vocational Education

Vocational colleges in China operate under a specific educational mandate involving the preparation of students for highly specialized, industry aligned careers. Xue and Bush (2024) suggest that in these institutions technical proficiency is prioritized rather than whole development and there is thus a gap in leadership training. According to Cai (2024), however, classroom leadership practices in the vocational settings have not been utilized to the fullest extent, and can positively affect students' motivation and initiative. Fang, Jeewattana, and Prachanan (2024) observe that in these institutions administrative vision is strong, and whether leadership development is prioritized or ignored much depends on it. Moreover, Juping (2025) reported that the short management program and its intense workload deprive no room for leadership engagement. Vocational colleges will fail to prepare graduates who are adaptable and leadership ready (Xiaoqiang, 2024; Mingming, 2024) unless structural reforms and strategic leadership integration take place.

As China reorients its education policy, the development of core outcome leadership cultivation has recently been a focus of vocational education. Now, student self-leadership is considered important to employability in dynamic job markets, Zhao and Wang (2025) also mention. Ma et al. (2024) report that leadership roles promote personal responsibility and independent thought, valued by creating organizations. Mingming (2024) believes that leadership programs must be incorporated into both content and cocontent areas, not just for all students. Xing (2024) notes the challenge of coalescing conventional technical instruction with leadership models that necessitate autonomy and interpersonal growth. If not, the policy vision has little chance to be translated into institutional practice (Fang et al., 2024; Li & Tian, 2023).

Student Organizational Participation

There are various types of Vocational college student organizations, and each one makes different contributions concerning leadership growth. According to Zhang et al (2022), Academic clubs promote analysis and good professional confidence through collaborative problem solving. Li and Tian (2023) state that service-oriented groups practice event planning and resource management in hands on experience. Based upon Mu, Jeewattana, and Prachanan (2024), cultural and volunteer organizations strengthen the emotional intelligence, empathy, and group cohesion, the relational leadership fundamentals. Moreover, Xiaoqiang (2024) underscores that hierarchical structures of political organizations engage in training students in communication, negotiation, and organizational awareness. Nevertheless, the capacity for student organizations to promote leadership can be severely constrained if there is a lack of supportive infrastructure (Tong, 2018; Zhao & Wang, 2025).

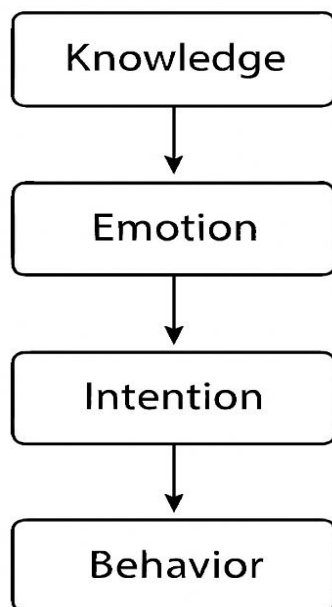
Although they are benefitting, many barriers restrain students in participating in vocational organizations. Time constraints, certification pressure, and rigid class schedules often prevent participations, they reported Xue and Bush (2024). As Tong (2018) claims, students put more weight on the credentialing than on soft skill when competitive markets are present. Institutional support is critical, according to Mingming (2024), who demonstrated that colleges that utilize resources and actively support student organizations have higher leadership outcomes. In Justice in Enhancing Job Satisfaction (2024) organizational climate is determined as important (leaders arising out of inclusive, empowering environments do so more strongly). Even organizations with well-designed structures may not achieve their developmental impact (Ma et al., 2024; Xing, 2024) without deliberate support.

Theoretical Foundations

Li Xiayan's Knowledge, Emotion, Intention, and Behavior (KEIB) model presents a comprehensive leadership model of student organizational engagement. The knowledge dimension draws attention to a student's cognitive knowledge about leadership, specifically its awareness of organizational purpose and function.

Emotion represents the gravity of emotional participation and is that of enthusiasm, pride, or motivation. Intention is the inner drive to become responsible and undertakes leadership roles and behavior is the outward that takes form in organizing events, mentoring their peers, or leading a meeting. As stated by Cai (2024), the four components need to be integrated to have the greatest development impact from organizational activities. According to Yuping (2025), intention and behavior are predictive indicators of long-term leadership potential. Xue and Bush (2024) discuss that emotional involvement is stronger emotion as compared to cognitive understanding. Moreover, Mu et al. (2024) and Mingming (2024) highlight the appropriateness of KEIB in the current Chinese vocational education environment.

Although the KEIB model is a culturally specific lens, the model is consistent with current theory surrounding global leadership. KEIB's behavior dimension aligns with the Student Leadership Challenge by Kouzes and Posner, which outlines five core behaviors – Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart. Shanshan and Loang (2024) show this model to be an appropriate way to structure leadership training in higher education. Just as KEIB has squiggles for emotion and intention, the Emotionally Intelligent Leadership (EIL) model concentrates on self-awareness, social awareness and relationship management, which relate closely to KEIB's emotion and intention dimensions. In this context, the EIL model is therefore important as it suggests that emotional intelligence is often overlooked in vocational training. The work by Zhao and Wang (2025) emphasizes that emotional and behavioral development integration combined with improving overall leadership readiness. In addition, Li and Tian (2023) suggest that local models such as KEIB be paired with global approaches to the design of integrated leadership programs for Chinese students.



KEIB Model (L (Xlayan))

The KEIB Model

The KEIB model explains how student organizational participation influences leadership development through a sequence of internal and external processes. Organizational participation is the independent variable, creating the setting and experiences that help form a student's leadership journey (Mu et al., 2024; Mingming, 2024). Leadership development is the dependent variable, observable behaviors, intentions to lead, emotional investment, and understanding of leadership roles. The KEIB stages include progress through knowledge, emotion, intention, and behavior (Mu et al., 2024; Li & Tian, 2023), which illustrates how students progress as they plan, collaborate, and decide his way. Moderating variables (e.g., gender, academic year) that influence students' access to opportunities and readiness to lead influence participation and leadership growth (Juping, 2025). This model illustrates the role of structured involvement in leadership through cognitive and emotional engagement.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Using a quantitative, cross sectional, correlational study, this study looks at the effects of participation in student organizations on vocational college students' leadership development in China. The quantitative approach used to systematic data collection and statistical analysis of the four dimensions, i.e., knowledge, emotion, intention and behavior of the KEIB model. The design used cross sections to describe leadership development status, and additional correlational methods to explore general associations among key psychology variables.

Sample

Study participants included a total of 563 students from a group of vocational colleges across China. IP records also pointed to the student sample from multiple provinces, mainly Guangdong and Hunan. In order to ensure diversity across gender, academic year, and leadership experience, stratified random sampling was utilized. The use of this method helped increase the reliability in subgroup analyses and lowered the bias (Xiaoqiang, 2024). Respondents included student organization leaders and normal members or ordinary members of the organization.

Instruments

A 55 items structured questionnaire designed from the KEIB model was used as the research instrument. These measures included Likert scale items for students' knowledge of leadership roles, practical engagement in organizational life, intention to lead, and self-reported leadership behaviors. Behavioural leadership constructs included "I support other members of the organization to make decisions independently" and "I recognise a job well done." The instrument was adapted from validated leadership and organizational behavior scales and reviewed with experts for content validity (Li & Tian, 2023; Juping, 2025). In a pilot test, the test was carried out to check clarity as well as to maintain internal consistency.

Data Collection

Survey platforms were used to collect data over a four-week period, which were logged through mobile and desktop devices. The questionnaire was mainly accessed through WeChat and direct web links. Anonymized IP addresses were used to track regional participant patterns. The survey was introduced with information about the informed consent; the anonymity of the participant was preserved. For completeness and quality of responses, we screened and removed duplicate entries.

Data Analysis

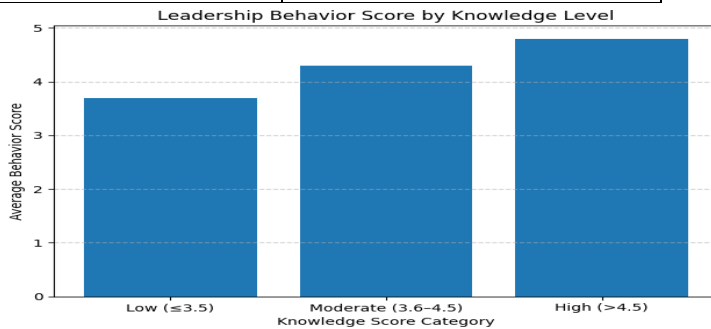
Data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0. Participant demographics and KEIB variable distribution were summarized using descriptive statistics. Strength and direction of relationships between variables were tested using the Pearson correlation. To evaluate the extent to which Knowledge, Emotion and Intention could predict actual leadership Behavior, multiple regression analysis was used. This analytical approach shed light on the psychological and behavioral ways that had shaped the leadership development of students.

Findings

Knowledge and Leadership Understanding

Students with higher average scores in the Knowledge dimension—such as awareness of organizational values and informal rules—also demonstrated higher scores in Behavior, suggesting a strong correlation between conceptual understanding and leadership actions.

Knowledge Score	Average Behavior Score
Low (≤ 3.5)	3.7
Moderate (3.6–4.5)	4.3
High (>4.5)	4.8



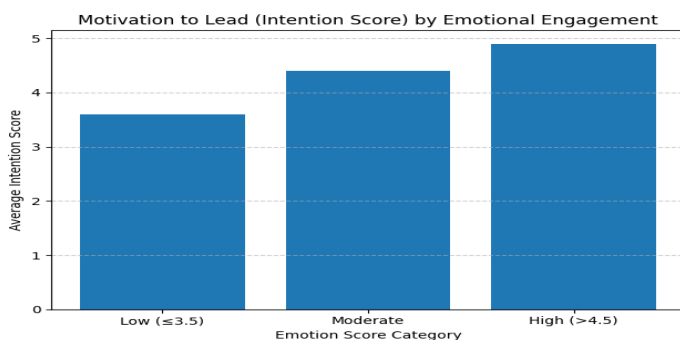
Leadership Behavior Score by Knowledge Level

Students with high knowledge scores (average >4.5) recorded the highest leadership behavior scores at 4.8, while those with low knowledge (≤ 3.5) averaged only 3.7. This suggests a direct relationship between cognitive understanding of organizational dynamics and leadership behavior. For example, students who recognized informal traditions and problem-solving processes showed stronger behavioral leadership traits. As knowledge increases, students likely feel more equipped and confident to take initiative, coordinate activities, and make informed decisions.

Emotional Engagement and Motivation to Lead

Students who reported feeling more emotionally connected—excited, enthusiastic, and positive after participating—also had higher **Intention** scores, indicating a readiness to lead.

Emotion Score	Average Intention Score
Low (≤ 3.5)	3.6
Moderate	4.4
High (>4.5)	4.9



Motivation To Lead (Intention Score) By Emotional Engagement

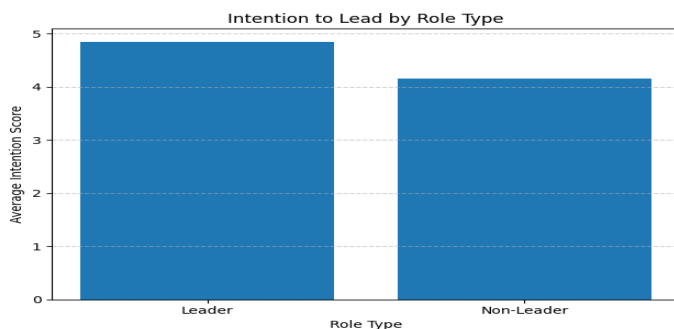
Emotional engagement significantly predicts leadership intention. Students with high emotional scores (>4.5) reported an average Intention score of 4.9, compared to only 3.6 for those with low emotional scores (≤ 3.5) (Hongbo et al., 2025). This shows that enthusiasm, enjoyment, and emotional attachment to organizational

activities strengthen students' internal drive to lead. Statements like "I feel better after participating" and "I'm enthusiastic about organizational activities" strongly correlate with willingness to take initiative.

Intention and Formal Leadership Roles

High Intention scores aligned with reported role type. Most students who self-identified as leaders scored significantly higher in Intention.

Role Type	Average Intention Score
Leader (1)	4.85
Non-Leader (2)	4.15



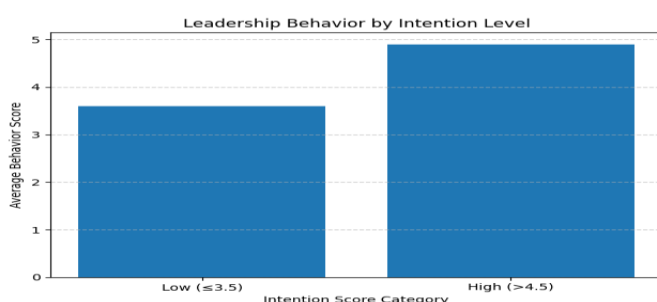
Intention to Lead by Role Type

Among students who self-identified as leaders (coded as 1), the average Intention score was 4.85, while non-leaders (coded as 2) averaged only 4.15. This clear gap underscores that intention is a strong psychological marker of actual role adoption. Students who agreed with statements like "I am willing to lead when problems arise" are more likely to hold leadership positions (Liu & Hallinger, 2018). The data suggests that students do not become leaders randomly; rather, high intention precedes and predicts role assumption.

Behavior and Demonstrated Leadership

The Behavior dimension, measuring actions like team coordination and recognition, was highest among those who also scored highly in Intention and Emotion.

Intention Level	Average Behavior Score
Low (≤ 3.5)	3.6
High (> 4.5)	4.9



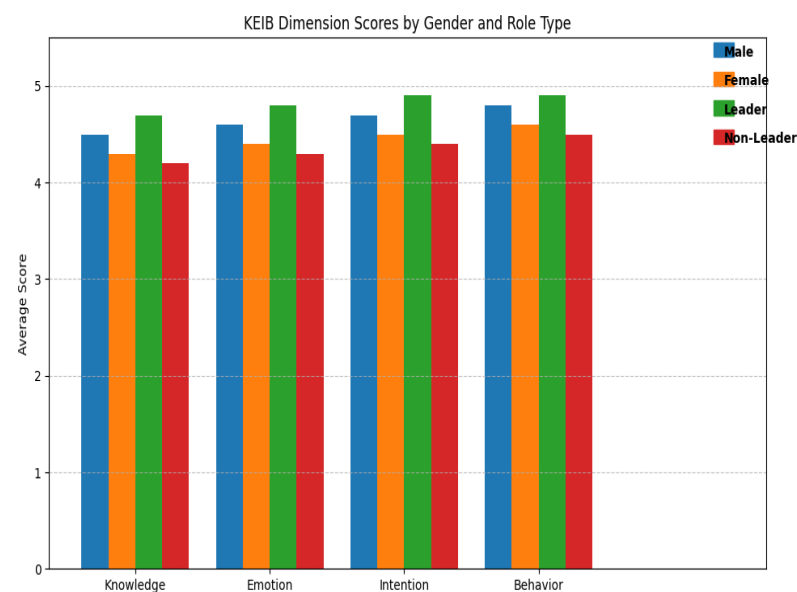
Leadership Behavior by Intention Level

Students with high Intention scores (>4.5) exhibited significantly stronger leadership behavior (average Behavior score: 4.9) compared to those with lower intention scores (≤ 3.5), who averaged only 3.6. This reinforces the behavioral outcome of leadership motivation—students driven by purpose are more likely to actively lead (Zheng et al., 2019). Behavior items like “I give others freedom to lead” and “I recognize a job well done” directly reflected this. These students not only accept responsibility but also empower others, encourage collaboration, and model servant leadership.

Variations by Gender and Role Type

Analysis showed males (coded as 1) and students in leadership positions generally had slightly higher scores across all KEIB dimensions.

Demographic	Avg Knowledge	Avg Emotion	Avg Intention	Avg Behavior
Male (1)	4.5	4.6	4.7	4.8
Female (2)	4.3	4.4	4.5	4.6
Leader	4.7	4.8	4.9	4.9
Non-Leader	4.2	4.3	4.4	4.5



KEIB Dimension Scores by Gender and Role Type

Males scored higher than females across all dimensions: Knowledge (4.5 vs. 4.3), Emotion (4.6 vs. 4.4), Intention (4.7 vs. 4.5), and Behavior (4.8 vs. 4.6). Similarly, students in leadership roles outperformed non-leaders significantly: Knowledge (4.7 vs. 4.2), Emotion (4.8 vs. 4.3), Intention (4.9 vs. 4.4), and Behavior (4.9 vs. 4.5). These results show that leadership readiness and enactment differ by demographic profile.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are consistent with how the model of KEIB describes the cognitive, emotional, volitional, and behavioral progression of leadership development. To this end, the results confirm that cognitive understanding forms the basis for leadership practice (Yue et al., 2024). Students with more knowledge of organizational values also displayed stronger leadership behaviors. However, Zuo et al. (2024) found that connecting emotional engagement to leadership, and a result, matched better with students who reported feeling more emotionally engaged with their organizations. And that emotional engagement directly affected on their intention to assume formal leadership roles (Zhao et al., 2024). This in turn, predicted a

greater willingness to lead, and these leaders possessed tangible leadership behaviors. In his work, Li et al. (2024) confirms that emotional involvement in the business at an early stage increases the development of leadership competencies and thus reinforces the idea that emotional investment is leading the leadership behavior (Mo & Anis, 2024).

Understanding how vocational colleges can enhance student leadership necessitates the role of organizational environments as the facilitators of leadership development. According to Mo and Anis (2024) this level of investment is achieved in organizational settings that have opportunities for peer interaction and leadership exposure. According to the study, students shown higher levels of leadership engagement in organizations with a focus on collaboration and mentorship are consistent with Zuo, Omar, and Lee (2024), which warns the need for an understanding of transformational leadership that contributes to engagement. Furthermore, leadership behaviors are increased in the environment stimulating role modeling and peer support (Yue et al., 2024). Zhao et al. (2024) state that mentorship is crucial in developing students to go from just knowledge acquisition to becoming an actual practicing leader. Mentorship and peer support thus engendered a feedback loop, wherein the more emotional engagement and leadership growth is experienced (Cao, 2011).

For policy and practice in vocational colleges, there is a need to integrate leadership development in formal educational programs and prepare students for leadership positions in the workforce. For this, vocational colleges need to develop programs that actually enhance technical skills with co-curricular activities and mentorship (Zuo et al., 2024). Yue et al. (2024) suggest that leadership development is tracked throughout the entire curricular and extra-curricular spaces to help meet a broader holistically need of students (Lavelle, 2021). It is essential to create policies that would encourage industry partnerships and offer real world leadership opportunities that would bridge the gap between classroom experiences and the demands of the workplace (Li et al., 2024). Cao (2011) stresses the importance of leadership development programs that meet national priorities to prepare students for leadership roles upon graduation. The leadership training integration ensures vocational education produces complete learners who are ready for leadership placement (Yue et al., 2024).

Lastly, the significance of role modelling, mentorship and long-term engagement cannot be underestimated in the development of leadership. Zhao et al. (2024) point out that long term involvement in student organizations helps one's continuous leadership growth in the long run. Mentorship in achieving leadership potential is important in the nurturing of leadership because students learn leadership traits by observing and associating with the mentors. Zuo et al. (2024) found that students who had had consistent mentorship, by experienced leaders, had stronger leadership behaviors and were more likely to take on formal leadership roles. Additionally, Mo and Anis (2024) discovered that engaging in leadership activities spreads over the period increases the self - efficacy and confidence of students, elements that be beneficial to effective leaders. The findings indicate that college ought to adopt long-term leadership commitment programs to cultivate leadership skills via mentorship, modeling, and long-term organisational involvement (Li et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that participation in student organizations plays a vital role in developing leadership among vocational college students in China. Using the KEIB model, the findings reveal that organizational involvement enhances students' leadership knowledge, emotional engagement, intention to lead, and leadership behaviors. Specifically, students who actively participate in organizations demonstrate greater understanding of organizational dynamics and stronger emotional connections, which in turn motivate their intention to lead and translate into concrete leadership actions. This progression—from cognitive awareness to emotional engagement and finally to behavioral leadership—illustrates that leadership development is a cumulative, multi-dimensional process.

The study also shows that students' leadership readiness and actual leadership performance are closely linked to their level of organizational participation. Emotional engagement emerged as a significant factor influencing motivation to lead, while knowledge of leadership concepts was strongly correlated with leadership behaviors. These findings answer the research questions by confirming that student participation positively affects all KEIB dimensions and that intention to lead reliably predicts leadership behavior. Additionally, different types

and levels of participation have varying impacts on leadership growth, highlighting the importance of supportive organizational environments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To effectively foster leadership development among vocational college students, it is essential that leadership training be integrated into the core curriculum across all disciplines. Embedding leadership education alongside technical skill development ensures that all students acquire foundational leadership knowledge, directly addressing the study's finding that organizational participation enhances students' understanding of leadership concepts. This integration also supports consistent exposure to leadership principles, preparing students for leadership roles regardless of their field of study.

Furthermore, vocational colleges should create transformational leadership environments that emphasize collaboration, peer support, and mentorship. Faculty and experienced student leaders must serve as role models, guiding students through leadership challenges and fostering emotional engagement. The study's results highlight that such supportive environments increase students' motivation to lead and promote leadership behaviors, making mentorship and positive organizational culture critical components for leadership growth.

Long-term and sustained participation in student organizations should also be encouraged. Establishing frameworks that promote continuous involvement enables students to develop leadership intentions over time and translate these intentions into real leadership actions. This approach reflects the cumulative nature of leadership development identified in the findings, where ongoing engagement reinforces knowledge, emotional connection, and behavioral practice.

Finally, stronger university-industry collaborations are needed to align leadership development with workplace demands. Policies that facilitate partnerships between vocational colleges and industry stakeholders can provide students with real-world leadership opportunities, enhancing the practical relevance of their leadership skills. This connection supports employability, which the study identifies as a key outcome of effective leadership development through organizational participation.

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