Graduate Students' Perceptions of Servant Leadership at a Private Christian University

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Abstract: Servant leadership is gaining recognition as a viable model for addressing challenges in higher education. The literature highlights how servant leadership is implemented, practiced in various settings, and embraced by people of different faiths and institutions across various organizations. Multiple studies have explored the influence of servant leadership in higher education settings from the perspectives of administrators, staff, faculty, and undergraduate students. However, studies investigating the impact of servant leadership from the perspectives of graduate students still need to be included in the literature. This qualitative descriptive single case study sought to address this gap in the literature and advance knowledge about the influence of servant leadership in higher education settings by exploring graduate students' perceptions of the impact of servant leadership at a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States. Greenleaf's servant leadership theory was utilized as the guiding theoretical framework for this study. Thirteen participants who met the eligibility criteria were recruited for the study through purposive sampling. The thematic analysis of the study's one-on-one interviews and focus group data, using NVivo 14, identified four themes. The study's findings indicated that servant leadership is relevant and practical within the context and culture of a private Christian university. The results showed that graduate students possessed varied perceptions about the servant leadership behaviors exhibited by their campus leaders. They perceived servant leadership as Christ-centered leadership, a student-focused approach, and a community-based approach. Future research should broaden the sample to include graduate students from Christian colleges and universities nationwide, overcoming the limitations of a small purposive sample.
Keywords: Servant Leadership, about Christ-centered Leadership, Student-focused Approach, Community-based Approach

Introduction

Servant leadership is increasingly recognized as a viable model for addressing challenges in higher education institutions (Cong et al., 2024; Dami et al., 2024; Kainde & Mandagi, 2023). Cong et al. (2024) demonstrated that servant leadership significantly impacted the innovation capability of higher education institutions. In their studies, Dami et al. (2024) indicated that trust, job satisfaction, and member-leader exchange were direct outcomes of servant leadership in Christian higher education institutions. Kainde and Mandagi (2023) affirmed the significance of servant leadership as a guiding philosophy for effective leadership in educational settings in a study showing that servant leadership positively impacted teacher morale, job satisfaction, and engagement, fostering a positive and collaborative culture. Servant leadership is a follower-focused approach that emphasizes that leaders abandon their selfish interests, put their followers first, and nurture and empower them (Canavesi & Minelli, 2022).

Servant leadership is a multidimensional construct that espouses a value system of service to others above anything else (Scott et al., 2020). Many researchers have explored the appropriateness, influence, and benefits of applying servant leadership in higher education settings from the perspectives of the staff and faculty (Aboramadam et al., 2021; Hashim et al., 2020; Zainab et al., 2022) and undergraduate students (Alshammari et al., 2019; Bao-Jian &Hsuan-Po, 2024; Du et al., 2024; Jagela; 2019; Yue et al., 2024). However, studies conducted to explore graduate students' perceptions of the influence of servant leadership within Christian higher education settings still need to be included in the literature. This qualitative descriptive single case study addresses this gap in the literature by exploring graduate students' perceptions of the impact of servant leadership at a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Servant leadership theory served as the guiding theoretical framework for this study. Many authors have recognized that servant leadership has existed since ancient times (Locke, 2019; Martinez & Leija, 2023; Mazzei, 2022). However, Robert K. Greenleaf was the first person in the modern era to articulate the concept of servant leadership (Mazzei, 2022). Greenleaf first coined the term servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1970). In his writings, Greenleaf presented a leadership philosophy contrary to contemporary coercive leadership theories (Greenleaf,

1970, 1977). Greenleaf defined a servant leader as an individual who is first servant (Greenleaf, 1977, 2002). Greenleaf asserted that servant leadership begins with the natural feeling to serve and place the needs of others above one's needs before one aspires to lead others (Greenleaf, 1970).

Northouse (2016) echoed Greenleaf's assertions about servant leadership, describing servant leadership as a paradoxical approach that runs counter to common sense and challenges the traditional beliefs about leadership—leaders first and servants follow. Scholars have tried to define servant leadership from many perspectives, resulting in various definitions. These definitions mostly conformed to the fundamental ideas of servant leadership set forth by Greenleaf in his seminal works on servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1970, 1977). However, scholars still have no consensus on the definition of servant leadership (Pawar et al., 2020) and what specific characteristics define servant leadership (Northouse, 2016). Center for Servant Leadership (2021) defines servant leadership "as a non-traditional leadership philosophy, embedded in a set of behaviors and practices that place the primary emphasis on the well-being of those being served" (p. 1). Canavesi and Minelli (2022) describe servant leadership as a moral-based approach that emphasizes that leaders prioritize the fulfillment of the needs of followers over their personal needs.

The Origin of Servant Leadership

Robert K. Greenleaf was acclaimed as the first person in the modern era to articulate the concept of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1970; Mazzei, 2022). However, many authors have recognized that servant leadership was taught and practiced more than two thousand years ago (Locke, 2019; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Tarallo, 2018). Servant leadership is rooted in Eastern and Western cultures (Tarallo, 2018). The concept of servant leadership was first described by Lao Tzu, a Chinese philosopher and the founder of Taoism, in the 5th century BC (Tarallo, 2018). Lao Tzu posited that the best leaders deflect attention from themselves, and when they finish their work, their followers would say, we did it ourselves (Tarallo, 2018). Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) argued that Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity, was the first person to teach the concept of servant leadership. This assertion has been echoed by many authors, identifying servant leadership with Jesus Christ, Christianity, and the Bible (du Plessis & Nkambule, 2020; McMahone, 2023; Moore, 2019). However, some scholars contested the biblical origin of servant leadership and cautioned against associating it directly with Jesus Christ and Christianity (Locke, 2019).

The Development of Servant Leadership

Greenleaf's seminal works on servant leadership significantly influenced the conceptualizations and development of servant leadership in theory and practice (Martinez & Leija, 2023; Northouse, 2016). After Greenleaf's seminal work on servant leadership, various conceptualizations and models of servant leadership have emerged from researchers' efforts to build a theory about servant leadership and develop and validate instruments to measure servant leadership (Liden et al., 2008, 2014; Patterson, 2003; Russel & Stone, 2002; Spears, 2002). Canavesi and Minelli (2022) argued that servant leadership has been the most promising and investigated leadership philosophy over the last few years because of its holistic approach, broad focus, and significant role in impacting individual and organizational outcomes. Existing literature showed that researchers have conducted various studies to examine the appropriateness, benefits, and impacts of implementing servant leadership in multiple settings and organization types.

Servant Leadership in Non-Profit Organizations

Non-profit organizations have been significant sources of empirical data for servant leadership in literature (Martinez & Leija, 2023; Parris & Peachey, 2013), confirming Greenleaf's belief that servant leadership is notably espoused in non-profit organizations settings (Greenleaf, 2002). The quantitative research findings by Sharp (2023) in a Christian non-profit organization setting suggested a positive relationship between servant leadership and numerical membership growth in Christian non-profit organizations. The findings further indicated that a positive relationship exists between servant leadership and creating value for the community. Other studies conducted in contexts of non-profit organizations indicated that servant leadership positively impacted organizational citizenship behavior and volunteer retention in non-profit organizations (Ngah et al., 2022). Building on their previous studies, Ngah et al. (2023) demonstrated in their most recent studies that servant leadership affected organizational citizenship behaviors of young volunteers in non-profit organizations in Malaysia through the mediating role of affective commitment.

Servant Leadership in the Public and Private Sectors

Many researchers have also shown that servant leadership is applicable, practiced, and embraced in the public and private sectors. Tripathi et al. (2020) demonstrated in quantitative research that servant leadership positively impacted employee work role performance in the public sector in India through the mediating role of knowledge sharing and psychological empowerment. Similarly, the findings of quantitative studies conducted by Gu et al. (2019) in 11 banks in China indicated that servant leadership is positively related to employee creativity through the mediating role of employee psychological empowerment. In the research to evaluate how corporate social responsibility contributes to the software industry in Vietnam conducted by Luu (2019), servant leadership was found to play a moderating role in the corporate social responsibility-customer value co-creation linkage. The

findings of a survey conducted by Woonyong and Hougyun (2021) in public institutions indicated that servant leadership positively influenced employees' affective organizational commitment and job engagement.

Servant Leadership in Higher Education Institutions

Numerous studies have been conducted in higher education settings to examine the impact of servant leadership on staff and faculty members. These include research on the effect of servant leadership on faculty job satisfaction (Hashim et al., 2020), work engagement (Zainab et al., 2022), work engagement and affective commitment (Aboramadam et al., 2021), innovation (Maalouf, 2023), and job satisfaction and trust (Dami et al., 2024; Zummy et al., 2022). Also, several studies have investigated the impact of servant leadership on undergraduate students. Alshammari et al. (2019) examined undergraduate students' perceptions of their professors' servant leadership behaviors at a private university. Jagela (2019) focused on the servant leadership behaviors exhibited by faculty, staff, and students within two Christian denominational campuses. Yue et al. (2024) researched the influence of undergraduates' servant leadership on their self-perceived employability.

Additionally, Bao-Jian and Hsuan-Po (2024) analyzed the effect of perceived servant leadership on undergraduates' innovative self-efficacy. Du et al. (2024) explored the relationship between servant leadership and undergraduate students' cognitive learning and sense of empowerment. However, research on graduate students' perceptions of the impact of servant leadership within Christian higher education settings is still lacking in the literature (Du et al., 2024; Jagela, 2019; Yue et al., 2024). Bass and Avolio (1994) emphasized that for a comprehensive understanding of emerging leadership models, such as servant leadership, it is crucial to compare and contrast the perceptions of various stakeholders. This approach allows for an in-depth analysis of the implications and applications of these leadership models. Graduate students represent a significant stakeholder group within higher education (Berg et al., 2024). Therefore, this study seeks to address the existing gap in the literature by exploring and contributing insights into graduate students' perceptions of the impact of servant leadership.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How do graduate students at a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States perceive the practice of servant leadership by administrators, staff, and faculty on the campus?

METHODOLOGY

In this study, I employed a qualitative descriptive single case study approach to explore graduate students' perceptions of the impact of servant leadership at a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States. After obtaining the NU IRB approval and site approval, a purposive sample of 13 participants who met the eligibility criteria—being at least 18 years of age and graduate students at a private university in the Southeastern region of the United States—were recruited for the study. The study included nine female and four male participants. The ages of the participants ranged from 23 to 34 years. The participants self-identified as Caucasian, Hispanic, and Black. All participants reported being Christians.

Each participant was interviewed individually, and seven were interviewed in a focus group using semi-structured, open-ended questions approved by a panel of experts via Zoom, a virtual platform. Yin (2018) suggested a sample size of 12-15 to attain data saturation. Semi-structured interviews are a primary source of rich data for qualitative case studies (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023). The focus groups contributed to data triangulation and improved the study's credibility by generating different types of data compared to one-on-one interviews. Individual interviews and focus groups were transcribed, and participants were asked to review, correct, and confirm the accuracy of the transcriptions. The verified interview and focus group data were coded and analyzed for recurring themes using NVivo 14. The thematic data analytic approach allows researchers to generate codes inductively for thick and detailed descriptions required for case studies (Merriam et al., 2023).

Results

Table 1 summarizes the four themes from the thematic analysis of the participant's responses in individual interviews and focus groups to address the research question.

Table 1
Research Question and Themes

Research Question	Themes
How do graduate students at a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States perceive the practice of servant leadership by administrators, staff, and faculty on the campus?	Servant Leadership is Visible, Valued, and Impactful on Campus
	Servant Leadership is a Christ-Centered leadership
	Servant Leadership is a Student-Focused Approach
	Servant Leadership is a Community-Based Leadership

DISCUSSION

The study's findings revealed that servant leadership is relevant and functional within the context and culture of a private Christian university. The campus administrators, staff, and faculty demonstrated servant leadership, and graduate students responded positively to this leadership approach, which positively impacted the campus. The graduate students could identify, understand, and effectively communicate the servant leadership behaviors their campus administrators, staff, and faculty demonstrated. The findings are consistent with previous studies that examined the impact of servant leadership on undergraduate students in higher education settings (Alshammari et al., 2019; Bao-Jian and Hsuan-Po, 2024; Du et al., 2024; Jagela, 2019; Yue et al., 2024).

However, the findings contrast with Jagela (2019), who noted that servant leadership was initially less visible on one of the two Christian campuses but became more apparent to students over time. Jagela (2019) found that the prominence of servant leadership varied depending on the university's religious affiliation. Fewer students observed servant leadership at a university with a weaker affiliation during their initial campus experiences. In contrast, at a university with a stronger religious affiliation, students noted the presence of servant leadership early in their time on campus. The difference between this study's findings and Jagela's (2019) may be attributed to the institution's strong religious affiliation and mission, which is focused on developing servant leaders. According to the information on the institution's website, it is a Christ-centered institution of higher learning committed to equipping the next generation of leaders to enter the world as influential servant leaders in their careers and communities.

The participants presented compelling evidence indicating that servant leadership is applicable, visible, valued, and impactful on their campus. P1 asserted, "I would say they demonstrate servant leadership in the way that they pursue their students in multiple ways." P1 added, "I would say for sure that the servant leadership I've seen in the leaders I've mentioned has a significant contribution toward the joyful, self-giving environment I have seen being cultivated." P4 noted, "I truly believe that they show servant leadership. And that's what makes our campus the way it is. It's being a safe space for everyone, where everyone can not only share their faith comfortably but can also share their struggles." P7 commented, "There is a positive atmosphere and positive vibe on campus. It's always good. It's always positive. People are friendly. I think it's like everybody is willing to help." P10 stated, "I've never been to a university or any type of environment where people with power and faculty are so keen to help and do things to help you succeed. I mean, this campus has to be one of the most peaceful places."

Additionally, the study's findings revealed that graduate students possessed varied perceptions regarding the servant leadership behaviors and practices exhibited by their campus administrators, staff, and faculty members. Firstly, analysis of participants' responses to interview and focus group questions indicated that they perceive servant leadership as Christ-centered leadership. The participants viewed their campus leaders as emulating Jesus and modeling Christian faith, virtues, and values. P3 stated, "Our campus is an example of a Christian university. But seriously, that of servant leadership, imitating Jesus our Savior." P6 emphasized the Christ-centered attitudes of their campus leaders, "The leaders are, honestly, just like Christ in their behaviors. I always tell my friends that it's a different environment when you come to our campus because we are Christ-centered." P13 testified, "So, what I've experienced so far is the faculty and staff just lay their lives down for the students." Many authors link servant leadership to Jesus Christ, Christianity, and the Bible (du Plessis & Nkambule, 2020; McMahone, 2023; Moore, 2019), reinforcing graduate students' perceptions of it as Christ-centered leadership. McMahone (2023) connected servant leadership to Jesus Christ, noting His focus on service during His ministry.

Secondly, the study's results indicated that servant leadership is student-focused. Participants vividly portrayed servant leadership practices of their administrators, faculty, and staff as prioritizing student well-being, empowering and developing student leadership, and creating opportunities for students to practice servant leadership. P6 noted, "In this campus particularly, servant leadership looks like prioritizing students. Honestly, it's like prioritizing not just their academic development but like a whole holistic view of the development of the students." P10 stated, "They make me feel like I matter, and that just creates the environment and the mindset for me to do the best possible. I always have a positive mindset when I'm on campus." P2 added, "They also offer a lot of volunteering opportunities for students around campus." This result aligns with Greenleaf's concept of servant leadership. Greenleaf described a servant leader as someone who first serves (Greenleaf, 1977, 2002). According to Greenleaf, servant leadership begins with an intrinsic motivation to serve and prioritize the needs of others before aspiring to lead (Greenleaf, 1970).

Thirdly, the findings indicated that graduate students regarded the servant leadership behaviors and practices demonstrated by campus administrators, staff, and faculty members as a community-based leadership approach. The participants perceived the servant leadership practices of their campus leaders as fostering a sense of belonging on campus, building community, and giving back to the community. P2 stated, "People feel welcome. People feel valued. People feel like they belong, that they are someone on campus, that they're seen, that they're loved." P5 added, "Servant leadership is just, you know, giving time, giving back to the community, or just being

a part of something you can give the community." This finding is corroborated by prior research, which indicated that servant leadership positively impacted undergraduate students' engagement on campus (Jagela, 2019) and their contributions to transforming their local communities (Rega & Honen-Delmar, 2022). The finding also aligns with Greenleaf's (2003) assertion that a servant leader is responsible for supporting the less privileged in society. These findings enhance our knowledge of the role and impact of servant leadership in higher education by providing new insights into how graduate students perceive the servant leadership of their campus leaders, particularly the faculty.

Conclusion

Servant leadership is increasingly recognized as a potential model for addressing various issues in higher education institutions (Cong et al., 2024; Dami et al., 2024; Kainde & Mandagi, 2023). This qualitative descriptive single case study explored 13 graduate students' perceptions of the impact of servant leadership at a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States. The study's results confirm the applicability and efficiency of servant leadership in higher education institutions. The results showed that graduate students recognized, understood, and appreciated their campus leaders' servant leadership behaviors and practices. Also, the study's findings revealed that graduate students possessed varied perceptions about the servant leadership behaviors exhibited by their campus leaders. They perceived servant leadership as Christ-centered leadership, a student-focused approach, and a community-based approach. The findings are consistent with previous studies that examined the impact of servant leadership on undergraduate students in higher education settings (Alshammari et al., 2019; Bao-Jian and Hsuan-Po, 2024; Du et al., 2024; Jagela, 2019; Yue et al., 2024). The finding also aligns with Greenleaf's (2003) assertion that a servant leader is responsible for supporting the less privileged in society. These findings underscore the necessity for campus leaders to assess their attitudes and behaviors regularly, ensuring they exemplify servant leadership in their interactions with students and serve as role models.

RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This qualitative descriptive single case study has contributed to the existing body of knowledge on the appropriateness, applicability, and impact of servant leadership in higher education institutions by examining and providing new insights into graduate students' perceptions of servant leadership, which has been lacking in the literature. Future research should broaden the sample to include graduate students from Christian colleges and universities nationwide, overcoming the limitations of a small purposive sample. Also, future research should compare the graduate students' perceptions of the impact of servant leadership in faith-based private higher institutions with those in non-faith-based public higher institutions.

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