

## **An Examination of Servant Leadership Behaviors Demonstrated by Campus Leaders from Graduate Students' Perspectives**

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### **Abstract**

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*Multiple studies have examined servant leadership behaviors, practices, and impacts in higher education institutions from the perspectives of administrators, staff, faculty, and undergraduate students. However, graduate students' views of servant leadership behaviors are still underrepresented in the literature. This qualitative case study addresses this gap by examining the servant leadership behaviors demonstrated by campus leaders at a private Christian university in the United States from graduate students' perspectives. The study's purposive sample consisted of 13 participants interviewed individually and in a focus group. The thematic analysis of individual interviews and focus group data, conducted using NVivo 14, revealed that campus leaders exhibited seven servant leadership behaviors: Emotional Healing, Putting Students First, Helping Students Grow and Succeed, Empowering Students, Creating Value for Community, Behaving Ethically, and Conceptualizing. These seven servant leadership behaviors constitute the core of the servant leadership model utilized as this study's guiding theoretical framework.*

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**Keywords:** Servant Leadership, Servant Leaders, Servant Leadership Behaviors, Graduate Students, Christian University, Christian Higher Education, Higher Institutions

### **1. Introduction**

After Greenleaf's seminal works on servant leadership, many researchers contributed significantly to developing servant leadership theory (Locke, 2019; Northouse, 2016). They developed various models of servant leadership to describe servant leadership and multiple instruments to measure the core dimensions of servant leadership (Liden et al., 2008, 2014; Patterson, 2003; Russel & Stone, 2002; Spears, 2002). This study adopted the model of servant leadership developed by Liden et al. (2008, 2014) for an in-depth understanding, coherent explanation, and thick description of the central phenomenon of the study. This servant leadership model provides a framework for clarifying and understanding servant leadership and its complexities (Northouse, 2016). Multiple studies have examined servant leadership behaviors, practices, and impacts in higher education institutions from the perspectives of administrators, staff, faculty, and undergraduate students (Aboramadam et al., 2021; Cong et al., 2024; Dami et al., 2024; Jegede, 2025; Melinda et al., 2020; Zainab et al., 2022). However, graduate students' views of servant leadership behaviors are still underrepresented in the literature. This qualitative case study addresses this gap by examining the servant leadership behaviors demonstrated by campus leaders, including administrators, staff, and faculty at a private Christian university in the United States, from graduate students' perspectives.

### **2. Literature Review**

The servant leadership model developed by Liden and his team consists of three main components: antecedent conditions, servant leadership behaviors, and leadership outcomes (Liden et al., 2014; Northouse, 2016). The central focus of this model of servant leadership is the seven servant leadership behaviors: conceptualizing, emotional healing, putting followers first, helping followers grow and succeed, behaving ethically, empowering, and creating value for the community.

These servant leadership behaviors are influenced by three antecedent factors: context and culture, the leader's attributes, and the follower's receptivity. When a leader engages in servant leadership, according to the model, the expected outcomes are follower performance and growth, organizational performance, and societal impact (Liden et al., 2014; Northouse, 2016). The following section explains the three components of the servant leadership model: antecedent conditions, servant leader behaviors, and leadership outcomes.

## **2.1 Antecedent Conditions of Servant Leadership**

The servant leadership model adopted as the guiding theoretical framework for this study consists of three antecedent conditions or factors that impact servant leadership: context and culture, leader attributes, and follower receptivity (Canavesi & Minelli, 2022; Liden et al., 2014; Northouse, 2016; Zainab et al., 2022). Though these three antecedent conditions do not include all the factors that impact servant leadership, they represent the significant factors most likely to influence the servant leadership process (Northouse, 2016).

### **2.1.1 Context and Culture**

Servant leadership is not restricted to a particular context or culture but is embraced, implemented, and practiced in various contexts and cultures (Martinez & Leija, 2023). However, how servant leadership is practiced is affected by the context and culture in which it occurs (Northouse, 2016; Sengupta, 2022). Contradictory findings exist in the literature regarding the effectiveness of servant leadership across various contexts and cultures (Sengupta, 2022). Northouse (2016) and Sengupta (2022) argued that servant leadership would be more embraced and effective in cultures where power distance is low, and power is shared equally among people at all levels of society. Therefore, nations (like China and India) that are high on power distance may be expected to be less tolerant of servant leadership (Sengupta, 2022).

Further, Sengupta (2022) posited that the followers' perception of a servant leader may be expected to be low in cultures with substantial uncertainty avoidance. Power distance refers to the degree to which group members expect and agree that power should be shared unequally (Northouse, 2016). This study will further contribute to understanding servant leadership behaviors demonstrated by campus leaders in Christian higher educational settings and Western cultures.

### **2.1.2 Leader Attributes**

A leader's traits and dispositions influence the servant leadership process (Liden et al., 2014; Northouse, 2016). Researchers have identified some leaders' qualities that are significant antecedents of servant leadership behavior, including emotional intelligence (du Plessis, 2015; Lee, 2018), self-efficacy (Amah, 2018), mindfulness (Verdorfer, 2016), core self-evaluation (Flynn et al., 2016), altruism (Sawan et al., 2020), humility and compassionate love (van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). Researchers have shown in various studies that narcissistic traits (being selfish, manipulative, and exploitative) hinder leaders from embracing and practicing servant leadership (Langhof & Gldenbergh, 2020; Peterson et al., 2012; Sawan et al., 2020).

### **2.1.3 Follower Receptivity**

The receptivity of followers to servant leadership is an antecedent factor that significantly affects the outcomes of servant leadership behaviors in an organization (Liden et al., 2014; Northouse, 2016). Empirical evidence exists in the literature indicating that when servant leadership was matched with employees who desired and embraced it, servant leadership positively impacted organizational citizenship behavior (Ngha et al., 2022, 2023), employee work role performance (Tripathi et al., 2020), employee creativity (Gu et al., 2019), and employees' affective organizational commitment and job engagement (Woonyong & Hougyun, 2021). When there is no match between servant leadership and employees' desire for servant leadership, servant leadership is ineffective (Northouse, 2016; Sengupta, 2022). In cultures high on power distance, employees are less tolerant of servant leadership because they expect their leaders to be authoritative and instructive. They may lack trust in leaders who demonstrate too much concern about them (Sengupta, 2022).

## **2.2 Servant Leader Behaviors**

The central focus of the model of servant leadership adopted as the guiding theoretical framework for this study is the seven leader behaviors that foster servant leadership: conceptualizing, emotional healing, putting followers first, helping followers grow and succeed, behaving ethically, empowering, and creating value for the community (Liden et al., 2014; Northouse, 2016).

In this study, the researcher adopted the seven servant leader behaviors highlighted by Liden et al. (2008, 2014) to determine if the administrators, staff, and faculty at a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States practice servant leadership.

### **2.2.1 Conceptualizing**

Conceptualizing refers to the servant leader's thorough understanding of the organization's mission, vision, goals, and complexities (Northouse, 2016). This capacity allows servant leaders to envision the goals of the organization, think outside the box, and develop and articulate a vision and mission statement to motivate their followers and give them a sense of purpose and direction (Greenleaf, 2003; Tait, 2020; Thumma & Beene, 2015). The ability to conceptualize allows servant leaders to think through and address multifaceted problems facing the organization creatively and effectively (Northouse, 2016).

### **2.2.2 Emotional Healing**

Emotional healing refers to servant leaders being sensitive and willing to attend to their followers' concerns, problems, and well-being (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). Servant leaders who demonstrate emotional healing are attentive to the concerns of their followers, make themselves available to their followers, listen to them, empathize with them, nurture them, and help them overcome their problems (Northouse, 2016; Tait, 2020). According to Greenleaf (2003), while servant leaders help their followers become whole, they heal themselves.

### **2.2.3 Putting Followers First**

Putting others first is the defining characteristic of servant leadership (Northouse, 2016). Greenleaf (1970) posited 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. Servant leaders prioritize fulfilling the needs of followers over their personal needs (Canavesi & Minelli, 2022). Crippen and Willows (2019) shared the same view, positing that the primary concern of servant leaders was the people they were responsible for. Ozyilmaz and Cicek (2015) echoed the same assertions about servant leaders, describing servant leaders as individuals with a genuine desire to serve others by setting aside their personal ambitions to meet the needs of others. A servant leader's primary motive is to satisfy the psychological needs of their followers (Sengupta, 2022). Servant leaders' words and actions clearly show their followers that their personal concerns, interests, and success come first (Northouse, 2016).

### **2.2.4 Helping Followers Grow and Succeed**

Servant leaders are committed to helping their followers grow and succeed personally and professionally by seeking to know their personal and professional goals, providing opportunities for their career development, mentoring, nurturing, and supporting them to reach their full potential (Northouse, 2016). Servant leaders dedicate themselves to serving their followers as mentors and supporters (Newman et al., 2017). Servant leaders engage their followers in multiple dimensions, including interpersonal, emotional, moral, and spiritual (Eva et al., 2019). Greenleaf's conceptualization of servant leadership emphasizes treating each person in an organization as a unique people with intrinsic value beyond their tangible input to the organization (Northouse, 2016).

### **2.2.5 Behaving Ethically**

Behaving ethically refers to servant leaders doing the right thing correctly (Northouse, 2016). Servant leaders serve as an ethical example for their followers (Aboramadam et al., 2021; Lemoine et al., 2019), setting standards of excellence for their followers through their actions instead of their commands (Wicks, 2019). Servant leaders do not compromise their ethical principles to pursue success (Northouse, 2016). Servant leaders are open, transparent, honest, and fair with followers (Northouse, 2016).

### **2.2.6 Empowering**

Empowering refers to servant leaders giving their followers the freedom to be independent, make decisions on their own, and be self-sufficient (Northouse, 2016). Tarallo (2021) described servant leadership as revolutionary leadership that places employees at the top of the hierarchy and leaders at the bottom. Greenleaf (1970) stated that servant leaders use less institutional power and control but shift authority to their followers. Northouse (2016) echoed Greenleaf's assertion, stating that servant leaders do not seek to dominate or control their followers; instead, they share control and influence. Servant leaders influence and empower their followers to serve others (Alshammari et al., 2019).

### **2.2.7 Creating Value for the Community**

Creating value for the community refers to servant leaders giving back to the community (Northouse, 2016). Servant leaders link their organizational goals with the broader purposes of the community by getting involved in community services and encouraging their followers to volunteer in community services (Northouse, 2016; Tait, 2020). Greenleaf (2003) stressed that a servant leader has a social responsibility to care for the less privileged.

## **2.3 Servant Leadership Outcomes**

When a leader exhibits the seven servant leader behaviors in the servant leadership model (conceptualizing, emotional healing, putting followers first, helping followers grow and succeed, behaving ethically, empowering, and creating value for the community), it will result in these three possible outcomes: follower performance and growth, organizational performance, and societal impact (Liden et al., 2014; Northouse, 2016). Greenleaf also highlighted these servant leadership outcomes in his original work. In Greenleaf's conceptualization of servant leadership, when leaders put followers first, listen to them, attend to their personal concerns, nurture and support them, and help them grow and succeed, their organizations become healthier, ultimately impacting society positively (Greenleaf, 1970).

### **2.3.1 Follower Performance and Growth**

In the servant leadership model, servant leader behaviors are expected to result in greater self-actualization for their followers. When servant leaders put their followers first, provide opportunities for their career development, nurture, empower, and support them, it will result in their followers realizing their full potential (Northouse, 2016). Much empirical evidence in the literature shows that servant leadership positively impacts followers. Researchers have demonstrated that servant leadership positively impacted employee work role performance (Tripathi et al., 2020), employee creativity (Gu et al., 2019), employees' affective organizational commitment and job engagement (Woonyong & Hougyun, 2021), faculty's job satisfaction and trust (Hashim et al., 2020; Zummy et al., 2022), and faculty's work engagement (Aboramadam et al., 2021; Zainab et al. (2022).

### **2.3.2 Organizational Performance**

Besides its positive influence on follower performance and growth, researchers have shown in many studies that servant leadership positively impacts organizational growth and performance. Sharp (2023) indicated a positive relationship between servant leadership and numerical membership growth in Christian non-profit organizations. Further, in a study, Ngah et al. (2022) showed that servant leadership positively impacted organizational citizenship behavior and volunteer retention in non-profit organizations. The results lend credence to the postulation by Sawan et al. (2020) that employees who have been positively impacted by servant leadership will be motivated to give their best to the organization. Organizational citizenship behaviors refer to employees' behaviors that exceed the basic requirements of their duties and ultimately improve and strengthen organizational performance (Northouse, 2016). Other researchers have suggested that servant leadership fostered organizational innovations (Lan et al., 2021; Maalouf, 2023).

### **2.3.3 Societal Impact**

Greenleaf posited that servant leadership nurtures individual growth, strengthens organizational performance, and ultimately benefits society (Greenleaf, 1970, 2003). The long-term outcomes of servant leadership include positive social change and helping society flourish (Northouse, 2016). Researchers have suggested that servant leadership positively influences undergraduate students' campus involvement (Jagela, 2019) and student contribution to transforming their local communities (Rega & Honen-Delmar, 2022). Also, Greenleaf (1970) postulated that servant leaders will produce more servant leaders. When followers receive caring, nurturing, empowerment, and support from servant leaders, they, in turn, will possibly become servant leaders and begin treating others in this way (Greenleaf, 1970).

## **3. Research Question**

What specific servant leadership behaviors are exhibited by the campus leaders from the perspectives of graduate students at a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States?

#### 4. Methodology

A qualitative single case study approach was used to examine servant leadership behaviors demonstrated by campus leaders from graduate students' perspectives at a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States. After obtaining the National University IRB approval and site permission, 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 through purposive sampling for the study. All the participants were interviewed individually, and seven participants who volunteered for the focus group were interviewed in a focus group via Zoom, a virtual platform. The participants were interviewed using semi-structured, open-ended questions reviewed and approved by experts. The transcribed interviews were sent to all participants to review, correct, and confirm their accuracy. The verified interview and focus group transcripts were uploaded to NVivo 14 for thematic analysis, yielding seven themes.

#### 5. Results and Discussion

The research question was addressed through seven themes identified from the interviews and focus group thematic data analysis using NVivo 14. Table 1 displays the research questions and seven themes. The participants identified and described aptly the following seven servant leadership behaviors demonstrated by their campus leaders: Emotional Healing, Putting Students First, Helping Students Grow and Succeed, Empowering Students, Creating Value for Community, Behaving Ethically, and Conceptualizing. These seven servant leadership behaviors constitute the core of the model utilized as this study's guiding theoretical framework (Liden et al., 2008; 2014; Northouse, 2016). The study findings indicated that the campus leaders exhibited all seven servant behaviors, and the graduate students could identify these behaviors. These findings align with prior studies exploring servant leadership from the perspectives of undergraduate students (Alshammari et al., 2019; Jagela, 2019). The seven servant behaviors are discussed as themes in this section.

##### 5.1 Theme 1: Emotional Healing

Participants identified listening to students' concerns, showing empathy and care, and providing emotional support, which were categorized as emotional healing. Servant leaders who demonstrate emotional healing are attentive to the concerns of their followers, make themselves available to their followers, listen to them, empathize with them, nurture them, and help them overcome their problems (Northouse, 2016; Tait, 2020). The participants provided detailed accounts of how their campus leaders listened to students' concerns, exhibited empathy and care, and offered emotional support. P2 recounted their experience to demonstrate that their professors exhibit empathy and care towards their students, "I went through a very hard time around four years ago in my life, and I was struggling with, you know, getting my work done because of personal things that were going on, and the professors were extremely, extremely empathetic about it. They cared about me personally." P4 stated with much joy, "As a matter of fact, I think this place is one of the places where I think students' opinions are taken very seriously. P6 supports other participants' statements with their own experiences, "From my experience, my professors are very empathetic, especially in the social work department. They've demonstrated that my professors and administrators take the time to truly listen to your concerns."

##### 5.2 Theme 2: Putting Students First

The research findings suggested that campus leaders prioritize students by being accessible and approachable, effectively addressing student needs, and carefully considering student feedback. Participants provided statements and experiences indicating that the campus leaders are accessible and approachable to students, effectively serve student needs, and thoughtfully consider feedback from students. P1 stated, "I would say they are prioritizing students. They're just so willing to see you, to greet you, and to make time for you, and sometimes even going out of their way to say we should talk about this more later." P7 added, "They are always available and willing to help. I don't know of other cases, but in my case, they are always available and willing to help." P8 further corroborated the assertions made by other participants regarding their professors' receptiveness to feedback, "My professors are always open to feedback, and also, at the end of each semester, we have a way to bring feedback to the professors anonymously through the course evaluation."

### 5.3 Theme 3: Helping Students Grow and Succeed

The study's findings indicated that campus leaders help students grow and succeed by supporting students' spiritual formation and professional development. Participants detailed how their campus leaders are helping them grow and succeed by supporting their spiritual formation and professional development. P2 mentioned, "I have had classes where we have Christian devotionals every week. And that has helped me a lot. I love that the Professor had Christian devotionals with us. The campus has been amazing because I could talk about God, my beliefs, and Christ. The professors really like to focus on Christ because they want you to be a good Christian. And that has been a big thing for me." P5 added, "In my personal and professional development, my social work professors have helped me since the beginning of my social work career, helping me with things like giving me suggestions, praying for me, or just being supportive." P13 reported feeling supported within the discipleship groups, "I think one of the main things on campus is our discipleship groups. That's a really good support system in a really good way. We kind of just come together, pray, and talk about life, which is a really good way for us to get together outside of the classroom."

### 5.4 Theme 4: Empowering Students

According to the study's findings, participants identified empowering students as one of the servant leadership behaviors exhibited by their campus leaders. They shared their unique experiences to illustrate how their campus leaders empower students through mentoring and collaboration. P1 highlighted that their Professor dedicated time to helping students in need: "My Professor is very free with her time. I think one of the key things in servant leadership is where you spend your time, and she spends it with those in need. When I have an issue, she comes to me and works with me." P2 observed that faculty and staff are committed to providing mentorship to students, "I've heard many students saying, 'Oh, yeah, I'm going to go and speak to my mentor, and they're on campus, and they are referring to a faculty or staff member. There are a lot of faculty members that have been mentors to many students.'" P8 shared their experience, affirming that faculty members are willing to offer mentorship to students, "I remember I just approached a distinguished professor in the Political Science Department. He's a high-profile person on campus and in America. He's a former Congressman of the United States. So, I approached him and said, hey, I would like to see if you could mentor me. And his answer was yes. I found myself very surprised about how the Professor was willing and in a good way to help me succeed, not only saying yes but supporting me."

### 5.5 Theme 5: Empowering Students

Participants identified creating value for the community as a servant leadership behavior of their campus leaders. They shared how administrators, faculty, and staff fostered a sense of community on campus and encouraged and motivated students to contribute to the community. P1 observed how the campus leaders helped build a sense of community in their department, "About once a month, at least in my college, we have meetings where we share a meal and talk about what's been happening so far in the last month. They encourage healthy opportunities to check in on everyone and support one another." P3 noted, "Before I came to campus, I had no motive to serve the community. But since I came to this Christian university, I've realized that it is self-rewarding, and that is what I need." In contrast, P11 argued that the university's community service efforts are insufficient, "I don't think there are a lot of volunteer opportunities for students to go and make an impact in the community." They further stressed, "I also don't think that the university is uniting the community and the students in any meaningful way."

### 5.6 Theme 6: Behaving Ethically

The study's findings indicated that the campus leaders behave ethically. Participants provided compelling evidence to show that their campus administrators, faculty, and staff behave ethically by modeling Christian values and demonstrating professionalism. P2 believes their professors focus on Christ and encourage students to follow Him, "I can see that my professors are Christ-centered. I can see that they want me to walk with God and Christ. And that's the most important thing." P9 corroborates the claims of other participants, affirming that their faculty consistently demonstrates ethical behavior, "I don't think I've had any unpleasant interactions with any of my graduate professors. They've all been very pleasant, very understanding, very kind, very respectful, very empathetic, very enthusiastic." P13 noted, "I would say they are just really amazing professional models. The way they all carry themselves is empathetic and professional."

### 5.7 Theme 7: Behaving Ethically

While participants understood conceptualizing as a servant leadership behavior, they expressed varying perspectives on the extent to which their campus leaders are aware of the challenges students face, particularly international and online students. P1 noted, "From what I've seen, I think there's certainly a level of proactivity in the sense that they're always trying to think one step ahead." P2 highlighted the frustration of some international students who feel neglected by campus leaders, "I felt like we international students were left aside for a period. And you know, many things were not done that affected their status here. And a lot of international students, you know, struggled and had a lot of like issues. Then, some of them had to leave the country. Well, there is a new director for that department, and I have faith that that person is going to do an amazing job. That person is amazing." P6 added, "Honestly, I don't think they completely understand how hard it is to be an international student." P11 also noted, "Honestly, I don't think the leaders are as in tune as they could be. I think the higher up in the organization they go, the more out of touch they may be., I think they're used to a certain way of doing things and maybe do not realize that the demographics of students are changing year to year, even from when I was an undergraduate student a year and a half ago. There's just a different student landscape, different types of students, and different needs as well."

### 6. Recommendation for Future Research

Given the limitations inherent in the research methodology and design, future research should expand the sample to encompass graduate students from Christian colleges and universities nationwide, thereby addressing the limitations associated with a small purposive sample. Additionally, future studies should compare graduate students' perceptions regarding servant leadership behaviors of campus leaders in faith-based private higher education institutions with those in non-faith-based public higher education institutions.

### 7. Conclusion

While multiple studies have examined servant leadership in higher education institutions from the perspectives of administrators, staff, faculty, and undergraduate students, graduate students' views of servant leadership behaviors are still underrepresented in the literature. This qualitative case study fills this gap in the literature by providing unique insights from graduate students on servant leadership behaviors. The study's results indicated that graduate students could identify and articulate all seven servant leadership behaviors demonstrated by their campus leaders: Emotional Healing, Putting Students First, Helping Students Grow and Succeed, Empowering Students, Creating Value for Community, Behaving Ethically, and Conceptualizing.

These findings have several implications. Campus leaders who demonstrate emotional healing by addressing students' concerns, showing empathy, and offering emotional support are more likely to connect effectively with students and establish trust, thus influencing students positively. When campus leaders prioritize students by being accessible and approachable, effectively addressing their needs, and carefully considering their feedback, students are more likely to be motivated and engaged within the campus community. Campus leaders who support students' spiritual development and professional growth are more likely to foster their success and personal development. Campus administrators, faculty, and staff who exemplify Christian values and professionalism are more likely to inspire students to act ethically and serve others. Based on these findings, I recommend that higher education institutions promote the principles of servant leadership and encourage administrators, staff, and faculty to cultivate and exemplify servant leadership behaviors.

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**Table 1. Research Question and Themes**

Research Question	Themes
What specific servant leadership behaviors are exhibited by the campus leaders from the perspectives of graduate students at a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States	Emotional Healing Putting Students First Helping Students Grow and Succeed Empowering Students Creating Value for Community Behaving Ethically Conceptualizing