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The Lived Experience of Former University Student Leaders in the Workplace

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Article Info

Abstract

This study delves into the workplace experiences of former university student leaders, focusing on how their leadership backgrounds influence their professional lives. Using a phenomenological approach, participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling methods, ensuring that those with relevant leadership backgrounds were included. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather in-depth insights into their experiences and perspectives. The findings reveal that the participants not only recognized the value of the leadership skills they cultivated during their university years but also embraced leadership as a critical component of their professional identity. Furthermore, the study uncovered how these individuals continue to nurture and enhance their leadership abilities alongside their professional careers, demonstrating a commitment to lifelong learning and self-improvement. This research underscores the importance of fostering leadership among students during their university years, as the lessons and skills gained during this time have far-reaching implications for their future success.

1. Introduction

Universities are valuable for students' personal and professional development, providing plenty of learning and development opportunities. Student leadership positions are one of these options that have come to be recognized as an important means of developing leadership abilities, self-determination, and job preparedness. These leadership roles can include department executives, presidents or vice presidents of clubs and organizations, and members elected in student government. Student leaders acquire important skills through these experiences in project management, communication, delegation, and dispute resolution, all of which are highly valued by employers.

Former student leaders often possess unique experiences and perspectives shaping their transition from the university campus to the professional world. Programs emphasizing resource management, team development, communication, dispute resolution, and strategic planning give student leaders the skills they need to succeed in the workplace. Correspondingly, Bai *et al*. (2022) [1] reported that student leadership experience can improve essential skills, including interpersonal relationships, collaboration, problem-solving, and decision-making. This promotes the development of relationships, career exploration, and employment opportunities. On the other hand, little research has been done on how these experiences affect their careers and add to their overall success at work. The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) issued Memorandum Order No. 9, Series 2013, or the Enhanced Policies and Guidelines on Student Affairs and Services in the Philippines. This guides universities to provide a well-rounded student experience, promoting academic excellence and well-being. Article VIII of this regulation fosters leadership and social responsibility. It describes numerous programs and activities to achieve this goal, such as Student Organizations and Activities, Professional Organizations or Societies, Special Interests, Leadership Training Programs, Student Council/Government, Student Discipline, and Student Publication/Media.

Moreover, students are being prepared for more significant responsibilities by having the opportunity to engage in decision-making and the execution of activities.

Giving students access to these kinds of activities would sculpt graduates who would go on to lead their communities and the nation in the future. Particularly, Gowthaman (2019) [3] noted that student leadership experiences involving diverse interactions are instrumental in shaping future leaders by fostering practical and interpersonal abilities. On the other hand, graduate employability of higher education assesses an institution's capacity to produce job-ready graduates and serves as a performance indicator for higher education institutions. Moreover, policymakers in the Philippines are concentrating on the differences between the knowledge and skills that higher education institutions provide and the employment opportunities accessible in the job market.

This study aimed to enhance the current understanding of how student leadership experiences translate into workplace skills and career success for former university student leaders of the University of Cabuyao in their respective workplaces. Through in-depth interviews, this research explored the lived experiences of former university student leaders, focusing on how their student leadership roles equipped them to navigate the professional world.

2. Methods
2.1 Research Design
This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of former student leaders in their respective workplaces. Qualitative research, as described by Tenny *et al*. (2022) described it as a research type that explores and provides deeper insights into real- world problems and is used to gather participants' experiences, perceptions, and behaviors. Phenomenology specifically aims to study individuals' lived experiences, allowing researchers to capture the essence of how participants perceive and make sense of a shared phenomenon.

2.2 Research Locale
The research was conducted in the cities of Cabuyao and Calamba, both in the province of Laguna. These locations were selected because the study focused on alumni of the University of Cabuyao, which is situated in Cabuyao City. The proximity and institutional relationship with the university enabled access to a population of former student leaders familiar with the local context, which was deemed beneficial for the depth and authenticity of the data collected.

2.3 Population and Sampling
The population of the study consisted of former student leaders who served in the University Student Government and College Student Government of the University of Cabuyao from batch 2018–2022. A combination of purposeful sampling and snowball sampling techniques was used. Purposeful sampling ensured that participants had direct, relevant experience with the phenomenon under investigation, while snowball sampling enabled the researchers to reach additional qualified individuals through referrals. A total of ten (10) participants were selected, consistent with recommended sample sizes for qualitative research using thematic or phenomenological approaches to ensure data saturation.

2.4 Research Participants
The selected participants were male and female former student leaders representing any of the 15 academic programs across six departments at the University of Cabuyao. To be eligible for inclusion in the study, participants were required to have at least two years of work experience and be currently employed within the Province of Laguna or the National Capital Region (NCR). It was not necessary for their current careers to align with their undergraduate degrees. Additionally, their willingness and ability to participate during the period of data collection were considered essential criteria.

2.5 Research Instrumentation
The primary research instrument was a semi-structured interview guide, developed by the researchers to explore the participants' lived experiences in the workplace. The guide was anchored on Behavioral Leadership Theory and Self-Determination Theory, ensuring that questions were theoretically grounded and relevant to the research objectives. The interview questions were validated by subject matter experts from the University of Cabuyao to enhance clarity, relevance, and appropriateness. This validation process ensured that the guide would effectively elicit rich and meaningful narratives from participants.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure
Upon receiving approval from the appropriate institutional review board, the researchers obtained formal consent from institutional authorities and the study participants. Participants were given an informed consent form outlining the nature and purpose of the study, their rights as participants, and assurances of confidentiality. Interviews were scheduled based on participant availability and were conducted only after the consent forms were signed and any questions had been addressed. Interviews were conducted using the validated semi-structured interview guide, allowing flexibility for follow-up questions based on participant responses. With participant permission, all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy.

2.7 Data Analysis
The data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). No software or digital tools were used in the analysis process; all data were manually analyzed. The researchers began by transcribing the audio recordings verbatim and then repeatedly reading each transcript to gain a holistic understanding of each participant's account. Initial notes were made to capture key ideas, emotional expressions, and significant statements. From these notes, emergent themes were identified for each transcript. Finally, patterns were examined across all participants to identify shared themes and meanings. This manual application of IPA allowed for deep interpretive engagement with the data and ensured that the analysis remained grounded in the participants' lived experiences.

2.8 Ethical Considerations
The researchers adhered to the ethical guidelines prescribed in the institutional research manual. Participation in the study was strictly voluntary, and participants were informed of their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Every effort was made to avoid harm or discomfort, and questions were carefully designed to minimize emotional risk. The study complied with the Data Privacy Act of 2012

(Republic Act 10173), ensuring that all collected data, including audio recordings, field notes, and personal information, were kept confidential and securely stored. Participants' names were replaced with codenames, and access to the data was restricted to the researchers only.

3. Results and Discussion
3.1 Results
This chapter presents the data analysis and interpretation of the data gathered in this study. This phenomenological study is intended to investigate the lived experiences of former university student leaders in their workplace. Methods of inquiry include phenomenological reflection on the data elicited through semi-structured interviews.

The themes that emerged from the responses of the participants about their lived experiences of former student leaders in their workplace are presented in this section. The themes were as follows:

Emerging Themes	Subordinate Themes
Theme 1: Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations Driving Student Leadership Engagement	Extrinsic Motivation
	Intrinsic Motivation
Theme 2: Leadership Program for Leadership Development	University-driven leadership programs
	External leadership programs
Theme 3: Transferable Leadership Skills Enabling Workplace Success	Communication skills
	Team management
	Emotional intelligence
Theme 4: Continuity in Leadership Responsibilities from University to Workplace	Responsibility
Theme 5: Expanding Leadership Through Professional Mentorship and Initiative	Opportunity to lead and mentor
	Opportunity to present at work
	Opportunity to lead and represent their work
	Opportunity to lead initiatives at work
Theme 6: Balancing Autonomy and Collaboration Through Leadership Experience	Autonomy in task completion
	Balanced collaboration enabling effective decisions
Theme 7: Building Confidence and Resilience Through Leadership	Adaptability to feedback
	Leadership values and skills
	Leadership Confidence
	Resiliency building through hardships
Theme 8: Enhanced Professional Development Fostering Leadership Growth	Fostering leadership growth through training
	Fostering leadership through practical skill development
Theme 9: Continuous Leadership Growth Through Self-Directed Learning and Community Engagement	Self-directed learning through various resources
	Learning from others' experiences
	Learning through seminars and volunteering
Theme 10: Fostering Positive Professional Relationships Through Effective Communication and Empathy	Collaboration and teamwork
	Adapting to personalities
	Professional boundaries
	Mentoring and Sharing Knowledge

4. Discussion
The research offered valuable insights into the professional impact of university leadership experiences by exploring the lived experiences of former student leaders in their professions by conducting semi-structured interviews and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), providing a thorough understanding of how these experiences shape career success and workplace adaptability.

In the first theme, Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivations Driving Student Leadership Engagement, the former university student leaders shared their responses. In summary, former student leaders are driven by a complex interplay of intrinsic elements, such as personal growth and advocacy, as well as extrinsic factors, such as support from peers and mentors. These motivations emphasize the various influences shaping students' commitment to engage in leadership roles, highlighting the importance of personal values and external encouragement. This insight suggests that effective university programs should consider these diverse motivations and promote settings that nurture both individual growth and community impact.

In the second theme, Leadership Program for Leadership Development, former student leaders shared how university-driven programs fostered their leadership and personal growth through initiatives focused on personal development, soft skills, and leadership foundations. External programs provided them with credentials, notably through General Assemblies, which recognized their involvement. Overall, these initiatives provided essential experiences that shaped their growth as leaders.

In the third theme, Transferable Leadership Skills Enabling Workplace Success, former student leaders identified key transferable skills from their university leadership experiences that support their current workplace success, including communication skills, emotional intelligence, and team management. These leaders credit their university experiences with making them adaptable, proactive, and supportive in the workplace, equipped with essential skills that create cohesion and contribute to a successful, collaborative environment.

The fourth theme, Continuity in Leadership Responsibilities from University to Workplace, shows that former student leaders observe strong similarities between their university and their current job responsibilities. These insights also demonstrated that experiences in student leadership offer a foundation for career advancement, equipping individuals with vital skills necessary for success in the workplace and effective leadership.

In the fifth theme, Expanding Leadership Through Professional Mentorship and Initiative, former student leaders reflected on the opportunities they experienced that helped them cultivate and show their leadership skills in their current jobs. In summary, the responses show how the participants enhanced their leadership capacities through professional mentorship, initiative leadership, presentation skills, and organizational representation, all of which catered to their personal development and significantly impacted their workplaces and communities.

In the sixth theme, Balancing Autonomy and Collaboration Through Leadership Experience, former university student leaders discussed their strategies for managing workplace relationships. They explained that they consider their colleagues' suggestions and perspectives, as well as the potential impact of their decisions on the entire group.

In the seventh theme, Building Confidence and Resilience Through Leadership, former university student leaders discussed how their leadership experiences helped them express themselves. This also applies the leadership skills

gained from the university up to their current role in their workplace.

In the eighth theme, Enhanced Professional Development Fostering Leadership Growth, former student university leaders shared that they expand their skills beyond their own specialization. In which they explore new opportunities that will strengthen their leadership abilities. Hands-on experience helped them grow both as leaders and professionals. Informal training, including team-building and handling complex tasks, further enhances their skills.

In the ninth theme, Continuous Leadership Growth Through Self-Directed Learning and Community Engagement, the former university student leaders shared that they continue to develop their leadership skills through accessible resources from their colleagues, engage in seminars, and volunteer work within their communities and workplaces to support their growth. This approach shows that they pursue learning in their way and on their terms, driven by a belief that leadership development is an ongoing, lifelong process.

In the tenth theme, Fostering Positive Professional Relationships Through Effective Communication and Empathy, former university student leaders described their experiences in building relationships with colleagues and supervisors. They shared that effective communication and adaptability to different personalities helped them form positive professional connections.

This study focused exclusively on the lived experiences of former university student leaders who have transitioned into the workforce, with a minimum of two years of professional experience. The participants currently reside in Cabuyao and Calamba City, within the Province of Laguna, and are employed in organizations located either in the Province of Laguna or the National Capital Region (NCR), Philippines. Eligibility for participation was not limited by alignment between the participants' current employment and their undergraduate degree; individuals working in fields unrelated to their academic background were still considered qualified. However, the scope of the study was confined to a total of ten participants. Future research may broaden this investigation by including a more diverse pool of participants from various universities and by focusing on individuals whose current professional roles are closely aligned with their academic training.

5. Conclusion

The research offered valuable insights into the professional impact of university leadership experiences by exploring the lived experiences of former student leaders in their professions. Furthermore, it provided a variety of motivational factors for students to take up leadership responsibilities, including personal growth and peer encouragement. In particular, the study highlighted significant themes demonstrating how former student leaders use university-based acquired skills in real-world professional settings. Communication, team management, and emotional intelligence are transferable abilities that former student leaders utilize to navigate workplace duties and responsibilities. Additionally, it also showed the impact of workplace teamwork, professional mentoring, and lifelong learning on their career success. As a result, former student leaders reported that their leadership experiences increased confidence, adaptability, and autonomy, which improved their performance in workplace relationships and team management. Consequently, the findings recommend that

educational institutions include leadership opportunities and mentorship in programs to better prepare students for future professional responsibilities. Overall, this research guides for building targeted support systems and professional development activities that promote personal and professional growth, focusing on how university leadership experiences create strong foundations for effective and resilient leaders. In conclusion, this multifaceted exploration emphasized the importance of university-based programs and external opportunities in developing leadership skills that can be applied effectively in the workplace.

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