

Servant Leadership in Higher Education: A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

This literature review explores the relationship between current trends in higher education leadership practices and servant leadership, with a specific focus on small, private colleges in upstate New York. The review confirms three areas of challenge for current leaders and the higher education industry. These challenges consist of a lack of longevity, insufficient diversity, and resistance to change, each signaling the need for a servant leadership approach. Through an examination of historical leadership frameworks, modern leadership practices, and emerging challenges, the review identifies servant leadership as a model that fosters organizational well-being, enhances employee satisfaction, and improves organizational performance. Key constructs such as bureaucracy and hierarchical structures are analyzed to highlight barriers that hinder the adoption of servant leadership within higher education institutions. Additionally, the review synthesizes findings from related studies to underscore the positive organizational outcomes associated with servant leadership, including improved innovation, engagement, and institutional performance. Anticipated themes such as the lack of professional development, the importance of employee satisfaction, and the persistence of traditional leadership models are explored to inform future research. Overall, the review substantiates the relevance of servant leadership and calls for its broader implementation to meet the evolving needs of higher education institutions.

KEYWORDS: Servant leadership, small private college, job satisfaction, employee well-being, leadership development, human capital

Servant leadership has gained increasing attention within academic leadership discourse due to its emphasis on ethical behavior, interpersonal connection, and follower development. While traditional leadership models in higher education have often prioritized hierarchy, individualism, and managerial efficiency, there is growing recognition of the need for leadership practices that promote well-being, inclusivity, and institutional resilience. In small, private colleges, especially those in regions like upstate New York, challenges such as declining enrollment, resistance to change, and leadership turnover have highlighted the inadequacy of conventional leadership paradigms. These challenges demand a reexamination of leadership strategies through the lenses of scholarship, policy, and practice.

From a scholarly perspective, servant leadership has been positively associated with job satisfaction, employee engagement, ethical conduct, and organizational commitment. These

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findings align with broader policy concerns regarding retention, diversity, and campus culture within higher education institutions. Additionally, higher education policy increasingly emphasizes shared governance, inclusive excellence, and leadership development, areas that resonate with the principles of servant leadership. At the practical level, leaders must now respond to institutional instability, student-centered learning demands, and staff burnout, requiring an adaptable and people-first leadership style.

This literature review aims to explore how servant leadership can address persistent challenges in higher education by synthesizing qualitative and empirical findings. The review is anchored in the following research questions:

RQ1: How prevalent is the use of servant leadership at small, private colleges in upstate New York?

RQ2: How does implementing servant leadership influence employee performance and development in these institutions?

RQ3: What are the organizational benefits of adopting servant leadership within higher education leadership structures?

Literature Review

Case and Methodology

This literature review utilized a thematic synthesis approach to explore the relevance, application, and barriers of servant leadership in higher education, with a specific focus on small, private colleges. The review was designed to identify patterns, contradictions, and gaps in the literature that inform how servant leadership influences organizational culture, employee development, and institutional performance.

Search Strategy and Selection Criteria

To ensure a comprehensive and relevant collection of sources, the researcher identified peer-reviewed articles by searching databases such as EBSCOhost, ProQuest, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and the AJQR database. The researcher used key search terms including “servant leadership,” “higher education leadership,” “small private colleges,” “organizational culture,” “employee well-being,” and “qualitative leadership” to refine the search results. I applied the following inclusion criteria:

- Published between 2020 and 2025 to prioritize contemporary perspectives
- Peer-reviewed journal articles, empirical studies, and conceptual frameworks
- Literature focused on higher education contexts
- Studies that referenced or applied qualitative methodology or theoretical analysis
- English-language publications only
- Exclusion criteria involved: non-peer-reviewed opinion articles or editorials
- Studies focused exclusively on higher education leaders. This includes presidents, vice presidents, salaried staff, and faculty.

Data Analysis

Once the researcher collected the studies, the researcher organized them into thematic categories using a qualitative lens. Emerging categories included: professional development, employee satisfaction, organizational barriers, and bureaucracy. Within each theme, the researcher examined how leadership style, particularly servant leadership, impacted key areas of organizational performance. This method provided a structured yet flexible approach to synthesizing a wide body of literature, allowing the review to identify where servant leadership aligns with or challenges prevailing leadership norms in academia.

Ethical Considerations

This study consisted only of a review and synthesis of previously published research on the subject matter. The completion of this literature review does not involve human participants or the collection of primary data. As such, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was not required. The literature review was conducted in accordance with ethical standards and scholarly inquiry.

The Problem

Focusing on leadership practices within higher education provides a potential solution to the ongoing decline in enrollment that these institutions face, which poses an economic challenge (Guzman et al., 2021). With that said, current higher education leaders have faced challenges in implementing servant leadership practices that negatively affected organizational performance. Scholars found that when higher education leaders did not practice servant leadership, corporate trust and job satisfaction decreased (Dahleez & Aboramadan, 2022). Furthermore, many experts questioned whether higher education leaders recognized servant leadership as a vital approach. Experts noted that, despite its importance to the industry, scholars should conduct further research on the servant leadership approach and its application to higher education (Ghasemy et al., 2022). In other words, recent history showed that higher education leaders did not prioritize servant leadership in their leadership development and practice.

This lack of recognition highlighted three significant areas of concern for small, private colleges regarding servant leadership practices. The first concern involved the overall stability and longevity of the small, private college (Fowler, 2021). The second primary concern was the need for greater diversity among leadership (Ash et al., 2020). Third, small, private colleges needed to adapt to the changing needs of the market audience (Markell & Mitchell, 2022). Lastly, the problem was visible within the current practices among the trends in higher education leadership (Kezar & Carducci, 2023). The cultivation of servant leadership addressed all four areas.

Business Practices

Current research demonstrates the importance of understanding higher education institutions as a business. More recently, the higher education industry has sought out interventions such as business intelligence models to gauge the quality of services that are provided by their organization (Sorour & Atkins, 2024). This information supports the connection between the use of servant leadership and the impact it has on employee performance and development. Therefore, an organization had to prioritize a servant leadership approach to develop followers effectively at the highest level. Furthermore, the focus of the business practices of an institution shows

information connecting to the organizational benefits of adopting the servant leadership practice within the higher education institution. According to scholars, specific character traits such as communication and resilience form the foundations of effective leadership. However, effective leadership in higher education requires leaders to exercise strong decision-making skills, provide constructive feedback, and collaborate across departments (Leavey, 2023). Scholars asserted that a leader's efforts to engage with the workforce through influence and character directly affected the sustainability and development of an organization (Piwowar-Sulej & Iqbal, 2023).

Considering how specific leadership practices impact employee performance, the researcher observed a common trait that is currently seen within higher education. One trait among current leaders in higher education was toxic leadership. Scholars reported that toxic leadership traits existed among higher education leaders and consisted of self-centered motivation with no regard for the psychological safety of the follower (Smith & Fredricks-Lowman, 2020). The employee perspective shifted within higher education from an achievement and publication focus to one that focused on motivation and transformation (Leavey, 2023). Therefore, the impact of toxic leadership traits demonstrated a need for change in leadership approaches in higher education. Additionally, researchers found that toxic leadership traits such as arrogance, a lack of empathy, and micromanagement had been the fundamental causes for preventing professional development among women at South African higher education institutions (Herbst & Roux, 2021). Shifting the prevailing toxic leadership traits within higher education to an approach that focused on the follower's development improved leadership across the higher education industry (Elliott, 2020).

In highlighting the presence and effect of negative leadership traits and their impact on employees and the organization, the literature demonstrated that traits with opposite and positive outcomes existed. For instance, research demonstrated that leaders who empowered employees through shared responsibility and decision-making, and who shared policy-related information, directly increased innovation throughout the organization (Sani et al., 2023). Servant leadership, which emphasized nurturing the growth and development of others, served as a practice that counteracted the impacts of toxic leadership traits within higher education (Udin et al., 2023). Furthermore, organizations that practiced servant leadership were effective mainly because all employees could engage in it without needing a formal title or level of authority, thereby allowing both leaders and direct reports to practice empowerment and service (Wang, 2023). Observations of these businesses practiced within higher education demonstrate the positive impact that the research questions consider. That is, the practice of servant leadership and implication is based on business elements such as employee performance and organizational improvement.

Modern-day Leadership in Higher Education

Experts point out that as society changed, higher education changed; therefore, leadership had to adjust its approach (Holcombe et al., 2023). Historians noted that traditional higher educational leadership models focused on individualism, hierarchy, power structures, and an overall scientific management style of leadership development (Kezar & Carducci, 2023). Understanding this traditional framework, in conjunction with inevitable industry change, led to the need for a servant leadership approach that focused on the empowerment and well-being of those serving under the leader's authority (Awasthi & Walumbwa, 2023).

In large part, studies have observed the impact of a leader on an organization. For instance, research into how the expertise held by leaders within small to medium-sized businesses showed a direct impact on those businesses' effectiveness (Ali & Anwar, 2021). More research shows how leaders have a direct impact on generating an environment of innovation and creativity within an organization (Siyal et al., 2021). Researchers found that leadership approaches directly influenced

knowledge sharing and were a primary element of organizational performance within higher education (Rehman & Iqbal, 2020). This research demonstrated that the leadership approach directly affected both employees and the organization. Experts noted that due to higher levels of competition in modern times, leaders within higher education had to adapt their leadership styles to ensure that the organization remained relevant for recruiting staff and achieving overall success (Asgari et al., 2020); thus, supporting the researcher's motivation about adapting the servant leadership approach. Further research shows that the leadership approach utilized by higher education leaders directly influences areas of employee perception of leadership, the creation and achievement of specific institutional goals, and overall practical effectiveness strategies from leaders (Barrett-Maitland et al., 2025).

On the contrary, evidence also showed that modern leadership practices in higher education were effective. For instance, an international study at various universities showed that current trends in higher education have implemented a highly effective peer leadership approach (Skalicky et al., 2024). Another example came from studies that found recent leadership trends in higher education focused on transforming practices in ways that mitigated barriers for women to serve at the highest leadership levels (Fauzi et al., 2024). A third example came from research into improving leadership in higher education, which demonstrated that current leaders were researching and practicing more collaborative methods to ensure the institution remained competitive in the industry (Robiah et al., 2024).

Longevity of Small, Private Colleges

Research suggests that several organizations from various industries suffer from low levels of longevity due to organizational performance (Arias-Pineda, 2022). Furthermore, existing research underscores the significance of targeted leadership practices, such as enhancing communication, improving decision-making, strengthening strategic planning, and upholding integrity, in fostering higher levels of organizational performance (Bajrami et al., 2024). In higher education, leadership factors also directly influence organizational performance and longevity. The literature showed that small, private higher education institutions were at risk in terms of longevity. Scholars found that the traditional leadership models within small, private colleges were less effective and led to decreased organizational performance (Fowler, 2021). Furthermore, these scholars pointed out that if leadership within higher education did not change toward a model that improved operational success, it would cease to be relevant to society at large (Fowler, 2021). The financial status of these institutions demonstrated their stability, yet financial experts warned that without change, small, private colleges risked eventual bankruptcy (LeClair, 2021). Some scholars held leadership responsible for the lack of longevity at these colleges. Research into strategies to increase financial stability at small, private colleges in America highlighted the importance of senior leadership, staff, and faculty as the primary sources of change and increased longevity (Totino, 2023).

On the contrary, opposing views highlighted experts who did not attribute fragile stability at small, private colleges solely to leadership style but rather to other factors. Some scholars highlighted rising tuition, lack of donor involvement, and location as the primary reasons for the increased risk of instability among small, private colleges (LeClair, 2021). Other experts pointed to decreased enrollment and the high costs of running a small private college as critical contributors to their failure to support longevity (Scott & Guan, 2023). A third opposing view found in the literature suggested that when leadership managed the longevity of an organization, it remained financially sustainable by using transactional leadership instead of servant leadership practices (Moqbel et al., 2023).

Nonetheless, the literature emphasized the leader's role in the failure at small, private colleges, thereby providing insight into the potential organizational benefits of servant leadership. Researchers found that a leader's inability to make critical decisions, combined with the actions implemented by leaders, caused the decline in overall performance (Mihopoulos, 2022). These leadership concerns jeopardized the continued success of small, private colleges, thereby confirming the potential of the servant leadership approach to improve leadership effectiveness. Research into the impact of servant leadership on employees throughout the organization showed that, by improving relationships among colleagues, this approach lengthened employee commitment and enhanced overall organizational performance and longevity (Kauppila et al., 2021). Furthermore, the literature highlighted that organizations led by small and medium-sized institutions that implemented servant leadership practices increased their persistence through crises (Silalahi et al., 2023).

According to some scholars, higher education leaders had implemented strategic measures to ensure their institution's longevity. Research found that at some institutions, current leadership had prioritized quality assurance measures to govern endowment funds, which in turn ensured the institution's longevity (Fardows et al., 2023). For instance, one study showed how Christian colleges in Pakistan ensured financial stability through strategic measures to manage and distribute their endowment funds (Fardows et al., 2023).

Lack of Diversity in Small, Private Colleges

The lack of diversity at small, private colleges in upstate New York underscores the need to examine how limited representation in leadership may contribute to the minimal adoption of servant leadership practices, affect employee performance and development, and restrict the broader organizational benefits such an approach could offer. Observing the evidence that shows the areas of benefit that an institution received from diverse hires shows the importance of considering the level of diversity when exploring leadership practices in higher education (Herman, 2025). The concept of diversity was vital to organizational success and reflected the practice of servant leadership. Studies found that when leaders made proper adjustments to cultivate diversity, the organization achieved increased sustainability and performance (Dahlvig & Longman, 2020). The impact of diversity on organizational success was also evident within higher education. Experts noted that the inability to adjust toward strategies that increased diversity was a critical failing for college leadership (Ash et al., 2020). Additional literature connected the concept of diversity to organizational performance. Research into organizations' social responsibility found that companies with gender-diverse senior leadership improved their economic performance (Kahloul et al., 2022).

Furthermore, studies found that when leaders cultivated a culturally enriched environment that produced fairness and celebrated cultural and personal differences, the organization achieved a higher level of effectiveness (Leslie & Flynn, 2022). Additionally, further research shows that culturally diverse organizations improve employee motivation, satisfaction, and performance, which also impacts the success of the organization (Alshaabani et al., 2022). Researchers found that there were barriers to increasing diverse leadership at higher education institutions (Lee, 2020).

Considering the role that diversity played in organizational success, the practice of servant leadership mitigates any negative impact that these efforts might pose. Scholars reported that organizations that practiced servant leadership generated an inclusive environment and increased diversity, which positively affected organizational performance (McCallaghan et al., 2020). Studies emphasize these benefits by showing that both the private sector and educational services reported the highest levels of performance outcomes when exploring the servant leadership approach and

efforts to foster a diverse workforce (Ng et al., 2024). This positive impact occurred by improving critical areas of the organizational structure. The servant leadership theory, when applied to organizational processes, improved the level of diversity by increasing opportunities for inclusion and by influencing work behaviors that generated a prominent level of meaning and purpose (Bhatti et al., 2022).

Despite earlier research showing that higher education leaders needed to focus on diversity, some leaders justified not enforcing these initiatives. Another area of contention in the literature about diversity and organizational performance involved the claim that increased diversity raised employee belief in the organization's morals; some studies found that even when organizations increased the number of diverse employees, belief in the organization's values decreased, which hindered workplace satisfaction and performance (Hoang et al., 2022).

Additionally, some literature showed that diversity was not an issue within higher education leadership. For example, studies indicated that a rising social justice focus within higher education leadership reflected a proactive approach to addressing diversity within current leadership trends (Karakose et al., 2023). Furthermore, researchers found that although a gap in representation for African American women in leadership still existed, higher education leaders had made considerable progress toward increasing women's representation (Johnson & Fournillier, 2021). Additional research shows that, although women excel in roles such as Assistant Dean and Department Chairs, they are less likely to be promoted to senior leadership and are out-earned by their male counterparts by at least 80% (Richardson, 2023).

Inability to Adapt to Change

Small, private colleges' failure to adapt to industry trends (Al-Taie & Alsiede, 2022) illustrates how the absence of servant leadership limited organizational performance, thereby highlighting the importance of the prevalence, its impact on employee development, and its broader organizational benefits. Scholars found that the servant leadership approach was vital for making changes to the organizational framework because it prioritized everyone and ensured stability throughout the change (Bor & Shargel, 2020). One example was the growing importance of work-life balance, which increased its prominence at higher education institutions. Scholars pointed out that current generations had prioritized work-life balance more than earlier generations, and higher education leadership had not adapted sufficiently to meet these trends (Sprung & Rogers, 2021). Additionally, hiring practices at the time reflected an inability to adapt to trends within the higher education industry. Research into the presidential hiring process at small, private colleges showed that search committees struggled to find candidates with diverse abilities that could drive innovation in enrollment practices (Markell & Mitchell, 2022). In other words, small, private colleges needed help in finding leaders who could adapt to evolving student trends.

The servant leadership approach proved practical in cultivating the ability to adapt to change. Experts noted that a servant leadership approach was vital for organizations that wanted to achieve specific goals while adjusting to industry changes (Heine et al., 2022). Even so, some higher education leaders cited student perspectives as the primary source of challenge rather than the leader's ability to adapt. Furthermore, considering the impact of change within the industry, the use of servant leadership practices improved the speed at which employees could adapt, thereby aiding the organization in meeting industry changes (Heine et al., 2022). More research found that using servant leadership increased innovative practices that promoted a progressive adaptation to change in higher education while upholding high ethical standards (Maalouf, 2023).

Considering the information that highlighted higher education's inability to adapt to change, opposing literature showed instances in which change had occurred within higher education

leadership. For instance, many universities had adapted new methods to provide instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic, which met the changing needs of students (Tilak & Kumar, 2022). Although decision-makers implemented these changes temporarily, higher education leaders argued that they must continue adapting to improve both short- and long-term educational outcomes (Tilak & Kumar, 2022). Furthermore, higher education leaders found that many students succeeded under traditional leadership and that a lack of desire for personal growth among students was the primary challenge (Weigold et al., 2021).

Leadership Development

Researchers must also consider leadership development when examining the characteristics of servant leadership and its relationship to prevalence, employee outcomes, and organizational performance. Contemporary organizational development draws on the rich history of leadership development, using it as a tool to shape values, build culture, and help organizations adapt to industry changes (McCauley & Palus, 2021). A universal view of leadership provided insight into the benefits of leadership development as a practice across various disciplines. More importantly, given modern-day leadership experiences, professionals consider leadership development a vital organizational practice, as seen in studies where experts noted that an organization's leadership development process helped mitigate productivity and performance issues and even prevented sexual misconduct (Megheirkouni & Mejheirkouni, 2020). According to the literature, the same held true when applying the concept of leadership development to higher education. Studies examining leadership development in higher education conceptualize it in multiple ways, often emphasizing structured efforts that strengthen faculty and staff expertise, enhance competencies, and foster constructive attitudes toward teaching and scholarship (Solomon et al., 2023). Additionally, higher education researchers found success in leadership development when an institution provided leadership pathways that foster social and institutional identities while providing access to tools of improvement (Nguyen, 2020).

Scholars found that training and development were vital factors within higher education that improved employee performance (Rivaldo & Nabella, 2023). Furthermore, research showed that faculty performance suffered when organizations did not foster professional development opportunities for leadership (Jamali et al., 2022). Earlier literature and research highlighted the importance and impact of leadership development within higher education. Additionally, insights from scholars confirmed that a lack of leadership development had negative consequences for employee performance and, thus, for the organization. One practice that improved leadership effectiveness in higher education was mentoring as a leadership development tool. Researchers found that when higher education professionals mentored individuals, those individuals increased their social experience, adapted to the organizational culture, and developed necessary skills (Owusu-Agyeman, 2022). Even though mentoring practices for professional development had benefits, scholars pointed out that the nuances and specificity required in mentoring made it challenging to implement organization-wide (Stroeger, et al., 2020). Nonetheless, leadership authors found that the personal empowerment and strong commitment to mentee development characteristic of servant leadership improved the success of mentoring efforts within higher education (Peyton & Ross, 2022).

Furthermore, research highlighted the relationship between servant leadership and leadership development. Biblical researchers found that in the church, where leadership development was a vital aspect of organizational success, servant leadership was the primary form of leadership (Moore, 2024). More studies confirmed that the servant leadership approach was ideal for leadership development in higher education. One study on institutional management in

higher education found that servant leadership was the ideal method for improving leadership in areas such as community building and unity (Goffar, 2024).

On the contrary, some literature pointed to other forms of leadership as the primary style for encouraging leadership development. Researchers believed that when an organization developed innovative practices, it should have relied on transformational leadership development (Rasheed et al., 2024). Additionally, some studies suggested that when discussing leadership development strategies, the service approach of servant leadership would have been practical only if combined with elements of experiential learning and emotionally intelligent leadership styles (Bonessa et al., 2024).

Employee and Organizational Well-Being

The literature showed that leadership's focus on well-being throughout the organization was important. The success of an organization is directly related to the well-being of its employees. Experts found that individual well-being affected organizational well-being through social, psychological, and cultural factors (Rania et al., 2021). In other words, if leadership had fostered consideration toward an employee's well-being, the organization benefited. Research into higher education provided insight into concerns that leaders had about well-being. Scholars found that the higher education environment historically did not support the development of individual employee well-being, which resulted in hostility, pain, and shame among employees (Smith & Ulus, 2020). Furthermore, studies find that despite their importance to the success of their students at higher education, staff and faculty report experiencing factors that compromise their well-being (Laundon & Grant-Smith, 2023).

Benefits involved a combination of personal and interpersonal interventions that increased organizational well-being. Researchers found that organizations that implemented measures to enhance the physical health and safety of the workplace increased employee well-being, thereby generating more committed and productive employees (Shabani et al., 2023). Additionally, interpersonal and organizational practices such as employee engagement opportunities, the cultivation of innovative ideas and practices, and targeted efforts to meet employees' needs generated a high level of well-being within the organization (Samad et al., 2022).

A significant concern among scholars regarding servant leadership was that its blurring of boundaries could hurt an organization's well-being (Czakert & Berger, 2024). Additionally, the literature showed that it was less the leadership style itself that determined organizational well-being than the employees' expectations of what they needed from the leader (Ehrnrooth et al., 2024). This focus on employee expectations illustrated that servant leadership might not have been the sole source of improvement in organizational well-being.

Job Satisfaction

The research showed that an organization's culture, as cultivated by leadership, directly influenced job satisfaction (Dreer, 2024). Furthermore, the literature drew a parallel between employee job satisfaction and increased productivity and organizational commitment, which led to higher overall performance (Dreer, 2024). Research highlighted the correlation between job satisfaction, servant leadership, and the prevalence of higher education. Specifically, in higher education, studies found that when faculty maintained positive job satisfaction, there was an increase in their commitment to the institution as well as a positive impact on student outcomes (Al-Refaei et al., 2024). Studies found that when leadership did not tailor training, development,

and guidance to the needs of staff, it generated a negative work environment, decreased staff commitment, and harmed the institution's reputation (Mampuru et al., 2024).

Further literature justified an increased priority for job satisfaction within higher education. Studies found that due to heightened competition, trends of turnover and unethical behavior emerged when leadership did not implement initiatives that increased job satisfaction (Ghasemy et al., 2024). Additional efforts in the literature review explored the connection between servant leadership and job satisfaction. Researchers found that the positive values promoted by servant leadership had a beneficial effect on job satisfaction (Gil et al., 2024). This information applies across teaching fields. Research in secondary education found that leaders who employed the servant leadership approach increased teachers' job satisfaction, which in turn improved classroom performance (Bayangkari et al., 2024). The literature also highlighted that leaders practicing servant leadership influenced innovation-driven leadership in higher education (Nawaz et al., 2024). Overall, there was consensus in the literature that leadership style directly influenced job satisfaction, which consequently improved organizational success (Nawaz et al., 2024). These studies supported the research findings that servant leadership increased employee commitment, performance, and overall productivity (Mignenan et al., 2022).

Literature on job satisfaction also provided insight into opposing viewpoints about servant leadership. Researchers showed that the relationship between leadership style and job satisfaction began with the employee's attitude toward the leader (Kauppila, 2024). In other words, if an employee had a positive attitude toward the leader and that leader's style was complementary, job satisfaction increased (Kauppila, 2024), thereby discounting the necessity of a specific leadership approach such as servant leadership.

Servant Leadership

According to the literature, servant leadership is a complex approach. Research found that the servant leadership approach was adaptable to various disciplines and, when applied, could positively help both organizations and individuals (Pawar et al., 2020). Furthermore, researchers found that when a leader used a servant leadership approach, it improved employees' empathy and the quality of service, thereby enhancing organizational performance (Elche et al., 2020). Earlier research efforts demonstrated the same benefits of servant leadership within higher education. Higher education scholars found that servant leadership fostered a strong interpersonal connection between leaders and employees through encouragement and empowerment (Latif et al., 2021). This connection fostered a dynamic between leader and follower that was vital to institutional success (Latif et al., 2021). Lastly, recent researchers highlight the positive impact of utilizing mentoring to foster an environment that allows lived experiences as a core component of the leadership approach (Eiden-Dillow & Best, 2022).

Further research showed the implications of servant leadership's impact on organizational success. One area of research focused on organizational sustainability and how servant leadership positively contributed to it. Researchers addressed issues of creativity and psychological resilience within organizations (Batool et al., 2022). They found that, because servant leadership placed merit on employee development and enhanced employee self-confidence, it effectively generated higher levels of creativity and psychological resilience within the workplace (Batool et al., 2022). Another area of research involved employee collaboration. Studies that applied servant leadership to teamwork showed that this approach provided an ideal environment for cultivating innovation, self-efficacy, and performance (Ren & Shen, 2024). Moreover, these researchers encouraged the intentional development and incorporation of servant leadership in industries that served others (Ren & Shen, 2024).

Additional research provided insight into the impact of servant leadership within higher education. Scholars studying the effects of various leadership approaches on professors in higher education found that servant leadership was a crucial contributor to increased organizational citizenship behavior and, thus, to improved lecturer performance (Subhaktiyasa et al., 2023). Additionally, faith-based higher education institutions recognized the importance of the servant leadership approach. Scholars found that leaders at Catholic institutions regarded servant leadership as a critical element in carrying out the value-centered mission of those universities (Fitzpatrick, 2023). Even though some scholars recommended transformational leadership as the ideal approach, research showed that when applied to higher education, servant leadership was more effective (Subhaktiyasa et al., 2023).

Furthermore, despite studies highlighting the benefits of servant leadership, little research has reflected its impact on higher education (Ali-Khan & Dinsmore, 2024). Authors noted a common misunderstanding of the servant leadership approach among higher education leaders (Ali-Khan & Dinsmore, 2024). Additional research highlighted that, despite its contributions to organizational success, exploring servant leadership in higher education was rare (Dami et al., 2024).

Bureaucracy

Bureaucracy was worth investigating within contemporary organizational structures, as this concept interacts with organizational performance and influences leadership practice (Ding et al., 2021). For instance, researchers found that representative bureaucracy practices in public-serving organizations such as higher education institutions produced moderately positive results (Ding et al., 2021). Studies found that the bureaucratic process influenced most organizations and that individuals preferred a symbolic, passive form of bureaucracy (Johnston et al., 2024). This research showed that many leaders viewed active bureaucracy as hindering organizational effectiveness (Johnston et al., 2024). Nonetheless, leadership experts noted that it was vital for organizations to understand the bureaucratic process to achieve success (Bonsu, 2024).

A bureaucratic system in higher education had arisen due to a lack of equitable processes among leaders (Delucchi et al., 2024). Therefore, organizations established systems and policies to enforce specific leadership metrics despite their potential negative impact on organizational success (Delucchi et al., 2024). The literature showed that certain policies could hinder changes in leadership approaches. Researchers found that, despite improvements in the student experience from policies that promoted equity among leaders, faculty, and staff, the bureaucratic system hindered the level of intersectionality among leadership needed to improve the institution (Fay et al., 2020).

A critical area demonstrating the flaws in current bureaucratic systems within higher education involved receiving and adapting to feedback—a process that servant leadership supported. Scholars found fault with the higher education feedback process because the time required to collect feedback rendered it impractical; the structure of predesigned course instructions filtered the information, resulting in inaccuracies and placing undue emphasis on the system of feedback collection, which ultimately limited the quality of feedback received (Winstone & Boud, 2022). On the other hand, a closer look revealed that servant leadership played a role in achieving the goals of a bureaucratic system (Webb, 2024). Studies found that because servant leadership incorporated ethics and morals, it helped address the development of moral character and, consequently, the concerns associated with strict regulations or policies (Webb, 2024).

Given that the literature pointed out how bureaucracy prevented effective feedback and constructive criticism (Winstone & Boud, 2022), leaders in higher education defended these

bureaucratic barriers by arguing that policies and regulations ensured proper feedback collection (Banihashem et al., 2022). Scholars noted that, because feedback was so important, a comprehensive system for collecting it would have better adapted to the increasing and changing industry landscape, even though the process remained difficult (Banihashem et al., 2022). Although higher education leaders justified bureaucratic barriers to receiving and adapting to feedback, this practice ultimately hindered organizational progress (Meuser & Smallfield, 2023). Researchers found that servant leaders discovered innovative ways to collect feedback from their followers and applied it to further organizational goals, generate a sense of ownership among followers, and develop leadership across the organization (Meuser & Smallfield, 2023).

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the benefits and application of servant leadership at small, private colleges in upstate NY, along with the positive impact that servant leadership has on factors that contribute to organizational performance. Evaluation findings across recent studies reveal a consistent pattern that supports the concept that servant leadership is conceptually well-suited to leaders within higher education. Additionally, these findings highlight the benefits, such as enhanced well-being and job satisfaction. Nonetheless, the literature also shows that despite the benefits of servant leadership, this approach remains unevenly understood and underutilized within many institutional contexts. These findings align with recent research on higher education leadership, suggesting the need for values-based leadership to mitigate conflicting role expectations within higher education (Richardson, 2023).

Regarding RQ1, the prevalence of servant leadership, the literature suggests that while servant leadership principles are present in pockets of higher education practice, they are not systematically recognized or ingrained within organizational frameworks at small, private colleges. Traditional, hierarchical within bureaucratic process, still exists as the primary influence on leadership practices of higher education professionals. A finding that aligns with research that shows the influence of bureaucracy, the impact it has on effective communication, and how this negatively impacts consent and transparency throughout the institution (Heiser et al., 2026). This gap between the documented benefits of servant leadership and its limited visibility in formal leadership structures highlights a vital missed opportunity for institutions facing enrollment pressures, staff burnout, and opportunities to improve institutional performance.

In relation to RQ2, employee performance and development, the literature strongly supports the claim that servant leadership positively influences employee outcomes. Studies consistently link servant leadership to improvements in job satisfaction, organizational commitment, emotional well-being, and the development of followers' skills and capacities. Servant leadership also appears to strengthen mentoring, feedback, and professional development processes, all characteristics that improve organizational sustainability. When leaders prioritize service, trust, and relational care, employees are more likely to experience psychological safety, engage in collaborative work, and sustain high levels of performance even amid challenging times for the institution. Recent studies found that current leadership frameworks hinder the ability of current administrators and department chairs to foster resilience among employees and disconnect the relationship and connection between employees and the institution (Clemons, 2025).

Regarding RQ3, the organizational benefits of servant leadership, the literature reflects evidence indicating that institutions that adopt servant leadership practices experience broader gains in culture and performance. These include more inclusive and diverse leadership pipelines, stronger alignment between institutional mission and daily practice, and higher levels of innovation and adaptability. Servant leadership has been associated with improved organizational citizenship

behaviors, enhanced ethical cultures, and greater resilience during periods of crisis or change. Studies find that leadership with a relationship-focused approach helps in preparation and support for employees to generate resilience through workplace-related adversity (Clemons, 2025). For small, private colleges in particular, these benefits are closely connected to long-term sustainability, as they depend heavily on committed personnel, positive campus work culture, and the capacity to adapt to student trends, demographics, and market shifts.

At the same time, studies reveal current and historical structural and cultural barriers that can hinder the implementation of servant leadership in higher education. Studies find that leaders are restricted by these institutional structures and bureaucratic demands, which hinder their ability to participate in employee-centered leadership approaches (DeMartino & Weiser, 2025). Bureaucratic systems, rigid traditions, and narrow conceptions of leadership often limit the space for leadership practices that focus on relationship building and employee development. A concern from some leaders relates to the concern of blurred role boundaries or a fear of moving away from performance-based expectations within their leadership approach. These findings suggest that increasing the prevalence of servant leadership will require not only individual attitude shifts but also intentional inclusion of servant leadership development within the organizational framework. Overall, this review extends prior scholarship by situating servant leadership within the specific context of small, private colleges and by clarifying how servant leadership intersects with institutional and employee performance. The specific higher education literature indicates that servant leadership can serve as a viable leadership approach for addressing current challenges in small private institutions, particularly when leaders are willing to critically examine and reform inherited leadership norms.

Conclusion

This literature review demonstrates that servant leadership offers a productive and potentially transformative approach for addressing pressing challenges facing small, private colleges in higher education. By centering leadership on characteristics of servant leadership, such as service, trust, leadership development, and relationship building, this leadership approach counters negative leadership experiences, fosters employee empowerment, and strengthens organizational sustainability. The review revisited key claims that traditional and some current approaches to leadership fall short in meeting today's institutional needs. Additionally, the literature confirms these findings through synthesized evidence across themes of leadership development, followership, well-being, and job satisfaction. By emphasizing employee-centered strategies, servant leadership aligns well with contemporary demands and provides a foundational approach to leadership within the higher education environment. While there is a need for more empirical research, this review lays the groundwork for future qualitative and mixed-methods inquiry into scaling the servant leadership practice across the field of higher education.

Implications for Practice and Research

- Higher education leaders should prioritize training programs that cultivate servant leadership traits among middle and senior management.
- Policymakers may consider embedding servant leadership principles into performance review standards.
- Further qualitative research is needed to explore large private institutions, public institutions, and the impact servant leadership has on enrollment and retention of students.

- Colleges facing sustainability challenges may benefit from reevaluating their leadership frameworks through a servant leadership lens.
- Servant leadership can serve as a blueprint for improving diversity, equity, and inclusion in academic leadership pipelines.

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Notes on Contributor

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