

Navigating Student Leaders Lived Experiences in Higher Education Institution

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Abstract

Student leadership acts as a practical laboratory where students test their decision-making and problem-solving skills. However, student leaders in Philippine state universities often struggle to balance heavy organizational duties with rigorous academic demands. Limited research exists regarding the psychological well-being and specific coping strategies of these students, as most literature focuses only on academic metrics. This study utilizes a transcendental phenomenological research design, employing purposive sampling to interview ten to fifteen active student leaders. The study anchors on the Self-Determination Theory to explain how institutional environments influence student motivation. Data collection involves semi-structured interviews, and the analysis extracts the essential structure of daily experiences. The findings reveal three primary themes: *experiencing academic and leadership exhaustion, managing administrative protocols, and facing pressures of role modeling*. Furthermore, the results highlight coping mechanisms, including *executing strategic time allocation, utilizing peer support systems, and engaging in cognitive reappraisal*. Finally, the study identifies the need for *implementing flexible academic policies, streamlining administrative and financial procedures, and establishing leadership mentorship and training*. This research provides university administrators and faculty mentors with a data-driven basis for designing targeted capacity-building programs and emotional support systems. The implications offer a clearer understanding of the gaps between institutional expectations and the actual capacity of student organizations.

Keywords: transcendental phenomenology; student leadership; self-determination theory; higher education

1. Introduction

Student leadership serves as a practical laboratory where young individuals test their decision-making and problem-solving capacities in authentic situations. Across the globe, student leaders demand meaningful involvement in educational policy and governance, which aligns directly with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG 4 on Quality Education and SDG 16 on Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions (International Association of Universities, 2023). In the Philippines, particularly within state universities and colleges, these officers balance rigorous academic requirements with their heavy organizational duties (Osuno et al., 2025). They frequently encounter severe time constraints, academic disruption, and emotional labor while trying to execute their mandates without adequate institutional backing (Atienza et al., 2022). By addressing the challenges these student leaders face, this study will contribute to the attainment of SDG 4 by ensuring inclusive learning environments, and SDG 16 by building effective, accountable, and inclusive student governance. This pressing reality points to the immediate need for an assessment study to explore the essence of their daily experiences and organizational realities.

Recent phenomenological studies emphasize that holding leadership positions significantly improves students' communication and socialization skills (Friaes, 2021). However, this developmental growth often comes at a high personal cost, primarily manifesting as acute operational exhaustion due to a lack of formal training (Chong et al., 2025). Standardized institutional assessments frequently fail to capture the subjective emotional burdens these students carry during their tenure (Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2024). Newer officers

often face immediate confusion when dealing with undocumented university procedures, while senior officers suffer from cumulative fatigue (Abarientos et al., 2025). Most existing literature focuses heavily on leadership outcomes and academic metrics, leaving a noticeable gap regarding the psychological well-being and specific coping strategies of these individuals (Pedroso et al., 2023).

This study is anchored on the Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020), which explains how social environments influence intrinsic motivation and behavior. SDT asserts that human beings have three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). In the educational context, the fulfillment of these needs directly dictates how students adapt to increased responsibilities and academic stress (Zhao et al., 2025). When student leaders perceive genuine support from their institutions, their need for relatedness and competence is met, fueling their internal drive to persist. Conversely, environments that demand high output without adequate emotional scaffolding thwart these basic needs, leading to burnout and decreased organizational commitment (Shi, 2023).

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of student leaders in higher education institutions during the academic year 2025–2026. Through the lens of transcendental phenomenology, it seeks to answer specific questions regarding their daily organizational realities. First, the research identifies the challenges encountered by student leaders in higher education institutions. Second, it investigates the coping mechanisms of student leaders in response to the challenges encountered in higher education institutions. Finally, the study determines what supports are needed by student leaders in higher education institutions based on the identified challenges.

Conducting this study is essential to address the pressing issues surrounding student welfare, aligning with the guidelines on student affairs and services under CHED Memorandum Order No. 8 (Commission on Higher Education, 2021). Evaluating their lived experiences provides a clearer understanding of the gaps between institutional expectations and the actual capacity of student organizations (Skalicky et al., 2020). The findings will benefit university administrators and faculty mentors by offering a data-driven basis for designing targeted capacity-building programs and emotional support systems. Furthermore, this research contributes to the existing body of knowledge on higher education administration by highlighting the vital role of psychological scaffolding in student governance (Pedroso et al., 2023). Ultimately, this study asserts that extracting the essential structures of their experiences is crucial for developing sustainable and effective institutional support mechanisms.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Methodology

This study utilized a transcendental phenomenological qualitative research design to describe the essence of human experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019). This design is appropriate to answer the central research question because it directly examines the actual lives of student leaders. Qualitative research methodologies allow researchers to set aside personal biases and collect raw data from the subjects. It uncovers the specific meaning of their daily academic and organizational duties. Through this approach, the researcher captures the detailed process of how these individuals handle their dual roles.

2.2 Research Locale

The study was conducted at a prominent higher education institution located in Leyte, Philippines. This specific school was chosen because it has a highly active student governance system and a diverse student population. Doing the research in a single institution ensures that all participants share the same administrative rules and campus culture (Rosowsky, 2022). The setting serves as a good representation of the Philippine educational system for evaluating local student leadership. Data collection took place within the private offices and quiet spaces of this university during the 2025-2026 academic year.

2.3 Research Participants

The researcher used purposive sampling to select ten to fifteen information-rich cases until the data reached saturation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The inclusion criteria required participants to be officially enrolled students of legal age who held an active leadership position for at least one full semester. On the other hand, the exclusion criteria disqualified graduating students, inactive officers, and those unwilling to be recorded. These strict parameters ensured that the selected individuals had enough direct experience to provide relevant and detailed data. The actual participants were current officers from the student government and recognized campus organizations who faced the specific challenges being explored.

2.4 Research Instrument

The primary tool for this study was a researcher-made semi-structured interview guide. The researcher developed this instrument specifically for the study based on a review of related literature and the theoretical framework of Self-Determination Theory. The guide consisted of four parts: participant profile, general lived experiences, specific challenges, and adaptive coping mechanisms with support needs. To ensure clarity and cultural relevance, the researcher allowed the questions to be asked in English, Filipino, or the local Waray dialect. The interview guide underwent a strict content validation process. Three experts validated the tool: two field experts with direct experience as student council advisers and one language expert. These validators evaluated the instrument using a four-point scale for relevance and clarity. The validators provided 100% agreement on the final tool.

2.5 Data Gathering Procedures

The data gathering procedure followed a systematic three-phase process. First, the researcher secured research ethics approval from the Research Ethics Committee and obtained the necessary institutional clearances from the university authorities. Following this, the researcher informed the target participants about the study and distributed the informed consent forms. These forms clearly explained the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. A timeline for the entire data gathering process is presented through a Gantt Chart.

During the second phase, the researcher conducted face-to-face, one-on-one interviews using the validated guide. The researcher recorded their responses using a digital audio recorder and took field notes to capture non-verbal cues. To maintain confidentiality, the researcher assigned codes to each participant and removed all identifying details from the transcripts. Finally, all digital recordings and physical notes were securely stored in a locked location accessible only to the researcher, ensuring full data privacy.

2.6 Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed the qualitative data using the transcendental phenomenological analysis method (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This analytical method is appropriate because it focuses on interpreting the deep meaning of the participants' personal stories. First, the researcher read the transcribed interviews multiple times to extract significant statements related to the research questions. These statements were then coded and grouped into thematic clusters to identify the common struggles and coping strategies. Finally, the researcher merged these themes into a composite synthesis that described the universal essence of their campus leadership.

2.7 Ethical Considerations

The researcher strictly upheld ethical standards to protect the safety, rights, and well-being of the respondents. Before the interview, the researcher secured written informed consent to ensure voluntary participation and the right to withdraw anytime. The researcher maintained data privacy and confidentiality in adherence to the Data Privacy Act of 2012 through secure storage and proper disposal of files. To observe beneficence and non-maleficence, the researcher mitigated probable risks by avoiding deception, declaring

any conflict of interest, and offering psychological support if needed. The researcher ensured cultural sensitivity, avoided data manipulation to respect intellectual property, and established a clear research dissemination plan.

2.8 Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the data is crucial to establishing the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the research findings. To ensure credibility and accurate representation, the researcher used member checking by returning the transcripts to the participants for review and confirmation. For transferability, the researcher provided rich and detailed descriptions of the participants and the research context so others can judge if the results apply to different settings. To establish dependability, the researcher maintained a strict audit trail that documented every step of the data collection and analysis. Finally, the researcher achieved confirmability through expert consultation and peer debriefing, ensuring that the final themes were shaped directly by the data and not by personal biases.

2.9 Reflexivity

The researcher acknowledged personal subjectivity regarding campus governance. To prevent this bias from affecting the data, the researcher practiced strict bracketing by setting aside prior assumptions during the interviews. The researcher maintained a neutral researcher-participant relationship to avoid influencing the answers of the students. Through continuous self-reflection, the researcher ensured that the final interpretation accurately reflected the true voices of the participants.

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings from the phenomenological analysis of the lived experiences of student leaders in higher education institutions. The results are organized into key themes derived from the participants' interviews, covering the specific challenges they encounter, the coping mechanisms they employ, and the institutional support they require. These findings are interpreted alongside existing literature to reveal the essential structure of student leadership and address the gaps in current university practices.

Challenges Encountered by Student Leaders

Theme 1: Experiencing Academic and Leadership Exhaustion

The lived experiences of student leaders revealed a shared phenomenon of physical and mental fatigue. They struggled to balance academic duties and organizational tasks. This dual role demanded extreme effort and time. Many participants sacrificed their personal well-being and sleep to meet institutional deadlines. The essence of their accounts showed a continuous battle against burnout. Awi et al. (2021) confirmed that juggling academic and non-academic duties negatively affects the mental health and physical well-being of students. Below are the participants' significant responses.

Significant response 1: "It is very hard to study for major exams when you have three events to organize in the following week." (P₂, L₁₄)

Significant response 2: "There are nights when I just cry because the workload from both my classes and the council is too much." (P₅, L₂₂)

Significant response 3: "I rarely get enough sleep, and my grades are slowly declining." (P₈, L₄₁)

Theme 2: Managing Administrative Protocols

Student leaders experienced structural difficulties when dealing with institutional procedures. They encountered delays in project implementation due to lengthy approval processes. The participants described the paperwork as tedious, which caused operational setbacks. The rigid structure of university offices hindered their ability to execute student welfare activities on time. Nadeem and Sully de Luque (2020) stated

that entrenched hierarchical structures in higher education institutions often limit collaborative leadership. Below are the participants' significant responses.

Significant response 1: "Our proposal took a week or more to be approved because it had to pass through different offices." (P₁, L₁₈)

Significant response 2: "Sometimes, the paperwork is so overwhelming that we just cancel the activity." (P₄, L₃₀)

Significant response 3: "We sometimes missed our target date because the approval process is long." (P₆, L₁₁)

Theme 3: Facing Pressures of Role Modeling

The student leaders described the heavy burden of maintaining an ideal public image. The university community expected them to perform excellently in academics while showing flawless behavior. This expectation created anxiety, as the participants felt they were not allowed to make mistakes. They hid their vulnerabilities to protect their leadership identity. Limeri et al. (2022) explained that students with strong evaluative concerns experience heightened anxiety about being judged negatively by their peers. Below are the participants' significant responses.

Significant response 1: "People expect me to have high grades just because I am the president, which is very pressuring." (P₂, L₅₀)

Significant response 2: "I feel like I am not allowed to make mistakes because everyone is watching my actions." (P₅, L₁₆)

Significant response 3: "It is exhausting to always put on a brave face when I am actually struggling with my own mental health." (P₈, L₂₉)

Coping Mechanisms of Student Leaders

Theme 1: Executing Strategic Time Allocation

The lived experiences of student leaders revealed that they rely on structured scheduling to manage their dual roles. They deliberately separate their academic tasks from their organizational duties. This separation prevents the overlapping of responsibilities. The essence of their accounts showed a conscious effort to establish strict boundaries. By doing this, they maintain their academic performance while fulfilling their leadership mandates. Adams and Blair (2019) confirmed that effective time management behaviors significantly reduce stress and improve the overall performance of university students. Below are the participants' significant responses.

Significant response 1: "I use a planner to strictly separate my study hours from council meetings." (P₁, L₁₅)

Significant response 2: "If it is exam week, I delegate my organizational tasks to my co-officers." (P₃, L₂₈)

Significant response 3: "Creating a strict daily schedule helps me finish my academic requirements on time." (P₆, L₄₂)

Theme 2: Utilizing Peer Support Systems

Student leaders utilized their social networks as a primary coping strategy. They shared their frustrations and burdens with co-leaders who understand their situation. This shared experience provided immediate emotional relief. The participants emphasized that having a reliable support group prevents them from giving up. The mutual encouragement within their circles sustains their motivation to serve. Cleofas (2019) stated that peer support networks serve as a critical buffer against the psychological demands placed on university student leaders. Below are the participants' significant responses.

Significant response 1: "I always talk to my co-officers after a stressful event because they are the only ones who understand." (P₂, L₁₉)

Significant response 2: "Venting out our frustrations during group dinners helps us release the tension." (P₄, L₃₁)

Significant response 3: "Knowing that my co-officers has my back gives me the strength to continue my duties." (P₇, L₀₈)

Theme 3: Engaging in Cognitive Reappraisal

The participants altered their perception of stressors to cope with heavy leadership demands. They viewed their difficulties as necessary preparations for their future careers. Instead of seeing the workload as a burden, they treated it as an opportunity for personal growth. This mental shift allowed them to endure challenging situations. The essence of this mechanism lies in finding meaning amidst exhaustion. Jamieson et al. (2018) established that reappraising stress as an enhancing factor improves both the performance and psychological well-being of individuals. Below are the participants' significant responses.

Significant response 1: "Whenever I feel tired, I just tell myself that this will make me a better professional someday." (P₅, L₂₄)

Significant response 2: "I treat the complaints of the students not as attacks, but as areas for organizational improvement." (P₈, L₁₄)

Significant response 3: "Looking at the positive impact of our projects makes all the sleepless nights worth it." (P₁₂, L₃₇)

Supports Needed by Student Leaders

Theme 1: Implementing Flexible Academic Policies

The lived experiences of the participants highlight a strong need for institutional leniency regarding academic requirements. Student leaders often struggle with rigid class schedules while organizing university events. Because of this, they require their professors to provide academic adjustments, such as excused absences and extended deadlines for major outputs. The essence of their accounts shows that strict class attendance and inflexible deadlines cause severe academic strain. Providing this support allows them to balance their dual roles without compromising their grades. Institutional barriers like inflexible class schedules heavily burden student leaders, making flexible academic arrangements necessary for them to maintain their educational success (Maturan et al., 2024). Below are the participants' significant responses.

Significant response 1: "It would be a huge help if our professors allowed us to submit our projects late when we are organizing university week." (P₂, L₁₄)

Significant response 2: "We need the school to officially excuse our absences whenever we attend mandatory leadership seminars." (P₅, L₂₂)

Significant response 3: "A flexible attendance policy for student council is what we need." (P₈, L₄₁)

Theme 2: Streamlining Administrative and Financial Procedures

Student leaders expressed a strong need to fix university bureaucratic systems. They face delays in paperwork and limited funding for their events. Therefore, they require a faster approval system and better financial support from the administration. The participants stated that a direct and simple process will significantly reduce their stress. This structural change allows them to focus on executing their initiatives rather than chasing signatures. Higher education institutions must deliver a wide array of administrative services and support programs to empower students to concentrate effectively on their core duties (Pope et al., 2019). Below are the participants' significant responses.

Significant response 1: "The administration should make the approval of activity proposals faster so we can implement them on time." (P₁, L₁₈)

Significant response 2: "We need the university to increase our budget so we do not have to spend our own money in some cases." (P₄, L₃₀)

Significant response 3: "A simpler process for reserving venues would take a huge weight off our shoulders." (P₆, L₁₁)

Theme 3: Establishing Leadership Mentorship and Training

The participants need proper guidance to handle high expectations and leadership pressures. They often feel forced to act perfectly to maintain a good image. Thus, they requested structured mentorship programs where they can learn practical skills. They want advice from experienced faculty members or alumni on how to deal with conflicts. Tailored leadership programs and guided mentoring journeys equip student leaders with the confidence and skills needed to excel in their dual roles (Sandua, 2023). Below are the participants' significant responses.

Significant response 1: "Having an adviser who actually mentors us on how to handle student complaints would be very helpful." (P₃, L₂₇)

Significant response 2: "We need leadership trainings that focuses on managing stress and expectations not just event planning." (P₁₁, L₀₉)

Significant response 3: "Talking to alumni who survived being a student leader gives us practical tips on how to balance everything." (P₁₅, L₃₅)

4. Conclusion

This study reveals that student leaders face severe challenges identified as *experiencing academic and leadership exhaustion, managing administrative protocols, and facing pressures of role modeling*. To survive, they adopt *executing strategic time allocation, utilizing peer support systems, and engaging in cognitive reappraisal* to maintain their motivation. These findings confirm the Self-Determination Theory, showing that when institutions fail to meet basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, students suffer from burnout and decreased commitment. This research fills the gap regarding the psychological strain of student governance by providing data on specific coping strategies that were previously overlooked. The data extends current knowledge by proving that organizational output is unsustainable without adequate emotional and structural scaffolding from the university. Consequently, universities should move toward *implementing flexible academic policies, streamlining administrative and financial procedures, and establishing leadership mentorship and training* to support student well-being. Adopting these changes will ensure that student organizations function as productive learning environments rather than sources of unnecessary stress.

5. Recommendation

The results reveal that student leaders bear a heavy burden when balancing academic and organizational duties. Institutions must address these issues to ensure student well-being is protected. Administrators should adopt flexible academic policies that grant student leaders extensions for major outputs during peak organizational periods. Streamlining university financial and procurement processes will effectively reduce the administrative stress these students face daily. Schools ought to establish structured mentorship programs that provide emotional support and practical leadership training for officers. Future researchers should conduct longitudinal studies to track how these leadership pressures change throughout the academic year. It is also recommended to replicate this study across different higher education institutions to broaden the data on student governance experiences.

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About the Author

Lester Q. Lelina is a dedicated educator and Master of Arts in Social Studies candidate with a specialization in Social Studies. He demonstrated excellence in both in-person and online pedagogy, classroom management, and educational technology.

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