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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## **The Role of Educational Leadership in Influencing Student Retention in Higher Education Institutions**

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**| ABSTRACT**

This research proposal will explore the role of educational leadership in influencing student retention within higher education institutions. In every institution across the globe, student retention has been a subject of discussion. Student retention indeed has remained a central challenge across universities and colleges in the United States and globally, with declining persistence rates particularly affecting first-generation, minority, and economically disadvantaged students. Schools have been on the way, and even though significant resources will continue to be devoted to advising, academic support, and institutional reforms, the connection between leadership practices and student persistence will remain underexplored. Within the entire course, this study will employ a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative analyses of institutional retention data with survey-based measures of leadership practices, to determine the extent to which leadership approaches such as transformational, servant, and distributed leadership will influence persistence outcomes. In general, this research proposal will bridge leadership theory with retention research to provide actionable insights for higher education leaders, policymakers, and stakeholders committed to improving both student success and institutional sustainability.

**| KEYWORDS**

Educational Leadership; Student Retention; Higher Education Institutions

**| ARTICLE INFORMATION**

**ACCEPTED:** 20 May 2026

**PUBLISHED:** 10 June 2026

**DOI:** 10.32996/jbms.2026.8.8.10

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### **Introduction**

#### **Problem Statement**

Retention has been a subject of concern in every institution. In educational areas, student retention continues and will always progress to be one of the most pressing issues in higher education. This matter affects not only institutional accountability but also student achievement and long-term workforce development (Wang'ombe, 2023). Since it is a global matter, studies have been done to explore its course with national statistics suggesting that retention rates in higher education remain inconsistent, with nearly 40 percent of undergraduate students in the United States failing to complete their degrees within six years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Since this is a global subject of concern, it creates questions where the impact of this attrition will be twofold. For instance, in this case, students will experience diminished career opportunities and increased debt burdens, while institutions will suffer financial losses due to reduced tuition revenues and lowered rankings. Most institutions have adopted various types of technology to deal with this disaster. Despite the increasing adoption of technology-based advising systems, early alert platforms, and mentoring programs, student persistence will remain an unresolved concern for many universities.

For this research proposal, the problem that will be investigated is the limited understanding of how educational leadership practices will influence student retention outcomes. For me to expand the understanding of this proposal, leadership will play a pivotal role in shaping institutional policies, fostering inclusive learning environments, and creating student-centered strategies that directly impact persistence. Leadership is a phenomenon that cannot be ignored in every organization, and even though retention has been widely studied from a student-development and organizational perspective, the role of leadership

behaviors and philosophies has not been adequately quantified (Huang et al., 2022). Not only in the business sectors but also within the educational sectors, leaders will be responsible not only for administrative oversight but also for cultivating faculty engagement, developing retention-focused programs, and building cultures of belonging that will support diverse student populations. Without a more rigorous understanding of how leadership practices influence persistence, institutional efforts will remain fragmented and inconsistent.

In this proposal, student retention will also be observed as a human resource and economic issue. To achieve this, we will consider it from a financial standpoint, where student attrition will represent substantial losses to institutions. In this proposal, a single student departure will equate to thousands of dollars in lost tuition revenue, creating strains on institutional budgets already pressured by state funding reductions (Mulhern et al., 2015). Moving from the economic overview to a human resource perspective, effective leadership will determine how faculty and staff are trained, supported, and engaged in student success initiatives. Since it involves leadership as the drive, leaders who adopt transformational or servant leadership approaches will be more likely to foster collaboration, improve morale, and establish systems that enhance persistence (Heenan et al., 2024). The absence of such leadership will result in reactive, short-term solutions that fail to address systemic barriers to retention.

As a matter of fact, this research proposal will address the gap in understanding the direct influence of educational leadership practices on student retention in higher education. This proposal will explore leadership behaviors, institutional policies, and measurable student outcomes, which will enable it to provide evidence-based recommendations for leaders seeking to improve persistence rates. The research findings will not only contribute to the scholarly literature on higher education leadership but also offer practical strategies for institutional decision-makers. Generally, the proposed study will be guided by the central research question: *To what extent will leadership practices in higher education influence student retention outcomes?*

## **Literature Review**

### **Overview**

Higher learning institutions across the world have constantly faced student retention, which has now become a subject of discussion, with implications for academic quality, financial sustainability, and workforce development. Due to its impacts on the economic, education, and social life of citizens, different scholars have, for the last five decades, developed multiple theories to explain why students leave college and what institutions can do to keep them engaged. These skillful scholars have also placed their search in leadership studies, highlighting how leaders influence organizational culture, faculty performance, and student outcomes. This section will now synthesize prior research into three themes, including theoretical models of student retention, leadership theories applied in higher education, and evidence linking leadership to persistence outcomes.

### **Theoretical Models of Student Retention**

To start with this theme, the model created by scholars like Belando-Montoro et al. (2022) about student departure remains the most influential framework in retention research. Within this model, they argued that academic integration (success in coursework, interactions with faculty) and social integration, in connection to a sense of belonging, peer connections are key determinants of persistence. According to them, learners who fail to integrate into either domain are more likely to withdraw. His findings have been affirmed and confirmed by subsequent research, which has confirmed that first-year experiences and faculty-student interactions are critical predictors of retention (Gustavo Silva Gonçalves et al., 2024). To ensure learners and every interested party understand these observations, researchers like (Koçak et al. (2021) expanded on the above findings and observations made by Belando-Montoro et al work by focusing on nontraditional students who are older, working, or enrolled part-time. Their findings claim that external factors such as employment obligations, finances, and family responsibilities will significantly influence persistence, often more than social integration. This perspective is increasingly relevant today as higher education serves a more diverse student body.

Other explorers, such as Astin (1999), also developed a theory of student involvement in connection to the above model by Belando-Montoro et al, which also provides a foundation for understanding persistence. Within his model, Astin argued that the amount of time and effort students devote to academic and social activities will predict their likelihood of persisting. The search did not stop at that. Pascarella and Terenzini reinforced this, noting that involvement in high-impact practices such as undergraduate research, study abroad, and service learning will positively correlate with retention (Kuh et al., 2019). Since everything that has its benefits must also meet some criticisms and challenges, notwithstanding the sweat and adequate research for years, national statistics continue to reveal challenges. According to the National Statistics, the average first-to-second year retention rate for full-time undergraduates at four-year institutions is 82 percent (Completing College National and State Reports with Longitudinal Data Dashboard on Six- and Eight-Year Completion Rates, n.d.). However, completion rates remain much lower, with only about 62 percent of students finishing a degree within six years. In the whole, this constant student attrition disproportionately affects first-generation, low-income, and minority students (Fomby & Cross, 2018). This suggests that while theories provide useful insights, systemic barriers persist that require institutional-level interventions, particularly those influenced by leadership.

### **Leadership Theories in Higher Education**

Leadership has always been a concept that cannot be ignored, either in business sectors or well-thriving organizations, whereby leadership theories developed in business and organizational studies have been increasingly applied to education. The most common leadership model is transformational leadership, described by Ugochukwu (2025) as the ability to inspire followers by articulating a compelling vision, providing individualized support, and fostering innovation. The application of this theory has shown positive effects in higher education. Within their search, investigators such as Litz and Blaik-Hourani (2020) have demonstrated that transformational leadership among school administrators improved teacher motivation, organizational learning, and indirectly, student achievement. Another significant type of leadership model best suited for this work is Servant leadership, introduced by Greenleaf (2025). This model emphasizes prioritizing the needs of others, humility, and stewardship. The use of this model in higher education has been associated with stronger faculty-student relationships, increased trust, and higher levels of student satisfaction (Yue et al., 2024).

The third and also most crucial theory is distributed leadership, which is a more contemporary framework. The leadership model highlights shared responsibility and collective decision-making (Harris et al., 2022). According to Tian et al. (2016), leadership should be viewed as a practice distributed across individuals and contexts rather than centered in one role. Thus, when focusing our weight on higher education, distributed leadership has been linked to greater collaboration in retention initiatives and stronger institutional cultures of student success (Holcombe et al., 2023). Generally, the above three theories illustrate that leadership practices will not only affect organizational structures but also shape faculty attitudes and institutional priorities. Given that retention is a multi-stakeholder challenge, leadership frameworks that emphasize vision, collaboration, and student-centered practices appear particularly promising.

### **Leadership and Student Retention**

Leadership and student retention have been viewed as two twin brothers in every learning center that cannot be separated. In this case, and to support the notion, Empirical evidence increasingly supports the connection between leadership and persistence. Research studies done by Aizhan Shomotova and Ibrahim (2024) highlighted the importance of leadership commitment to high-impact educational practices, which have been proven to enhance retention across student populations. According to the findings of this study, leaders who prioritize these initiatives create environments where students are more engaged and likely to succeed. The argument gained support from investigators like Kuh et al. (2019), who studied community college leaders and found that leadership engagement was critical for fostering equity-driven initiatives that improved persistence among underserved populations. To expound and make the record straight on the above findings, Kezar and Holcombe (2017) demonstrated that leadership fostering inclusion and cross-campus collaboration significantly increased student success rates.

Other studies, such as those done by reputable scholars like National Student Clearinghouse (2024) using institutional retention data, found that colleges with leaders who articulated retention-focused strategic priorities saw measurable improvements in persistence compared to institutions without such leadership. These findings also gained adequate support from scholars like Eddy and VanDerLinden (2006), who showed that leadership style directly influenced faculty engagement, which in turn affected student experiences and retention.

In addition to their results, exploration by BusinessBalls (2025) emphasized that leaders who modeled trust, encouragement, and shared values were more likely to create institutional cultures that supported student belonging, which is a critical predictor of persistence. This aligns with Belando-Montoro et al. (2022) findings on the importance of community and social integration.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding these findings, there remains a gap in systematic, quantitative analyses linking leadership behaviors to measurable persistence outcomes. Most studies are qualitative or case-based, limiting generalizability. Mixed-methods approaches, which integrate retention data with leadership surveys, will be necessary to provide robust evidence.

## **Research Design and Methodology**

### **Research Design**

My proposal in this section will employ a **mixed-methods research design**. In other words, it will assimilate both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of how educational leadership influences student retention. Within this study, I will use quantitative methods to analyze institutional data on retention and persistence rates. In contrast, qualitative methods will be employed through surveys and interviews to capture the perspectives of faculty, staff, and students regarding leadership practices. For further understanding, this design will allow for triangulation of data, enhancing validity and generating both measurable and contextual (Fàbregues et al., 2023).

### **Research Questions**

My research proposal will be guided by the following primary research question:

**Key question:** *To what extent will educational leadership practices in higher education influence student retention outcomes?*

Since the above question cannot stand on its own, the following supporting research questions will be included:

- Which leadership practices (transformational, servant, distributed) will be most strongly associated with improved student persistence rates?
- How will faculty and students perceive the role of leadership in creating conditions that promote retention?
- What institutional policies and leadership behaviors will predict measurable improvements in retention over time?

### ***Population and Sampling***

My research proposal at all cost will engage a population that will include higher education institutions in the United States, with a focus on medium-sized public universities. This proposed project will use a purposive sampling method to select three institutions with varying retention rates and diverse student demographics. The proposal will involve the quantitative component, which, on the other hand, will use institutional retention data (e.g., first-year retention, graduation rates). In contrast, the qualitative component will involve surveys and interviews with faculty, administrators, and students. On the side of the surveys, a stratified random sample of approximately 300 participants will be drawn from each institution, including 200 faculty/staff and 100 students. The proposal within its reach will embrace interviews, which will be conducted with 10–15 administrators (e.g., deans, department chairs, student affairs leaders) across the selected institutions. This approach will ensure representation of multiple stakeholder perspectives while maintaining manageable sample sizes.

### ***Data Collection***

#### **Quantitative Data**

It will by all means possible embrace both qualitative and quantitative methods. Starting with quantitative, institutional data will be collected from official records such as institutional research offices and published retention statistics. After adequate data collection, metrics will include first-to-second year retention rates, four- and six-year graduation rates, and disaggregated data by race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Since leadership is also a matter of concern, its practices will also be measured quantitatively through a validated survey instrument, such as the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Batista-Foguet et al., 2021), adapted for higher education.

#### **Qualitative Data**

On the side of qualitative data collection methods, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with administrators to explore how leadership decisions and strategies influence retention policies. During this course, faculty and student surveys will include open-ended questions about perceptions of leadership effectiveness, inclusivity, and support for student success. I strongly believe interview protocols will be developed to align with the study's theoretical frameworks (transformational, servant, and distributed leadership).

### ***Data Analysis***

On matters of analyzing data, quantitative data will be analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. On the other hand, descriptive analyses will summarize institutional retention rates, while inferential analyses like regression models will examine relationships between leadership practices and persistence outcomes. In this case, regression models will test whether transformational leadership scores predict higher retention rates after controlling for student demographics and institutional characteristics.

Qualitative data will be transcribed and coded using thematic analysis. NVivo software will be employed to organize codes and identify themes related to leadership practices, faculty engagement, and student belonging (Allsop et al., 2022). The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings will occur during the interpretation phase, where convergent and divergent patterns will be compared to generate comprehensive conclusions.

### ***Validity and Reliability***

Validity and reliability will be ensured when the study uses established survey instruments with proven psychometric properties (Edwards et al., 2010). To ensure this, institutional retention data will be verified through official records to ensure accuracy. Again, triangulation of data sources (surveys, interviews, retention statistics) will strengthen validity by corroborating findings across methods. Pilot testing of the survey will also be conducted to refine wording and improve clarity before full deployment.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

To avoid doubts among the participants and all parties involved, this research proposal will adhere to the ethical standards outlined by the American Educational Research Association (AERA, 2011). Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval will also be obtained prior to data collection. During this course, all participants will provide informed consent, and confidentiality will be

maintained through anonymization of survey responses and interview transcripts. For future use, all collected data will be stored securely and used only for academic purposes. Special care will be taken to ensure that students and faculty do not feel coerced into participation, and participation will be entirely voluntary.

### Anticipated Limitations

This proposal anticipates various limitations. The most projected limitation is that the use of purposive sampling will limit generalizability to all higher education institutions. Another significant limitation is that self-reported survey data may be subject to bias. Again, even though mixed methods will provide depth, the integration of data may present challenges in aligning quantitative and qualitative findings. Despite these limitations, the study will provide valuable insights into the underexplored relationship between educational leadership and student retention.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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