

# The Relationship Between Students' Servant Leadership and Volunteer Service Activities at Z University in Henan, China

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**Abstract:** This study took students from Henan Z University as the research participants, and aimed to systematically analyze the current characteristics of college students' servant leadership and volunteer service activities, the differences under different background variables, and the correlation between the two variables. The study also addressed the limited empirical research on the relationship between servant leadership and volunteer service activities among university students in China. This study adopted the scale questionnaire method for data collection and quantitative analysis. A total of 361 questionnaires were distributed and 361 questionnaires were recovered, with an effective recovery rate of 100%. The study processed the data by adopting descriptive statistical analysis, independent sample t-test, one-way analysis of variance, and Pearson correlation analysis. The research results showed that the total servant leadership and volunteer service activities among students in Henan Z University were at a moderate level. In terms of difference analysis, students with different genders, residences, grades, and class leader status presented significant differences in servant leadership and volunteer service activities. Students of different majors showed no significant difference in servant leadership and volunteer service activities. In terms of correlation analysis, servant leadership was significantly and positively correlated with students' volunteer service activities. Moderate to high positive correlations existed among all dimensions. The research findings provided empirical evidence for universities to improve students' leadership and volunteer service participation in educational management, and indicated that practical activities and differentiated training strategies could effectively promote the development of students' comprehensive literacy. The findings also suggested that universities should design service-learning activities and leadership training programs according to students' background differences.

**Keywords:** Servant Leadership, Volunteer Service Activities, University Students.

## 1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of global social transformation and increasingly complex public governance, volunteer service activities have become an important means of promoting civic participation, social responsibility, and collaborative governance. They are widely regarded as a key supplement to public service systems and a driving force for social cohesion and sustainable development (Bavik et al., 2021). College students, with strong learning capacity and willingness to engage in society, play an increasingly important role in volunteer systems.

Meanwhile, higher education has shifted from knowledge transmission to the cultivation of social responsibility and comprehensive competence, creating a foundation for the development of servant leadership, which emphasizes service, moral responsibility, and collective growth (Hyde & McClendon, 2021; Eva et al., 2021). Universities have gradually institutionalized and diversified volunteer service through structured programs and community partnerships, enhancing students' altruism, empathy, and psychological well-being. However, insufficient participation may limit access to social

support and increase psychological pressure. In response, policies have strengthened mental health education and encouraged volunteer engagement, highlighting the important role of servant leadership in integrating value guidance, emotional support, and practical education to promote students' holistic development.

With rapid social transformation and improved governance in China, volunteer service activities have become an important force in promoting social governance modernization and cultivating civic responsibility. Supported by national policies, these activities have gradually shifted from spontaneous participation to institutionalized and standardized development, with college students widely engaged across areas such as community governance, public health, and rural revitalization (Jiang & Chen, 2023). Universities have also strengthened moral education by integrating volunteer service into talent cultivation systems, including ideological education and practical training platforms (Yin et al., 2022). As students take on roles as organizers and leaders, higher requirements are placed on their responsibility and leadership abilities (Geng & Wang, 2024). Consequently, leadership concepts have shifted toward service-oriented approaches that emphasize care, collaboration, and collective development, aligning with traditional Chinese values (Li & Zheng, 2024).

Henan Province is transitioning toward a talent-driven and education-strong region, with increasing emphasis on college students' participation in social governance. Volunteer service activities have become more standardized and project-based, expanding into areas such as grassroots governance and rural revitalization, and requiring stronger responsibility and leadership from students. Universities have integrated these activities with regional development by promoting organized and sustainable projects, where students act as coordinators and leaders. Volunteer service has shifted from simple participation to a value-oriented platform for cultivating students' public spirit, service awareness, and leadership abilities.

However, previous studies have mainly discussed servant leadership or volunteer service

activities separately. Limited empirical research has examined the relationship between servant leadership and volunteer service activities among university students in China, especially in Henan Province. It is also still unclear whether students with different demographic backgrounds show different levels of servant leadership and volunteer service participation. Therefore, this study aimed to fill this research gap by examining the current status, demographic differences, and correlation between servant leadership and volunteer service activities among students at Henan Z University.

### Research Objectives

- 1) To understand the general demographic background information of students in Henan Z University, including their gender, residence, grade, major, class leader status.
- 2) To investigate the current status of servant leadership among students in Henan Z University.
- 3) To investigate the current status of volunteer service activities among students in Henan Z University.
- 4) To analyze the differences of students' servant leadership under different demographic background variables in Henan Z University.
- 5) To analyze the differences of students' volunteer service activities under different demographic background variables in Henan Z University.
- 6) To explore the correlation between servant leadership and volunteer service activities among students in Henan Z University.

Based on the research objectives and previous studies, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H1: There were significant differences in servant leadership among students with different demographic background variables.

H2: There were significant differences in volunteer service activities among students with different demographic background variables.

H3: There was a significant positive correlation between servant leadership and volunteer service activities among students at Henan Z University.

## Literature Review

### *Social Learning Theory*

Social learning theory, proposed by Bandura (2018), explains that individual behaviors are formed through observation, imitation, and social interaction. Modern developments emphasize cognitive processes such as self-reflection, situational feedback, and the internalization of values and norms, making the theory highly applicable to education and volunteer contexts (Nguyen et al., 2025). In volunteer service activities, college students learn not only practical skills but also responsibility and altruistic values by observing peers and team leaders, showing that such activities are continuous processes of socialization rather than one-way service (Hyde & McClendon, 2021). Social learning theory helps explain the formation of leadership behaviors, as students gradually develop service-oriented leadership through role modeling and interaction within teams. These behaviors are not innate but are acquired and internalized through experience and observation, providing a theoretical basis for understanding how servant leadership emerges and develops in volunteer service activities (Li & Zheng, 2024).

### *Social Learning Theory on Volunteer Service Activities and Servant Leadership*

Social learning theory provides an important framework for understanding both servant leadership and volunteer service behaviors. It suggests that individuals learn and internalize behaviors by observing and imitating others in social interactions (Bandura, 2018). In the context of servant leadership, leaders demonstrate care, responsibility, and service-oriented behaviors, which team members gradually adopt through observation and feedback, forming similar values and behavioral patterns (Delgado et al., 2025). These behaviors also enhance psychological security and responsibility, further reinforcing positive actions (Bavik et al., 2021). In volunteer service activities, students similarly develop participation motivation, altruistic values, and social responsibility by observing peers and

leaders, making volunteer service a continuous learning and socialization process (Jiang & Chen, 2023; Yin et al., 2022). Servant leadership serves as a key role model within volunteer contexts, promoting the formation, transmission, and sustainability of service-oriented behaviors through social learning mechanisms.

### *Servant Leadership*

Servant leadership proposed by Greenleaf (1977), emphasizes that leaders should prioritize serving others, focusing on meeting followers' needs, promoting personal growth, and creating value for organizations and society. Subsequent studies further conceptualized it as a multidimensional leadership approach characterized by care, empathy, empowerment, and ethical behavior (Eva et al., 2021). Unlike traditional leadership, it relies more on service behaviors and value recognition than formal authority (Yin et al., 2022). This concept was suitable for university volunteer service contexts because student leaders often guide others through support, cooperation, and example rather than formal power.

In terms of measurement, early servant leadership scales were mainly developed for organizational contexts, but recent studies have adapted them to educational settings. While traditional scales remain applicable, researchers have emphasized the need for situational adjustments to reflect students' characteristics. For example, revised scales focusing on dimensions such as service intention, empathy, and empowerment have shown good reliability in college volunteer contexts (Zhang & Huang, 2023; Zhao et al., 2024). Overall, these adaptations provide a solid foundation for measuring servant leadership among college students.

Although many studies had examined servant leadership in organizations, fewer studies have focused on university students as both learners and service participants. This limitation supports the need for the present study.

### *Volunteer Service Activities*

Volunteer service activities are generally

defined as voluntary, non-profit, and public welfare-oriented behaviors through which individuals provide services to others or society (Penner et al., 2021). They not only involve external actions but also reflect social responsibility, value orientation, and interpersonal interaction (Liu & Wang, 2022). In higher education, such activities are viewed as important platforms for fostering students' social responsibility, civic awareness, and personal growth, integrating behavioral participation with psychological development such as self-efficacy and value identification (Wang et al., 2023; Zhang & Chen, 2024).

In terms of measurement, research has shifted from single indicators like participation frequency to multidimensional frameworks that include motivation, psychological engagement, and social outcomes (Martinez et al., 2023). Studies in China further developed context-specific scales covering dimensions such as value identification, learning growth, social interaction, and sense of achievement, with strong reliability and validity (Zhang & Liu, 2024; Delgado et al., 2025). Overall, measurement approaches have become more comprehensive and context-adaptive, providing a solid basis for analyzing volunteer service activities. However, some studies still focused more on participation frequency than on students' internal experience and developmental outcomes. Therefore, this study examined volunteer service activities through multidimensional indicators to better understand students' participation quality.

### ***Research on Demographic Variables in Relation to Servant Leadership and Volunteer Service Activities***

Demographic and learning contextual variables significantly influence college students' participation in volunteer service activities. Factors such as gender and grade affect students' attitudes, social norms perception, responsibility awareness, and behavioral intentions, leading to differences in participation levels and stability (Hu et al., 2023). Additionally, family economic status, residence background, and major impact access to

resources, service opportunities, and understanding of volunteer value, resulting in variations in participation patterns and service performance (Li, 2025). These factors also influence students' servant leadership behaviors, such as teamwork and responsibility. Demographic variables interact to jointly shape college students' volunteer participation and sustained engagement (He et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, previous findings were not fully consistent. Some studies found significant demographic differences, while others reported limited or no differences. Therefore, this study further examined whether gender, residence, grade, major, and class leader status were related to differences in servant leadership and volunteer service activities.

### ***Correlation between Servant Leadership and Volunteer Service Activities***

Servant leadership and volunteer service activities share strong alignment in values and behavioral logic, both emphasizing care, responsibility, collaboration, and value creation. In volunteer teams, servant leadership enhances members' self-efficacy, satisfaction, and sense of belonging through support and empowerment, thereby improving participation quality and sustainability (Zhang et al., 2023). Empirical studies show that servant leadership significantly predicts students' willingness to participate and organizational commitment, with effects mediated by psychological empowerment and emotional engagement (Li & Xu, 2022). It also promotes service performance, deep learning, and social responsibility (Wen & Chen, 2024). Cross-cultural research further confirms that servant leadership has a consistent positive impact on motivation and sustained participation, although cultural contexts influence its effects (Martinez et al., 2023). Moreover, the relationship is dynamic, as long-term volunteer participation can in turn strengthen students' servant leadership behaviors (Ye & Sun, 2025).

However, there was still a lack of empirical evidence from Chinese university

students, especially in local university contexts. Thus, this study explored the correlation between servant leadership and volunteer service activities among students at Henan Z University.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study selected 5,811 full-time students who had participated in volunteer service activities at Henan Z University as the population and determined a sample size of 361 based on the method proposed by Krejcie and Morgan (1970). Using convenience sampling, questionnaires were distributed online through the Wenjuan Xing platform with the assistance of university volunteer service organizations, ensuring adequate coverage and diversity of participants.

Convenience sampling was used because the participants were students who had direct experience in university volunteer service activities and could be reached through existing volunteer service organizations. However, this sampling method may limit the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, the results should not be generalized to all university students in Henan Province or China.

Before data collection, the participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the anonymity of their responses. They were also told that the data would be used only for academic research.

The research instrument was developed by integrating the *Servant Leadership Scale* by Cho et al. (2018) and the *Volunteer Service Activities Scale* by Liden et al. (2008). The questionnaire consisted of three parts: an introduction, demographic information (gender, residence, grade, major, and class leader status), and measurement items for servant leadership (seven dimensions, 28 items) and volunteer service activities (five dimensions, 15 items). All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Reliability analysis showed that the Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  coefficients of all dimensions of the servant leadership scale ranged from 0.86 to 0.91, while those of the volunteer service activities

scale ranged from 0.77 to 0.91, all exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating good internal consistency. Validity analysis further demonstrated satisfactory model fit, with indices such as CFI = 0.98 and RMSEA = 0.06 for the servant leadership scale, and CFI = 0.935 and RMSEA = 0.068 for the volunteer service activities scale.

## 3. Results

Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to examine the demographic characteristics of 361 students from Henan Z University, including gender, residence, grade, major, and class leader status. The sample structure was relatively balanced and provided a reliable basis for further analysis. In terms of gender, females (53.2%) slightly outnumbered males (46.8%). For residence, rural students (52.4%) were slightly more than urban students (47.6%). Regarding grade, the sample mainly consisted of freshmen (55.7%) and sophomores (44.3%), indicating a focus on lower-grade students. In terms of major, the distribution was relatively balanced across disciplines, including science (21.9%), engineering (21.6%), economics and management (19.1%), education (16.9%), and others (20.5%), reflecting good diversity. For class leader status, most respondents were non-class leader students (67.6%), while 32.4% were class leader.

Table 1: Demographic Information of the Participants

| Variables | Group                    | n   | %    |
|-----------|--------------------------|-----|------|
| Gender    | Male                     | 169 | 46.8 |
|           | Female                   | 192 | 53.2 |
| Residence | Urban                    | 172 | 47.6 |
|           | Rural                    | 189 | 52.4 |
| Grade     | Freshman                 | 201 | 55.7 |
|           | Sophomore                | 160 | 44.3 |
| Major     | Science                  | 79  | 21.9 |
|           | Economics and Management | 69  | 19.1 |
|           | Engineering              | 78  | 21.6 |
|           | Education                | 61  | 16.9 |
|           | Others                   | 74  | 20.5 |

|                     |                  |     |      |
|---------------------|------------------|-----|------|
| Class Leader Status | Class Leader     | 117 | 32.4 |
|                     | Non-Class Leader | 244 | 67.6 |
|                     | Total            | 361 | 100  |

1) The sample of 361 students was well distributed across gender, residence, grade, major, and class cadre status, providing a representative basis for analysis.

2) Servant leadership dimensions and volunteer service activities dimensions all showed moderate levels, indicating stable overall development and participation. This result responded to the second and third research objectives. It suggested that students at Henan Z University had a moderate level of servant leadership and a moderate level of volunteer service activities.

3) Female students scored significantly higher than males, with  $t$  values ranging from  $-4.433$  to  $-6.003$  ( $p < .001$ ). Urban students outperformed rural students in some dimensions, with  $t$  values between  $1.639$  and  $2.884$  ( $p < .05$ ). Higher-grade students scored higher than lower-grade students, with  $t$  values from  $-1.804$  to  $-3.240$  ( $p < .05$ ). Class leader scored significantly higher than non-class leader, with  $t$  values ranging from  $5.359$  to  $6.914$  ( $p < .001$ ). No significant differences were found across majors. Therefore, H1 was partially supported.

4) Female students performed significantly better than males, with  $t$  values from  $-4.477$  to  $-6.424$  ( $p < .001$ ). Higher-grade students showed greater participation, with  $t$  values ranging from  $-2.074$  to  $-3.547$  ( $p < .05$ ). Urban students scored higher than rural students in some dimensions, with  $t$  values between  $2.103$  and  $2.333$  ( $p < .05$ ). Class leader demonstrated significantly higher participation than non-class leader, with  $t$  values from  $6.569$  to  $9.105$  ( $p < .001$ ). No significant differences were observed across majors. Therefore, H2 was partially supported.

5) Pearson correlation analysis showed a significant positive relationship between servant leadership and volunteer service activities across all dimensions, indicating that higher leadership levels were associated with stronger participation, responsibility, and adaptability. The results

indicated that servant leadership was positively related to volunteer service activities among students at Henan Z University. Therefore, H3 was valid.

## 4. Discussion

Students at Henan Z University showed a moderate and balanced level of servant leadership across all dimensions, with slightly higher scores in conceptual skills and empowering, indicating strengths in problem-solving and independent decision-making (Eva et al., 2021; Bavik et al., 2021). The overall consistency suggested that universities provided supportive environments through curriculum and practice, enabling students to develop leadership abilities, social responsibility, and ethical awareness in a relatively comprehensive manner (Langhof & Gldenber, 2020). This finding was consistent with previous studies showing that servant leadership could be developed through supportive educational environments and practical learning experiences. It also implied that students' leadership development was not only related to personal traits but also shaped by university learning contexts.

Volunteer service participation among students was also at a moderate and stable level, with balanced development across value, career, learning, self-esteem, and social dimensions (Yin et al., 2022). Higher scores in value and learning reflected strong recognition of social responsibility and personal growth through practice, indicating that universities effectively promoted the integration of knowledge and social engagement (Jiang & Chen, 2023). This result suggested that volunteer service activities functioned as an important form of experiential learning. Through participation, students could connect classroom learning with social practice and develop a stronger sense of public responsibility.

Significant differences were found across gender, residence, grade, and class cadre status, while no differences appeared by major. Female, urban, higher-grade, and cadre students showed stronger servant leadership, highlighting the influence of emotional traits, resource access,

experience accumulation, and practical opportunities on leadership development (Li & Zheng, 2024).

Similarly, volunteer participation differed significantly by gender, residence, grade, and cadre identity, but not by major. Female, urban, higher-grade, and cadre students demonstrated higher engagement and better outcomes, suggesting that social resources, experience, and organizational roles played key roles in shaping participation and service quality (Zhao et al., 2024; Geng & Wang, 2024).

A significant positive correlation was identified between servant leadership and volunteer service activities, with all dimensions showing moderate to high relationships (Zhang & Chen, 2024). Higher servant leadership was associated with stronger participation, responsibility, and performance, while continuous volunteer experience further enhanced leadership development, indicating a mutually reinforcing relationship (Martinez et al., 2023).

Overall, the findings showed that servant leadership had theoretical and practical meaning in university volunteer service contexts. Theoretically, the study supported the use of social learning theory to explain how students developed service-oriented leadership through volunteer service activities. Practically, universities should design structured volunteer programs, provide leadership training, and give more support to rural students, lower-grade students, and non-cadre students. These strategies may help students gain more equal chances to develop servant leadership and volunteer service competence.

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