

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARTICIPATION IN STUDENT CLUBS AND STUDENTS' LEADERSHIP PRACTICE AT S COLLEGE, ZHENGZHOU, HENAN PROVINCE, CHINA

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Abstract: Against diverse global cultural contexts, student clubs are widely used by universities to cultivate student leadership with well-established international theories and notable East–Western differences, while amid China's higher education modernization and talent training reform, college student clubs have become vital platforms for holistic student development but lack sufficient empirical research, especially for local applied universities like Zhengzhou S University in Henan and Zhengzhou, whose student clubs suffer from management, resource and operational constraints that limit their effectiveness in fostering students' leadership practice. This study investigated the status of student participation in extracurricular activities and their leadership practice abilities among college students at Zhengzhou S University. The findings indicated that students at Zhengzhou S University demonstrated high levels of engagement in campus clubs, showing strong participation tendencies across behavioral, cognitive, attractiveness, self-expression, and life-centeredness dimensions. Regarding students' leadership practice, overall performance remained average. Balanced development was observed in motivational influence, role modeling, action initiation, process challenge, and shared vision encouragement. Variance analysis revealed no significant gender differences in club engagement, while grade-level disparities were notable. Different academic disciplines exhibited partial differences in certain dimensions, with particularly pronounced variations among club types. For students' leadership practice, gender differences were insignificant, whereas grade-level differences were evident, with senior students demonstrating relatively higher proficiency. Academic disciplines showed partial variations in specific leadership practice dimensions. Club types demonstrated significant differences in overall and individual dimensions of students' leadership practice, as the organizational contexts and practical opportunities provided by different club types influenced development. Correlation analysis confirmed a significant positive correlation between club engagement and students' leadership practice, with all dimensions of club engagement maintaining significant positive relationships with both overall and individual students' leadership practice. This study puts forward four targeted recommendations for Zhengzhou S College: establish a graded and categorized guidance mechanism for student club participation and leadership cultivation according to students' grade and individual differences, improve standardized club operation rules and supporting systems to fully recognize students' leadership performance, adopt differentiated and personalized training strategies to enhance leadership competencies of students at different participation levels, and strengthen the leadership education concepts and professional guidance abilities of faculty and administrators to build a long-term collaborative education system for sustainable student leadership development.

Keywords: Student Club Engagement, Students' Leadership Practice, Zhengzhou S College.

1. Introduction

In international higher education research, the relationship between student clubs and the development of students' leadership practice has been widely examined, forming a theoretical

framework grounded in experiential learning theory, student development theory, and organizational leadership theory. Since the late 20th century, countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia have

increasingly emphasized holistic education, recognizing leadership development as a key component of higher education's social mission (Robiadek et al., 2019). International organizations such as UNESCO have also highlighted the importance of cultivating socially responsible and innovative leaders (Kouzes &

Posner, 2020). In North America, student organizations are considered an essential extension of formal education, providing practical opportunities for developing communication, organization, and civic engagement skills (Evans & Zhu, 2023; Dollinger & Vanderlelie, 2019). European institutions further integrate public engagement and governance participation into student activities, enhancing students' democratic awareness and leadership capacity. However, research also shows that leadership development through student organizations is influenced by cultural contexts: Western institutions emphasize autonomy and self-expression, while East Asian contexts focus more on collaboration and collective responsibility (Seale & Schreiber, 2023; Barnes, 2020).

Against the backdrop of higher education modernization and talent cultivation reform in China, university student clubs have gradually evolved from interest-based groups into important platforms for fostering students' comprehensive development and implementing the fundamental task of moral education. Their functions now extend to collaborative, experiential, and cultural education, providing students with practical opportunities to develop organizational, communication, and leadership skills through activities such as event planning and team coordination (Zhang & Gao, 2024). Chinese universities have further enhanced student participation by integrating club activities, social practice, and innovation initiatives into credit systems, while also embedding ideological and political education into club development.

However, despite the rapid growth of student clubs, existing research remains limited and fragmented, particularly in terms of empirical studies on club engagement and students' leadership practice. In many local universities, issues such as insufficient resources, weak

management, and uneven activity quality constrain the effectiveness of clubs. Although deeper participation and greater responsibility in club activities have been shown to significantly improve students' practical and leadership abilities (Zhang, 2023; Li, 2021).

Although international studies have established theoretical frameworks for student clubs and leadership development and revealed obvious cultural differences between Western and East Asian contexts, and domestic scholars have recognized the important role of college student clubs in talent cultivation under China's higher education reform, existing research is mostly limited to theoretical discussion and scattered qualitative analysis, lacking systematic empirical exploration of the relationship between student club participation and leadership practice, especially targeting local applied universities in Henan and Zhengzhou such as Zhengzhou S College; therefore, this study takes Zhengzhou S College as the research object to empirically examine the influence of student club participation on students' leadership practice, clarify existing practical problems of campus clubs, and propose targeted improvement strategies, so as to fill the research gap of localized empirical research on student club participation and leadership development in regional applied universities.

Research Objectives

- 1) What is the current statue of student club engagement at Zhengzhou S College?
- 2) What is the current statue of students' leadership practice at Zhengzhou S College?
- 3) Are there differences in student club engagement at Zhengzhou S College across different demographic variables?
- 4) Are there differences in students' leadership practice at Zhengzhou S College across different demographic variables?
- 5) Is there a correlation between student club engagement and students' leadership practice at Zhengzhou S College?

Research Hypotheses

H1: There are significant differences in student club engagement across different demographic variables.

H1-1: There are significant differences in student club engagement across different gender groups.

H1-2: There are significant differences in student club engagement across different age groups.

H1-3: There are significant differences in student club engagement across different grade levels.

H1-4: There are significant differences in student club engagement across different academic disciplines.

H1-5: There are significant differences in student club engagement across different club types.

H2: There are significant differences in student leadership practice across demographic background variables;

H2-1: There are significant differences in student leadership practice across different genders

H2-2: There are significant differences in student leadership practice across different age groups

H2-3: There are significant differences in student leadership practice across different grade levels

H2-4: There are significant differences in student leadership practice across different academic disciplines

H2-5: There are significant differences in student leadership practice across different club types

H3: There is a positive correlation between student club engagement and student leadership practice at Zhengzhou S College.

Literature Review

Social Cognitive Theory

Social Cognitive Theory, proposed by Bandura, explains behavior as the interaction of personal, behavioral, and environmental factors, with self-efficacy playing a central role in shaping motivation and engagement (Bandura, 2018). In the context of student clubs, students' confidence in their abilities and expectations of success influence their willingness to participate, take responsibility, and demonstrate leadership. Learning occurs through both experience and

observation, meaning that peer and leader behaviors can shape others' actions through imitation (Zhang & Gao, 2024). Successful participation in club activities can enhance self-efficacy and further promote engagement and leadership practice (Hochstein & Colclough-Davy, 2021), while supportive environments encourage deeper involvement (Leksuwankun et al., 2022). Overall, this theory provides a clear framework for understanding how different dimensions of club engagement contribute to the development of students' leadership practice.

The Leadership Practices Model

The Leadership Practices Model proposed by Kouzes and Posner conceptualizes leadership as a set of learnable behaviors rather than fixed traits, and has been widely applied in education and students' leadership practice research (Kouzes & Posner, 2020). It identifies five core behaviors—model, inspire, challenge, enable, and encourage—which provide a clear framework for understanding leadership in student clubs. In this context, students develop leadership by demonstrating role-model behavior, articulating shared goals, promoting innovation, empowering peers, and offering recognition and support, all of which contribute to team effectiveness and participation (Alzmet et al., 2025; Khaenamkhaew, 2025). By breaking leadership into observable and measurable dimensions, the model offers a practical basis for assessing how students cultivate and internalize leadership behaviors through repeated participation in club activities.

Student Club Engagement

Student club engagement refers to students' sustained participation, psychological identification, and commitment in club activities, encompassing behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions (Kim & Wargo, 2022; Sun & Holt, 2022). It involves not only observable participation such as attending activities and completing tasks, but also deeper reflection, sense of belonging, and value recognition. As a form of autonomous and meaningful involvement, club engagement represents an important process of informal learning and student development,

3. Research Findings

The sample consisted of 346 students, including 180 females (52.02%) and 166 males (47.98%). The proportions of students from freshman to senior year were relatively even, with sophomores accounting for the largest share (27.17%), followed by seniors (25.72%), juniors (24.86%), and freshmen (22.25%). The age distribution was also relatively dispersed, with students aged 25 and above comprising the largest group (28.32%), followed by those aged 23–25 (26.01%), 21–22 (24.28%), and 20 and below (21.39%). In terms of club types, sports and physical activity clubs had the highest proportion (23.12%), followed by political and public welfare clubs (21.39%), other types (20.23%), academic and innovation clubs (18.21%), and arts and culture clubs (17.05%). Regarding academic disciplines, arts students accounted for the largest proportion (21.10%), followed by humanities and social sciences (20.52%), education (20.23%), science and engineering (19.36%), and other fields (18.79%).

Table. 1: Demographic Information of the Participants (N=346)

Variable	Group	N	%
Gender	Male	166	47.98
	Female	180	52.02
Grade	First Grade	77	22.25
	Second Grade	94	27.17
	Third Grade	86	24.86
	Fourth Grade	89	25.72
Age	20 years old and under	74	21.39
	21–22	84	24.28
	23–25	90	26.01
	Over 25	98	28.32
Club Type	Political Ideology and Public Welfare	74	21.39
	Academic and Innovation	63	18.21
	Arts and Culture	59	17.05
	Sports and Physical Education	80	23.12
	Other	70	20.23
Subject Type	Science and Engineering	67	19.36
	Humanities and Social Sciences	71	20.52
	Education	70	20.23
	Arts	73	21.10
	Other	65	18.79
Total		346	100.00

1) In the process of analyzing the status of student club engagement at Zhengzhou S College, the overall mean score was 4.11 (SD = 0.205), indicating a relatively high level of engagement.

Among the dimensions, behavioral engagement (M = 4.23) and centrality of engagement (M = 4.22) were relatively high, while cognitive engagement (M = 3.33), attraction engagement (M = 3.14), and self-expression engagement (M = 3.25) were at an average level. This suggests that students perform well in practical participation and life involvement, but still have room for improvement in psychological identification and self-expression.

Table. 2: Current Status of Student Club

Engagement at Zhengzhou S College

Dimension	N	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Behavioral Engagement	346	4.23	0.219	High
Cognitive Engagement	346	3.33	0.222	Moderate
Attraction Engagement	346	3.14	0.197	Moderate
Self-Expression Engagement	346	3.25	0.231	Moderate
Centrality of Engagement	346	4.22	0.219	High
Club Engagement	346	4.11	0.205	High

2) In the process of analyzing the status of students' leadership practice at Zhengzhou S College, the overall mean score was 3.47 (SD = 0.359), indicating a relatively high level. The "model" dimension scored higher (M = 4.01), while "challenge" (M = 3.40), "encourage" (M = 3.39), "enable" (M = 3.32), and "inspire" (M = 3.31) were at an average level. This shows that students are relatively strong in role modeling and responsibility-taking, but need improvement in motivating others and team coordination.

Table. 3: Current Status of Student Leadership Practice at Zhengzhou S College

Dimension	N	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Encourage	346	3.39	0.380	Average
Model	346	4.01	0.374	High
Enable	346	3.32	0.388	Medium
Challenge	346	3.40	0.355	Medium
Inspire	346	3.31	0.369	Moderate
Student Leadership Practice	346	3.47	0.359	Moderate

3) In the process of comparing differences in student club engagement across demographic variables, the p value for gender was greater than 0.05, indicating no significant difference. However, age (F = 11.25, p < 0.001), grade level (F = 4.65, p = 0.003), major (F = 4.70, p = 0.001),

and club type ($F = 28.76, p < 0.001$) all showed significant differences. This indicates that student club engagement varies significantly across these variables.

4) In the process of comparing differences in students' leadership practice across demographic variables, the p value for gender ($p = 0.058$) was greater than 0.05, indicating no significant difference. However, age ($F = 6.847, p < 0.001$), grade level ($F = 14.632, p < 0.001$), major ($F = 5.430, p < 0.001$), and club type ($F = 36.823, p < 0.001$) all showed significant differences, indicating that students' leadership practice varies across these groups.

5) In the process of analyzing the correlation between student club engagement and students' leadership practice, Pearson correlation results showed a significant positive relationship ($r = 0.738, p < 0.01$). All dimensions of club engagement were significantly positively correlated with all dimensions of students' leadership practice ($r = 0.604-0.966, p < 0.01$), indicating that higher levels of engagement are associated with stronger leadership practice.

4. Discussion

Descriptive analysis showed that students at Zhengzhou S College attained relatively high overall levels in both club engagement ($M=4.11$) and leadership practice ($M=4.03$). Within club engagement, behavioral engagement and engagement centrality obtained the highest scores; in leadership practice, the modeling dimension ranked first, while other sub-dimensions remained at a moderate level with considerable room for improvement. Demographic comparisons indicated that gender had no significant influence on either club engagement or leadership practice, whereas significant differences were found across age, grade level, major category, and club type, with older students, upper-grade students, arts majors, and participants in sports clubs demonstrating higher club engagement and stronger leadership practice. Pearson correlation analysis further confirmed a significant moderate-to-high positive correlation between club engagement and leadership practice at both the overall and dimensional levels. Based on these

results, this discussion elaborates that universities should value both students' behavioral participation and psychological identification in club activities, acknowledges that age, grade, academic discipline, and club background shape individual leadership development, and verifies that in-depth club participation effectively promotes the improvement of students' leadership competencies. These findings are consistent with the results of previous studies and provide empirical evidence for optimizing college club management and targeted leadership cultivation.

Using independent-samples t -tests and one-way ANOVA, this study found no significant gender differences in either student club engagement or leadership practice at Zhengzhou S College, while significant disparities existed across age, grade level, major category and club type, with older and higher-grade students, arts majors, and sports club participants showing higher engagement and leadership levels than their counterparts; Pearson correlation analysis further identified a strong significant positive correlation between club engagement and leadership practice at both the overall and dimensional levels. Drawing on prior literature, this section further elaborated that demographic characteristic shape students' club participation and leadership performance, and in-depth club involvement serves as an effective practical pathway to foster students' leadership competencies, which also offers empirical implications for implementing targeted group-based cultivation strategies in college student affairs management.

5. Conclusions

Based on a sample of 346 undergraduates from Zhengzhou S University covering diverse genders, grades, majors and club types, this study objectively found that students show a generally high level of club engagement and relatively sound overall leadership practice; significant demographic differences exist in both club engagement and leadership practice across age, grade level, major category and club type, while gender shows no obvious disparity, with older and higher-grade students as well as students from specific majors and club types presenting higher

participation and leadership levels; additionally, all dimensions of student club engagement are significantly and positively correlated with student leadership practice at both the overall and dimensional levels.

6. Recommendations

Practical Recommendations

1. Establishing a Categorized Mechanism for Guiding Student Club Participation and Cultivating Leadership
2. Improving Club Operational Standards and Student Leadership Practice Support Systems
3. Implementing Targeted Strategies to Enhance Leadership Skills
4. Strengthening Leadership Education Philosophy and Guidance Capabilities Among Faculty and Administrators.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research could expand the sample scope to include more universities across different regions and types to enhance the generalizability of the findings, adopt longitudinal research designs to track the dynamic development of students' club engagement and leadership practice over time, and further explore the mediating or moderating roles of potential variables such as self-efficacy, interpersonal relationship quality and club organizational atmosphere in the relationship between club participation and leadership development; additionally, subsequent studies may employ qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and case studies to deeply explore the internal mechanism and practical process of how different types of club activities shape students' leadership practice, so as to form more comprehensive and targeted theoretical explanations and practical guidance strategies.

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