Management Competence of Executive Leaders in Philippine State Universities and Colleges: Evidence from the Caraga Region

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ABSTRACT

Leadership effectiveness is critical to the sustainability and performance of State Universities and Colleges (SUCs), particularly amid increasing demands for accountability, innovation, and quality assurance in higher education. This study assessed the extent of management competence among SUC executives in the Caraga Region, Philippines, and examined whether competence differed according to selected demographic and professional variables. Using a quantitative research design, data were gathered from 124 top management officials from four SUCs: North Eastern Mindanao State University, Caraga State University, Agusan del Sur State College of Agriculture and Technology, and Surigao del Norte State University. A validated researcher-developed questionnaire measured competence across seven domains: strategic decision-making, leadership and governance, financial management and resource mobilization, policy formulation and implementation, innovation and adaptability, student support, and external resource management. Results indicated an overall competent level of management performance, with strategic decision-making rated highest and financial management lowest. Analysis of variance revealed that trainings attended consistently produced significant differences across most domains, highlighting the critical role of continuous professional development. The study concludes that institutionalizing structured leadership training programs is essential to strengthen executive competence and enhance the effectiveness of SUC governance and performance.

Keywords: management competence, higher education leadership, State Universities and Colleges (SUCs), executive professional development, Philippine higher education

INTRODUCTION

Leadership serves as a fundamental element of institutional success, particularly in higher education where governance, strategic direction, and visionary decision-making determine the quality and relevance of academic outcomes. In the Philippine context, State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) are vital instruments of national development, tasked with equipping students with knowledge and competencies that respond to socioeconomic demands. Amid intensifying global competition, rapid educational change, and heightened expectations for accountability and quality assurance, the role of institutional leaders has become more complex and consequential. This study investigates the extent of management competence among SUC executives in the Caraga Region, focusing on the multifaceted capacities required to effectively navigate contemporary challenges and drive organizational excellence.

Recent scholarship underscores the critical nature of managerial and leadership competencies in higher education institutions worldwide. Rony (2023) highlights that effective leadership competence—encompassing strategic, administrative, and interpersonal skills—is essential for managing complex university operations and sustaining institutional goals (Rony, 2023). Similarly, a systematic review of managerial competencies in higher education identified core competencies such as strategic thinking, effective decision-making, and adaptability as key to institutional performance and competitiveness in a globalized context (Connie et al., 2025). These studies suggest that institutional success is closely linked to how well leaders possess and apply management competencies in practice, reinforcing the need for empirical examination of leadership effectiveness among SUC executives.

Despite existing evidence on leadership competencies in educational settings, there remains a notable gap concerning how management competence manifests specifically among senior executives in regional Philippine SUCs. Few studies have empirically measured the breadth and depth of managerial competence at the executive level within SUCs, leaving unanswered questions about the strengths and limitations of leaders across critical domains of institutional governance. For example, while research has examined leadership skills among academic managers or middle managers (Mora, 2021), there is limited insight into the management competence of top executives and how demographic and professional factors influence these competencies. Addressing this gap, the present study provides a focused assessment of management competence among Caraga Region SUC executives, offering context-specific evidence to inform leadership development and organizational policy.

By elucidating the extent of management competence among SUC executives, this study contributes to the frontier of knowledge on higher education leadership in the Philippines and similar developing contexts. It offers empirical insights that can inform capacity-building initiatives, professional development programs, and institutional policies aimed at strengthening leadership effectiveness. The findings are significant for academic stakeholders, policymakers, and institutional governing bodies seeking to enhance organizational resilience, strategic responsiveness, and quality assurance across SUCs. Ultimately, this research aims to support evidence-based interventions that foster innovative, adaptable, and competent leadership in higher education.

Moreover, the analysis sought to determine the profile of the respondents in terms of age, sex, civil status, highest educational attainment, length of service as designee, membership in professional associations, and relevant management-related trainings or seminars attended. It also aimed to assess the extent of management competence among respondents from State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) in terms of strategic decision-making, leadership and governance, financial management and resource mobilization, policy formulation and implementation, innovation and adaptability, student support, and external resource management. Furthermore, the study sought to determine whether there was a significant difference in the level of management competence of SUCs when respondents were grouped according to their profile variables.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study utilized a quantitative method to examine key variables. The respondents of this study comprised top management officials from selected government-owned State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) in the Caraga Region, namely North Eastern Mindanao State University (NEMSU), Caraga State University (CarSU), Agusan del Sur State College of Agriculture and Technology (ASSCAT), and Surigao del Norte State University (SNSU). These institutions were purposively selected due to their significant roles in higher education governance, policy implementation, and institutional decision-making in the region.

The respondents included university presidents, vice presidents, and key administrative officers whose roles involve strategic planning, policy formulation, and the implementation of institutional mandates. Their positions enable them to provide informed and credible perspectives in assessing management competence across SUCs in the Caraga Region. Using a simple random sampling technique, participants were selected from the official roster of top management officials in each institution to ensure that every eligible member of the population had an equal chance of inclusion and to minimize selection bias. A total of 124 top management officials participated in the study, consisting of 36 respondents from NEMSU, 30 from CarSU, 33 from SNSU, and 25 from ASSCAT, drawn from an overall population of 178 officials.

The study utilized a researcher-made questionnaire designed specifically to align with the context and objectives of the investigation. To establish content validity, the instrument underwent thorough evaluation by a panel of quantitative research experts. The experts examined each item for relevance, clarity, and consistency with the study's objectives, ensuring that the instrument effectively captured the intended constructs. This validation process strengthened the credibility of the instrument and the overall findings.

Instrument reliability was established through pilot testing, in which the questionnaire was administered to a small group of respondents with characteristics similar to those of the target population. The collected data were then subjected to reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha to assess internal consistency. The instrument obtained a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.80, indicating good internal consistency and confirming that the questionnaire provides reliable and consistent measurements.

Moreover, the study strictly adhered to ethical standards to protect participants' rights and welfare. Informed consent was obtained, with participants fully informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through the use of participant codes and secure data handling. The research upheld the principles of beneficence and justice by ensuring the study's value to stakeholders and by selecting participants fairly without coercion. Transparency was maintained by clearly communicating the study's objectives and allowing participants to verify their responses. Cultural sensitivity guided all interactions throughout the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the study and provides an in-depth discussion of the findings based on the data gathered from the respondents. The analysis focuses on the respondents' profile, the extent of management competence of SUC executives, and the significant differences in competence when grouped according to selected demographic and professional variables.

Table1. Profile of the Respondents

Age	Age Bracket	Frequency	Percentage
	21-30	4	3%
	31-40	34	27%
	41-50	57	46%
	51 and above	29	23%
TOTAL		124	100%
Sex	Category	Frequency	Percentage
	MALE	52	42%
	FEMALE	72	58%
TOTAL		124	100%
Civil Status	Category	Frequency	Percentage
	SINGLE	21	17%
	MARRIED	102	82%
	WIDOW	1	1%
TOTAL		124	100%
Highest Educational Attainment	Level	Frequency	Percentage
	DOCTORAL	65	52%
	MASTER	44	35%
	COLLEGE	15	12%

Table 1 presents the demographic and professional profile of the 124 SUC executives reveals a leadership structure anchored in experience and academic excellence but also suggests areas for strategic improvement. The 41–50 age bracket holds the highest representation at 46%, indicating that most SUC leaders are in their mid-career stage, potentially balancing youthful energy with institutional experience, which aligns with research showing that mid-career leadership cohorts often possess a balance of expertise and adaptability necessary for effective governance (Carson, 2022). Conversely, only 3% fall within the 21–30 age group, suggesting limited early career progression into executive roles and a possible need to build stronger leadership pipelines for younger professionals. Interestingly, a female majority (58%) was observed, contrasting the often male-

dominated perception of executive leadership, and reflecting a positive shift toward gender inclusivity within SUCs, consistent with findings that diversity in leadership is increasing, though barriers remain (Alshdiefat, 2024).

In terms of civil status, the overwhelming majority are married (82%), with only 1% widowed and 17% single, pointing to a traditional demographic profile. Academically, 52% hold doctorate degrees, followed by 35% with master's degrees, affirming the high qualification standard for SUC executive posts. However, 12% remain at the college level, highlighting a small but significant need to align all executives with the advanced academic qualifications expected in the sector. In terms of tenure, the highest proportion of executives (37%) have 16–20 years of service, while only 6% have served 5 years or below, signaling a mature leadership cohort and possible gaps in leadership succession planning.

Membership in professional organizations is high, with 83% listed as members, but only 17% serving as officers, implying limited leadership representation beyond institutional boundaries. The most striking imbalance is found in training exposure: while 83% attended local trainings, only 2% and 3% had access to international and national trainings, respectively. This highlights a critical area for development, as global and national training engagements are essential for exposing SUC executives to broader, innovative practices in governance and leadership, as supported by studies emphasizing the value of comprehensive leadership development programs and global exposure in higher education (Shomotova, 2025; Cheng & Zhu, 2025). Implications of these findings underscore the importance of developing strategic leadership pipelines that actively support younger, emerging leaders while also addressing the need for more globally aligned training opportunities. Further, the limited number of executives in officer roles within professional organizations suggests a missed opportunity for inter-institutional influence and policy shaping.

Table 2. Extent of Management Competence of the Respondents of SUCs

Indicators	Mean	Adjectival rating
Strategic Decision Making	4.106	Competent
Leadership & Governance	3.911	Competent
Financial Management & Resource Mobilization	3.277	Less Competent
Policy Formulation & Implementation	3.935	Competent
Innovation & Adaptability	3.921	Competent
Support to Students	3.783	Competent
External Resource Management	3.909	Competent
Over-all Mean	**3.835**	**Competent**

Table 2 revealed that Strategic Decision-Making earned the highest mean score of 4.106 (competent), indicating that SUC executives are competent in steering their institutions through critical choices that define long-term direction and sustainability. This finding suggests that SUC leaders can set priorities, allocate resources effectively, and make calculated decisions amidst uncertainty. In higher education research, strategic decision-making is increasingly viewed as vital for institutional resilience and adaptability, supporting leaders in navigating dynamic external environments and aligning institutional goals with emergent challenges (Gudissa et al., 2025). The implication is clear: SUC executives are not only aware of their strategic role but are also actively engaged in advancing institutional goals through informed, deliberate choices, a crucial element in redefining leadership excellence in the Philippine higher education context (Gudissa et al., 2025).

Closely following in performance is Leadership and Governance, with a mean of 3.911 (competent), also categorized as competent. This result reflects the ability of SUC executives to exercise participatory, ethical, and visionary leadership while managing internal systems and structures. Effective governance in higher education has been shown to significantly influence institutional performance and service quality, particularly when accountability, transparency, and participation are emphasized (Atanaw, 2025). The relatively high score indicates that SUC leaders are meeting governance expectations; however, for leadership to be truly transformative, institutions must embed inclusive governance mechanisms that empower not only top administrators but also faculty, students, and community partners.

In contrast, Financial Management and Resource Mobilization emerged as the lowest-rated indicator, with a mean of 3.277 (less competent), placing it in the "less competent" category. This exposes a significant challenge faced by SUC executives—balancing limited budget allocations with the growing demands of academic expansion, infrastructure, and quality assurance. Research indicates that robust financial planning and system management are critical to higher education performance, reinforcing that institutional leaders must integrate strategic financial practices into broader planning frameworks to enhance fiscal resilience (Garad et al., 2025). The low score suggests gaps in financial planning, revenue diversification, and grant acquisition, calling for strengthened financial competencies among SUC leadership.

Despite this gap, the domain of Policy Formulation and Implementation posted a relatively strong rating of 3.935 (competent), signifying competence in creating and institutionalizing effective academic and administrative policies. Policy-making in SUCs must be both evidence-based and participatory to ensure relevance and compliance. Higher education governance scholars emphasize that policies grounded in inclusive stakeholder engagement and ongoing evaluation mechanisms contribute to institutional relevance and adaptability (Atanaw, 2025). The implication of this finding is twofold: SUC executives are generally capable of developing sound policies, yet they must work on strengthening policy evaluation mechanisms and clarifying implementation processes to align policies more tightly with performance metrics and stakeholder feedback.

In today's fast-changing educational environment, Innovation and Adaptability are essential traits of executive leadership. With a mean of 3.921 (competent), SUC leaders are found to be competent in initiating change and responding proactively to technological, social, and academic shifts. This reflects a leadership culture that embraces improvement and transformation. The importance of adaptive leadership that fosters innovation and responsiveness in higher education has been highlighted in recent studies that examine leadership upskilling and strategic alignment in institutional contexts (Daher-Armache et al., 2025). The implication here is that SUCs are becoming increasingly flexible and forward-looking; however, innovation must be institutionalized not just as a response to crises, but as a permanent leadership mindset focused on continuous improvement and global competitiveness.

The indicator Support to Students earned a mean score of 3.783 (competent), indicating a moderate level of competence in delivering programs and services that address students' academic, financial, psychological, and developmental needs. Comprehensive student support services are linked to improved student retention and success, particularly when designed to address equity and diversity in higher education contexts (Barnes et al., 2024). The slightly lower score in this area implies that while SUC executives recognize the importance of student-centered programming, there is still a need to strengthen systems that are proactive, data-informed, and equitably accessible to all students—especially those from marginalized backgrounds.

Finally, External Resource Management scored 3.909 (competent), reflecting the executives' competence in cultivating partnerships, managing donor relations, and leveraging external networks for institutional development. Collaboration with external stakeholders can enhance institutional resilience and relevance by bridging academic goals with real-world applications, contributing to research, funding, and community engagement (Fumasoli & Hladchenko, 2024). This competency reflects positively on SUC leadership, yet formalizing such engagements through agreements, impact tracking, and sustained partnerships could further optimize the benefits of external collaboration.

Taken together, the overall mean of 3.835 places SUC executives within the "competent" range in terms of strategic management effectiveness. This reinforces the central argument of the ongoing study—that SUC executives are indeed redefining excellence through stable, strategic leadership. However, the disparity across

indicators—particularly in financial management—suggests that leadership competence is not uniformly distributed. The findings call for targeted leadership development programs, institutional capacity-building, and system-wide reforms that emphasize adaptability, inclusivity, and fiscal responsibility.

Table 3. Significant Difference on the Level of Management Competence of SUCs

Sources of Variation		Computed f	P-value	Decision	CONCLUSION
Strategic Decision Making	Age	1.510	0.215	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	sex	0.150	0.701	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Civil Status	0.040	0.958	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Educ	1.070	0.347	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Length	1.060	0.368	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Membership	0.090	0.766	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Trainings	5.860	0.024	Reject Ho	Significant
Leadership & Governance	Age	0.560	0.642	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	sex	12.910	0.000	Reject Ho	Significant
	Civil Status	0.170	0.841	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Educ	0.770	0.466	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Length	1.210	0.308	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Membership	1.200	0.275	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Trainings	6.020	0.034	Reject Ho	Significant
Financial Management	Age	0.600	0.618	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	sex	0.000	0.954	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Civil Status	1.050	0.351	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Educ	1.660	0.194	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Length	3.060	0.031	Reject Ho	Significant
	Membership	0.820	0.368	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Trainings	7.840	0.044	Reject Ho	Significant
Policy Formulation & Implementation	Age	1.410	0.243	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	sex	1.390	0.241	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Civil Status	0.610	0.543	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant

	Educ	0.780	0.459	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Length	0.830	0.440	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Membership	0.090	0.767	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Trainings	10.250	0.018	Reject Ho	Significant
Innovation & Adaptability	Age	0.680	0.564	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	sex	0.390	0.535	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Civil Status	1.650	0.196	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Educ	0.640	0.529	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Length	0.780	0.505	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Membership	3.120	0.080	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Trainings	13.970	0.003	Reject Ho	Significant
Support to Students	Age	0.390	0.763	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	sex	0.590	0.442	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Civil Status	0.910	0.405	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Educ	0.320	0.730	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Length	0.280	0.840	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Membership	0.220	0.642	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Trainings	8.810	0.019	Reject Ho	Significant
External Resource Management	Age	0.370	0.775	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	sex	1.010	0.316	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Civil Status	1.380	0.257	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Educ	0.720	0.488	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Length	3.570	0.048	Reject Ho	Significant
	Membership	0.230	0.633	Failed to reject Ho	Not Significant
	Trainings	9.680	0.018	Reject Ho	Significant

The ANOVA results for strategic decision-making competence showed that among all profile variables, only trainings attended had a statistically significant difference (F = 5.860, p = 0.024). This suggests that exposure to relevant training programs enhances SUC officials' ability to make informed and strategic decisions. Training provides essential tools and frameworks that improve leadership performance, emphasizing the need for continued investment in professional development.

Similarly, in the leadership and governance domain, sex (p = 0.000) and trainings attended (p = 0.034) showed significant differences. The result implies that gender and training experiences influence leadership styles and effectiveness. While the sex variable suggests potential differences in approach or leadership dynamics, the strong impact of training affirms the value of continuous learning in enhancing governance capabilities.

In financial management, both length of service (p = 0.031) and trainings attended (p = 0.044) were found to significantly influence competence. These results highlight that experience gained over time and participation in training programs are crucial for developing financial planning and accountability skills among SUC leaders. This aligns with literature suggesting that combining experiential and formal training strengthens competencies necessary for complex managerial tasks in education (Shoib et al., 2025)

For policy formulation and implementation, only trainings attended was significant (F = 10.250, p = 0.018). This underscores the role of professional development in building officials' capacity to design and implement policies aligned with institutional goals and regulatory standards.

The domain of innovation and adaptability followed the same pattern, with trainings attended emerging as highly significant (F = 13.970, p = 0.003). This implies that training equips SUC leaders with knowledge on emerging trends and strategies, enabling them to respond effectively to institutional challenges and lead innovation.

In supporting students, trainings attended again showed a significant result (F = 8.810, p = 0.019), highlighting its importance in shaping student-centered leadership. Nonetheless, the result affirms the need for training programs focused on student welfare and support systems.

Lastly, in external resource management, both length of service (p = 0.048) and trainings attended (p = 0.018) were significant. This indicates that experience and continuous capacity-building enhance officials' ability to secure and manage partnerships and funding. Investing in both mentorship and targeted training can improve SUCs' external engagement and sustainability.

Overall, these findings highlight the critical role of trainings attended across all domains of management competence. Consistently significant results reveal that structured professional development programs are essential in building the capacity of SUC leaders to lead strategically, govern effectively, manage resources wisely, support students, and respond adaptively to institutional challenges. These insights imply a strong need for SUCs to institutionalize ongoing training and mentoring programs tailored to the evolving demands of leadership in higher education (Murthy et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the extent of management competence among SUC executives in the Caraga Region revealed an overall competent level of leadership performance, particularly in the areas of strategic decision-making, leadership and governance, policy formulation, innovation and adaptability, student support, and external engagement. The profile data further reveal that SUC leadership is largely composed of experienced and highly educated individuals, many of whom hold doctorate degrees and have long years of service. This suggests that SUCs are being guided by leaders with strong academic foundations and institutional knowledge. However, the limited representation of younger leaders and the imbalance in exposure to national and international trainings point to a critical gap in leadership succession and professional development. These patterns suggest that while current leadership is stable, long-term sustainability will depend on intentionally developing future leaders and broadening access to high-quality training opportunities.

One of the most significant contributions of this study is the consistent finding that trainings attended emerged as the most influential factor across almost all domains of management competence. This has direct practical implications for SUCs and higher education policymakers. It suggests that leadership competence is not shaped by position alone, but is strengthened through continuous learning and capacity building. SUCs, therefore, need to move beyond ad hoc seminars and instead institutionalize structured leadership development programs, mentorship systems, and funded opportunities for national and international exposure. Similarly, the findings related to length of service influencing financial and external resource management highlight the value of experiential learning, reinforcing the importance of coaching, succession planning, and knowledge transfer within institutions.

Collectively, the results emphasize that strengthening SUC leadership is both a personal and systemic responsibility. While many executives already demonstrate competence, targeted interventions—particularly in financial management, resource mobilization, and professional development—are necessary to elevate leadership from competent to exemplary. For SUCs, this means investing in long-term leadership pipelines, encouraging broader participation in professional organizations, and prioritizing continuous executive training as a strategic institutional investment rather than an optional activity. If acted upon, these practical implications can contribute to more adaptive, accountable, and future-ready SUC leadership capable of responding effectively to the evolving demands of Philippine higher education.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

The authors declare that there was no conflict of interest in the conduct of this study. The research was carried out with honesty and integrity, following anti-plagiarism guidelines and ensuring an objective interpretation of the results. The findings were used solely for academic and research purposes.

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