

Travails Through Billow Waters: Lived Experiences of Former Presidents of Local Universities and Colleges in the Negros Island Region

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ABSTRACT

This descriptive phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of former presidents of Local Universities and Colleges (LUCs) in the Negros Island Region, Philippines. The study focused on how former presidents experienced, interpreted, and made sense of their leadership roles in locally governed higher education institutions. Five former LUC presidents participated through purposive total-population sampling. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step descriptive phenomenological method. The analysis produced five interrelated themes: (1) Navigating Governance Through Compliance; (2) Political Embeddedness of Academic Leadership; (3) Leading Amid Structural Constraints and Resource Limitations; (4) Human-Centered and Student-Centered Leadership; and (5) Faith-Guided Perseverance and Meaning-Making Through Adversity. The findings suggest that leadership in LUCs cannot be understood solely as administrative management. Instead, it is a complex lived experience that involves adapting to regulations, engaging in political negotiations, managing institutions, serving students and staff, and demonstrating personal resilience. The study concludes that effective leadership in LUCs requires integrating ethical governance, political skills, strategic resource management, compassion, and ongoing commitment to public service. These findings have implications for leadership development, CHED and local government policy, institutional succession planning, and future research on locally governed higher education.

Keywords: Local Universities and Colleges, educational leadership, lived experiences, phenomenology, Colaizzi, higher education governance, Negros Island Region

INTRODUCTION

The presidency of a higher education institution comes with responsibilities that go beyond formal administrative authority. Modern leadership in higher education highlights the importance of influence, collaboration, shared governance, trust, and responsiveness. In the Philippines, these responsibilities are particularly challenging in Local Universities and Colleges (LUCs) where local government units support the institutions while the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) sets national standards for regulation and quality assurance.

The source study describes LUCs as functioning in a dual governance context where presidents must balance local needs with national higher education standards. CHED Memorandum Order No. 18, Series of 2022, outlined the requirements related to governance, organizational structure, academic programs, faculty qualifications, institutional development, and sustainable financing. These conditions place LUC presidents at a crossroads of institutional leadership, public accountability, local government relations, and quality assurance.

The reviewed literature points out a significant gap in understanding. Most existing research has focused on governance structures, organizational performance, policy execution, and institutional outcomes. Less attention has been given to how former LUC presidents experienced leadership and interpreted its challenges and

meanings. The study thus concentrated on former presidents in the Negros Island Region and used phenomenology to explore leadership as a lived experience.

The study was guided by three main questions: What are the lived experiences of former presidents of LUCs? What meanings do they associate with these experiences? What core essence of leadership emerges from their experiences?

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMING

Governance and Regulatory Adaptation

The literature reviewed describes governance in LUCs as a constant negotiation between having institutional autonomy and being accountable to regulations. CHED requirements make compliance an ongoing leadership duty while related Philippine research indicates that effective governance also involves strategic judgment, collaboration, and long-term planning. Thus, governance is depicted as adaptive stewardship, not merely procedural compliance.

Political Embeddedness of Academic Leadership

LUCs are created, funded, and supported by local governments, making political relationships an essential part of their environment. The reviewed studies suggest that political involvement isn't necessarily negative. Its impact depends on the leaders' ability to uphold academic values, institutional integrity, and ethical decision-making while building positive relationships with local officials and governing bodies.

Structural Constraints and Resource Limitations

Resource scarcity is a common challenge in public higher education leadership. Limitations regarding finances, facilities, staffing, and institutional capacity can impact strategic planning, academic programming, and student services. As a result, resource scarcity becomes a context for leadership that demands stewardship, innovation, resilience, and collaboration in generating resources.

Human-Centered and Student-Centered Leadership

The importance of educational leadership lies in its effects on people. Core aspects of effective leadership include trust, inclusion, collaboration, faculty development, student welfare, educational equity, and community responsiveness. These views align with servant-leadership principles that focus on the growth and well-being of followers while achieving institutional goals.

Resilience, Meaning-Making, and Faith

The literature also connects leadership resilience with the capacity for meaning-making. Phenomenological inquiry is especially useful for understanding how individuals interpret significant experiences and find meaning amid challenges. The reviewed literature indicates that reflection, optimism, personal convictions, and a sense of purpose can help educational leaders navigate pressures and uncertainty.

METHOD

Research Design

This study used a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design to investigate the lived experiences of former presidents of LUCs in the Negros Island Region. Phenomenology was chosen because the research aimed to comprehend the essence of leadership from the perspective of individuals who experienced it firsthand. Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to share their experiences, thoughts, and interpretations.

Participants and Sampling

Five former LUC presidents participated in the study. The methodology outlined purposive total-population sampling, suitable for the small number of eligible participants. Inclusion criteria included serving as a president of an LUC in the Negros Island Region for the required period and willing to engage in the study and provide informed consent. Key informants were also identified as potential sources of triangulating information.

Data Collection

Data collection began with formal communication to the college presidents and obtaining informed consent. Interviews took place after rapport was established and the study's purpose was explained. The researcher practiced bracketing to limit the influence of personal assumptions. Follow-up interviews occurred as needed, and the process continued until no significantly new information or meanings emerged.

Data Analysis

Colaizzi's seven-step descriptive phenomenological method was utilized. The process included: (1) becoming familiar with the data; (2) identifying significant statements; (3) formulating meanings; (4) clustering themes; (5) developing a comprehensive description; (6) creating the fundamental structure; and (7) validating through member checks.

Trustworthiness and Ethics

To ensure trustworthiness, the study addressed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The methodology included strategies such as member checking, detailed description, peer review, triangulation, audit trails, and external evaluation. Ethical safeguards involved institutional approval, informed consent, confidentiality, participant coding, secure data storage, and consideration of potential emotional discomfort during interviews. The study also adhered to the Data Privacy Act of 2012.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis revealed five interrelated themes. Together, they illustrate how leadership in LUCs involves balancing external accountability, political realities, institutional constraints, service to people, and personal resilience.

Theme

Central experience

Leadership implication

Navigating Governance Through Compliance

Balancing CHED requirements, institutional realities, and organizational identity.

Compliance is seen as adaptive stewardship, not just passive adherence.

Political Embeddedness of Academic Leadership

Collaborating with local officials while maintaining academic integrity and credibility.

Political engagement requires diplomacy, ethical judgment, and defining boundaries.

Leading Amid Structural Constraints and Resource Limitations

Managing limitations in finances, facilities, staffing, and operations.

Scarcity encourages innovation, collaboration, resilience, and resource mobilization.

Human-Centered and Student-Centered Leadership

Focusing on students, faculty, staff, access to education, and community welfare.

Leadership is judged by its impact on people and educational opportunities.

Faith-Guided Perseverance and Meaning-Making Through Adversity

Using prayer, reflection, and personal conviction to find meaning during tough times.

Personal systems of meaning can support commitment and perseverance in complex leadership situations.

Navigating Governance Through Compliance

Participants felt governance as a continuous leadership duty rather than a fixed administrative system. The findings show that presidents had to interpret external policies within unique institutional contexts that did not always match standardized regulatory expectations. One participant highlighted the need to adapt to regulatory requirements, while another noted that governance meant safeguarding the institution's identity and educational mission. The findings characterize compliance as constrained yet adaptive: leaders could not control all external requirements but had a say in how they were interpreted and enacted within their institutions.

These findings align with the literature, which depicts governance in LUCs as a continuous process of interpretation, stewardship, ethical accountability, and adaptability.

Political Embeddedness of Academic Leadership

Participants recognized political relationships as an unavoidable aspect of LUC leadership. They articulated the need to collaborate with local officials due to the reliance on local government for institutional operations and support. However, they also stressed the importance of maintaining professional boundaries and upholding academic standards. This leadership approach involved neither avoiding politics nor depending on it; rather, it encouraged constructive engagement paired with ethical commitment. The findings similarly indicate that political leadership is about fostering productive partnerships without sacrificing academic values or institutional integrity.

Leading Amid Structural Constraints and Resource Limitations

Participants described resource scarcity as an enduring feature of their leadership. Constraints involved finances, facilities, staffing, and operational support. Yet the narratives also showed active resource mobilization. One participant described soliciting support for buildings, computers, and a library, illustrating how institutional development could depend on leaders' initiative and external collaboration.

The findings suggest that scarcity was not merely an obstacle but a context in which leadership capacity became visible. Presidents responded through creativity, strategic resource generation, collaboration, and personal sacrifice. This aligns with the reviewed literature identifying resource stewardship and innovation as essential competencies in resource-constrained public higher education.

Human-Centered and Student-Centered Leadership

Participants placed people at the center of institutional leadership. Student welfare, faculty performance, educational access, academic excellence, and community service were repeatedly associated with the purpose of the presidency. The findings describe leadership as service rather than positional authority and emphasize that institutional accomplishments acquire meaning through their effects on students, personnel, and communities.

The study's synthesis likewise identifies compassion, faculty development, educational equity, and commitment to academic excellence as defining elements of human-centered leadership.

This result is congruent with the literature reviewed in the study, which presents trust, inclusion, collaboration, faculty development, and educational equity as central to effective higher education leadership.

Faith-Guided Perseverance and Meaning-Making Through Adversity

The final theme captures the internal dimension of leadership. Participants described prayer, reflection, surrender, personal conviction, and meaning-making as sources of strength during prolonged institutional and personal difficulties. The findings indicate that faith was experienced not simply as a private belief but as a sustaining resource that helped leaders maintain hope, integrity, and commitment to public service.

The finding extends the reviewed leadership literature by foregrounding a dimension that is less visible in conventional administrative accounts. The literature reviewed in the source study similarly argues that resilience involves meaning-making and that purpose-driven leadership can sustain motivation during political pressure, resource scarcity, and uncertainty.

Integrative Essence of LUC Leadership

Taken together, the five themes indicate that the presidency of an LUC is a multidimensional lived experience. Governance, politics, resource constraints, human-centered service, and personal faith interact rather than operate as isolated dimensions. The study therefore conceptualizes effective LUC leadership as an ongoing process of balancing external expectations with internal convictions while sustaining the educational mission of the institution. The source conclusions describe this essence as an integration of governance, political stewardship, organizational resilience, compassionate service, and faith-guided perseverance.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The study concludes that leadership among former LUC presidents transcends conventional administrative management. It is shaped by governance responsibilities, political realities, structural constraints, human development, and personal faith. Effective leadership requires organizational competence, ethical decision-making, relational engagement, adaptability, and resilience. □

Policy and Institutional Implications

The findings suggest that leadership development for LUC presidents should address not only generic administrative competencies but also regulatory navigation, local-government relations, ethical decision-making, resource mobilization, stakeholder engagement, student-centered leadership, and resilience. The study recommends stronger policy support from CHED and LGUs, leadership development programs, governance structures that protect academic integrity, succession planning, mentoring, faculty development, student support, and sustainable resource management.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. CHED and relevant higher education stakeholders should consider leadership development programs specifically responsive to the governance, political, financial, and institutional realities of LUCs.
2. Local governments and governing boards should strengthen collaborative governance while protecting academic integrity and institutional decision-making.
3. LUCs should establish leadership succession and mentoring mechanisms to prepare future academic leaders.
4. Institutions should continue investing in faculty development, student support services, educational equity, and sustainable resource management.

5. Future researchers should examine LUC leadership using comparative, longitudinal, or multi-stakeholder qualitative designs and should further investigate the role of meaning-making and spirituality where ethically and culturally appropriate.

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