



The Theoretical Model of College Student Leadership Development Based on Moral Development Theory

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Abstract

This research consists purposes were 1. to Study the current status of moral development and leadership development among college student leaders 2. to Design the contribution and interaction between moral development and leadership development process of college students 3. to Create a leadership development model for college students that is centered on moral development and 4. to Confirm the leadership development model for college students that is centered on moral development. This research adopts a mixed-methods approach in this study were questionnaires and a set of questions for the focus group discussion. The sample consisted of 375 students through simple random sampling, following Krejcie and Morgan sample size determination table. Data were collected using a five-point Likert scale questionnaire with an expert evaluation form. Data were analyzed using frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, Pearson correlation coefficient and multiple regression analysis. In addition, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with assess content validity, a panel of five experts was invited to review the questionnaire. The research results found that 1) That institutions incorporate moral education into leadership training, expand reflective and experiential learning opportunities, and apply the confirmed model as a framework for cultivating ethical, effective, and culturally grounded student leaders 2) All five dimensions of moral development (moral cognitive stage, moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation and moral character) showed statistically significant positive correlations with all five dimensions of leadership development 3) A leadership development model was created, composed of five key components: moral development (MD), student identity development (SID), learning activities (LA), experiential learning (EL) and leadership development (LD) and 4) Expert evaluation confirmed the model's conceptual clarity, cultural relevance, and practical applicability. The overall mean evaluation score was 4.77 out of 5.00, with high ratings



for propriety ($M = 4.94$), utility ($M = 4.82$) and accuracy ($M = 4.76$), indicating that the model meets high academic and practical standards.

Keywords: College Student, Leadership Development Model, Moral Development Theory

Introduction

Leadership has long been a focal topic in social sciences, with early studies primarily emphasizing inherent traits and individual characteristics. Over time, the field evolved to encompass behavioral, situational and relational theories, acknowledging that effective leadership is shaped by complex interactions between leaders, followers, and context. In recent decades, the conversation has shifted toward transformational, authentic and ethical leadership paradigms, placing increasing importance on the moral dimensions of leadership. (Ciulla, J. B, 2014) Morality is now widely recognized as fundamental to leadership effectiveness. Research shows that leaders' ethical standards are directly related to follower trust, organizational culture, and the long-term success of teams and institutions. As society becomes more complex, with rapid changes in technology and social values, leaders must navigate increasingly challenging moral landscapes. This is especially pertinent in education, where leaders are not only expected to manage organizations but also to serve as moral exemplars and foster ethical development among students and staff. In the academic literature, there is growing consensus that leadership models must move beyond skills and traits to actively incorporate ethical reasoning, moral sensitivity, and values-based decision-making as core components. (Northouse, P. G, 2021)

College students often face new challenges and responsibilities, such as managing peer relationships, making independent decisions, and participating in extracurricular activities. These experiences provide fertile ground for the development of both moral reasoning and leadership skills. (Komives et al., 2013) Studies have shown that involvement in student government, volunteer organizations, and campus leadership programs can significantly enhance students' moral sensitivity and judgment. (Dugan, J. P., and Komives, S. R, 2010; Rest et al., 1999) Universities serve not only as academic institutions but also as communities where young adults are exposed to diverse perspectives, ethical dilemmas, and real-world consequences of leadership actions. (Astin, A. W., and Astin, H. S, 2000) Importantly, research suggests that the college environment can be intentionally structured to support both moral and leadership development through strategies such as service learning, reflective practice, and mentoring. (Owen, J. E, 2012) In the Chinese context, there is a growing recognition that university education should produce graduates who are not only professionally competent but also morally grounded, prepared to contribute positively to society. (Wang, Y., and Zhang, H, 2022)



Effective leadership in higher education requires the integration of both leadership skills and moral values. Despite growing recognition of this need, there are significant gaps and challenges in the actual development of ethical leadership among college student leaders. These issues not only hinder the holistic growth of students but also undermine the long-term effectiveness and credibility of student leadership in universities. (Zhao, X., and Ma, J, 2021). This section outlines several core problems that motivate the present study. These persistent problems reflect the urgent need to accurately assess moral development among student leaders, systematically embed moral reasoning within leadership programs, construct a model that centers moral development in student leadership, analyze the most influential factors, and propose cohesive, effective training strategies. Addressing these issues is essential for preparing the next generation of ethical, competent and impactful leaders in higher education.

Research Objectives

1. To Study the current status of moral development and leadership development among college student leaders
2. To Design the contribution and interaction between moral development and leadership development process of college students
3. To Create a leadership development model for college students that is centered on moral development
4. To Confirm the leadership development model for college students that is centered on moral development

Literature Review

1. Social Change Model of Leadership Development

The Social Change Model of Leadership Development (SCM) stands as a transformative framework in higher education, emphasizing the development of leadership as a process that advances positive social change and benefits the common good. Conceived in the 1990s by a group of leadership educators working through the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles, the SCM was designed specifically for college students, positioning leadership as a value-driven, collaborative, and socially responsible process rather than a position of authority (Wagner, W, 1996).

2. Contemporary Perspectives and Intersectionality

Recent research recognizes that student identity is not developed in isolation but is deeply affected by intersecting social identities, including race, gender, class and sexuality (Broido, E. M, 2023). The modern student



development paradigm emphasizes that identity is both individually constructed and socially mediated, shaped by cultural narratives, institutional climate, and opportunities for meaningful participation. Educators are thus challenged to support diverse identity journeys and to recognize the impact of systemic inequities on student development

3. Connection to Student Leadership

Student leadership is closely intertwined with identity development. Engaging in leadership opportunities enables students to experiment with new roles, refine their values and solidify their sense of self (McKenzie, B. L, 2015). Leadership programs that foster reflection, mentorship and community engagement are shown to facilitate both personal growth and the emergence of a strong leadership identity (Butler, P. E, 2023). Scholars emphasize the importance of intentional leadership development practices that recognize the diversity of student backgrounds and experiences.

Methodology

1. Population and sample groups in the research include

The target population for this study consists of all undergraduate students currently enrolled at Guizhou Qiannan Economic College. As of the most recent institutional report, the college has a total undergraduate population of 14,231 students, spanning various academic disciplines and all four years of study (freshman to senior). This comprehensive population includes students from diverse backgrounds in terms of gender, age, major, year level, political affiliation, and urban-rural origin.

The rationale for selecting this population is twofold. First, undergraduate students represent a critical stage for both moral development and leadership capacity-building, making them ideal subjects for examining the relationship between these two constructs within the higher education context. Second, Guizhou Qiannan Economic College provides a representative microcosm of students in Chinese regional universities, enabling insights that may be relevant for similar educational settings.

2. Research tools include

This section provides a detailed explanation of the design process for the research instruments used in this study. It outlines the development, structure, and validation of both the quantitative questionnaire and the qualitative interview protocol, ensuring that each tool accurately measures the key variables identified in the conceptual framework. The procedures for item selection, adaptation, expert review, and pilot testing are described, establishing the reliability and validity of the instruments for use with undergraduate students at Guizhou Qiannan Economic College.



2.1 Questionnaire Design: The questionnaire for this study is carefully structured to collect both objective and subjective data regarding the learning, leadership, and personal development experiences of undergraduate students at Guizhou Qiannan Economic College. The instrument consists of five main sections: Background Information, Moral Development Scale, Leadership Development Scale, Student Identity Development Scale, and supplementary scales to assess the depth and quality of Learning Activities and Experiential Learning.

2.2 Interview Design: In addition to the questionnaire, qualitative interviews are incorporated into this research to gain in-depth insights into the dimensions and contextual factors shaping moral development and leadership growth among college students. The interview component consists of two types: expert interviews and semi-structured student interviews, each serving distinct but complementary purposes.

3. Data Collection

Data for this research will be collected primarily through the online survey platform WenJuanXing, which is widely used in China for academic and professional research. The finalized questionnaire will be distributed electronically to the selected sample of undergraduate students at Guizhou Qiannan Economic College. An invitation, including a link to the survey and an informed consent statement, will be sent via university email and relevant student social media platforms to maximize participation.

Respondents will complete the questionnaire anonymously and voluntarily. The use of WenJuanXing ensures efficient data collection, secure storage, and automated export of responses for subsequent statistical analysis. For the qualitative component, interviews will be arranged face-to-face or via online meeting platforms according to participants' availability, and audio recordings will be transcribed for analysis. All data will be handled in accordance with research ethics guidelines to ensure confidentiality and data integrity.

4. Data Analysis and Statistical used in research

The Research presented using SPSS22.0, the IOC (Project-Objective Consistency Index), KMO and Bartlett's Test evaluation framework and study focuses on empirically analyzing the impact of education and teaching level on the quality of agricultural vocational undergraduate students through survey research. Taking the students' training objectives and students' practical ability as the independent variables, and the employment quality and external evaluation as the intermediary variables, and the social demand and school-running strength are designed as the moderating variables. Through various scales for data analysis, the relationship and influence coefficient between six factors were obtained, and they are concluded that played positive roles in promoting the education and teaching level and quality of agricultural vocational undergraduate students in Guangxi.



To address the research objectives and provide comprehensive answers to the research questions, several statistical techniques will be utilized. Each method is selected to correspond with the structure of the questionnaire and the nature of the variables assessed.

4.1 Descriptive Analysis: Descriptive statistics will be used to summarize and present the basic characteristics of the sample and the main variables. This includes frequency distributions, means, standard deviations, and percentages for demographic data (e.g., gender, year of study, political affiliation, place of origin, only child status), as well as for the major constructs (moral development, leadership development, identity development, learning activities, and experiential learning). Descriptive analysis will provide a clear overview of the status quo and the general trends in the student population, directly addressing the first research objective regarding the current state of moral development and leadership capacities among college students.

4.2 Correlation Analysis: Correlation analysis will be employed to examine the relationships between key variables, particularly between moral development and leadership development, as well as the links between identity development, learning activities, and experiential learning. This analysis will help to address the research objective concerning the contribution and interaction of moral development within the broader leadership development process. Pearson's correlation coefficients will be calculated to assess the strength and direction of these relationships.

4.3 Regression Analysis: Regression analysis will be performed to determine the predictive effect of moral development and other independent variables (e.g., learning activities, experiential learning, identity development, and student background factors) on leadership development. Multiple regression models will be constructed to evaluate the relative contribution of each variable and to explore the mediating or moderating effects where appropriate. This statistical approach directly supports the research objective of constructing a theoretical model and identifying key influencing factors.

4.4 Analysis of Variance (t-test and ANOVA): To compare differences in leadership and moral development across different student subgroups (such as gender, year of study, urban/rural background, only child status, and involvement in specific learning activities), both independent sample t-tests and one-way ANOVA will be used. These analyses will help determine whether significant group differences exist, thereby offering insights for the development of targeted training and intervention strategies. This is particularly relevant for the objective of making evidence-based recommendations for leadership training programs.

4.5 Mediation and Moderation Analysis: To further explore the pathways and mechanisms underlying the relationship between moral development and leadership development, mediation and moderation analyses will be conducted. For example, variables such as student identity development or learning activities



may serve as mediators or moderators in this relationship. The PROCESS macro for SPSS, developed by Hayes, or similar bootstrapping approaches, will be used to statistically test for mediation and moderation effects. These analyses will help determine whether and how intermediary or contextual variables influence the direct effects of moral development on leadership outcomes, providing a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play and offering more precise guidance for targeted interventions.

Results

This Research The researcher can classify the research results as follows

1. Study the current status of moral development and leadership development among college student leaders.

This section presents the descriptive statistical analysis of the current status of moral development among college student leaders at Guizhou Qiannan Economic College. The moral development construct was measured through five major dimensions: Moral Cognitive Stage, Moral Sensitivity, Moral Judgment, Moral Motivation, and Moral Character. Each dimension was assessed using multiple Likert-scale items (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Higher mean values indicate stronger development in the corresponding moral dimension, while lower means indicate weaker moral functioning. Descriptive statistics (Mean, Standard Deviation, Level, and Rank) were calculated for each dimension to determine the relative strength of students' moral development areas.

The following interpretation scale was used to classify the level of each dimension: 4.24–5.00 (Highest), 3.43–4.23 (High), 2.62–3.42 (Moderate), 1.81–2.61 (Low) and 1.00–1.80 (Lowest).

The results are shown in Table Descriptive Statistics of the Five Moral Development Dimensions below.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of the Five Moral Development Dimensions (n = 375)

Dimension	Mean	S.D.	Level	Rank
Moral Cognitive Stage	4.10	0.95	High	1
Moral Character	3.94	0.87	High	2
Moral Motivation	3.93	0.87	High	3
Moral Judgment	3.86	0.86	High	4
Moral Sensitivity	3.85	0.92	High	5
Overall Moral Development	3.94	0.89	High	—

As shown in Table: Descriptive Statistics of the Five Moral Development Dimensions, all five dimensions of moral development among the 375 college student leaders fall within the “High” range (3.43–4.23). This



indicates that overall, the respondents exhibit a strong sense of moral reasoning, awareness, and behavioral consistency. Among the five dimensions, the Moral Cognitive Stage ranked the highest ($M = 4.10$, $S.D. = 0.95$), suggesting that student leaders possess strong abilities to discern right from wrong and apply moral reasoning when making ethical judgments. This reflects the effectiveness of moral and ideological education in Chinese higher education, which emphasizes moral reflection, civic responsibility, and the cultivation of virtue. Following closely were Moral Character ($M = 3.94$) and Moral Motivation ($M = 3.93$), both reflecting that student leaders not only value moral principles but are also motivated to act consistently with them. These results highlight that the participants demonstrate high levels of integrity, self-discipline, and moral responsibility in their daily conduct. The Moral Judgment ($M = 3.86$) and Moral Sensitivity ($M = 3.85$) dimensions ranked slightly lower, although still within the “High” range. This suggests that while students are capable of evaluating moral situations and empathizing with others, these abilities are relatively less developed compared to their moral reasoning and behavioral consistency. This slight gap may stem from differences in emotional engagement and the contextual challenges students face in applying moral principles in social life.

Overall, the mean composite score of 3.94 ($S.D. = 0.89$) places the moral development of college student leaders firmly within the High level. This demonstrates that most participants are well-formed in moral reasoning and ethical awareness, aligning with the Kohlbergian (1984) and Rest (1986) frameworks of moral development, which emphasize moral cognition, sensitivity, judgment, motivation, and character as integral stages of ethical growth.

In summary, college student leaders at Guizhou Qiannan Economic College exhibit a high overall level of moral development across all five dimensions, with particularly strong moral cognition and behavioral integrity. These findings suggest that moral education and leadership cultivation in the institution are effective in nurturing ethically responsible and value-driven student leaders. However, the slightly lower scores in moral sensitivity and judgment imply a continued need for experiential and reflective moral learning to deepen empathy and decision-making in complex moral contexts.

2. Design the contribution and interaction between moral development and leadership development process of college students.

This section examines the relationships between the five dimensions of Moral Development (MD) and the five dimensions of Leadership Development (LD) among college student leaders. The purpose of this analysis is to identify how moral reasoning, motivation, and behavior contribute to leadership competencies such as teamwork, influence, and ethical decision-making. Pearson’s correlation coefficient (r) was used to determine the strength and direction of the relationships between the two constructs.

Table 2 Correlation Coefficients Between Moral Development and Leadership Development Dimensions

Moral Development Dimensions	Personal Values / Self-Awareness	Teamwork and Collaboration	Motivation and Influence	Conflict Management	Ethical Decision-Making
Moral Cognitive Stage	0.569	0.538	0.527	0.510	0.560
Moral Sensitivity	0.598	0.537	0.546	0.534	0.587
Moral Judgment	0.686	0.657	0.653	0.629	0.671
Moral Motivation	0.673	0.656	0.667	0.651	0.706
Moral Character	0.710	0.695	0.710	0.656	0.696

As presented in Table 4.14, all correlation coefficients between moral development and leadership development dimensions are positive and statistically significant ($p < .01$), ranging from $r = 0.510$ to $r = 0.710$. This indicates that higher levels of moral development are associated with higher levels of leadership development among college student leaders. The strongest correlation was observed between Moral Character and Motivation and Influence ($r = 0.710$), suggesting that students who display consistent moral behaviors are also more capable of inspiring and guiding others.

Similarly, Moral Character showed a very strong relationship with Personal Values / Self-Awareness ($r = 0.710$), indicating that ethical consistency contributes significantly to self-reflective and value-oriented leadership. Moral Motivation also demonstrated strong correlations with Ethical Decision-Making ($r = 0.706$) and Motivation and Influence ($r = 0.667$), implying that students who are morally driven tend to apply ethical reasoning in leadership situations and effectively motivate others. Furthermore, Moral Judgment showed consistently strong associations across all leadership dimensions ($r = 0.629$ – 0.686), highlighting that the ability to reason through moral dilemmas translates into more responsible and fair leadership actions. Moral Cognitive Stage and Moral Sensitivity also correlated moderately to strongly with leadership variables, particularly with Personal Values / Self-Awareness ($r = 0.569$ – 0.598) and Ethical Decision-Making ($r = 0.560$ – 0.587).

Overall, these findings confirm a robust and multidimensional link between moral and leadership development. Students with advanced moral reasoning, stronger moral motivation, and consistent moral character tend to exhibit higher leadership skills, greater ethical awareness, and enhanced ability to collaborate effectively.

In summary, all dimensions of moral development are significantly and positively correlated with leadership development dimensions. The strongest associations are observed for Moral Character and Moral



Motivation, especially with Motivation and Influence and Ethical Decision-Making dimensions. This suggests that moral integrity and motivation are foundational elements in the development of effective and ethical student leadership.

3. create a leadership development model for college students that is centered on moral development. Model Refinement Based on Expert Feedback While overall expert agreement was high, valuable qualitative feedback led to several structural refinements to ensure greater conceptual balance and practical utility. Initially, the model positioned Student Identity Development (SID) as the core mediating mechanism linking Learning Activities (LA) and Experiential Learning (EL) to both Moral Development (MD) and Leadership Development (LD). However, experts recommended reducing the centrality of SID to better reflect the direct developmental influence of learning and experiential processes on both morality and leadership.

Based on this feedback, the following refinements were made:

3.1 Revised Core Structure: The model now emphasizes dual direct pathways from both Learning Activities and Experiential Learning to Moral Development and Leadership Development. This adjustment reflects expert consensus that moral and leadership growth are often shaped simultaneously through structured learning and real-world practice, rather than solely through identity mediation.

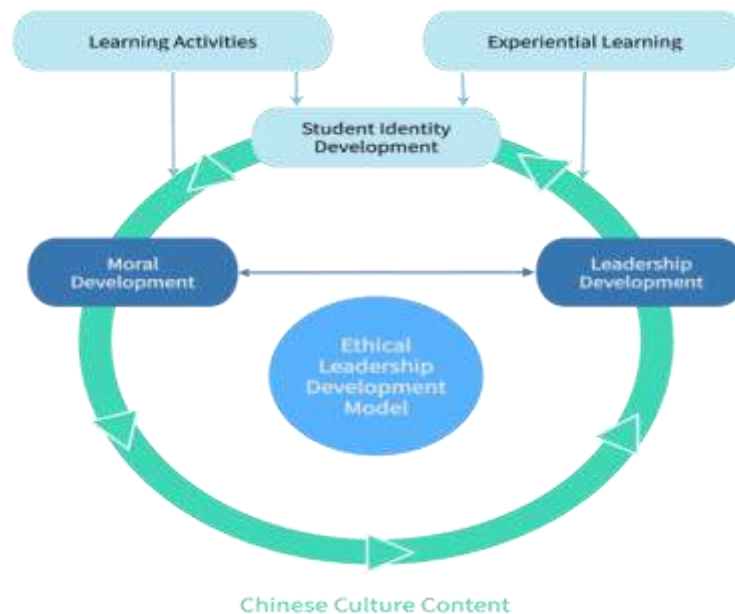
3.2 Redefined Role of Student Identity Development (SID): remains an essential supportive and reflective process, aiding in the internalization of moral values and leadership roles. It now functions as a secondary enhancer that strengthens the effects of learning and experience rather than serving as the model's central link.

3.3 Clarified Reciprocal Relationship between Moral and Leadership Development: The refined model acknowledges that moral maturity directly enhances ethical leadership, while leadership experiences reinforce moral understanding through reflection and action. This reciprocal interaction aligns with Kohlberg's (1981) theory of moral development and Avolio and Gardner's (2005) concept of authentic leadership.

3.4 Practical Integration Emphasis: Experts encouraged emphasizing that Learning Activities (e.g., reflective courses, peer mentoring, service-learning) and Experiential Learning (e.g., internships, student organizations, community projects) provide real-life contexts for moral reasoning and leadership practice. These components make the model operationally meaningful and institutionally feasible.

The final model emphasizes that Moral Development (MD) and Leadership Development (LD) function as dual and mutually reinforcing outcomes, both shaped directly by Learning Activities (LA) and Experiential Learning (EL) and further enhanced through Student Identity Development (SID). As show on Figure below. This

structure aligns with both moral psychology and educational leadership theory, providing a comprehensive and culturally contextualized framework for fostering ethical leadership among Chinese college students.



4. Confirm the leadership development model for college students that is centered on moral development.

Confirmation Results the expert confirmation verified that the revised Ethical Leadership Development Model for College Students demonstrates strong conceptual validity, cultural propriety, and practical feasibility. Experts agreed that the model successfully captures the interdependence of moral growth and leadership maturity, guided by educational experiences and contextual reflection. The final model represents a more balanced, realistic, and culturally resonant understanding of student leadership formation. It highlights that leadership development in Chinese higher education must be rooted in moral consciousness, sustained through learning engagement, and realized through experiential practice. Accordingly, the model serves not only as an analytical framework but also as a strategic guide for designing and implementing leadership education programs that cultivate ethically responsible, socially engaged and culturally grounded student leaders.

To verify the validity and applicability of the proposed model, an expert evaluation was conducted using the Expert Evaluation Form developed according to Stufflebeam's (2003) Five Evaluation Criteria Utility, Feasibility, Propriety, Accuracy and Evaluation Accountability. Five domain experts two specializing in moral and character education, two in leadership and higher education management, and one in educational evaluation



independently assessed the model's conceptual clarity, theoretical rigor, and practical relevance. The evaluation adopted a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), allowing for both quantitative assessment and qualitative feedback. Experts also provided written comments suggesting structural and theoretical refinements. The descriptive summary of expert ratings is shown in Table Summary of Expert Evaluation Results for the Ethical Leadership Development Model

Table 3 Summary of Expert Evaluation Results for the Ethical Leadership Development Model

Evaluation Criterion	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Interpretation
Utility	4.82	0.24	Excellent
Feasibility	4.60	0.32	High
Propriety	4.94	0.18	Excellent
Accuracy	4.76	0.29	Excellent
Evaluation Accountability	4.71	0.27	Excellent
Overall Mean	4.77	0.26	Excellent

Conclusion

This Research The researcher can summarize the results of the research study according to the following The Purposes

1. This study confirms that college student leaders are developing not only in leadership skills but also in ethical and moral reasoning. This supports the argument that moral development is foundational to effective leadership, and that the two should be integrated within leadership education programs. The findings suggest that higher education institutions in China should continue to promote leadership development that is grounded in moral values, cultural traditions, and reflective practice.

2. This study confirms a dynamic and reciprocal relationship between moral and leadership development. College students who develop morally are better equipped to lead ethically, and those who lead are often placed in situations that further challenge and deepen their moral reasoning. These findings reinforce the need for leadership education to go beyond skill-building and include structured support for moral reflection, ethical decision-making, and value-driven action, rooted in both theory and contextual cultural values.

3. The developed model offers a balanced and empirically supported structure showing that moral development is not just one part of leadership, but the core driver of ethical leadership formation. Through identity development and practical experiences, students internalize moral values and apply them in leadership



contexts. This model contributes not only to theoretical advancement but also provides a valuable framework for designing leadership education programs that are both developmentally rich and culturally grounded.

4. The expert-confirmed and refined model is both theoretically robust and culturally contextualized. It successfully integrates moral reasoning, identity development and learning experiences into a holistic structure that explains how college students grow into ethical leaders. The model stands not only as a validated research product but also as a practical framework for guiding leadership development programs in Chinese universities. It encourages institutions to design educational experiences that develop leadership competence through the lens of moral growth, cultural responsibility and experiential engagement.

Discussion

This Research The researcher can discuss the research results as follows

1. The study confirms that college student leaders are developing not only in leadership skills but also in ethical and moral reasoning. This supports the argument that moral development is foundational to effective leadership, and that the two should be integrated within leadership education programs. The findings suggest that higher education institutions in China should continue to promote leadership development that is grounded in moral values, cultural traditions and reflective practice.

2. This study clearly demonstrates a strong and significant relationship between moral development and leadership development among college student leaders, all five dimensions of moral development moral cognitive stage, moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation and moral character were positively and significantly correlated with the five dimensions of leadership development

3. This study, student leaders who showed strong moral character were also better at motivating others and making ethical decisions, suggesting that moral integrity enhances both relational and functional leadership skills. Furthermore, the strong positive correlations and mediation effects observed among MD, SID, LA, EL and LD reflect the interconnected developmental pathways that are emphasized in developmental systems theory. Moral development and leadership are not isolated processes but evolve through ongoing interaction between the individual and their environment. This model confirms that moral values are not only internal traits but are cultivated and applied through active learning and real-world practice, including peer interaction, community engagement and reflective learning.

4. The confirmed model also reflects Rest's Four-Component Model (1986) by recognizing the essential progression from moral awareness and judgment to motivation and action. Importantly, the revised model also introduces a reciprocal interaction between moral and leadership development an insight supported



New finding or knowledge

Model was refined to reflect direct pathways from learning activities and experiential learning to both moral and leadership development, with student identity development serving as a supporting factor. The model emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between moral growth and leadership formation. Those institutions incorporate moral education into leadership training, expand reflective and experiential learning opportunities, and apply the confirmed model as a framework for cultivating ethical, effective and culturally grounded student leaders.

Suggestion

1. Suggestions for use

1.1 Integrate Moral Education into Leadership Programs: Colleges and universities should embed moral development as a core component of all student leadership programs. The findings confirm that moral character, motivation, and judgment are key predictors of leadership success. Institutions can design leadership courses that include ethics case studies, value-based decision-making workshops, and training on social responsibility to strengthen students' moral foundations alongside leadership skills.

1.2 Strengthen Experiential Learning Opportunities: Universities should expand hands-on leadership opportunities such as student government roles, service-learning projects, peer mentoring, and internships. The research shows that experiential learning directly influences both moral and leadership development. These real-life experiences help students internalize ethical principles while developing confidence, communication, and team leadership abilities.

1.3 Promote Reflective and Identity-Building Activities: Programs should include structured reflection practices, such as journaling, dialogue circles, or coaching sessions, to encourage self-awareness and identity formation. As Student Identity Development (SID) plays a supporting role in the leadership process, helping students reflect on their values, motivations, and leadership identity will enhance their ethical decision-making and personal growth.

1.4 Design a Culturally Grounded Curriculum: Leadership education in Chinese universities should integrate Confucian values such as Ren (benevolence), Li (propriety), and Yi (righteousness), as these are deeply connected to students' understanding of moral and leadership responsibilities. Educators should contextualize leadership training within Chinese cultural norms to ensure that students develop ethical behaviors aligned with societal expectations.



1.5 Use the Leadership Development Model as a Framework: The confirmed leadership development model should be adopted as a practical guide for program planning, implementation and evaluation. It offers a clear framework showing how Learning Activities and Experiential Learning directly influence both Moral and Leadership Development. Institutions can use this model to structure interventions, assess progress and align program goals with student development outcomes.

2. Suggestions for next research

2.1 Future research should expand the study to diverse educational institutions. Including students from various types of colleges and universities such as comprehensive universities, vocational colleges, and institutions in other regions of China can help determine whether the leadership development model is applicable across different educational and cultural settings. This would enhance the generalizability and adaptability of the model.

2.2 Future research should explore longitudinal developmental changes. By tracking students over the course of their university experience, researchers can better understand how moral and leadership development evolve over time. Longitudinal studies would reveal the timing, sequence, and long-term effects of interventions and leadership experiences.

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