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## Impact of Servant Leadership on Graduate Students' Perceptions of their Preparedness to Serve Society after Graduation

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### Abstract

The problem addressed in this study was the unpreparedness of students leaving Christian higher education institutions in the United States to engage, serve, and contribute to the common good of society after graduation. Student unpreparedness for life after college is now considered a significant threat to higher education enterprise in the United States. Servant leadership is gaining recognition as a viable model for addressing challenges in higher education. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive single case study was to explore graduate students' perceptions of the impact of servant leadership behaviors of the administrators, staff, and faculty at a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States on their preparedness to engage, serve, and contribute to the common good of society after graduation. Greenleaf's servant leadership theory was utilized as the guiding theoretical framework for this study. Thirteen participants who met the eligibility criteria were recruited for the study through purposive sampling. The thematic analysis of the study's one-on-one interviews and focus group data, using NVivo 14, identified two themes that addressed the research question that guided the study. The study findings showed that graduate students developed servant leadership by observing and learning from campus administrators, faculty, and staff who exhibited servant leadership behaviors and offered them opportunities to practice servant leadership. Also, the findings indicated that graduate students believed their experiences with servant leadership on campus have equipped, prepared, inspired, and motivated them to contribute meaningfully to society after graduation. This qualitative descriptive single case study has contributed to the existing body of knowledge on the appropriateness, applicability, and impact of servant leadership in higher education institutions by examining and providing new insights into graduate students' perceptions of servant leadership, which has been lacking in the literature. Future studies should include quantitative analyses to evaluate the impact of servant leadership from the perspective of graduate students across various colleges and universities nationwide.

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## Introduction

The role and effectiveness of higher education institutions in preparing students for real-world engagement after college are under scrutiny in society today (Jensen, 2021; Mann, 2020). Student unpreparedness for life after college is now considered a significant threat to higher education enterprise in the United States (Mann, 2020; PR Newswire, 2023). A recent survey by the Mary Christie Institute and affiliates indicated that nearly 40% of young graduates felt unprepared for the workplace and society by their colleges (American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2023). Another recent survey revealed that 40% of business leaders believed that recent college graduates are unprepared to contribute meaningfully to the workplace and society (PR Newswire, 2023). Further, 94% of the 1,243 business leaders who participated in the survey admitted they would rather avoid hiring recent graduates due to their unpreparedness for the workplace (PR Newswire, 2023). Studies have reported a significant decline in volunteerism among college students and fresh graduates (Lenahan, 2024; Normah & Lukman, 2020).

Higher education institutions now face unprecedented pressure to address student unpreparedness to make meaningful contributions to the workplace and society after college (Mann, 2020). Jensen (2021) warned about impending disruption in the higher education sector and half of higher education institutions in the United States becoming bankrupt in the next 10-15 years. More than one in five higher institutions in the United States are faith-based (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Christian higher education institutions contribute distinctively to the landscape of higher education by integrating faith and learning to develop students holistically to engage, serve, and contribute to the common good of society (Mann, 2020; Wallace, 2021). An ongoing scholarly debate exists regarding the capability of Christian higher education institutions to deliver on their primary mission statement of integrating faith and learning to prepare and equip students to contribute to the common good of society and be world-changers after graduation (Fehr, 2024; Lawson & Schreiner, 2021; Mann, 2020).

Mann (2020) argued that Christian higher education institutions in the United States are positioned to positively transform and prepare students to engage and transform local and global communities. However, the results of a survey of 57 member institutions of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) by Lawson and Schreiner (2021) indicated a lack of institutional infrastructure and support to prepare doctoral students for life after college. Scholars warned that the survival and thriving of Christian higher institutions in the current highly competitive landscape of higher education largely depends on the emergence of new leaders that will redesign traditional hierarchical structures, foster more equitable and inclusive leadership environments, and initiate more collaborative leadership models (Jensen, 2021; Mann, 2020; Wallace, 2021). Christian colleges and universities are now under more significant pressure to thrive in the current challenging and competitive higher education landscape in the United States by producing graduates who can serve and contribute meaningfully to society (Fehr, 2024; Jensen, 2021; Wallace, 2021).

The problem addressed in this study was the unpreparedness of students leaving Christian higher education institutions in the United States to engage, serve, and contribute to the common good of society after graduation (Mann, 2020; Wallace, 2021). The purpose of this qualitative descriptive single case study was to explore graduate

students' perceptions of the impact of servant leadership at a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States on their preparedness to engage, serve, and contribute to the common good of society after graduation. There is a growing acceptance of servant leadership as a promising model for solving many problems facing higher institutions, especially student unpreparedness for real-world engagement after college (Cong et al., 2024; Dami et al., 2024; Kainde & Mandagi, 2023). Various studies have been conducted in higher education settings to understand the impact of servant leadership from staff and faculty members' perspectives (Aboramadam et al., 2021; Melinda et al., 2020; Zainab et al., 2022) and undergraduate students' perspectives (Cong et al., 2024; Dami et al., 2024). However, studies have yet to examine the influence of servant leadership from graduate students' perspectives. This qualitative descriptive single case study addresses this gap in the literature by exploring and contributing insights into graduate students' perceptions of the impact of servant leadership on their preparedness to engage, serve, and contribute to the common good of society after graduation.

## Literature Review

Since the Great Recession of 2007, the role and effectiveness of higher education institutions in preparing and equipping students for life after college have come under increased scrutiny in the United States (Dockery, 2019; Jensen, 2021; Mann, 2020). Researchers have warned about impending disruption in the higher education sector and half of higher education institutions in the United States becoming bankrupt in the next 10-15 years (Barton, 2019; Jensen, 2021). Christian higher education's values, impacts, challenges, and future in the United States are presently a significant debate among scholars (Barton, 2019; Collins & Clanton, 2018; Guthrie, 2018; Mann, 2020; Schreiner, 2018). This debate is justified because more than one in five higher institutions in the United States are faith-based institutions (Barton, 2019). Also, 5-10% of almost 20 million students in the United States receive their education at Christian higher institutions (Barton, 2019; Collins & Clanton, 2018). Christian higher education institutions contribute distinctively to the landscape of higher education by integrating faith and learning to develop students holistically to engage, serve, and contribute to the common good of society (Mann, 2020). This section highlights the values and economic, social, and community impacts of Christian higher education, the challenges facing Christian higher education, and the future of Christian higher education institutions in the United States.

### The Values and Impacts of Christian Higher Education

An ongoing scholarly debate exists regarding the values and impacts of Christian higher education institutions in the United States (Mann, 2020; Lawson & Schreiner, 2021). Some researchers have strongly stated the values and impacts of Christian higher education (Collins & Clanton, 2018; Jagela, 2019; Koonce et al., 2018; Mann, 2020; Otto & Harrington, 2016; Roso, 2019; Savarirajan & Fong, 2019). Collins and Clanton (2018) argued that Christian higher education institutions contribute significantly to meeting the increased demand for higher education in the United States by providing higher education for about 10% of over 20 million higher-education students. In a study, Jagela (2019) showed that servant leadership in Christian institutions inspired and motivated students to serve their campus community and the surrounding community off-campus. Also, a study by Koonce et al. (2018) indicated that students who attended Christian higher institutions experienced a notable change in

their worldview and growth in their leadership skills.

Christian higher education prepares students for more than careers; unlike secular education, it promotes spiritual formation in students and thus prepares their whole beings (Collins & Clanton, 2018; Roso, 2019; Tulung et al., 2024). Mann (2020) argued that Christian higher institutions in the United States can positively transform and prepare students to engage and transform local and global communities. Savarirajan and Fong (2019) reported that integrating faith and learning positively impacted students' development and understanding of the Christian worldview of science. The findings also underscored the significant role of the faculty grounded in the Christian worldview in the effective integration of faith and learning in classes. In a study, Roso (2019) indicated that students in a Christian university perceived they were well-prepared to apply classroom theory to solve real-world problems and practice their Christian faith through service learning.

Though Schreiner (2018) affirmed that Christian higher institutions are developing and producing godly graduates, the researcher argued that the graduates are not actively engaging and transforming the world as claimed by Christian higher institutions. The results of a survey of 57 member institutions of the CCCU by Lawson and Schreiner (2021) supported Schreiner's argument, indicating a lack of institutional infrastructure and support to prepare doctoral students for life after college. Likewise, Guthrie (2018) cast doubt on the effectiveness of the existing Christian higher institution curriculum in adequately preparing students to be good ambassadors of Jesus Christ in their workplaces. However, the Council for Christian Universities and Colleges (2018) presented a compelling case for the value of Christian higher education in the United States in a report highlighting the collective significant economic, social, and community impacts of its 180 member institutions.

### ***Economic Impact of Christian Higher Education***

The Council for Christian Universities and Colleges (2018) reported that its 150 member institutions in the United States generate \$60 billion annually for the national economy from its institutions' operations and capital investments and the earnings of its graduates. Collins and Clanton (2018) estimated that about 10% of almost 20 million students in the United States receive their education at Christian higher institutions. Christian higher education helps meet the increased demand for higher education in the United States and creates employment for many. The CCCU (2018) claimed that its institutions in the United States are responsible for creating and supporting 134,000 jobs, contributing about \$10 billion annually to the federal tax revenue. In addition, CCCU reported that about 2 million students have graduated from its institutions and earn \$22.5 billion more annually, generating an additional \$7.5 billion in federal tax revenue. Also, CCCU claimed that its graduates are pursuing personal success in their careers and contributing to society in various ways (CCCU, 2018, 2021).

### ***Social Impact of Christian Higher Education***

Emphasizing the social impact of Christian higher education, CCCU (2018, 2021) reported that its member institutions prepared and produced godly graduates who bring their Christian worldview to their careers, seek to help others, and transform society. Also, some scholars have emphasized the significant social impacts of

Christian higher education in the United States (Collins & Clanton, 2018; Jagela, 2019; Koonce et al., 2018; Mann, 2020; Savarirajan & Fong, 2019). Describing the contribution of Christian higher education to the common good of society, Collins and Clanton (2018) asserted that Christian higher institutions benefited society by producing and disseminating knowledge and preparing and equipping students to pursue the most basic human goods, such as inner peace and religion. The students, in turn, help shape and influence society positively. Unlike secular higher education, Christian higher education focuses not only on educating, preparing, and equipping students for vocations but on students' whole being and thus preparing students for the common good of society (Guthrie, 2018; Mann, 2020). The common good refers to a combination of factors that promote the growth and success of all individuals in the community (Guthrie, 2018).

Studies by Koonce et al. (2018) and Savarirajan and Fong (2019) have been used to bolster the arguments of other researchers in support of the significant contributions of Christian higher education to the common good of society. A study by Koonce et al. (2018) indicated that students who attended Christian higher institutions experienced a notable change in their worldview and growth in their leadership skills to impact society positively. Roso (2019) reported that students in a Christian university perceived they were well-prepared to apply classroom theory to solve real-world problems and practice their Christian faith through service learning. Schreiner (2018) agreed with other scholars that Christian higher education contributes to the common good and the kingdom good by developing students and producing graduates who adhere to Christian values and desire to serve within their churches. However, Schreiner (2018) showed in a study that Christian higher education does not develop and produce students and graduates who desire leadership roles outside their churches or seek to engage the world.

### ***Community Impact of Christian Higher Education***

Christian higher institutions integrate faith, learning, and living to prepare students and produce graduates who seek to engage and serve their communities (Mann, 2020). A study by Jagela (2019) indicated that servant leadership in Christian institutions inspired and motivated students to serve their campus community and the surrounding community off-campus. Collins and Clanton (2018) pointed out that Christian higher institutions significantly impact their communities through community outreach, such as students volunteering for community services and offering free medical and legal services. Leaders of Christian higher institutions seek to implement community engagement through various programs such as curricular and co-curricular programs (Mann, 2020). Christian higher institutions can use curricular programs to offer students credits and opportunities to connect their specific course learning objectives with community projects. They can also use co-curricular programs to offer students no credits but aid them in personal moral development and civic responsibility as they engage in voluntary community services (Mann, 2020).

The Council for Christian Universities and Colleges (2018, 2021) reported that many graduates from CCCU institutions play leading roles in many fields and substantially impact their communities. In addition, CCCU claimed that its member institutions offer students opportunities to develop through community service and engagement, resulting in 5.4 million hours of community service yearly. The CCCU (2021) reported that its member institutions invest in a wide range of community engagement, including community service and service

learning and making their facilities accessible. They also provide educational, medical, and legal services within their communities, invest in schools and real estate projects, and provide employment opportunities for people in the community. Likewise, Collins and Clanton (2018) affirmed that the mere presence of Christian higher institution facilities, activities, public events, and diverse students contributes to community progress.

### **The Challenges Facing Christian Higher Education**

Researchers have warned about impending disruption in the higher education sector and the possibility of half of higher education institutions in the United States becoming bankrupt in the next 10-15 years (Barton, 2019; Jensen, 2021). More than one in five higher institutions in the United States are faith-based (Barton, 2019). Christian colleges and universities are now under more significant pressure to thrive in the current challenging and competitive higher education landscape in the United States (Barton, 2019; Jensen, 2021; Mann, 2020). Christian higher educational institutions face many challenges threatening their survival and thriving in the highly competitive higher institutions landscape in the United States (Barton, 2019; Guthrie, 2018; Hulme et al., 2016; Schreiner, 2018). Researchers have identified significant challenges facing Christian higher education, including postmodernism, the rising cost of higher education, leadership turnover, and student unpreparedness for life after college (American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2023; Barton, 2019; Hulme et al., 2016; Otto & Harrington, 2016; Wicks, 2019).

#### ***Postmodernism***

Researchers have argued that a postmodern mindset poses a challenge to the spiritual formation that distinguishes Christian higher education from secular education and gives Christian higher institutions an advantage over secular institutions because postmodernism rejects the Bible as the foundation of truth and the traditional Christian worldview rooted in absolute truth and morals (Daniels et al., 2019; Kretchmar, 2021; Tulung et al., 2024). Collins and Clanton (2018) stressed that the unique function of Christian higher institutions is to "educate students as though the Christian faith were true" (p. 8). Therefore, Christian higher institutions benefit society as a public witness against postmodernism, subjectivism, and relativism (Collins & Clanton, 2018; Tulung et al., 2024). Scholars have warned that if Christian higher institutions fail to respond appropriately to the challenge of postmodernism or the rise of secularization, it will dilute the uniqueness of Christian higher education and reduce its values and impacts (Daniels et al., 2019; Tulung et al., 2024). In addressing the challenges of postmodernism, scholars recommended adopting a balanced approach (Tulung et al., 2024), embracing and staying true to a distinct Christian identity and mission (Daniels et al., 2019), and Christian teachers teaching more classes in secular institutions to engage and influence more students (Roldan Hernandez, 2023).

#### ***The Rising Cost of Higher Education***

Another significant challenge facing Christian higher education institutions is providing quality education to low-income students despite the rising cost of higher education in the United States (Daniels et al., 2019). Daniels et al. (2019) argued that funding is the most significant challenge facing Christian colleges and universities. They

stressed that even tiny drops in enrollment could have substantial financial implications for faith-based institutions. Researchers warned that the increasing pressures of offering quality higher education at an affordable cost to poor or low-income students can shift the focus of a Christian higher institution from its distinctive mission and purpose to mere survival and from its emphasis on the common good to individual good (Collins & Clanton, 2018; Daniels et al., 2019). Therefore, scholars have cautioned against reactive responses to the challenges posed by the rising cost of higher education, such as reducing faculty, increasing tuition, or increasing courses and programs to compete with secular institutions because they may cost Christian higher education its distinctiveness. Instead, they suggested strategically accepting and addressing the challenge and striving to reimagine Christian higher education (Collins & Clanton, 2018; Daniels et al., 2019; Hulme et al., 2016).

### ***Leadership Turnover***

Barton (2019) warned of an impending leadership crisis in higher education, citing a projected exodus of senior-level faculty and less attention to adequate succession planning. Consequently, Christian higher institutions have come under pressure to deliver on their mission's promise to produce godly, influential, and transformational leaders (Schreiner, 2018). Barton (2019) recommended that Christian higher institutional leaders deliberately develop a conducive organizational culture to develop and produce new innovative and transformational leaders. The CCCU (2021) posited that Christian colleges and universities are the laboratories for producing the next generation of godly leaders. Therefore, they must prioritize preparing and developing future leaders to reimagine Christian higher education in today's challenging and competitive landscape.

### ***Student Unpreparedness for Life After College***

Student unpreparedness for life after college is now considered a significant threat to higher education enterprise in the United States (Wicks, 2019). A recent survey by the Mary Christie Institute and affiliates indicated that nearly 40% of young graduates felt unprepared for the workplace by their colleges (American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2023). Another recent survey revealed that 40% of business leaders believed that recent college graduates are unprepared to contribute meaningfully to the workplace and society (PR Newswire, 2023).

Conflicting reports exist in the literature regarding the capability of Christian higher education institutions to adequately prepare students for a life of service after college. Roso (2019) reported that students in a Christian university perceived they were well-prepared to apply classroom theory to solve real-world problems and practice their Christian faith through service learning. Other studies also indicated that students who attended Christian higher institutions experienced a notable change in their worldview and growth in their leadership skills to impact society positively (Koonce et al., 2018; Savarirajan & Fong, 2019). In support, Mann (2020) stated that Christian higher institutions in the United States can positively transform and prepare students to engage and transform local and global communities.

However, the results of a study conducted by Poppinga et al. (2019) suggested that students leaving many Christian higher institutions in the United States are underprepared to constructively engage and serve a post-

Christianity society because the demographic compositions of students and staff do not reflect the growing religious diversity of society in the twenty-first century. Likewise, the results of a recent survey of 57 member institutions of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities by Lawson and Schreiner (2021) indicated a lack of institutional infrastructure and support to prepare doctoral students for life after college. Other studies also cast doubt on the effectiveness of the existing Christian higher institutions curriculum in adequately preparing students to be good ambassadors of Jesus Christ in their workplaces (Guthrie, 2018; Schreiner, 2018). There is a growing acceptance of servant leadership as a promising model for addressing many problems facing higher institutions, especially student unpreparedness for real-world engagement after college (Alshammari et al., 2019; Wicks, 2019).

### **The Future of Christian Higher Education**

Many concerned researchers about the future of Christian higher education have offered some recommendations for its survival and thriving in the highly competitive higher institutions landscape in the United States (Barton, 2019; Collins & Clanton, 2018; Daniels et al., 2019; Gregorutti et al., 2017; Hulme et al., 2018; Jagela, 2019; Roldan Hernandez, 2023). The recommendations include embracing a distinct identity in a postmodern world, effectively integrating faith and learning, and prioritizing producing a new generation of innovative leaders.

#### ***Embracing a Distinct Identity in a Postmodern World***

Christian higher education institutions are under increasing pressure to change or redefine their unique religious identity and mission to comport with social changes in the postmodern world (Daniels et al., 2019). Christian higher institutions share three fundamental commitments: integrating biblical truth, fostering Christian virtues, and advancing God's kingdom in the world (CCCU, 2018, 2021). Though all higher education institutions produce and disseminate knowledge, engage in various forms of community outreach, and prepare students for careers, the uniqueness of Christian higher education institutions is integrating the Christian faith with learning to transform, develop, prepare, and equip students holistically for the common good of society (Collins & Clanton, 2018; Roso, 2019; Tulung et al., 2024). To survive and thrive in the highly competitive higher education landscape in a post-Christian world, scholars recommended that Christian higher institutions embrace, promote, and defend their unique identity and mission as Christ-centered institutions (Daniels et al., 2019; Tulung et al., 2024).

Additionally, Daniels et al. (2019) suggested that while staying true to their Christian identity and mission, Christian higher education institutions must integrate liberal arts throughout their curriculum to develop student's analytical, critical thinking, and communication skills and must also seek to reinforce the ideals of free speech and academic freedom on their campuses. Other scholars agreed with these recommendations, stressing the need for Christian higher education institutions to promote meaningful dialogues and critical and ethical engagements among different campus perspectives to bridge gaps between different worldviews (Tulung et al., 2024). Also, Schreiner (2018) suggested that Christian higher institutions intentionally market and promote their distinctiveness and efforts to prepare students for individual good and society's common good.

### ***Effective Integration of Faith and Learning***

Christian higher education institutions contribute distinctively to the landscape of higher education by integrating faith and learning to transform and develop students holistically into godly, influential, and transformational leaders who will positively change the world (Mann, 2020; Roso, 2019; Savarirajan & Fong, 2019; Schreiner, 2018). Savarirajan and Fong (2019) indicated that integrating faith and learning positively impacted students' development and understanding of the Christian worldview of science. The findings also underscored the significant role of the faculty grounded in the Christian worldview in the effective integration of faith and learning in classes. Likewise, in a study by Roso (2019), all the students perceived they were equipped and prepared to apply classroom theory to solve real-world problems and practice their Christian faith through service learning (S.L.). Moreover, the results showed the relevance and significance of implementing S.L. in Christian institutions as an effective method for integrating faith and learning and helping students realize the connection between classroom theory and Christian faith. Scholars recommended that Christian higher education institutions should be more creative in integrating faith and learning to thrive in the highly competitive higher education landscape in the United States (Daniels et al., 2019; Tulung et al., 2024).

### ***Prioritizing Producing a New Generation of Innovative Leaders***

Barton (2019) warned of an impending leadership crisis in higher education, citing a projected exodus of senior-level faculty and less attention to adequate succession planning. Therefore, Christian higher education institutional leaders must prioritize developing a conducive organizational culture to develop and produce new innovative and transformational leaders (Barton, 2019). The CCCU (2021) posited that Christian colleges and universities are the laboratories for producing the next generation of godly leaders. The survival and thriving of Christian higher institutions in the current highly competitive landscape of higher education largely depends on the emergence of new leaders that will redesign traditional hierarchical structures, foster more equitable and inclusive leadership environments, and initiate more collaborative leadership models (Barton, 2019).

Many researchers have proposed servant leadership as the most promising model for addressing the various challenges facing higher education institutions and preparing students for life after college (Alshammari et al., 2019; Jagela, 2019; Rega & Honen-Delmar, 2022; Wicks, 2019). Researchers argued that today's higher education leaders must become servant leaders to address the problem of student unpreparedness for life after college (Wicks, 2019) and to position higher education institutions to compete in the global market (Alshammari et al., 2019). The literature is replete with various studies conducted in higher education settings to understand the impact of servant leadership on staff and faculty members, such as the effect of servant leadership on faculty job satisfaction (Hashim et al., 2020), work engagement (Zainab et al., 2022), work engagement and affective commitment (Aboramadam et al., 2021), innovation (Maalouf, 2023), job satisfaction and trust (Zummy et al., 2022).

Limited studies have also been conducted to examine the influence of servant leadership on students in higher education institutions, such as undergraduate students' perceptions of the servant leadership behavior of their

professors at a private university (Alshammari et al., 2019) and undergraduate students' perceptions of servant leadership behaviors exhibited by faculty, staff, and students within two Christian denominational campuses (Jagela, 2019). Yue et al. (2024) explored the impact of undergraduates' servant leadership on their self-perception of their employability. Bao-Jian and Hsuan-Po (2024) investigated the influence of undergraduates' perceived servant leadership on their innovative self-efficacy.

Studies have also examined the connection between servant leadership and undergraduate students' cognitive learning and a sense of empowerment (Du et al., 2024). However, research exploring graduate students' perceptions of the impact of servant leadership within Christian higher education settings on student preparedness to serve society after graduation still needs to be included in the literature (Du et al., 2024; Yue et al., 2024). This qualitative descriptive single case study addresses this gap in the literature by exploring graduate students' perceptions of the impact of servant leadership at a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States on student preparedness to engage, serve, and contribute to the common good of society after graduation.

### Research Questions

This study explored graduate students' perceptions of the impact of servant leadership at a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States on their preparedness to engage, serve, and contribute to the common good of society after graduation. The following questions were used to guide this exploration:

**RQ1:** How do graduate students at a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States perceive their preparedness to engage, serve, and contribute to the common good of society after graduation?

**RQ2:** Which servant leadership behaviors exhibited by administrators, staff, and faculty at a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States do graduate students believe most impact their perception of their preparedness to engage, serve, and contribute to the common good of society after graduation?

### Methodology

Researchers have used quantitative and qualitative methodologies to explore the influence of servant leadership in higher education settings. The literature is replete with multiple quantitative studies examining the impact of servant leadership in higher education settings from the perspectives of administrators, staff, and faculty members (Aboramadam et al., 2021; Hashim et al., 2020; Maalouf, 2023; Melinda et al., 2020; Zainab et al., 2022; Zummy et al., 2022). A few researchers have also conducted qualitative studies to examine the influence of servant leadership in higher education from the perspectives of undergraduate students (Cong et al., 2024; Dami et al., 2024) and graduates (Rega & Honen-Delmar, 2022). This study explored graduate students' perceptions of the impact of servant leadership on their preparedness to engage, serve, and contribute to the common good of society after graduation at a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States.

The qualitative methodology was deemed more appropriate for investigating the central phenomenon of this study and addressing the research questions. The purpose of this study aligns with the selection of a qualitative methodology, as it necessitates interviewing graduate students to understand their perceptions of the impact of servant leadership. The qualitative methodology facilitates direct and close interaction between the researcher and participants. This approach enables an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, allowing for a comprehensive analysis and interpretation of the research findings (Merriam et al., 2023). Qualitative methodology emphasizes a detailed examination of a specific concept or phenomenon, incorporates flexibility and adaptability, and relies on inductive reasoning. Also, qualitative methodology involves studying the context within which participants exist and encourages collaboration with those participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023).

A qualitative methodology for this study was suitable, as it would provide detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences, thoughts, emotions, and perceptions (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). Stake (1995) stipulated using qualitative methodology when a detailed understanding of a phenomenon is only possible by allowing the participants to voice their opinions. Bloomberg and Volpe (2023) echoed this assertion, stating that qualitative methodology is more appropriate than quantitative methodology for promoting a deep understanding of a phenomenon from the research participants' perspectives. Bloomberg and Volpe (2023) argued that qualitative research gives voice to the research participants. The qualitative methodology allows researchers to study phenomena of interest in their natural or real-world settings to understand them from the participants' perspectives (Merriam et al., 2023). The study phenomenon can only be explored and understood from the research participants' perspectives. Therefore, selecting a qualitative methodology was appropriate for this study. The study's research questions included how and what. Bloomberg and Volpe (2023) and Yin (2018) stated that the qualitative methodology best addresses open-ended questions of how and what.

The study's problem, purpose, and research questions justify using a descriptive single case study as the research design. Yin (2018) stipulated that a case study should be used to explore and understand a contemporary phenomenon in depth within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context may not be evident. Employing a case study will enable a comprehensive understanding of the central phenomenon within its real-world context. A case study is designed to delimit the object (the case), which makes it most appropriate for the study. A case study is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system (Merriam et al., 2023). The possibility of excluding all other students and limiting the participants to graduate students at a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States makes the study phenomenon intrinsically bounded.

### **Population and Sample**

The population for this qualitative descriptive single case study consisted of male and female graduate students attending a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States. The study population is not vulnerable or protected, making it feasible to meet the Institutional Review Board (IRB) considerations (Booker-Zorigan & Lloyd, 2021). After obtaining the NU IRB approval letter and site permission from the institution, using the NU IRB approved recruitment letter and flyer, a small purposive sample consisting of 13

participants were recruited who met the study's eligibility criteria—were at least 18 years or older and graduate students at a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States. The participants included nine female and four male participants. The ages of the participants ranged from 23 to 34 years. The participants self-identified as Caucasian, Hispanic, and Black. All participants reported being Christians. Table 1 presents the demographic summary of the participants.

Table 1. Demographics of Participants

Participants	Age	Gender	Race
P1	26	Female	Caucasian
P2	26	Female	Hispanic
P3	27	Male	Black
P4	24	Female	Hispanic
P5	23	Female	Hispanic
P6	23	Female	Black
P7	34	Male	Black
P8	23	Male	Hispanic
P9	26	Female	Black
P10	24	Male	Hispanic
P11	23	Female	Caucasian
P12	24	Female	Caucasian
P13	25	Female	Caucasian

Yin (2018) suggested a sample size of 12-15 to attain data saturation. The small size of the purposive sample made it feasible to complete the study successfully within the timeframe. Purposive sampling is the most time-effective and cost-effective method of selecting sample participants for qualitative case studies (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). Purposive sampling is the non-probabilistic sampling technique used in qualitative research that involves intentionally selecting participants with specific required characteristics, knowledge, or experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023; Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). Using the purposive sampling technique ensured the selection of sample participants who met the pre-selected criteria to provide rich data relevant to the research problem and purpose (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023; Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019).

### **Instrumentation**

Qualitative researchers may employ multiple data collection techniques, including interviews, focus groups, observation, document review, and critical incident reports, to gather qualitative data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023; Merriam et al., 2023). In this study, I employed two sources of data, one-on-one semi-structured interviews and focus groups, to gain an in-depth understanding of the study phenomenon, achieve data triangulation, and enhance the study's credibility. The study's primary data collection method was a one-on-one semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews are a primary source of rich data for qualitative case studies (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023).

Using semi-structured open-ended interview questions for the qualitative case study allows for the balance between interview questions and interview dynamics (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023; Merriam et al., 2023). Semi-structured interview protocols enable researchers to pursue a consistent line of inquiry related to the study and some spontaneity to follow new directions emerging during the natural exchange of views (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023). The interview questions were submitted to a panel of experts for review via email. The interview questions were revised according to the feedback from the panel of experts. The validated interview protocol (see Appendix G) was subsequently used for data collection from the research participants.

Despite the inherent strengths and advantages of interviews, researchers have identified some weaknesses or limitations of interviews as a qualitative data-collection technique, including response bias due to the researcher's presence, inaccuracies due to participants' poor recall, perception, or articulation, and asymmetrical power relations between researchers and participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023; Merriam et al., 2023). Therefore, the interview data collected was corroborated with data from focus groups to achieve data triangulation and enhance the study's credibility because they produce different types of data from one-on-one interviews by fostering interactivity and dialogue among research participants and encouraging a variety of viewpoints on the study phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023). A focus group consisting of seven participants, who had been previously interviewed individually and were available, was interviewed in a group setting using the focus group protocol. A panel of experts reviewed and approved the focus group protocol. The focus group questions differed from those used in the one-on-one interviews to generate new rich, broad, and deep data.

### **Study Procedures**

After obtaining NU IRB approval (see Appendix A) and permission from the research site (see Appendix B), the study participants were recruited by pasting the NU IRB-approved recruitment letter and flyer on bulletin boards and distributing them on the campus. Participants who met the eligibility criteria—are at least 18 years or older and graduate students at a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States—were recruited for the study. A small purposive sample of 13 participants who met the eligibility criteria were emailed the information letter and consent form (see Appendix J) approved by the NU IRB. After obtaining consent, individual interviews and focus groups were scheduled by mutual agreement. The 13 participants were interviewed individually over Zoom using the NU IRB-approved interview protocol for the study. The one-on-one interview sessions lasted approximately 50 minutes on average.

Out of the 13 participants who participated in the one-on-one interview, only seven were available for the focus group session. The seven participants were interviewed over Zoom for 67 minutes using the NU IRB-approved focus group protocol (see Appendix H) for the study. The transcribed interviews were sent to each participant to review, correct, and confirm their accuracy. They reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of the information. Two participants pointed out some spelling mistakes, which were immediately corrected. The verified interview and focus group data were imported into NVivo 14 for comprehensive thematic analysis. The thematic data analytic approach allows researchers to generate codes inductively for thick and detailed descriptions required for case studies (Merriam et al., 2023).

## Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research is a complex, non-linear, iterative, and recursive process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the masses of data collected from multiple sources (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023). Researchers use data analysis to answer research questions (Merriam et al., 2023). Although numerous methods exist for qualitative data analysis, in this study, I employed thematic analysis utilizing NVivo 14. Thematic analysis was selected for this qualitative case study because it enables the inductive generation of codes for comprehensive and detailed descriptions necessary for case studies (Merriam et al., 2023). Also, thematic analysis allows for examining multiple perspectives of the research participants and highlighting similarities and differences in their perspectives, which are necessary for an in-depth exploration and understanding of a case (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023; Merriam et al., 2023). Thematic analysis fully embraces the values of qualitative research and the researcher's subjectivity (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023).

Thematic analysis focuses on uncovering recurring patterns or themes within the masses of raw narrative data collected in the fields by researchers, identifying any relationship among these patterns or themes, and developing a thick description of them (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023; Merriam et al., 2023). In thematic analysis, researchers may use an inductive approach with themes emerging from the data or predetermined themes based on existing theory or literature in a deductive approach. Data collection and preliminary analysis proceed simultaneously in thematic data analysis. Data analysis begins immediately after the first raw data is collected and progresses more intensively until the end of the research process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023). Therefore, as soon as the first raw data from the one-on-one semi-structured interview were collected, I started to analyze the data following the six steps of thematic analysis (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023; Merriam et al., 2023).

Figure 1 shows the six steps of thematic analysis used to analyze interview and focus group data with NVivo 14. Familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

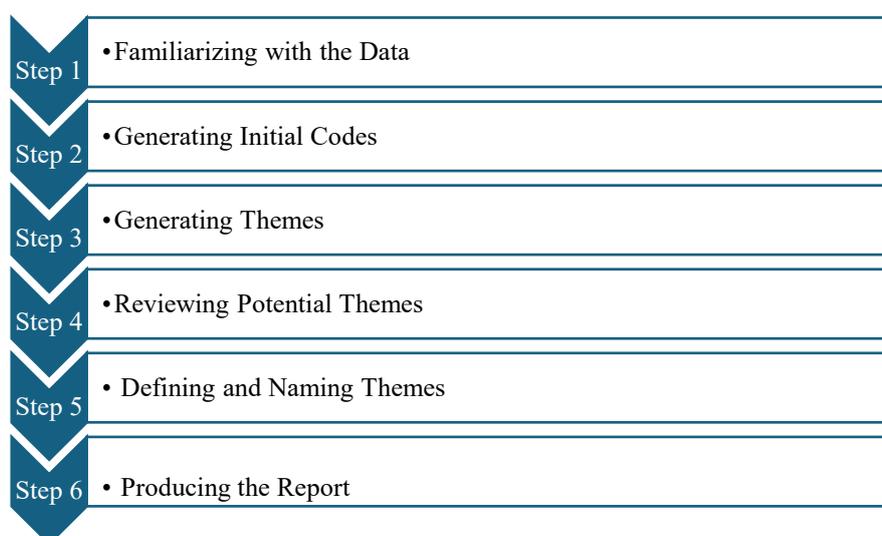


Figure 1. The Six Steps of Thematic Analysis

### ***Step 1: Familiarizing with the Data***

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2023), data must be well organized before it can be analyzed thoroughly. Therefore, the first step in the thematic data analysis process is properly organizing and preparing the voluminous raw qualitative data collected from multiple sources. This step involves transcribing interviews, converting the handwritten observation field notes to text files, winnowing, sorting, and arranging the data into different types depending on the data sources, and labeling them accordingly (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2023). After verifying that all information was complete, readable, well-labeled, and securely stored to maintain the confidentiality of research participants, I set about familiarizing myself with the data. The interview and focus group transcripts were retrieved and printed from Zoom for detailed reading and initial manual coding. Each transcript was read thoroughly and multiple times to understand the data and develop insights gained during the data collection. The data were uploaded into NVivo 14 for comprehensive thematic analysis.

### ***Step 2: Generating Initial Codes***

After thoroughly reviewing the data multiple times to understand and identify the big ideas, I coded the data and organized the coded segments into categories using NVivo 14. Codes are shorthand (names or identifiers) that researchers attach to a data segment they deem relevant to the study. Coding is essential to understanding, managing, sorting, and structuring a mass of raw data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023). Creswell and Poth (2018) describe coding as winnowing the data collected. According to Saldaña (2021), coding is a cyclical act. The first cycle of coding is rarely perfect. Therefore, researchers must revise codes and add new codes as they emerge.

Coding involves identifying words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs of interest or significance in a mass of data, segmenting them into categories, and labeling those categories with a term, often based on the actual language of the research participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023; Merriam et al., 2023). Researchers can create codes inductively by deriving codes from the data and deductively using a predetermined set of codes, categories, or themes (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023). In this study, I utilized an inductive approach by deriving codes directly from the data using the exact words or phrases expressed by the participants. This method is referred to as open coding. The codes were subsequently classified into distinct categories. Categories must be responsive to the purpose of the research, exhaustive, mutually exclusive, sensitizing, and conceptually congruent (Merriam et al., 2023).

### ***Step 3: Generating Themes***

Following the coding of all data and the organization of codes into categories, themes were derived from these categorized coded extracts. This step involves developing themes that capture recurring coherent and meaningful patterns across all the data and defining the nature of each theme to the existing literature. Themes are a powerful way to see trends and patterns across the data. Emergent themes inform research findings and are directly tied to the research questions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023). Themes are significant findings in qualitative studies, and they must display multiple perspectives of the participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023). Participants' quotations

must be included to support the themes generated (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023; Merriam et al., 2023).

#### ***Step 4: Reviewing Potential Themes***

This step involved assessing the potential themes identified in relation to the coded data and the overall dataset. Themes that did not effectively serve as meaningful interpretations of the data or provide insights relevant to the research questions were subsequently revised. Each revised theme must be distinct and supported by sufficient data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023; Merriam et al., 2023). These themes will be used as headings in the findings section of this study.

#### ***Step 5: Defining and Naming Themes***

This step involves determining which data items to select as extracts when presenting the analysis results. Defining themes involves thoroughly analyzing the underlying data items (Byrne, 2022). The chosen extracts must clearly and accurately present the arguments made by a specific theme (Byrne, 2022). The themes that emerged in this study were identified and named through inductive data analysis and deductive application of the theoretical framework underpinning the research.

#### ***Step 6: Producing the Report***

This final step involves presenting a detailed picture of how the analyzed data adequately addresses the research questions. Qualitative researchers report their findings narratively (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023; Merriam et al., 2023). The study's findings will be presented to illustrate how each theme was meticulously derived from an in-depth analysis of the data, ensuring they address the research questions comprehensively. The themes will be used as headings in the findings sections of this study, showcasing various perspectives from participants and substantiated with their quotations.

### **Trustworthiness of the Data**

Providing proof of trustworthiness within a study is critical to evaluating its worth, rigor, and credibility (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023). Trustworthiness in qualitative research entails establishing the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study's findings (Yin, 2018). If a researcher fails to provide proof of trustworthiness, the study is perceived as lacking rigor and credibility, and the findings are worthless or unreliable. Therefore, in this section, I explain how I ensured the four trustworthiness criteria in qualitative research were met in the study.

#### ***Credibility***

Credibility refers to whether the study's findings accurately represent research participants' perceptions, experiences, emotions, and actions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023). In this study, I used triangulation and member

checking to establish the credibility of the study's findings. Triangulation is using multiple data sources, data collection or analysis methods, theoretical frameworks, or researchers to test and establish the credibility of the study's findings (Stahl & King, 2020). I employed two data sources in this study, one-on-one interviews and focus groups, to achieve data triangulation and enhance the study's credibility. I also used member checking to establish the credibility of the research findings. Member checking involves taking back the transcribed interviews, preliminary findings, or summaries of the researcher's interpretations to participants to review and check whether they accurately portray their perceptions, experiences, feelings, or actions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023; Merriam et al., 2023, Motulsky, 2021). I sent the transcribed interviews to each participant to review, correct, and confirm their accuracy. They reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of the information. Two participants pointed out some spelling mistakes, which were immediately corrected.

### ***Transferability***

Transferability in qualitative research measures the extent to which the study's findings are applicable within other contexts and settings. Researchers cannot guarantee the transferability of the study's findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023); however, researchers can demonstrate the transferability of their findings by providing thick descriptions of the research context and process to enable other researchers to evaluate whether they can apply the study's findings to their contexts. Thick description refers to thoroughly describing the research context, participants, related experiences and interactions, data analysis, and findings so that readers can understand the research process and make contextualized meaning (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023; Stahl & King, 2020). In this study, I provided thick descriptions of the research methodology and design, population and sample, instrumentation, study procedures, data analysis, and findings for readers to determine if the findings are applicable to different situations and settings.

### ***Dependability***

Dependability in qualitative research is a measure of the stability and consistency of the study's findings. In other words, dependability concerns whether the study's findings would be compatible with other researchers' findings if replicated with the same participants or in similar contexts (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023). Researchers can establish the dependability of their studies through triangulation, audit trail, and peer review (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023; Stahl & King, 2020). Triangulation was developed in this study by using two sources of data, one-on-one interviews and focus groups, to address and support the study's dependability.

Additionally, I kept an audit trail throughout the study. An audit trail is a clear and comprehensive record of all the choices, decisions, and steps taken throughout the research and the rationale for them. Using NVivo 14 software for thematic analysis of the data helped to further establish the dependability of the findings by allowing detailed data organization, creating an audit trail of the entire data analysis process, and providing features to track and query themes, patterns, and relationships within the data. The dissertation committee also had access to all the research documents and data to ensure transparency and auditable documentation of the research process.

### ***Confirmability***

Confirmability in qualitative research refers to whether the study's findings are derived from the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023). Confirmability is the degree of data neutrality of the study (Stahl & King, 2020). In other words, confirmability is the extent to which the study's findings and interpretations are shown to be the research outcome and not the researcher's biases, assumptions, prejudices, or subjectivities. Using an audit trail and triangulation, researchers can demonstrate the study's confirmability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023; Stahl & King, 2020). An audit trail refers to a transparent, detailed, and thorough description of how qualitative research was conducted. Throughout the study, I kept an audit trail including field notes, transcripts, records of raw data, and a reflexive journal to monitor and scrutinize my perspectives, biases, assumptions, values, interests, experiences, and expectations that might influence the research process and findings. I also employed data triangulation, using two data sources in the study, to establish the confirmability of the study's findings.

### **Assumptions**

I assumed that all participants in the study willingly provided honest answers to the interview questions and shared their perspectives on the study phenomenon. I assumed the research participants were sincere in their motives for participating. Further, I assumed that the small sample of participants selected through purposive sampling were valid representatives of the study population and would be able to provide rich narrative data to address the research problem and questions and achieve the research purpose—exploring the graduate students' perceptions of the impact of servant leadership at a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States on their preparedness to serve society after graduation for the study.

### **Limitations**

The nature of the research methodology and design and the purposive sample selected for this study impose some limitations on the study. In qualitative research, researchers do not employ instruments designed by other researchers to collect and analyze data. Instead, qualitative researchers are the primary instruments for collecting and analyzing data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023; Merriam et al., 2023). The researcher, being at the center of qualitative research, actively participating in the study, observing, interviewing, and engaging research participants may present some limitations to the study (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019).

The researcher's personal biases, experience, and expertise in data collection and analysis may affect the quality of the research. The closeness between qualitative researchers and participants may cast doubt on the ability of the researchers to collect, analyze, and interpret data in an objective, unbiased manner (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023; Merriam et al., 2023). I sought to mitigate the limitations that may be imposed on the study due to the researcher's personal biases by keeping a reflexive journal to monitor and clarify any biases brought to the study and how they may impact and influence all aspects and stages of the research process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023; Holmes, 2020). Further, I provided a transparent and detailed audit trail, used triangulation (multiple collection methods of data—interviews and focus groups), and member-checking to mitigate the limitations.

The researcher's ability to construct semi-structured interviews and focus group questions related to the study phenomenon that will elicit and generate rich narrative data to explore and understand the phenomenon may present some limitations to the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023). Likewise, the researcher's skills in conducting face-to-face interviews, moderating in focus groups, thematic data analysis, and using NVivo may impose some limitations on the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023). I sought to mitigate these limitations by sending the semi-structured interviews and focus group questions to a panel of experts to review and approve them. Additionally, I endeavored to enhance my competencies in conducting interviews, moderating focus groups, and utilizing NVivo through practical applications.

The limited generality of qualitative research is an unavoidable limitation of this study. Qualitative research aims not to produce findings that can be generalized to other people or settings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023). The inherent weaknesses of interviews as a qualitative data-collection technique, including response bias due to the researcher's presence, inaccuracies due to participants' poor recall, perception, or articulation, and asymmetrical power relations between researchers and participants may also impose some limitations on this study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2023). The small purposive research sample of 13 graduate students studying at a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States poses an unavoidable potential limitation to the study. The study sample selected through purposive sampling may not represent the demographic diversity of the graduate student population at the university and across the country.

### **Delimitations**

The delimitation of this qualitative case study was precluding other stakeholders of Christian higher education institutions in the United States, such as faculty instructors, administrative staff, college administrators, parents, and church leaders in the study. The literature is replete with various studies that examined the perceptions of multiple stakeholders on the influence of servant leadership in Christian higher education institutions (Aboramadam et al., 2021; Melinda et al., 2020; Zainab et al., 2022). Graduate student perceptions of the influence of servant leadership in Christian higher education settings are still underrepresented in the literature. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive single case study was to explore graduate student perceptions of the impact of servant leadership at a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States on their preparedness to engage, serve, and contribute to the common good of society after graduation. The purposive sampling method employed in this study was well-suited to achieving the study's purpose.

### **Ethical Assurances**

When conducting qualitative research, Tolich and Tumilty (2020) asserted that researchers must develop ethics praxis—the ability to plan appropriately upfront and the agility to respond ethically in the field. Bloomberg and Volpe (2023) echoed this assertion, stressing that researchers must show ethical considerations when selecting a research topic and continuing throughout the research process. In this study, I adhered strictly to the fundamental ethical principles of conducting research involving human participants: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, as stipulated in the Belmont Report (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979). All

participants were well informed about the purpose, the research design, the expected duration, the right to decline or withdraw participation at any time, confidentiality limits, and potential participation risks and benefits.

I obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of National University before commencing data collection. All participants were provided with an informed consent form per the guidelines of the NU IRB. All participants were treated fairly, equitably, and equally respected as autonomous agents. No coercion or undue influence was exerted on any participants. There were no significant anticipated risks to the participants involved in this study. I followed NU IRB and CITI guidelines for data collection. I protected participants' confidentiality throughout the study using pseudonyms instead of real names. In addition, all the signed consent forms, data, and research documents will be securely stored in a password-protected computer to protect the confidentiality of the participants beyond the study. Throughout the research process, I used reflexive practices to examine, monitor, question, and address the personal views, values, beliefs, expectations, biases, and assumptions brought to the study to mitigate their impact on the research design, conduct, and findings. Adopting a reflexive approach is essential for identifying, articulating, developing, and shaping the researcher's positionality (Holmes, 2020). Also, I employed triangulation, journaling, member checks, and peer review to reduce the impact of potential biases on the research findings.

## Results

This qualitative descriptive single case study explored graduate students' perceptions of the impact of servant leadership on their preparedness to engage, serve, and contribute to the common good of society after graduation at a small, private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States. According to the information on the institution's website, it is a Christ-centered institution of higher learning committed to equipping the next generation of leaders to enter the world as influential servant leaders in their careers and communities. The institution offers more than 115 degree programs at the associate, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels to about 12,000 students. After collecting data from one-on-one interviews and focus groups, I reviewed the interview transcripts from Zoom, correcting punctuation and spelling errors. Subsequently, I sent the interview transcripts to the participants for review and confirmation of accuracy. All participants responded, confirming the transcripts' accuracy. The approved interview transcripts were uploaded into NVivo 14 to develop four themes using the six steps of thematic analysis explained in the methodology section to address the two research questions.

### Theme 1: Cultivating Servant Leadership

Table 2 presents the development of theme 1: Cultivating Servant Leadership. This theme addresses the first research question regarding graduate students' perception of their preparedness to serve society after graduation. Through open coding, 46 significant codes were identified based on participants' keywords, phrases, or sentences. These codes were then grouped into two categories: Campus Leaders Demonstrate Servant Leadership and Students Learn and Practice Servant Leadership.

Table 2. Codes, Categories, and Theme 1: Cultivating Servant Leadership

Codes	Categories	Theme
Role Model, Active Listening, A Leader, A Servant Heart, Building and Recognizing Team, Empathy, Cultivate, Examples of Good Leaders, Giving Us the Example, Observing My Professors, Teaching Us, We talked a lot about Leadership, Showing Servant Leadership, Reminder, Servant Leaders, Servant Leadership, Positive Leaders, Professors, Connections, Good Leader, Greatest Leaders	Campus Leaders Demonstrate Servant Leadership	Cultivating Servant Leadership
Read Leadership Books, Learned a lot about Having Empathy, Learning to Become a Servant Leaders, Admire the Leadership, Good Exercise in Servant Leadership, Growing and Pushing Myself, Giving Back to the Community, Put into Practice, Opportunities to Grow, Opportunity to Help, Opportunity to Serve, Incorporate, Serving My Community, Serve Others, Grow, Integrate, Mission Trip, Volunteer, Trying to be a Servant Leader, See the Impact, Legacy, Huge Benefit, Development	Students Learn and Practice Servant Leadership	

All research participants contributed to the development of theme 14: Cultivating Servant Leadership. They reported efforts to cultivate servant leadership by observing and learning from campus administrators, faculty, and staff who demonstrate servant leadership behaviors and provide opportunities to practice servant leadership.

P1 conveyed their willingness to learn and apply servant leadership principles:

I think it is on you to decide how you will serve if you're going to do it with a servant's heart, or if you're going just to do it for your own gain, you know. So, knowing that, I came into this role with the hope of learning how to become a servant leader in the back of my mind. And so, I look to these opportunities to grow and not just seek to work my way up some kind of leadership ladder. I've also been looking to these people to give me examples of what it means to be a good leader.

P2 articulated that their professor's attendance at their event, providing support, has inspired them to cultivate and practice servant leadership.

My professor came to the event I organized on campus, and you know, he supported me. So, I feel like the servant leadership that my professor showed me, and my other professors have shown me through all these years, has made me want to be like that. and they listen to me, they try to understand me and be graceful, and that has made me want to aspire to be a good leader.

P3 mentioned that their professors had encouraged them to embrace and practice servant leadership:

My professors have really inspired me to serve others. In all that I do, or even with my roommates, I try to practice servant leadership on a small scale.

P4 stated their intention to be a servant leader, inspired by observing servant leadership demonstrated by their

mother and faculty:

The biggest servant leader that I have as a role model will be my mom. Since I was a little kid, my mom owns a company. So, she's the highest in the position of a company, of course, so she was a person who lived by example, but not only by that, but she also took care of everyone like in other positions. Seeing that since I was a little kid and continuing to see that in my university, it's something that I'm also trying to aim to excel at in my life every day. I'm trying to be a servant leader every day because I think that's how we can meet people's needs. I think it's the best way.

P5 discussed how servant leadership by campus leaders inspired their community involvement:

Our department has a social work Advocacy Club. We go out and give out food for the unhoused people groups in the community dream center and pick up trash. And so, they have a whole club for that, and I try to go to, and then I also volunteer at my church which they have like a center, where they give out food to the unhoused people. We host events where people can get clothes. So yes, I am involved in giving back to the community.

P6 mentioned learning empathy by observing their professors demonstrating it:

I was inspired by my professor to become a leader and get more involved on campus. And I just admire the leadership and the way they go about things. I learned a lot about empathy for others, observing my professors truly putting yourself in someone's shoes, and going out of your way to figure out what they need and what I can do to help them.

P7 stated their commitment to contribute to society after graduation, inspired by their campus leaders:

After graduation, we have, as international students, one year to opt. So, I told myself that while doing the opt, I could channel whatever I've learned or have been taught in the university to help people in society by giving back, teaching people, influencing, and imparting my knowledge.

P8 shared that their professors taught them to seek God's guidance in their plans:

I have learned from my professors that if you surrender your life to God, you don't know what to do. And it's okay. But God will guide you step by step; even if you don't see the whole picture at the end of the day, you will see that God is guiding you through the things and places you are supposed to go.

P9 discussed how volunteering highlighted the needs of underprivileged children in the impoverished area of the community:

I volunteered at the Dream Center with children in impoverished areas of this community. I really enjoyed the volunteering I did with the Dream Center. We would go on Saturdays, play with the kids, and then teach them a Bible lesson. And then we would give them snacks, and I really enjoyed that because it opened my eyes to the need of these children to have someone to look up to because it was a very, very rough neighborhood that you shouldn't go in at all. And these children were living there. They were living in circumstances that I was privileged enough not to have to live in, and it was something that really opened my eyes.

P10 mentioned that campus leaders are helping students develop servant leadership:

They're actively teaching us or giving us examples of what it will look like, telling us the right thing, guiding us, and giving us wisdom and advice to be great leaders.

P11 reported significant growth and essential leadership skills development:

I think one of the biggest things I have developed is my soft skills and maybe my people skills, as well

as being able to understand others, be empathetic, be humble, and implement different types of leadership, especially as an executive leadership major. I've learned so many different leadership theories, frameworks, and types of leadership. And so, I think I have grown a lot as a person, and being able to engage with others, both in a personal and professional setting, and just practice some of the things I learned here to have more meaningful relationships, to have a good career, and just to have a good life in general.

P12 expressed confidence in their ability to embody servant leadership in any future endeavors:

I don't know what my plans are. I know something about music, whether that's me being a singer or songwriter or working in the music industry from the business side. But I've been able to see it done, you know, from all areas. You can still be a servant leader wherever you are and go. Yeah, that's good. That's a great plan.

P13 felt they should contribute more to the community:

I've volunteered with our Super Kids Ministry, which is our ministry for children with special needs. Honestly, I feel like I'm not pouring in as much as I think I actually need to. Outside of the church and my workplace, I don't know how much community service I actually do, which was a little convicting on my part.

## Theme 2: Cultivating Servant Leadership

Table 3 presents the development of theme 2: Ready and Eager to Serve Society. This theme emerged from 30 codes identified through open coding of individual interviews and focus group data from the research participants. These codes were then consolidated into two categories: Students Feel Equipped and Prepared to Contribute to Society and Students Feel Inspired and Motivated to Serve Society.

Table 3. Codes, Categories, and Theme 2: Ready and Eager to Serve Society

Codes	Categories	Theme
A Completely Changed Person, Changed, Changing My Perception, Perception Shift, Impacted My Life, Choose to Serve, Confidence Level, Confident in My Skills, Gained More Confidence, I Do Feel I'm Prepared, I Feel Empowered, I Feel I have been Equipped, My Way of Thinking has Changed, Ready and Prepared, Prepared, People Skills, Practical Skills, Ready to Contribute to Society, Find Ways to Serve People, Graduate, Soft Skills, Practicing Skills, Preparedness	Students Feel Equipped and Prepared to Contribute to Society	Ready and Eager to Serve Society
Aspire to be a Good Leader, Influenced and Inspired Me, Inspired, Motivating, Motivating Factor, Encouraging, I Love Serving	Students Feel Inspired and Motivated to Serve Society	

All research participants contributed to developing theme 15: Ready and Eager to Serve Society. Participants expressed, with enthusiasm, that their experiences with servant leadership on campus have equipped, prepared, inspired, and motivated them to make meaningful contributions to society after graduation.

P1 expressed their readiness and motivation to continue the legacy of their campus leaders, who have exemplified servant leadership:

It's certainly obviously encouraging to know that there are servant leaders in higher positions, such as the ones I've mentioned. It's also motivating to want to be their student who carries on this legacy they have shown me. So, it's a motivating factor. And I think it has prepared me more for what I'll do after graduation. I think seeing how they integrate all of these different facets of their work, their life, their spirituality, and their servant leadership in this atmosphere has given me more of a context or framework of how I can cultivate that when I graduate.

P2 articulated confidence in their preparedness and possession of the necessary leadership tools to serve as a servant leader following graduation:

You know I am doing the executive leadership. So, I have had some leadership courses, and in addition to all that my professors have taught me, I have read and researched. And I'm like, oh, wow! That's true; leaders should do these things. Oh, wow, like, I do want to follow these. But for sure, that has given me the tools and prepared me to be the leader that I should be and the leader that God wants me to be. I have seen that through my professors and some of the staff, and yes, so I will say yes, it has prepared me to be that.

P3 conveyed their readiness and commitment to serving their community, demonstrating exemplary servant leadership:

I feel I'm ready and prepared to go over and beyond in serving my community and in showing servant leadership. I'm doing this on a small scale in the house, going the extra mile, cleaning the house, and making sure the tables are all well set. When I go back to the village. I want to continue serving my community as a servant leader.

P4 expressed their love and enjoyment in serving their community:

Coming to this university was a mind-changing experience because I learned about servant leadership. I love serving. Serving is part of who I am. It's something that just comes out of me. I don't know how else to explain it. I'm always available to help people, especially if I hold a leadership position.

P5 stated that the school had prepared her to contribute to the community:

I definitely think they do prepare you through those serving opportunities, such as mission trips. They definitely promote it, even in chapel, like to get out of the bubbles because Jesus hangs out with sinners. And that's something that's pushed to give back to our community. So yes, I feel prepared with that firm foundation to serve my community.

P6 stated that they had gained more confidence as a leader and acquired practical leadership skills to use in their future career:

I do feel like I'm prepared. But you always could learn along the way. But I'm prepared to serve my society. I've honestly gained more confidence as a leader, especially with those mandatory leadership classes at the beginning of my freshman year. We talked a lot about leadership. We read leadership

books. We learned how to be a selfless leader. They were very intentional about us developing practical skills, like empathy, active listening, and teamwork, which I now integrate into my job or my internship in my master's program. As a social worker, I plan to use it in my future career. So, I feel like I have been equipped and have become more confident in my skills.

P7 described how the college transformed their thinking and approaches, preparing them to contribute meaningfully to the world:

I'm ready to contribute to society, not even my society, but to the entire world. I'm ready to give back. I'm ready to help. I'm prepared to do whatever is within my means to go out there and do what the Lord has told me to do. This school has had a lot of impact on me. So, it has shaped me. The way they interact and the way they treat people has really shaped me. My way of thinking has changed, and the way I even approach matters has also changed.

P8 attested to the esteemed reputation of the institution within the community, attributing this to the high caliber of students that the school produces:

When you go to any place in this community and you say, oh, I'm from this campus, most of the time, it is easy to connect with people in the community because they know the quality of students who have been doing internships there or helping in the community.

P9 articulated a clear intention and plan to contribute to the community following graduation:

I do want to do something to give back to the community. I'm looking into a women's house where they help women who are pregnant out of wedlock or teenagers. There is another place here that helps women who are homeless, and they do fitness with them, and I love doing fitness. I go to the gym, and that's something that I thought would be really cool to do with these women so they can still stay active. But that's something, of course, I will do after I'm done with my graduate studies.

P10 mentioned a perception shift in school that has made them a better person for society:

One of the things that I've noticed changing is my perception, change. I have learned about forgetting myself, you know, and thinking about others a little more, not taking decisions that are selfish but are for the good of others. I'm not thinking so much about what I'm going to gain. But what is everybody going to gain? I think that that perception shift was, you know, given to me here. I feel like ever since I came here, I've been a different person for the better.

P11 expressed confidence in their servant leadership abilities, drawing from skills gained and examples set by campus leaders:

I think I've seen great examples of servant leaders who have shown me how to be a servant leader and incorporate that in the future, no matter what job I do or what part of the community I engage with. I think I'm pretty confident I can use those skills I've learned from my experience here to serve.

P12 felt confident and prepared to serve society, with plans to continue developing their servant leadership qualities:

I feel confident. Yes, I'm being prepared to do them now, you know, starting to work those qualities now and then, after graduation, just continue to work that you know. It's like working out, you know, to be in great shape or to have strong muscles; you got to keep working at them every day. It's just not going to happen one time, or you sit here and do nothing. You just have to keep working at it, and then, once it becomes a great habit, it just comes naturally. So, I think, with some of those qualities, I've been working

at them now and just have to be more diligent and keep working at them even after graduation.

P13 expressed that their confidence has increased as a result of observing the campus leaders exemplify servant leadership on campus:

Before I came to the college, I was not as confident as I am now. I definitely thought I had a long way to go to become a servant leader. And now that I'm a year in, I'm seeing how they've modeled things and just how they run the college. I'm like, oh, I actually feel empowered to be a servant leader, and I honestly think back to what I was saying. Just seeing them model it so well, I feel pretty confident about it now. There's so much I still need to learn and need to grow. And we're all still learning and growing. But I would say, like 8 out of 10, I probably feel like an 8 with my confidence level.

### Theme 3: Emotional Healing

Table 4 presents the development of theme 3: Emotional Healing. This theme was derived from 23 codes identified through open coding of research participants' responses to individual interviews and focus group questions about the servant leadership behaviors of campus leaders that most influenced their perception of their preparedness to serve society after graduation. The codes were organized into two categories: Supporting and Caring for Students and Demonstrating Empathy Towards Students.

Table 4. Codes, Categories, and Theme 3: Emotional Healing

Codes	Categories	Theme
Care about Me, Caring, Love, Listen, Intentional, Meet the Needs of the People, Willing to See You, Willing to Greet You, Willing to Make Time for You, Grace with her Time, Stewards her Time, Stewardship, Interested in Knowing Students, Remembering Details, Friendship Element	Supporting and Caring for Students	Emotional Healing
Empathetic, Empathy, Grace, Connection, Willingness to Help Students, Wanting Students to Graduate Well, Compassion, Kindness	Demonstrating Empathy Towards Students	

All research participants contributed to the development of this theme. The participants expressed that experiencing emotional healing through the support, care, and empathy demonstrated by their campus leaders is one of the most influential servant leadership behaviors on their perception of their readiness to serve society after graduation.

P1, a graduate assistant, shared that their boss, the Dean, showed care by remembering details from their past conversations, which had a significant impact on them:

I would say the greatest impact has been from my boss, the Dean. Well, quite a few individuals, but her specifically the way she stewards her time to meet the needs of all people. And she's very intentional and

remembering details. I'm always shocked because she doesn't need to remember the details of my life. I'm always shocked when she comes in and asks about something I talked to her about a month ago, and it's very specific to whatever that situation was. So, her grace with time and her grace with her remembering details are both things that I think have always amazed me.

P2 articulated that the empathy shown by their professor during their participation in a tournament had the most significant impact on them:

When I'm in a tournament, I'll say, hey, Professor, I'm in a tournament. My professor always says it's okay. Just let me know if you need extra days after you come from the tournament to complete your homework because I know you'll be tired. Let's schedule the test you missed when you are available and feel comfortable to take the test.

P3 explained that their professors demonstrated understanding when they were contacted on weekends:

So, it's a Sunday when I reach out to our professor today. Most of them will get back to you. First, you may get a message that I'm unable to talk now, and then they call you back almost immediately that, hey, I missed your call, or hey, I miss your email. What can I do for you? They always say that we understand that things happen. You have things coming up. You're an adult. Let me know if you need me to create a schedule that works for you.

P4 mentioned that the kindness from campus leaders greatly influenced their choice to be kind to others:

I've seen the impact of servant leadership on my life. And I'm truly amazed at how a small act of kindness can make a great, very big deal in someone's life, and since experiencing that, it's something that I'm trying to be and do for others.

P5 described how observing their professors' leadership and service in the classroom influenced their decision to assist and serve other students:

Their leadership has definitely impacted me 100 percent. How they just lead the classroom has definitely impacted my life in many ways, how I view the class and other people. And how I can step out of my way and serve others as well just as they serve. If they have given me a resource, I can share with other students just the way they teach and help in and out of the classroom.

P6 expressed how the thoughtful care from their professor after their grandfather's death had a significant impact on them:

I'll say the way they show they care. For example, I had a grandfather who passed away, and I reached out to my professor, and I was like, hey, my grandfather passed away. I'm not going to be in the class, I'm traveling home to go to the funeral. And in about 5 minutes, I got an email from the SOS (Students Outreach Services) team, and they said, hey, we heard about your grandfather. I'm like. Dang! That was fast, like, how did you all hear about that? So, my professor reached out to them, obviously, and they reached out. So, I felt like that was intentional.

P7 mentioned that their professors' compassion, empathy, and willingness to assist significantly influenced them:

It is the compassion, empathy, and willingness to help that has really had a huge impact on me. I've met people who have gone out of their way to do things for me, and I've seen this not only in one person but also in almost every leader I come across. They really want to help more and even extend to your family. They want to know more about your family.

P8 noted that their professors' efforts to understand people's contexts and backgrounds significantly impacted

them.

It is easy to access and connect with my professors. They are interested in understanding people's context and backgrounds. And I don't know, I think these are great qualities.

P9, a graduate assistant, described the significant impact of their boss, the Dean of the college, demonstrating empathy toward students facing difficulties:

Yes, and I would use my boss again as an example. The way he has gone above and beyond for students has influenced me to do as much as I can. The way he's more empathetic towards the students and gives students multiple chances. How do I explain it? For example, if a student is failing something, he's not just going to say, oh, the student is failing because they are not paying attention. He's going to find the source of why the student is failing, talk to the student, and see how he can help the student.

P10 noted that their professors' love, kindness, and care profoundly impacted them:

It's that love, kindness, and care for others that they exemplify that have really stuck with me. I think everything else just stems from that heart.

P11 described how the empathy they received on campus during a rough time recently significantly impacted them:

To get a little bit personal. I had a little bit of a rough patch, maybe a week or two ago, just in my personal life, and my peers and my boss noticed that. And because they're so empathetic, they just picked up the slack for me in some areas. They tried not to overwork me or give me too much at one time so that I wouldn't get even more overwhelmed with the things I was going through, and I could handle my personal life and then get back to normal without having to be almost pushed over the edge, you know. And I think that's a big thing shown all across the board.

P12 mentioned that they observed the willingness of their faculty to help and serve others:

They genuinely want to help other people and meet them where they're at, and just genuinely want to serve them in any shape or form, whether that, you know, is from a practical standpoint or a spiritual standpoint.

P13 was significantly impacted by observing their team caring for someone's well-being:

I've seen that within the team I've been on, it's caring first and foremost about the person, like their well-being and relationship with God, and everything else is secondary to that. I remember an example. One morning, one of our bass players woke up, completely sick and throwing up. It was the day that we had chapel. And it's like, I guess we're just not going to have a bass player. But it wasn't like, oh, my gosh! This is terrible, like the set's going to go bad. I've never experienced that before. Here, it was more like caring about the person.

#### **Theme 4: Helping Students Grow and Succeed**

Table 5 outlines the development of theme 4: Helping Students Grow and Succeed. This theme was derived from identifying 28 codes through open coding of all individual interviews and focus group data from the research participants. These codes were subsequently integrated into two categories: Modeling Servant Leadership to Students and Developing Servant Leadership in Students.

Table 5. Codes, Categories, and Theme 4: Helping Students Grow and Succeed

Codes	Categories	Theme
Role Model, They Do What They Preach, They Teach through Examples, Lead the Way, Sacrifice, Sacrificing, Servanthood, Teamwork, My Boss, Old Provost, Accountability, Honest, Authentic, Authenticity, Respect, Humble, Humility, Spirit of Humility, Looking Beyond Oneself	Modeling Servant Leadership to Students	Helping Students Grow and Succeed
Mission Trips, Opportunities to Grow, Opportunities to Serve, Graceful, Communication, Influenced, Inspired, Teach and Help, Mentoring	Developing Servant Leadership in Students	

All research participants contributed to developing theme 13: Helping Students Grow and Succeed. They described how campus administrators, faculty, and staff exemplified servant leadership to students and promoted the cultivation of servant leadership within the student body.

P1 detailed the opportunities they were provided to develop and practice servant leadership:

Our college is constantly connecting with people from all over the world. We have people always coming and visiting us to establish networking and connections and whatnot. So, part of what I took on for myself was to serve those people as well as I could, so that has given me opportunities to meet people and to find ways to serve people, kind of practicing skills that will be used throughout the rest of my life. I'm thinking about the mission trips again. That would probably be another example. I was able to go on a mission trip this past spring, and choosing to do that was a good exercise in servant leadership regarding team building and recognizing team unity is dependent upon being servant-hearted toward one another. So yeah, that's another opportunity.

P2 mentioned encountering great leaders on campus who cared for students and served as role models:

There are many greatest leaders that I have come across on campus who have made me say, okay, I want to be like that. I want to be graceful like that. I want to care for those who I'm leading. I want to give, you know, be able to give the best that I can for those who I'm leading.

P3 felt motivated after seeing a professor help keep the campus clean:

I saw one of our professors just when we were walking downstairs, and he saw a piece of paper and a piece of another paper, and then he kept picking them and then making sure that they were in the right place in the trash. That is not what he's supposed to do because he has his job. I saw him going beyond the job description to ensure the whole community was cared for. So, that has really influenced and inspired me that it doesn't take anything from me, but it only makes me a role model as well as an asset to the community just going beyond and doing that little thing that doesn't count, and I mean, that nobody cares about.

P4 noted that the authenticity of their campus leaders had a significant impact on them:

I think for me, the highlight will be that they do what they preach. So, it's very, very important to be

authentic. As for who you are and whatever you're saying and proclaiming to be, you're also living to do that. I think that's very key, especially when we talk about religion.

P5 said their professors' emphasis on accountability motivated them:

Accountability has been the most inspirational for me because it's the most practical, like, hey, did you get that homework done? Hey, did you call that doctor? Hey, were you able to get your car fixed? So, when I go out and serve my community, I tell a child, hey, did you do your homework? I'm making sure to keep them accountable but not condemning them for not doing it, and if they did, I'm definitely congratulating them.

P6 mentioned that their leaders regularly seek input from the staff, and this is significant for them:

They also show respect, you know, and teamwork. That is a big thing I've seen amongst the leaders on this campus. No matter how big or small their position is, I've seen them get their staff's input.

P7 mentioned that their professors prepared them for the job market, which means a lot to them:

They have taught me a lot. How to live with people here. They have also taught me how to build relationships here in America and make friends. They've also taught me how to be ready for the job market. So, once I'm done with school, then I will just go and start my work. So, the kind of training they give you here gives you that preparedness for the outside world. That is one thing that is huge for me.

P8, a student working on campus, described how their supervisor and faculty lead by example:

Servant leaders don't only show the way. They lead the way. So, I remember one of my supervisors, who was working in the grounds department on campus, would come and teach me how to use the shovel and equipment, and he was not scared to get dirty. So, I think it's important to teach through example, and a lot of our faculty members do it through example.

P9, a graduate assistant, described how their boss helped improve their communication and service to rude and disrespectful students:

I work a lot with the students, and the communication with the students has really helped me to understand that sometimes the students are freaking out because they don't understand what's going on, and they might come across very rudely. At first, I would get really upset and annoyed. Why would someone speak to me like that in such a rude manner? Through the guidance of my boss and my professor, I understood how to better respond to it and still be respectful, but also talk to the student or express to the student that they can't talk to you like that but still help them.

P10 stated that being a graduate assistant helped them discover themselves:

As a graduate assistant, which is my first real job, I found it is in me to want to help my professors with anything to do, regardless of whether I'm feeling tired or not, you know. I want to do my job to the best of my ability.

P11 explained the influence of campus leaders demonstrating humility on them:

I think they've all impacted me and inspired me to be better. But I think one of the most important qualities is humility, just because I've seen people throughout the organization who have titles and experience and have these things that could be typically a divider between two different people become a tool for them to serve you better. They're able to use what they have to serve others and help instead of maybe keeping that division and keeping that kind of line that you can't cross and that boundary.

P12 mentioned that they have observed humility from various role models on campus:

I've had opportunities to learn from and be close to some of the best leaders, role models, and mentors on the campus. They lead from a spirit of humility, and I think that's something really admirable because they're not looking for you. How can this benefit me? Or looking to be the center of attention, but they're genuinely humble and want to help others genuinely.

P13 attributed their campus's health to intentional student care by the leaders:

I would just say overall, we have a very emotionally intelligent and healthy campus, but I think that just stems down from our leaders being so intentional about it.

## Discussion

The problem addressed in this study was the unpreparedness of students leaving Christian higher education institutions in the United States to engage, serve, and contribute to the common good of society after graduation (American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2023; Lenahan, 2024; Mann, 2020; Normah & Lukman, 2020; Wallace, 2021). Student unpreparedness for life after college is now considered a significant threat to higher education enterprise in the United States (Fehr, 2024; Wallace, 2021). This qualitative descriptive single case study explored graduate students' perceptions of the impact of servant leadership on their preparedness to engage, serve, and contribute to the common good of society after graduation at a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States.

For the study, I explored the perceptions of 13 graduate students attending a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States regarding the servant leadership behaviors exhibited by their campus administrators, staff, and faculty and how these behaviors impacted their perceptions of their preparedness to serve society after graduation. I utilized Greenleaf's servant leadership theory, as developed by Liden et al. (2008, 2014). The servant leadership model developed by Liden and his team consists of three main components: antecedent conditions, servant leadership behaviors, and leadership outcomes (Liden et al., 2014; Northouse, 2016). The central focus of this model of servant leadership is the seven servant leadership behaviors: conceptualizing, emotional healing, putting followers first, helping followers grow and succeed, behaving ethically, empowering, and creating value for the community. These servant leadership behaviors are influenced by three antecedent factors: context and culture, the leader's attributes, and the follower's receptivity.

According to the servant leadership model, a leader exhibiting the seven servant leadership behaviors will result in these three possible outcomes: follower performance and growth, organizational performance, and societal impact (Liden et al., 2014; Northouse, 2016). Greenleaf also highlighted these servant leadership outcomes in his original work. In Greenleaf's conceptualization of servant leadership, when leaders put followers first, listen to them, attend to their personal concerns, nurture and support them, and help them grow and succeed, their organizations become healthier, ultimately impacting society positively (Greenleaf, 1970). Based on this postulation, I explored how servant leadership practices at a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States impacted graduate students' perception of their preparedness to engage, serve, and contribute meaningfully to society after graduation. The study's purposive sample comprised 13 participants who met the eligibility criteria. Triangulation was achieved using two data sources: one-on-one interviews and focus groups.

Data from individual interviews and focus groups were analyzed using NVivo 14 to develop codes, categories, and themes to address the research questions. In this section, the findings are discussed in relation to each research question.

**Research Question 1: How do graduate students at a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States perceive their preparedness to engage, serve, and contribute to the common good of society after graduation?**

The interviews and focus group data analysis from research participants revealed two themes related to this research question: Cultivating Servant Leadership and Ready and Eager to Serve Society. The study findings indicated that students cultivate servant leadership by observing and learning from campus administrators, faculty, and staff who demonstrate servant leadership behaviors and provide opportunities to practice servant leadership. P1, a graduate student and assistant, states, "I came into this role with the hope of learning how to become a servant leader in the back of my mind. And so, I look to these opportunities to grow and not just seek to work my way up some kind of leadership ladder." P3 commented, "My professors have really inspired me to serve others. In all that I do, or even with my roommates, I try to practice servant leadership on a small scale." P6 mentioned, "I learned a lot about empathy for others, observing my professors truly putting yourself in someone's shoes, and going out of your way to figure out what they need and what I can do to help them." The finding supports Greenleaf's (1970) postulation that servant leaders will produce more servant leaders.

The findings also suggested that students perceived that their experiences with servant leadership on campus have equipped, prepared, inspired, and motivated them to make meaningful contributions to society after graduation. All participants expressed their readiness and eagerness to serve society after graduation. P3 stated, "I feel I'm ready and prepared to go over and beyond in serving my community." P5 expressed, "I definitely feel prepared with that firm foundation to serve my community." P7 announced, "I'm ready to contribute to the society, not even my society, but the entire world. I'm ready to give back. I'm ready to help." These findings were anticipated, aligning with the outcomes predicted by Greenleaf's servant leadership theory, which served as the theoretical framework for this study. According to this study's servant leadership model, a leader demonstrating the seven servant-leader behaviors will result in these outcomes: follower performance and growth, organizational performance, and societal impact (Liden et al., 2014; Northouse, 2016). In Greenleaf's conceptualization of servant leadership, when leaders put followers first, listen to them, attend to their personal concerns, nurture and support them, and help them grow and succeed, their organizations become healthier, ultimately impacting society positively (Greenleaf, 1970).

***Theoretical Implications***

The study's results corroborate Greenleaf's servant leadership theory, as expanded by Liden et al. (2008, 2014). Liden et al. (2014) posited that leaders demonstrating the seven servant leadership behaviors integral to the servant leadership model can achieve three primary outcomes: follower performance and growth, organizational performance, and societal impact. This study contributes to the literature on servant leadership outcomes in higher

education by examining the effects of servant leadership behaviors exhibited by campus leaders at a private Christian university in the Southeastern United States. The outcomes of servant leadership in higher education institutions have been sparsely covered from graduate students' perspectives in the existing literature.

### ***Practical Implications***

According to the study's results, graduate students cultivated servant leadership skills through observing and learning from campus administrators, faculty, and staff who demonstrated servant leadership behaviors and provided the students with opportunities to practice servant leadership. The implication is that students at institutions where campus leaders exemplify servant leadership and opportunities are provided for students to practice servant leadership are more likely to develop servant leadership skills. Consequently, these students may become effective servant leaders in society after graduation. Based on the results, implementing servant leadership within higher education institutions is appropriate and effective in preparing and motivating students to participate, serve, and contribute meaningfully to society. All the participants conveyed their willingness and enthusiasm to contribute to society after graduation, attributing this aspiration to their experience with servant leadership. The implication is that students who experience servant leadership on campus are more likely to demonstrate a willingness and enthusiasm to engage, serve, and contribute meaningfully to society after graduation.

**Research Question 2: Which servant leadership behaviors exhibited by administrators, staff, and faculty at a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States do graduate students believe most impact their perception of their preparedness to engage, serve, and contribute to the common good of society after graduation?**

Two themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the interviews and focus group data: Emotional Healing and Helping Students Grow and Succeed, addressing this research question. The research findings revealed that emotional healing and helping students grow and succeed are the most significant servant leadership behaviors influencing graduate students' perceptions of their readiness to serve society post-graduation. The literature review reveals a scarcity of studies on the impact of servant leadership in higher education from students' perspectives. Alshammari et al. (2019) found that undergraduate students at a private university rated their professors highly on *Agapao* loving behaviors (which include effective listening, valuing people, and equality), empowerment, and serving in servant leadership behaviors.

### ***Theoretical Implications***

The research participants identified and described emotional healing and helping students grow and succeed as the most influential servant leadership behaviors on their perceptions of their preparedness to serve society after graduation. The findings significantly enhance the understanding of the impact of servant leadership behaviors within the servant leadership model used as this study's theoretical framework. The existing literature lacks sufficient coverage of graduate students' views on the effects of servant leadership behaviors. This study fills this

gap by offering insights into graduate students' perceptions of the effects of servant leadership behaviors, particularly emotional healing, and helping students grow and succeed.

### ***Practical Implications***

According to the study, graduate students perceived emotional healing and helping students grow and succeed as the most influential servant leadership behaviors on their perceptions of their preparedness to serve society after graduation. The implication is that graduate students who receive emotional support from campus leaders are more likely to feel prepared to serve society after graduation. Also, when students receive support for their spiritual development and professional growth, they are more likely to feel ready, confident, and motivated to contribute meaningfully to society. According to Greenleaf (1970), when followers receive caring, nurturing, empowerment, and support from servant leaders, they, in turn, will possibly become servant leaders and begin treating others in this way.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Researchers have examined the effects of servant leadership in higher education from the perspectives of staff and faculty (Aboramadam et al., 2021; Dami et al., 2024; Hashim et al., 2020; Maalouf, 2023) and undergraduate students (Alshammari et al., 2019; Bao-Jian & Hsuan-Po, 2024; Du et al., 2024; Jagela, 2019; Yue et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the perspectives of graduate students regarding the applicability and impact of servant leadership in higher education are insufficiently represented in the existing literature. This qualitative descriptive single case study fills this gap in the literature. This study expands current knowledge on the appropriateness, applications, and implications of servant leadership in higher education by exploring graduate students' perceptions of the impact of servant leadership on their preparedness to engage, serve, and contribute to society after graduation from a private university in the Southeastern region of the United States. Based on the findings of this study, I propose the following recommendations for practice and future research.

### **Exemplify Servant Leadership**

According to the results of this study, servant leadership is relevant, applicable, and positively affects the campus climate. Researchers have studied and shown the applicability and benefits of servant leadership in higher education settings (Alshammari et al., 2019; Bao-Jian and Hsuan-Po, 2024; Du et al., 2024; Jagela, 2019; Yue et al., 2024). All research participants indicated that servant leadership positively influenced the campus climate by promoting an inclusive environment where each community member felt valued, welcomed, and accepted.

The graduate students developed servant leadership by observing and learning from campus administrators, faculty, and staff who exhibited servant leadership behaviors. The results demonstrated the significant impact campus leaders who exhibit servant leadership behaviors can have. Participants expected their campus leaders to exemplify servant leadership through their actions and behaviors. Based on these findings, I recommend that colleges and universities promote the principles of servant leadership and encourage administrators, staff, and

faculty to cultivate and exemplify servant leadership behaviors.

The graduate students perceived their campus experiences with servant leadership had equipped, prepared, inspired, and motivated them to make meaningful contributions to society after graduation. These findings align with Greenleaf's (1970) theory that servant leaders tend to cultivate more servant leaders. According to Greenleaf (1970), when followers experience caring, nurturing, empowerment, and support from servant leaders, they are likely to adopt similar behaviors and treat others similarly. All the participants articulated their commitment and enthusiasm to contribute to society after graduation. Based on the findings, campus leaders should continually reflect on their attitudes and behaviors to set an example for students. They should demonstrate servant leadership behaviors more intentionally when engaging with students and community members.

### **Provide Students with Opportunities to Develop and Practice Servant Leadership**

According to the study findings, graduate students cultivate servant leadership when provided opportunities to serve and practice it. Participants in the study described the servant leadership behaviors of their administrators, faculty, and staff as fostering student leadership and providing opportunities for students to practice servant leadership. They described their experiences with servant leadership and its influence on their leadership development. Based on these findings, higher education institutions should intentionally and innovatively support students in developing servant leadership mindsets and behaviors while offering opportunities to practice servant leadership.

### **Promote Student Involvement in Community Service**

There is an indication developed from this study's results that campus leaders create value for the community by promoting a sense of belonging and motivating students to give back to the community. Sharp (2023) reported a positive correlation between servant leadership and creating value for the community. The finding also aligns with Greenleaf's (2003) assertion that a servant leader is responsible for supporting the less privileged. Although all participants acknowledged that the institution provides students with opportunities to engage in community service, more than half indicated that they are not currently involved in community service or volunteering activities. Studies have reported a significant decline in volunteerism among college students and fresh graduates (Lenahan, 2024; Normah & Lukman, 2020). These findings can be applied to call upon colleges and universities to develop innovative strategies for encouraging students to participate in community service, integrate community service into the curriculum, and actively promote and recognize student involvement in such activities.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This qualitative descriptive single case study has contributed to the existing body of knowledge on the appropriateness, applicability, and impact of servant leadership in higher education institutions by examining and providing new insights into graduate students' perceptions of servant leadership, which has been lacking in the available literature. Future research should broaden the sample to include graduate students from Christian

colleges and universities nationwide, overcoming the limitations of a small purposive sample. Also, future research should compare the graduate students' perceptions of the impact of servant leadership in faith-based private higher institutions with those in non-faith-based public higher institutions.

According to the results from this study, graduate students identified emotional healing and helping students grow and succeed as the most influential servant leadership behaviors affecting their perceptions of their preparedness to serve society after graduation. Future qualitative studies should explore and understand how and why graduate students perceive these behaviors as the most impactful. Moreover, given the limitations inherent in the research methodology and design, future studies should include quantitative analyses to evaluate the impact of servant leadership from the perspective of graduate students across various colleges and universities nationwide. These studies should also examine their awareness of campus leaders' servant leadership behaviors and their perceived development in servant leadership.

## Conclusion

The problem addressed in this study is the unpreparedness of students leaving Christian higher education institutions in the United States to engage, serve, and contribute to the common good of society after graduation (Mann, 2020; Wallace, 2021). Student unpreparedness for life after college is now considered a significant threat to higher education enterprise in the United States (Mann, 2020; PR Newswire, 2023). Higher education institutions are currently under significant pressure to address the issue of student unpreparedness in making meaningful contributions to both the workplace and society following their graduation (Mann, 2020). Servant leadership is increasingly being recognized as a potential model for addressing various issues in higher education institutions, particularly the challenge of student preparedness for real-world engagement after college (Cong et al., 2024; Dami et al., 2024; Kainde & Mandagi, 2023). This qualitative descriptive single case study explored 13 graduate students' perceptions of the impact of servant leadership on their preparedness to engage, serve, and contribute to the common good of society after graduation at a private Christian university in the Southeastern region of the United States.

The existing literature was extensively explored to analyze servant leadership's application, implementation, and impact in higher education institutions from the viewpoints of staff, faculty, and undergraduate students. However, the perspectives of graduate students remain underrepresented in the current body of research. This study was developed to address this gap by examining graduate students' perceptions of the impact of servant leadership.

The study's results confirm the applicability and efficiency of servant leadership in higher education institutions. The findings support Greenleaf's (1970) assertion that servant leaders tend to cultivate more servant leaders. When followers experience care, nurturing, empowerment, and support from servant leaders, they are likely to adopt these leadership qualities themselves and treat others similarly. The results from this study highlight the need for campus leaders to exhibit servant leadership behaviors deliberately. It also suggests supporting students in developing servant leadership mindsets and behaviors, as well as encouraging and acknowledging student participation in community volunteering services.

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