Research Article

Burnout risk of tertiary student leaders in the Philippines

Abstract

This descriptive-correlational quantitative research design study aimed to determine the profile of tertiary student leaders in terms of sex, years of leadership experience, and general weighted average (GWA); describe their level of burnout risk using the Maslach's Burnout Inventory (MBI); and determine the relationship between burnout and the three variables. Among the 101 purposively-selected student leaders who participated in the study, more than two-thirds are female, a majority has more than four years of experience, and none have GWAs below 2.00. They experience moderate to high-level burnout, mostly from feelings of depersonalization. Results further show that sex, leadership experience, or academic standing does not significantly affect the burnout risk of tertiary student leaders. Therefore, schools must mitigate burnout, empower personal achievement, and bridge less experienced student leaders to their more experienced peers.

Keywords: burnout risk, student, leaders, leadership experience

John Erwin Prado Pedroso, Joseph James Llorico, Gizelle Amour Tagabi
West Visayas State University, Philippines

Correspondence: John Erwin Prado Pedroso, West Visayas State University, Philippines,
Email johnerwin.pedros@wvsu.edu.ph

Introduction

Leadership is imperative in the higher education curriculum, so institutions are called upon to develop socially responsible student leaders.[1] Hence, we see a growing trend in the practice of student leadership in the context of higher education.[2] However, despite fulfillment in leadership roles, student leaders' academic performance gets negatively affected when tiresome situations lead to academic burnout.[3,4] Burnout is an effect of emotional exhaustion and patience towards non-cooperative members while handling the stress of performing academically well. Furthermore, increasing stress levels leave these student leaders unprepared to lead in a complex, challenging, and changing world producing graduates with low-stress resiliency, risk-aversion, and difficulty coping with challenges and failure before and after graduation.[5] Higher education invests heavily in equipping graduates with critical thinking and leadership skills. Still, it falls short of investing in resilience or the ability to cope with shocks while maintaining similar levels of functioning.[6]

The lack of structures and systems that promote mental health, adaptability, and resiliency for students and student leaders was made more pronounced during the pandemic after the disruptions created in providing quality education. Significant and hasty changes and revisions to curricula and assessments forced students to suddenly move to unfamiliar learning environments.[7] This led to educational quality drawbacks and negative impacts on mental and social-emotional health, most especially on student leaders.[8]

Therefore, this descriptive-correlational quantitative study determining the burnout risk of tertiary student leaders in the Philippines aimed to describe the profile of tertiary student leaders in terms of sex, years of leadership experience, and general weighted average (GWA); describe the level of burnout risk of tertiary student leaders in terms of the three components of Maslach's Burnout Inventory (MBI): burnout, depersonalization, and personal achievement; and determine the relationship between burnout and years of leadership experience, sex, and GWA. It is anchored on the conservation of resources (COR) theory, which proposes that individuals obtain, retain, foster, and protect the resources that are crucial for their well-being and survival, and experience stress when these resources are under threat or lost. Understanding the status of student leadership through this study will help inform student leadership programs and initiatives

that are suitable and responsive to the emotional and mental needs of student leaders who operate during times of rapid change and crisis as agents of transformation. With their unique position in the student community as peer educators and bridges between students and the institution, we hope to improve student leadership after the pandemic by exploring the factors that affect their vulnerability and functioning.

Methodology

Research design

This study employed the descriptive-correlational quantitative research design. It is anchored on the COR theory, which posits that people are motivated to conserve resources they value, and the depletion of such is caused by prolonged exposure to stressors, which causes burnout.[9] Humans have an evolutionary-based cognitive bias, wherein they develop a tendency to overvalue potential losses of resources and undervalue potential gains, affecting how they perceive and respond to stress.[10]

Participants

All participants were practicing officers in their respective organizations throughout the academic year 2022-2023, occupying roles from chairmanship down to representative positions. Students who are not practicing officers were excluded from this study. Factors such as Years of Leadership Experience, Sex, and GWA were then identified among the participants. A total of 101 student leaders responded to the survey for burnout risk.

Instrument

The data-gathering instrument used in this study is a three-part questionnaire. Part One contained a statement of consent, affirming the participant's inclusion in this study. Part Two gathered the participants' personal information, such as their name (optional), age, sex, years of leadership experience in tertiary education, and GWA classified according to the University's rating system. Part Three measured the participants' risk of burnout using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), which was adopted for the study. It is one of the most commonly used self-assessment tools in identifying whether an individual is at risk of burnout. This inventory was utilized by the researchers as it garnered a mean alpha estimate of 0.70 to 0.80

across 221 studies.[11] This part is divided into the inventory's three components: burnout, depersonalization, and personal achievement.

Using the tool's prescribed scoring results interpretation, high scores in the first and second sections and a low score in the third section indicate burnout.

Burnout

Total of 17 or less, Low-level burnout

Total between 18-29 inclusive, Moderate burnout

Total of 30 or more, High-level burnout

Depersonalization

Total of 5 or less   Low-level burnout

Total between 6 and 11 inclusive, Moderate burnout

Total of 12 and greater, High-level burnout

Personal achievement

Total of 40 and greater, Low-level burnout

Total between 34 and 39 inclusive, Moderate burnout

Total 33 or less, High-level burnout

Converted comprehensively into parts through a website-based application called Google Forms, the participants answered the questionnaire online as a checklist.

Data gathering procedure

The research instrument was administered to the participants online via email and Facebook Messenger, a messaging application. A purposive sampling technique was used to meet the characteristics needed for the scope of this study and provide the best information to achieve the study's objectives. The survey commenced on April 28, 2023, and 101 participants consented to and completed it. To ensure reliability, the survey questionnaire was made accessible through the participant's university email address. The participants were only allowed to access the questions once.

Data analysis procedure

The data gathered were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics on the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS Statistics 17.0). Frequency count, percentage, mean, and standard deviation were the descriptive statistics used. To determine the relationship between the burnout risk of tertiary student leaders and their sex, years of leadership experience, and the GWA, the data were analyzed using Pearson's r correlation coefficient with a 0.05 alpha level of significance.

Results

Table 1 shows that generally, more than two-thirds of the participants are female (68.32%, N=69), and the rest are male (31.68%). These tertiary student leaders have an average of 3.35 years of leadership experience (sd=1.56), and most of the participants have more than four years of experience (39.6%, N=40). Furthermore, the majority of the participants have a Highly Outstanding GWA (63.37%), 20.79% are Outstanding, and 13.86% are Excellent, which is the highest range. The remaining 1.98% are Very Good, with no participant obtaining a GWA below 2.00. There are relatively more female student leaders compared to their male counterparts, similar to cases in other parts of the Philippines and the United States of America.[1,4] This study also supports findings that student leaders still excel despite extracurricular work.[12,13] Collectively, they have an average of approximately three years of experience as student leaders at the collegiate level, implying that these student leaders who were elected in their organization have more experience and are highly favored over their less experienced counterparts (Atienza et al., 2022).[4]

Table 1 Profile of tertiary student leaders

Profile	N	%
Sex		
Male	32	31.68
Female	69	68.32
Years of Leadership Experience		
Less than or equal to 1 year	17	16.8
1 year and 1 day – 2 years	20	19.8
2 years and 1 day – 3 years	15	14.9
3 years and 1 day – 4 years	9	8.9
More than 4 years	40	39.6
GWA		
1.00 – 1.24 (Excellent)	14	13.86
1.25 – 1.49 (Highly Outstanding)	64	63.37
1.50 – 1.74 (Outstanding)	21	20.79
1.75 – 1.99 (Very Good)	2	1.98
2.00 – 2.24 (Good)	0	0
2.25 – 2.49 (Very Satisfactory)	0	0
2.50 – 2.74 (Satisfactory)	0	0
2.75 – 2.99 (Fair)	0	0
3.00 – 4.99 (Passing)	0	0
5.00 (Failure)	0	0

Table 2 shows evidence of moderate to high-level burnout among tertiary student leaders. The burnout mean (M=20.89, sd=8.24) indicates that on average, tertiary student leaders have a moderate level of burnout or depressive anxiety syndrome. Meanwhile, the depersonalization mean (M=12.60, sd=7.40) is equivalent to high-level burnout. Lastly, tertiary student leaders have a moderate level of burnout from their sense of personal achievement (M=35.40, sd=7.11). Specifically, in the burnout dimension of the MBI in Table 3, males experience it more than females. Males experienced moderate levels of burnout (M=21.56, sd=7.46) on average while their counterparts experienced lower levels (M=2.58, sd=8.61). On the other hand, all groups experienced moderate burnout regardless of their years of leadership experience, though student leaders with a year of experience at most have higher scores than their peers (M=23.71, sd=7.82). In terms of academic achievement, students who excelled academically reported lower levels of exhaustion (M=16.71, sd=10.29) compared to those who performed below the "Excellent" threshold. This group has similar results with resident assistants (RA), who are student leaders performing 24-hour service in the medical field.[14–17] Using the MBI-Human Services Survey, in particular, the RA's mean is higher by 3.52 points than this study's participants, since resident assistants are more prone to burnout due to role ambiguity, compassion fatigue, and job severity.[18]

Table 2 Descriptives of burnout risk

Variables	M	sd	Description
Burnout	20.89	8.24	Moderate burnout
Depersonalization	12.6	7.4	High-level burnout
Personal Achievement	35.4	7.11	Moderate burnout

Table 3 Descriptives of burnout (Emotional Exhaustion)

	M	sd	Description
Sex			
Male	21.56	7.46	Moderate burnout
Female	2.58	8.61	Low-level burnout
Years of Leadership Experience			
Less than or equal to 1 year	23.71	7.82	Moderate burnout
1 year and 1 day – 2 years	18.25	10.36	Moderate burnout
2 years and 1 day – 3 years	20.73	8	Moderate burnout
3 years and 1 day – 4 years	22.33	8.54	Moderate burnout
More than 4 years	20.75	7.16	Moderate burnout
GWA			
1.00 – 1.24 (Excellent)	16.71	10.29	Low-level burnout
1.25 – 1.49 (Highly Outstanding)	21.52	8.41	Moderate burnout
1.50 – 1.74 (Outstanding)	21.86	5.71	Moderate burnout
1.75 – 1.99 (Very Good)	20	2.83	Moderate burnout
2.00 – 2.24 (Good)	0	0	
2.25 – 2.49 (Very Satisfactory)	0	0	
2.50 – 2.74 (Satisfactory)	0	0	
2.75 – 2.99 (Fair)	0	0	
3.00 – 4.99 (Passing)	0	0	
5.00 (Failure)	0	0	

In the second dimension of burnout in Table 4, both male and female student leaders experienced high-level burnout. As with the first dimension, males (M=13.66, sd=8.50) have higher scores on average than their female counterparts (M=12.12, sd=6.84). Moreover, considering years of leadership experience, most of the groups also experienced high levels of burnout. Notably, those with 1–2 years of experience only experience moderate burnout (M=10.85, sd=6.96) compared to their peers. Lastly, following the same trends under the first dimension, those with "Excellent" GWAs experience less burnout than the rest of their peers. While the rest of the participants experienced high levels of burnout, only those with excellent grades experienced moderate levels (M=9.64, sd=8.00). This group scored higher by at least five points than other studies testing burnout among student leaders in the US and China. [14–17,19] This implies that tertiary student leaders have a higher tendency to manifest burnout through negative behavior toward people they cooperate with such as fellow students, colleagues, and even superiors.[20]

In the last dimension of burnout, Table 5 shows that regardless of sex and GWA, tertiary student leaders experienced moderate burnout. Males (M=36.47, sd=7.42) still have higher scores than females (M=34.90, sd=6.96). Furthermore, though having the same description as their peers, those with "Excellent" GWAs still have better results (M=38.36, sd=6.62), as higher scores in this section indicate lower levels of burnout. This group moderately experienced burnout in terms of personal achievement or evaluation of their effectiveness and satisfaction with school performance and achievement.[14,15] Reduced personal achievements are related to inefficiency or the belief that one's efforts and resources, particularly cognitive and emotional resources, are insufficient to perform professional tasks.[15] Considering that student leaders are those who do work that directly deals with people, constantly making personal sacrifices and working long hours to serve others may take a toll not only on their physical and mental health but also on the way they perceive the extent of their achievements.[18]

On the other hand, the results of burnout in terms of personal achievement and years of leadership experience are more varied.

Those with a year or less experience have high levels of burnout (M=30.47, sd=4.61), and those with 3–4 years of experience have low-level burnout (M=39.89, sd=4.65). The rest of the groups have moderate levels of burnout. At a significance level of 0.05, the findings of this study revealed that there is no statistically significant association between sex (r = -.056, p=.580), years of leadership experience (r = -.032, p=.751), and GWA (r = -.141, p=.159) when considered together with burnout risk, suggesting that irrespective of an individual's sex, leadership experience, or academic standing, the burnout risk of tertiary student leaders remains consistent.

Table 4 Descriptives of depersonalization

	M	sd	Description
Sex			
Male	13.66	8.5	High-level burnout
Female	12.12	6.84	High-level burnout
Years of Leadership Experience			
Less than or equal to 1 year	13.65	8.09	High-level burnout
1 year and 1 day – 2 years	10.85	6.96	Moderate burnout
2 years and 1 day – 3 years	12.6	7.73	High-level burnout
3 years and 1 day – 4 years	12.44	7.8	High-level burnout
More than 4 years	13.08	7.32	High-level burnout
GWA			
1.00 – 1.24 (Excellent)	9.64	8	Moderate burnout
1.25 – 1.49 (Highly Outstanding)	12.95	7.44	High-level burnout
1.50 – 1.74 (Outstanding)	13.52	7.01	High-level burnout
1.75 – 1.99 (Very Good)	12.5	4.95	High-level burnout
2.00 – 2.24 (Good)	0	0	
2.25 – 2.49 (Very Satisfactory)	0	0	
2.50 – 2.74 (Satisfactory)	0	0	
2.75 – 2.99 (Fair)	0	0	
3.00 – 4.99 (Passing)	0	0	
5.00 (Failure)	0	0	

Table 5 Descriptives of personal achievement

	M	sd	Description
Sex			
Male	36.47	7.42	Moderate burnout
Female	34.9	6.96	Moderate burnout
Years of Leadership Experience			
Less than or equal to 1 year	30.47	4.61	High-level burnout
1 year and 1 day – 2 years	36.45	6.15	Moderate burnout
2 years and 1 day – 3 years	36.27	8.73	Moderate burnout
3 years and 1 day – 4 years	39.89	4.65	Low-level burnout
More than 4 years	35.62	7.39	Moderate burnout
GWA			
1.00 – 1.24 (Excellent)	38.36	6.62	Moderate burnout
1.25 – 1.49 (Highly Outstanding)	34.69	7.41	Moderate burnout
1.50 – 1.74 (Outstanding)	35.48	6.6	Moderate burnout
1.75 – 1.99 (Very Good)	36.5	2.12	Moderate burnout
2.00 – 2.24 (Good)	0	0	
2.25 – 2.49 (Very Satisfactory)	0	0	
2.50 – 2.74 (Satisfactory)	0	0	
2.75 – 2.99 (Fair)	0	0	
3.00 – 4.99 (Passing)	0	0	
5.00 (Failure)	0	0	

Previous research has yielded mixed results regarding the relationship between these variables and burnout. Some studies have suggested that sex and academic performance can predict burnout.[17,21] For example, higher levels of school-related burnout have been observed among male students compared to females in Poland.[22] In contrast, an inverse relationship was found between burnout and academic achievement in school, college, and university settings in the United Kingdom while among nursing students in Iran, various factors related to academic performance, such as motivation, stress, and self-efficacy, have been found to contribute to burnout.[23,24] Similarly, there are contrasting findings on the association between years of leadership experience and burnout risk. Studies in Portugal showed a positive correlation between years of experience and burnout.[25] Meanwhile, no significant correlation between these variables was observed in a study based in South Africa, therefore coinciding with the present study's findings.[26] Less experience has been associated with a higher likelihood of burnout among athletic trainers.[27]

Among tertiary student leaders, those with the least experience showed higher scores in depersonalization and burnout compared to their more experienced peers. This differs from the findings in Argentina, where students who recently entered their course had lesser feelings of depersonalization.[28] This difference may be attributed to the student leader's lack of personal achievement, as those with a year or less of experience also scored the lowest in personal achievement with high-level burnout. A study in the Philippines further explains that those who feel that they are not contributing enough to their organizations tend to have stronger feelings of depersonalization.[4] These same feelings of inadequacy among young nurses in Turkey contribute to higher levels of stress and burnout (Table 6).[29,30]

Table 6 Pearson's r results for burnout risk

	r	p-value
Sex	-0.056	0.58
Years of Leadership Experience	-0.032	0.751
GWA	-0.141	0.159

Discussion

The findings from this study reveal that tertiary student leaders experience moderate to high levels of burnout. Surprisingly, variables such as sex, years of leadership experience, and academic performance (measured by their general weighted average or GWA) did not significantly influence their burnout levels. Interestingly, the burnout levels among student leaders were found to be comparable to those of resident assistants, who typically have higher scores due to role ambiguity, compassion fatigue, and job severity.[14–18] The presence of these factors increases the risk of burnout for student leaders, similar to counselors and other school staff with similarly demanding jobs.[10,31] In comparison to their counterparts in the United States and China, tertiary student leaders in the Philippines have a higher tendency to manifest burnout through negative behavior toward the people they cooperate with, such as fellow students, colleagues, and superiors.[14–20] Furthermore, burnout among student leaders is related to reduce feelings of personal achievement, which may be due to the constant personal sacrifices and long hours devoted to serving others. This relationship aligns with the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, as their efforts may outweigh the perceived benefits derived from student leadership, leading to burnout.[32] Nevertheless, their continued service in student leadership implies that perceived benefits and gains from this extracurricular activity outweigh some of its risks and disadvantages. On the other hand, students with better academic performance tended to experience lower levels of emotional exhaustion. However, there was no significant correlation between academic performance and burnout risk among student leaders. Those with the least experience as student leaders had the highest scores in depersonalization and burnout, which contradicts findings in some other studies. This difference may be attributed to the student leaders' lacking sense of personal achievement and feelings of inadequacy.[4,15,18,29,30]

Despite facing extracurricular work and responsibilities, student leaders still excel in their roles, as evidenced by their efficiency in managing both academic and extracurricular tasks.[12,13] This efficiency can be attributed to their experience, given that their prolonged tenure as student leaders suggests that they are highly competent and trusted by their peers, which enhances their leadership skills further. Based on these findings, suggestions for the development of student leadership programs and mental health initiatives are proposed. Firstly, facilitating regular and healthy communication to integrate and build positive relationships among school members, along with better support and behavioral management, should be encouraged. Secondly, student leadership development programs should train student leaders in stress management and burnout indicators, effective time management, and prioritization. School counselors should be trained to provide support and guidance to specific student leaders, as well. Third, their sense of personal achievement should be empowered through development programs, as student leaders are crucial connections between the school administration, teachers, and students. Recognizing their efforts through awards and acknowledgments can be beneficial in enhancing their motivation and mental well-being. Finally, bridging the gap between less experienced and more experienced student leaders through practical knowledge transfer can be valuable in improving the efficiency and effectiveness of student leaders' initiatives. Effective documentation, regular feedback, and reflection within organizations, as well as involving recipients/constituents, can contribute to a more fulfilling experience and better management of work and mental health among student leaders.

Various limitations of this study should also be noted and addressed in future studies. First, the sample size should be increased to cover more participants across the entire country for it to be more representative of the population of student leaders in the country. Second, the findings and implications of this study apply only to tertiary student leaders but may be used for further research about the burnout risk of student leaders of different levels or students in general. Third, a more updated and appropriate version of the MBI may be used in replicating this study. However, other versions must be used with caution and research as some versions have not been extensively tested for reliability. Lastly, further research may be needed to further validate the results of this study, particularly by replicating the tests made in this study on other groups in educational institutions to further study the extent and effects of burnout on its actors to create or modify mechanisms to support mental health and wellness, especially among student leaders.

Conclusion

Student leaders are multi-taskers. They juggle academic responsibilities and leadership roles with the pressure of performing well in both aspects. This puts them in positions that are vulnerable to stress and, eventually, burnout. Student leaders are those who do work that directly deals with people, constantly making personal sacrifices, and working long hours to serve others may take a toll not only on their physical and mental health but also on the way they perceive the extent of their achievements. Therefore, we conclude that the prevalence of burnout among students, especially student leaders

at the collegiate level, highlights the need for attention and action. Systems and programs mitigating burnout among male student leaders, empowering the personal achievement of women, and bridging less experienced student leaders to their more experienced peers must be put in place. Furthermore, student development programs should also tackle strategies to increase academic achievement and fulfillment among student leaders to reduce burnout, depersonalization, and lack of personal achievement.

Considering the crucial role of student leadership in the development of educational institutions and their embedded systems, it becomes imperative for stakeholders in tertiary education to join forces with student leaders in establishing an efficient, meaningful, and mentally supportive working environment. Through this collaborative effort, productivity and well-being can be enhanced within the educational institution, leading to benefits that extend beyond the students and the school itself. Ultimately, such initiatives contribute to the betterment of the entire community.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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