

EXAMINING SERVANT LEADERSHIP, ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT, AND ORGANIZATIONAL CITIZENSHIP BEHAVIOR IN ETHIOPIAN STATE UNIVERSITIES: AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

Sintayehu Gurmessa Chimedessa^{1*}, Arvinder Singh Chawla², Sofia Khan³

^{1,2} Faculty of Management and Commerce, Guru Kashi University, Talwandi Sabo, Punjab 151302, India.

Email: sintayehugurmessa12@gmail.com chawlaas4207@gmail.com

³ Department of Management Studies, Vivekananda Global University, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India. Email: drsofiakhan010@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This empirical investigation explores how servant leadership relates to organizational commitment and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) within five state-funded universities located in Southern Ethiopia. We used standardized survey questionnaires to collect responses from 384 faculty members using cross-sectional quantitative technique. Statistical techniques like descriptive analysis, Pearson correlation and structural equation modeling were utilized to test our hypotheses. Our findings reveal that servant leadership demonstrates mean scores of 3.42 (SD=0.67), organizational commitment averages 3.38 (SD=0.71) while OCB records 3.51 (SD=0.64). The structural model indicates servant leadership significantly influences organizational commitment ($\beta=0.58$, $p<0.001$) and OCB ($\beta=0.47$, $p<0.001$). Additionally, organizational commitment functions as a partial mediator between servant leadership and OCB (indirect effect: $\beta=0.22$, 95% CI [0.16, 0.29]). Model fit statistics demonstrate acceptable values ($\chi^2/df=2.34$, CFI=0.94, TLI=0.93, RMSEA=0.059). These results indicate that cultivating servant leadership skills among university administrators may enhance faculty commitment and encourage voluntary activities that positively impact institutional performance.

KEYWORDS: servant leadership, faculty commitment,, Ethiopian universities, mediation analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

Universities are essential for improving national socioeconomic development by creating knowledge, building human capital and engaging with society [1]. In the last few decades, Ethiopia higher education system has grown a lot. In 2005, there just eight public colleges but by 2024 there will be more than 45 [2]. This growth meets growing need for higher education but it also creates difficult problems with quality of education, efficient use of resources and institutional performance [3]. Academic staff are most important part of a university operations. They are responsible for making sure that teaching is of highest quality, that research is done well and that institution reaches out to community for further advancement in their fields [4].

How leaders manage their roles inside organizations significantly impacts employee views regarding the organization and workplace behavior [5]. In field of educational administration, servant leadership ideology which emphasizes progress and well being of followers above personal goals has received considerable research focus [6, 7]. This leadership paradigm is very different from traditional hierarchical organizations since it encourages moral behavior, empowerment and shared goal which are all very important for academic institutions [8].

Organizational commitment is when employees feel emotionally connected to their company which is shown by how they work for the firm goals and plan to stay with the company [9]. In Ethiopian higher education it is still hard to keep skilled teachers, so it is important to understand what leads to commitment [10]. Supporting coworkers, participating in committee work and improving employees image are all examples of voluntary actions that go beyond formal job duties and improve the performance of an organization [11].

Even though these ideas are important in theory but there are not many real-world studies that look at them in Ethiopian schools [12]. Current literature mostly examines Western environments raising issues about applicability of findings to Ethiopian institutions that function within unique cultural, economic and administrative frameworks [13]. This study fills this gap in knowledge by looking at how common servant leadership is, how committed Southern Ethiopian university teachers are and how they act as citizens, as well as how these things are related.

1.1 Study Objectives

This research pursues five primary objectives:

1. Evaluate degree of servant leadership in state universities in Southern Ethiopia.
2. Measure organizational commitment intensity among academic personnel
3. Calculate frequency of organizational citizenship behavior
4. Examine how servant leadership links to organizational commitment
5. Examine if impact of servant leadership on organizational citizenship behavior is mediated by organizational commitment.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Servant Leadership Perspective

Greenleaf [14] first described servant leadership as starting with natural desire to help others first. Instead of using their position of power to get things done for the business servant leaders help their followers grow and do their best work [15]. Recent research found that servant leadership has many aspects such as active listening, understanding with empathy, growing awareness, persuasive communication, conceptual thinking, looking to the future, responsible stewardship, developmental commitment and building communities [16]. Van Dierendonck [17] provides a thorough synthesis that illustrates favorable correlations between servant leadership and follower outcomes, encompassing performance, dedication and extra-role contributions. In academic settings.

servant leadership is clear when administrators create safe spaces where teachers feel valued let them make their own choices, and encourage their professional growth [18].

Researchers have found positive links between servant leadership and number of different organizational results. Liden and his colleagues [19] showed that servant leadership makes workers happier, builds trust in leaders and improves performance. Cross-cultural study in Asian and African settings backs up these patterns though cultural factors like power distance and collectivism may make it harder for servant leadership to show itself and work [20, 21, 22].

2.2 Organizational Commitment Framework

Organizational commitment denotes degree of identification and intensity of participation of individuals inside specific organizations [9]. Meyer and Allen tripartite conception endures as the prevailing framework distinguishing between affective commitment (emotional connection), continuation commitment (perception of departure costs) and normative commitment (feelings of obligation). Recent meta-analytic research substantiates this framework across several organizational contexts [24].

In higher education, organizational commitment affects things like keeping teachers, quality of teaching, amount of research done and involvement in developmental initiatives [25]. Studies of developing nations show that academic commitment is affected by working conditions, chances to move up in a job, quality of leadership and the support systems in place at the institution [26]. Tetteh et al. [27] did study at African university and found that leadership support best predictor of faculty commitment.

There is a lot of information about leadership and commitment relationships. Leaders who show concern for their employees let them be part of decisionmaking and promote their professional growth usually get higher levels of commitment [28]. This relationship is especially important for Ethiopian institutions where teachers have a lot of work to do, limited resources and not enough recognition [3].

2.3 Organizational Citizenship Behavior Conceptualization

Organizational citizenship behavior is voluntary efforts by employees that go above and beyond their formal duties and help the organization work better [11]. Organ foundational conceptualization distinguished five OCB dimensions: altruism (individual assistance), courtesy (problem prevention), sportsmanship (inconvenience tolerance), conscientiousness (minimum requirement exceeding) and civic virtue (responsible organizational participation). Podsakoff and colleagues [29] extensive review confirms OCB significant organizational performance prediction.

OCB shows up in academic settings through mentoring by junior faculty, serving on committees without being asked, helping with student activities outside of teaching duties, and promoting the university image [30]. These optional actions are especially useful in places with few resources where success of school rests on faculty members being willing to go above and beyond their contractual duties. New research shows how important OCB is in African colleges that do not have a lot of money [31].

Leadership style and the level of commitment of employees both have an effect on OCB. Ilies et al. [32] performed a meta-analysis indicating that transformational and servant leadership styles exhibit favorable correlation with citizenship behaviors. Meyer et al. [24] also found that affective and normative commitment are two of most important factors that affect OCB. Understanding these relationships helps administrators

create environments that encourage positive actions from the low level employees to high level peoples in the leadership [33].

2.4 Research Model and Hypotheses

This study uses idea of social exchange theory [34] which says that employees should show appreciation for good treatment from their bosses and coworkers by having good attitudes and behaviors. When leaders show servant leadership traits workers feel more emotionally connected to the company (affective commitment) and have stronger sense of obligation to reciprocate (normative commitment). Enhanced commitment then drives citizenship behaviors that support the goals of organization.



Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Our conceptual framework proposes servant leadership influences organizational citizenship behavior through dual pathways: directly through role modeling and indirectly via organizational commitment strengthening. This framework yields three testable hypotheses:

H1: Servant leadership is a good predictor of faculty commitment to the organization.

H2: Servant leadership positively forecasts faculty organizational citizenship behavior.

H3: Organizational commitment acts as a mediator in link between servant leadership and organizational citizenship behavior.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Design and Approach

We used a quantitative cross-sectional survey design. This method enables systematic measurement of constructs and evaluation of statistical relationships [35]. Cross-sectional data collection is a good way to look at current events and trends that are linked to them [36].

3.2 Participants and Sampling

Our target group consisted academic professionals across all ranks (lecturer through professor) employed at Southern Ethiopian state universities. Five institutions were purposively selected representing geographic diversity and institutional variety: Arba Minch University, Wolaita Sodo University, Dilla University, Wachemo University and Wolkite University. These universities collectively employed approximately 2,850 academic personnel during 2023/24.

Yamane's formula determined minimum sample requirements assuming 95% confidence and 5% error margin, yielding 351 participants. Anticipating potential non-response, we distributed 450 questionnaires. Stratified random sampling ensured proportional institutional and rank representation. We received 384 valid responses (85.3% response rate), exceeding recommended survey research thresholds [37]. Table 1 summarizes respondent demographics.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Profile (N=384)

Demographic Variable	n	%
Gender		
Male	278	72.4
Female	106	27.6
Age Category		
25-35 years	156	40.6
36-45 years	162	42.2
Above 45 years	66	17.2
Highest Degree		
Bachelor's	89	23.2
Master's	247	64.3
Doctorate	48	12.5
Current Rank		
Lecturer	142	37.0

Assistant Professor	184	47.9
Associate Professor	48	12.5
Professor	10	2.6

3.3 Measurement Instruments

We utilized validated instruments adapted for Ethiopian context. Servant leadership employed a 23-item instrument based on Barbuto and Wheeler [16] scale, assessing listening, empathy, awareness, persuasion and stewardship dimensions. Organizational commitment used Meyer and Allen's [23] 18-item measure evaluating affective, continuance and normative components. Organizational citizenship behavior applied a 20-item adaptation of Podsakoff et al. [29] instrument measuring altruism, conscientiousness, sportsmanship, courtesy and civic virtue.

All scales employed five-point Likert response formats (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). Demographic questions captured gender, age, qualification, rank and tenure. Pilot testing with 30 faculty from a non-sample university yielded Cronbach alpha coefficients of 0.89 (servant leadership), 0.86 (organizational commitment) and 0.88 (OCB) surpassing 0.70 acceptability thresholds [38]. Confirmatory factor analysis verified construct validity with factor loadings exceeding 0.60 and Average Variance Extracted values above 0.50 [39].

3.4 Analytical Procedures

Analyses utilized SPSS 26 and AMOS 24. Descriptive statistics characterized variable distributions. Pearson correlations examined bivariate associations. Structural equation modeling tested hypothesized relationships and mediation [40]. SEM advantages include simultaneous measurement and structural model estimation while controlling measurement error [41].

Model adequacy was assessed using Hu and Bentler [42] recommendations: χ^2/df ratio below 3.0, Comparative Fit Index exceeding 0.90, Tucker-Lewis Index above 0.90 and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation under 0.08. Mediation testing employed bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals following Preacher and Hayes [43]. Alpha set at 0.05.

3.5 Research Ethics

Institutional review board approval preceded data collection. Participation remained voluntary with informed consent obtained from all respondents. We maintained participant anonymity and data confidentiality throughout. Respondents understood their withdrawal rights without penalty.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Variable Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 displays descriptive statistics for study variables and subscales. Servant leadership averaged 3.42 (SD=0.67) indicating moderate faculty perceptions of leadership servant orientation. Among servant leadership facets empathy rated highest (M=3.58, SD=0.71) while persuasion rated lowest (M=3.28, SD=0.74) suggesting leaders demonstrate empathetic understanding yet may rely excessively on positional authority versus persuasive influence.

Organizational commitment averaged 3.38 (SD=0.71). Affective commitment led (M=3.51, SD=0.76), followed by normative commitment (M=3.42, SD=0.73) then continuance commitment (M=3.21, SD=0.81). Results indicate moderate emotional institutional attachment, though perceived departure costs generate comparatively weaker commitment.

Organizational citizenship behavior averaged 3.51 (SD=0.64), highest among primary constructs. Conscientiousness peaked (M=3.68, SD=0.69) indicating frequent minimum requirement exceeding. Altruism (M=3.62, SD=0.71) and civic virtue (M=3.54, SD=0.68) also scored relatively high while sportsmanship scored lowest (M=3.32, SD=0.78).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Study Constructs

Construct/Dimension	M	SD
Servant Leadership (Composite)	3.42	0.67
Listening	3.45	0.72
Empathy	3.58	0.71
Persuasion	3.28	0.74
Stewardship	3.39	0.69
Organizational Commitment (Composite)	3.38	0.71

Affective	3.51	0.76
Continuance	3.21	0.81
Normative	3.42	0.73
Organizational Citizenship Behavior (Composite)	3.51	0.64
Altruism	3.62	0.71
Conscientiousness	3.68	0.69
Sportsmanship	3.32	0.78
Courtesy	3.48	0.72
Civic Virtue	3.54	0.68

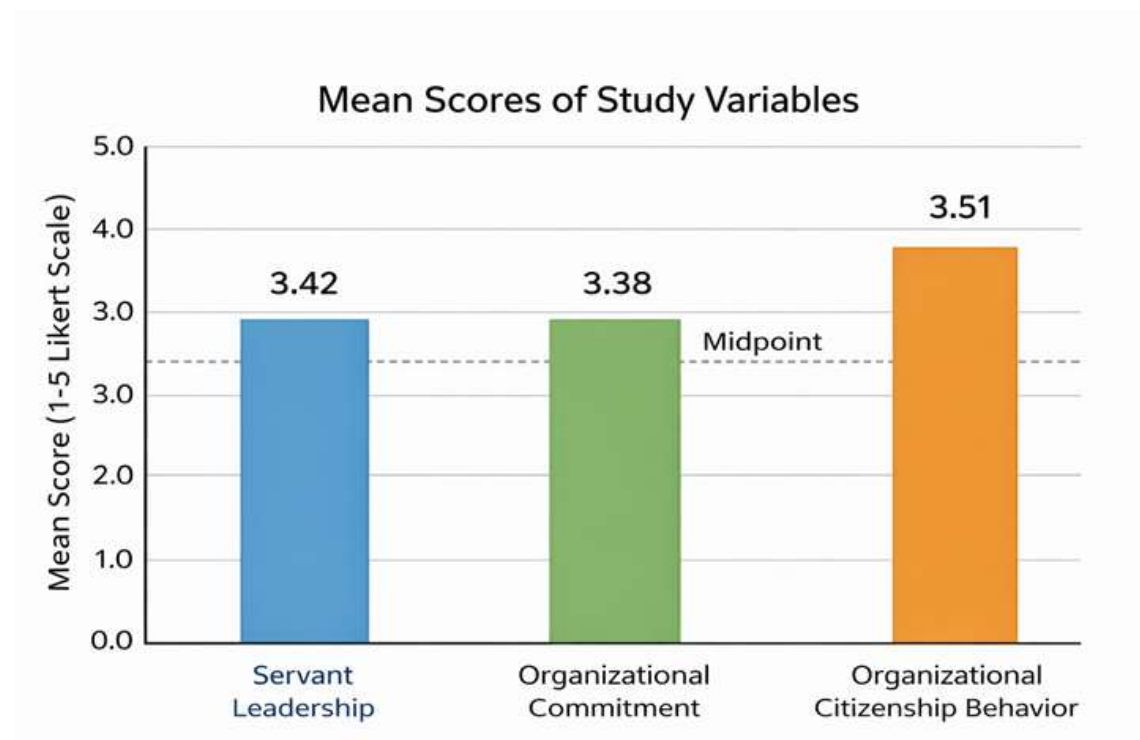


Figure 2. Comparison of Mean Scores for Primary Study Variables. The dashed horizontal line represents the scale midpoint (3.0).

4.2 Bivariate Correlations

Table 3 presents Pearson correlations among primary constructs. All correlations achieved statistical significance ($p < 0.01$). Servant leadership correlated strongly with organizational commitment ($r = 0.64$) and moderately with OCB ($r = 0.56$). Organizational commitment also correlated moderately with OCB ($r = 0.59$). These bivariate patterns provide preliminary hypothesis support, though multivariate analyses accounting for measurement error offer more rigorous tests.

Table 3. Intercorrelations Among Study Variables

Construct	1	2	3
1. Servant Leadership	—		
2. Organizational Commitment	0.64**	—	
3. Organizational Citizenship Behavior	0.56**	0.59**	—

Note. ** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed).

4.3 Measurement Model Evaluation

Prior to structural testing, we assessed measurement model adequacy through confirmatory factor analysis incorporating all latent constructs and indicators. Results demonstrated acceptable fit: $\chi^2(876)=2049.58$, $p<0.001$; $\chi^2/df=2.34$; CFI=0.94; TLI=0.93; RMSEA=0.059 (90% CI [0.056, 0.062]).

Standardized loadings ranged from 0.62 to 0.87, confirming convergent validity. Composite reliability spanned 0.88 to 0.91, exceeding 0.70 criteria. Average Variance Extracted ranged from 0.52 to 0.59 meeting 0.50 standards. Table 4 confirms discriminant validity as squared AVE roots exceeded interconstruct correlations.

Table 4. Reliability and Discriminant Validity Evidence

Construct	CR	AVE	1	2	3
1. Servant Leadership	0.89	0.52	0.72		
2. Organizational Commitment	0.88	0.54	0.64	0.73	
3. OCB	0.91	0.59	0.56	0.59	0.77

Note. CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted.

4.4 Structural Model and Hypothesis Tests

Maximum likelihood estimation tested the structural model, yielding acceptable fit: $\chi^2(878)=2056.42$, $p<0.001$; $\chi^2/df=2.34$; CFI=0.94; TLI=0.93; RMSEA=0.059 (90% CI [0.056, 0.062]). These indices meet recommended criteria [42] confirming adequate data representation.

Table 5 summarizes path coefficients and hypothesis outcomes. Servant leadership significantly influenced organizational commitment ($\beta=0.58$, $SE=0.05$, $p<0.001$) accounting for 34% variance. This supports H1, suggesting servant leadership perceptions strengthen institutional commitment.

Servant leadership also directly influenced OCB ($\beta=0.47$, $SE=0.06$, $p<0.001$) supporting H2. Organizational commitment significantly predicted OCB ($\beta=0.38$, $SE=0.05$, $p<0.001$). Combined, servant leadership and commitment explained 52% OCB variance.

Bootstrapping tested H3 mediation. The indirect effect proved significant ($\beta=0.22$, $SE=0.03$, 95% CI [0.16, 0.29], $p<0.001$) indicating partial mediation. Total servant leadership effect on OCB equaled 0.69 (0.47 direct + 0.22 indirect), with 32% mediated through commitment. Both direct and indirect paths achieving significance confirms partial mediation [44], supporting H3.

Table 5. Structural Path Analysis and Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Structural Path	β	SE	p
H1	SL $\rightarrow$ OC	0.58***	0.05	<.001
H2	SL $\rightarrow$ OCB (direct)	0.47***	0.06	<.001
—	OC $\rightarrow$ OCB	0.38***	0.05	<.001
H3	SL $\rightarrow$ OCB (indirect via OC)	0.22***	0.03	<.001
—	Total Effect (SL $\rightarrow$ OCB)	0.69***	—	<.001

Note. SL = Servant Leadership; OC = Organizational Commitment; OCB = Organizational Citizenship Behavior. *** $p < .001$. Model fit: $\chi^2/df=2.34$, CFI=0.94, TLI=0.93, RMSEA=0.059. $R^2(OC)=0.34$; $R^2(OCB)=0.52$.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Variable Status Interpretation

Moderate servant leadership levels ($M=3.42$) indicate partial implementation within Southern Ethiopian universities. While empathetic behaviors appear relatively common, persuasive approaches require strengthening. This pattern aligns with African higher education research [20], [21] documenting persistent hierarchical tendencies despite participatory management rhetoric.

Moderate organizational commitment ($M=3.38$) reflects acceptable yet improvable institutional attachment. Higher affective versus continuous commitment indicates emotional attachment rather than a constraint-based retention model. However, moderate overall dedication may indicate issues within Ethiopian

universities such as limited resources, constrained development opportunities and excessive workloads [3], [10]. These patterns are consistent with earlier observations from Sub-Saharan Africa [27, 31].

Relative elevation of organizational civic behavior $M=3.51$. Even though leadership support and commitment levels are low, teachers often do helpful things on their own time. It is possible that this is because of the collectivist cultural values that are common in Ethiopian culture [13], [22], which stress well-being of the whole community and success of students. Similar trends emerge in collectivist cultures, where OCB is based on customary standards other than leadership or commitment [45].

5.2 Relationship Interpretation

The significant servant leadership-organizational commitment link ($\beta=0.58$) corresponds with social exchange theory [34] which posits that leadership investment in staff development fosters reciprocal commitment. Given Ethiopian culture appreciation for nurturing authority figures [22], servant leadership may be especially beneficial in fostering faculty-institutional relationships. This finding corresponds with meta-analytic research revealing strong cross-cultural connections between servant leadership and commitment [17], [46].

The direct OCB effect of servant leadership ($\beta=0.47$) shows that role modeling encourages followers to be good citizens. When leaders put the needs of their faculty first, pay attention and give them the freedom to make their own decisions, climates develop that normalize contributions outside of their typical duties [19], [33]. This pattern has significance for the development of leadership in Ethiopia and aligns with studies indicating that servant leadership predicts organizational citizenship behavior across several contexts [17, 32].

Partial mediation of organizational commitment shows two ways that servant leadership can contribute to OCB: directly through role modeling and indirectly by building commitment. Dedicated professors exhibit citizenship behaviors since they align with institutional goals and perceive vested interest in achieving success [24,28]. This dual process indicates that treatments focused on either leadership or commitment may improve organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). Partial mediation findings correspond with contemporary studies illustrating mediating effect of commitment in leadership-organizational citizenship behavior interactions [47].

5.3 Implications for Theory and Practice

Theoretically, this study verifies the servant leadership-commitment-OCB framework within African higher education. Findings extend social exchange theory [34] to Ethiopian colleges, revealing reciprocity mechanisms perform efficiently in collectivist environments. Methodologically, rigorous SEM and bootstrapping produce substantial evidence exceeding typical regression procedures [43].

In real world, results show that administrators at Ethiopian universities should learn how to be servant leaders. Strong leadership, commitment and OCB relationships could lead to teacher involvement and extra effort returns in programs that stress active listening, empathetic understanding, making moral decisions and giving students power [48].

Leaders should encourage commitment by making workplace better making it clear how to get promoted, encouraging participation in decisions and recognizing efforts [25,26]. If affective commitment is greater than continuation commitment it means that strategies for building emotional bonds may work better than strategies for keeping money.

Institutions should recognize and reward behaviors that show good citizenship. Recognition schemes for mentoring, committee service and community services are not required by law but they can motivate people to do the same things [30]. This is crucial because OCB goes beyond official measures to improve efficacy of institutions.

5.4 Limitations and Research Directions

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. Cross-sectional design prevents definitive causality claims [36]. Though theoretical frameworks and analyses suggest directionality, longitudinal research could establish causation more conclusively and examine relationship evolution [49]. Single-source self-reports may introduce common method bias [50]. Though Harman test suggested minimal concern, future studies incorporating supervisor OCB ratings and objective commitment measures would strengthen conclusions.

Focus on Southern Ethiopian state universities limits generalizability to private institutions or other regions. Cultural and institutional contexts vary across Ethiopia potentially affecting leadership effectiveness. Comparative studies across university types and regions would broaden understanding. While achieving good fit and explaining substantial variance other potentially relevant variables (organizational culture, job resources, work-life balance) merit future exploration.

Future investigations should examine moderators potentially strengthening or weakening observed relationships. Organizational factors including resource availability, autonomy, and governance may influence how servant leadership translates to commitment and OCB [51]. Individual differences like

professional identity, career stage and discipline could moderate relationships. Along with quantitative results [52] qualitative study could show how faculty experience and think about servant leadership in Ethiopian settings.

6. CONCLUSION

This study looked at servant leadership, organizational commitment and organizational citizenship behavior in Southern Ethiopian state colleges and how they relate to each other. The results show that all of constructs have moderate amounts with OCB slightly higher than leadership and commitment. Importantly, servant leadership has good effect on both commitment and OCB with commitment playing a role in how leadership and OCB interact with each other. The structure model explained 34% of variation in commitment and 52% of variation in OCB showing that it has a lot of explanatory power.

The results add to body of research on leadership in higher education in Africa. The needs of Ethiopian universities which are growing and have limited resources are well met by servant leadership ideals that stress follower service and ethical stewardship. Adopting servant leadership practices helps managers increase faculty commitment and encourages individuals to act in ways that benefit the institution. The results support idea of social exchange in Ethiopian settings showing that mechanisms for reciprocity work well in collectivist countries.

Practical implications stress the importance of developing leaders creating a supportive environment, and recognizing both formal and informal contributions. As higher education continues to grow despite new problems it is important to establish servant leadership and generate organizational commitment in order to maintain quality and reach developmental goals. Subsequent study ought to utilize longitudinal methodologies, integrate diverse data sources and investigate contextual and individual factors to achieve a thorough comprehension of these essential organizational dynamics in African higher education.

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