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Page: 01-35

FORMING THE YOUNG SCHOLAR-LEADER: BIBLICAL DISCIPLESHIP, CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY, AND YOUTH ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN AMERICAN AND GLOBAL SOUTH HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Universities that promise to form young scholar-leaders usually run three formation programmes at once: discipleship through a chaplaincy, scholarship through departments, and civic responsibility through a service or community-engagement office. This review argues that the three are kept apart for reasons better than inertia. Integration forces each stream to answer a question it can otherwise avoid. Discipleship must say whose discipleship, in institutions serving religiously plural and increasingly unaffiliated student bodies. Civic formation must say which polity a graduate owes, when the graduate may well emigrate. Scholarly formation must say whose standards of excellence count, when those standards arrived through colonial university systems and are still policed from elsewhere. The contribution offered here is to state those conflicts plainly rather than dissolve them into a synthesis that no institution can actually operate.

Three further claims follow. First, the developmental stage named in the title does analytical work that the literature on faith-based leadership education has largely left unused: emerging adulthood is a period of unusual identity plasticity, which makes formation both more effective and more coercive, and the distinction between formation and indoctrination cannot be drawn without reference to it. Second, American and Global South models differ less in values than in the scarcity around which each is organised, attention and institutional legitimacy in the one case, employment and teaching capacity in the other; programmes that travel between them without reckoning with that difference fail in predictable ways. Third,

the servant-leadership literature on which faith-informed leadership education leans carries far more normative weight than its evidence can bear, and saying so strengthens rather than weakens the case for character formation.

KEYWORDS: biblical discipleship; scholar-leadership; civic responsibility; emerging adulthood; Christian higher education; Global South.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Three Formations, Three Offices, Three Budgets

Look at the organisational chart of almost any Christian university and the three formations named in this paper's title appear as three separate offices. A chaplaincy or spiritual formation department runs chapel, small groups and mission trips. Academic departments run the degree. A community engagement or service-learning office runs the placements. Each has its own director, its own budget line, its own assessment instruments, and its own account of what a good graduate looks like. Students move between them several times a week and are left to do the integrating themselves.

The standard diagnosis treats this as a coordination failure. Jun and Aronson (2021), surveying leadership development at faith-based institutions in the United States, describe programmes that derive legitimacy from institutional mission statements while struggling to translate those statements into anything students recognise as development. Skalicky et al. (2020), working across Australian and international settings, argue much the same for student leadership generally: proliferation of initiatives without a shared developmental logic produces activity rather than formation. The prescription that follows is nearly always integration. Align the outcomes, map the curriculum, put the chaplain on the leadership committee.

That prescription is not wrong. It is, however, far too cheap. It assumes the three streams want the same thing and have simply failed to notice. This review begins from the opposite assumption.

1.2 What Integration Actually Costs

Suppose a university genuinely attempted to fuse discipleship, scholarship and civic formation into one developmental pathway for undergraduates. Three questions would surface immediately, and each is the sort of question an institution prefers to leave in the mission statement rather than the handbook.

Whose discipleship? A Nigerian Baptist university, a Catholic institution in Kinshasa and an evangelical liberal arts college in Michigan all speak of forming students in the pattern of Christ. They mean materially different things by obedience, authority, gender, wealth and the political order. Once discipleship becomes a graduation outcome rather than a voluntary activity, the institution must specify which account it is assessing, and must decide what to do with students who arrive from another one, or leave for none.

Civic responsibility toward which polity? Civic formation assumes a demos to which the graduate belongs. That assumption is comfortable for a student who will spend her working life in Ohio. It is considerably less comfortable at a Ghanaian or Zimbabwean university whose strongest students are actively planning to leave, and whose government has invested in an education whose returns will accrue to another tax base. Civic formation that ignores emigration is either naive or quietly nationalist.

Excellence by whose standards? Scholarly formation is the stream that presents itself as neutral. It is not. The disciplinary structures, citation norms, journal hierarchies and quality-assurance regimes through which African and Asian universities certify excellence were largely inherited from colonial systems and are still adjudicated in London, Amsterdam and Washington. Laakso and Hallberg Adu (2024), interviewing twenty-six political scientists in Botswana, Ghana, Kenya and Zimbabwe, found that colleagues wanting to build locally grounded courses were slowed less by philosophical disagreement about decolonisation than by accreditation bodies and funders who approved internationally framed programmes faster than local ones.

This article's central claim is that naming these three conflicts is more useful than resolving them, and that a formation programme designed to hold them is more honest and more durable than one designed to make them disappear. The conflicts are not obstacles on the way to integration. They are what integration consists of.

Two subsidiary arguments support it. The first concerns the word *young*. Emerging adulthood is more than the age at which leadership education happens to occur. It is the condition that makes formation potent and makes it dangerous. The second concerns comparison. American and Global South models are usually contrasted by values, individualism against communalism, and the contrast rarely survives contact with evidence. The more productive comparison is by scarcity. Each system is organised around what it does not have.

1.3 Scope, Method and Limits

This is a structured narrative review rather than a systematic one, and the difference matters for what can be claimed. Peer-reviewed scholarship on Christian higher education, student

leadership development, civic engagement and emerging-adult development was read comparatively and thematically, with priority given to work that specifies a setting, a sample and a method. Where two studies point in different directions, the review says so and takes a position.

Geographic scope covers the United States and selected Global South contexts, with Nigeria, South Africa, Ghana, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Indonesia and the United Arab Emirates recurring because those are the settings in which the relevant empirical work has actually been done. Global South is used here as shorthand for a set of institutional conditions, not a cultural essence, and the review flags several points at which the category obscures more than it reveals.

Three limits deserve statement at the outset. Most of the evidence on faith-informed leadership formation is cross-sectional, self-reported and gathered at single institutions by researchers employed there. Very little of it can support causal claims, and this review does not pretend otherwise. Second, the literature is skewed towards students who are already engaged; the disengaged are systematically under-observed. Third, almost all of the servant-leadership research reviewed in section 3.3 shares a measurement problem serious enough to warrant treating its effect sizes as provisional.

2. Foundations: Discipleship and the Formation of the Young

2.1 Biblical Discipleship as Leadership Formation

Discipleship inverts the usual sequence of leadership education. Conventional programmes begin with capacity, teach influence, and attach ethics as a constraint. The biblical pattern begins with allegiance and treats influence as something entrusted later, if at all. Crowther (2018) locates the legitimacy of servant leadership in the pattern of Christ rather than in organisational results, which makes leadership an ethical vocation before it is a competence. The practical consequence is that a disciple who never leads anything has not failed at discipleship.

Formation of this kind requires repetition, not information. Setran and Wilhoit (2020) describe Christian education and spiritual formation as mutually constitutive, education supplying interpretive resources and formation directing knowledge towards practice. Otto and Harrington (2016) push the institutional implication further: spiritual formation in Christian higher education is either the responsibility of the whole institution or it is an extracurricular hobby. Knoetze (2022), writing from within African theological education,

argues that credible leadership emerges through sustained relationships with faith communities rather than through curricula.

The empirical record is more equivocal than the theological argument. Lee, Djita and Price (2024) found that students at religious institutions in the United States reported greater perceived support for their faith than peers in secular settings, which is what the theory predicts. But perceived support is a low bar, and it measures climate rather than change. Francis et al. (2026), studying members of the Student Christian Movement in the United Kingdom, identified prayer, Bible study, worship and public engagement as pathways associated with growth in discipleship and vocational clarity, which suggests that participation rather than enrolment does the work.

Adedibu (2024) presses a different objection from Nigeria. Theological education that transmits doctrine while leaving character and social responsibility untouched produces graduates fluent in a vocabulary they do not inhabit; the remedy he proposes reconnects Christian formation with mission and with socioeconomic obligation. Kretzschmar (2020), examining the moral formation of Christian leaders in South Africa, is blunter still about what spiritual disciplines are for: they exist to counteract pride, self-glorification and greed, which are not abstract risks for young scholars entering systems that reward exactly those dispositions.

Two institutional cases show what translation looks like. At the Université Chrétienne Bilingue du Congo, leadership formation combines academic study with manual work, community service and mentoring, deliberately unsettling the authoritarian assumptions that students bring from the surrounding society (Asiimwe & Kwani, 2025). At a Christian university in the United States, graduate students reported that watching faculty and administrators behave in service-oriented ways, and being given something to do, strengthened their sense of preparedness for post-graduation contribution (Jegede, 2026). Both are self-report studies at single institutions, and neither can tell us whether the graduates behaved differently five years later.

A defender of this literature would answer that self-report is the only instrument available. Character is not directly observable; asking people what has changed in them is what psychologists of religion have always done; and demanding randomised designs of a chaplaincy is a category error. Half of that is right. The objection here is narrower: the problem is not that the measure is perceptual but that the perceiver, the intervention and the researcher usually share an employer, and that almost no study follows anyone out of the building. Those are fixable defects, and the field has not fixed them.

The honest summary is that discipleship formation has a strong theological rationale, a plausible mechanism, and an evidence base composed almost entirely of perceptions gathered from people still inside the institution doing the forming. That is a reason to be careful about the claims, not a reason to abandon the practice.

2.2 Emerging Adulthood: What the Word *Young* Contributes

Between roughly eighteen and twenty-five, students are doing something other than acquiring capability: they are deciding who they are. That condition is the reason formation works and the reason it is hazardous, and the literature on faith-based leadership education has mostly treated the word *young* in this article's title as decoration.

Arnett (2000) named the period emerging adulthood and characterised it by demographic instability, subjective in-betweenness, and identity exploration extended well past adolescence. Commitments in love, work and worldview are made provisionally and revised. That description has held up across a large empirical literature: Maehler and Hernández-Torrano (2025), reviewing 909 quantitative studies of identity development published between 1966 and 2022, describe a field organised around exploration and commitment processes and their relation to psychosocial functioning. Identity at this stage is not a fixed thing being expressed. It is being assembled, in public, under observation.

Two consequences follow for leadership formation.

The first is that this is a window of unusual plasticity. Shulman et al. (2016), reappraising the dual systems model, describe reward sensitivity peaking in late adolescence and declining thereafter while cognitive control continues strengthening into the early twenties. The gap between the two is what makes emerging adults responsive to strong experience, to charismatic exemplars and to communities that offer a coherent account of what life is for. Formation is unusually effective here because the self being formed is unusually available.

The second consequence is that the same plasticity is what gives institutions leverage. A student who has not yet settled what she believes, whom she trusts, or what she owes anyone is not well positioned to resist an institution that tells her, with confidence and warmth, who she should become. Sunderman et al. (2026), tracing meaning-making in college students' leadership narratives, show that leadership experiences become developmentally significant precisely when students interpret them as saying something about who they are. That is the mechanism. It is also the vulnerability.

Evidence on what actually changes during these years is more specific than most leadership writing acknowledges. Stoppa and Lefkowitz (2010), following 434 emerging adult college students in the United States across three semesters, found religious attendance falling

sharply, from roughly 1.6 services a month to under one, while the stated importance of religious belief remained essentially flat, and 78 per cent of students kept their affiliation. Behaviour moved; conviction did not. Watanabe and Todd (2025), applying latent class growth modelling to 1,402 religiously affiliated adolescents in the National Study of Youth and Religion, found four distinct doubt trajectories and showed that deidentification followed not from doubt alone but from doubt combined with disengagement from practice.

That pairing of findings should reorganise how faith-based institutions think about their formative task. Doubt is not the enemy. Isolation is. An institution that responds to a student's questions by tightening requirements is optimising for the variable that does not predict the outcome it fears.

Moral development runs on a similar logic. Chen and Chan (2022), using longitudinal data from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education, found that honours programmes, undergraduate research and frequent out-of-class contact with faculty were associated with growth in moral reasoning. What these have in common is sustained, cognitively demanding relationship with an adult who takes the student's thinking seriously. None of them is a values course.

Finally, the developmental frame itself needs a geographic caveat. Arnett's emerging adulthood was theorised from affluent Western societies in which extended exploration is affordable. Honwana (2012), working across Mozambique, Senegal, South Africa and Tunisia, describes something that looks superficially similar and is structurally opposite: *waithood*, a prolonged and involuntary suspension between youth and adulthood produced by the absence of work, housing and the means to marry. The exploratory student in Michigan and the unemployed graduate in Maputo are both twenty-three and both not yet adults. One is choosing — the other is waiting. Leadership programmes exported from the first condition to the second routinely mistake enforced delay for developmental freedom, and design accordingly.

2.3 Christian Worldview and the Permission to Dissent

Worldview language does its worst work when it functions as a synonym for correct conclusions. Esqueda (2014) argues that a biblical worldview should operate as a unifying foundation for learning rather than as a wall, on the grounds that faith and knowledge are not autonomous domains needing artificial reconciliation. The argument is sound, and it is also the point at which Christian higher education most often loses its nerve, because a genuinely unifying framework has to be exposed to the possibility of being wrong about something.

Kim (2020) found that faith-learning integration in Christian colleges was associated with growth in critical thinking and in students' rated importance of worldview development, which at least undercuts the assumption that confessional commitment necessarily dulls inquiry. Sabri et al. (2008), interviewing theology undergraduates in the United Kingdom, found something more interesting and less comfortable: intellectual development depended on students being given room to explore the tension between what they believed existentially and what they were being asked to investigate scholarly. Where that room was absent, students learned to produce two separate registers of speech, one for seminars and one for church.

Institutional conditions determine whether that room exists. Ogunji (2012) argues that faith-learning integration in African Christian institutions must reach teaching, administration, assessment and community engagement or it will not survive contact with the timetable. Botha (2026), working in South Africa, identifies the specific failure mode: lecturers without professional formation and institutional support attach biblical language to otherwise unchanged disciplinary content, which students correctly read as ornamental. Richardson (2019) describes the alternative, disciplined conversation between scriptural commitments and subject-specific knowledge through deliberate instruction and modelling, which is considerably harder to timetable than a devotional at the start of class. Iselin and Meteyard (2010) push against purely conceptual accounts of worldview, arguing for an incarnational model in which faith, knowledge and practice interact in lived educational experience.

The claim worth defending here is narrow and somewhat against the grain of the literature. A Christian worldview is educationally valuable to the extent that it is falsifiable in the student's experience, that is, to the extent that the student could conceivably conclude that some part of it is mistaken and say so without institutional penalty. A worldview that cannot be argued with is not a framework for inquiry; it is a loyalty test with a syllabus attached. The counter-argument is obvious and serious: institutions have the right to maintain confessional identity, and an institution that treats every doctrine as provisional will not hold together for a generation. That is true. It establishes that the boundary must be drawn somewhere. It does not establish that the boundary should be drawn silently, which is the current practice at many institutions and the source of most of the trouble discussed next.

2.4 Formation, Indoctrination and the Power to Require

Faith formation is treated across most of the literature reviewed here as unambiguously benign. It is not, and the strongest version of the case for it has to say so.

Start with the conceptual problem. Lewin (2022) argues that the tidy philosophical distinction between education, which is good, and indoctrination, which is bad, will not survive examination, because most proposed criteria either rule out educational influence altogether or rule out nothing at all. Education, on his account, is the intentional attempt to improve a student's relation to some content, and every such attempt involves influence that the student did not choose. His proposal is not to abandon the distinction but to relocate it: the safeguard lies in educators simultaneously promoting a view and protecting students from the force of their own promotion. That is an uncomfortable and paradoxical position. It is also more usable than the pretence that a confessional institution merely offers resources from which students freely select.

Now the empirical problem. Allen, Glanzer and Dougherty (2025), studying chapel at a Christian university in the United States, found that students' prior religious commitment and practice did not predict reporting that chapel had strengthened their faith, though it did reduce the likelihood of reporting that chapel had weakened their belief. Read that carefully. The institution's flagship formative practice was, for a meaningful group of students, working in the wrong direction, and the students most exposed to harm were the ones who arrived least committed. Required chapel is not a neutral good that some students simply fail to benefit from.

Aune et al. (2026) provide the sharpest finding in this area. Following 1,000 students across 122 UK universities between 2021 and 2022, they found that perceived religious diversity, safe space for spiritual expression, and encounters that provoked students to question their own assumptions all predicted growth in pluralism. Two things predicted its decline: religion-related insensitivity, and coercion. Coercion specifically reduced students' commitment to interfaith service and collaboration. An institution that pushes hard on religious participation therefore risks more than failing to form. It risks forming students away from the very civic dispositions the discipleship-plus-citizenship model exists to produce.

Three difficulties follow that the field has largely declined to discuss.

The first is institutional power over dependent people. A twenty-year-old on a scholarship at a residential Christian university is subject to her institution for her housing, her grades, her financial aid, her reference letters and her friendships. Consent given inside that structure is not the same kind of consent as an adult's decision to join a congregation. Where formation practices are assessed, disciplined or made conditions of standing, the institution should say plainly that it is exercising authority over students rather than offering opportunity.

The second is exclusion. Yang (2025), studying 887 queer students, found that campus safety and financial aid services, LGBTQ+ student organisations and intergroup dialogue were among the resources associated with sustaining religious identity, and framed the question as how faith-based institutions can support these students while meeting their obligations. That framing is generous; the underlying situation is that some students are formed in institutions whose doctrinal commitments define part of who they are as a problem to be managed. A paper that recommends embedding discipleship across the curriculum without naming this is recommending something it has not examined.

The third is departure. Formation that works sometimes produces students who conclude, with integrity, that the tradition is mistaken. Watanabe and Todd's (2025) trajectories suggest this is a normal outcome rather than a system failure. An institution that treats every departure as a formation failure will respond by tightening control, which, as Aune et al. (2026) indicate, predicts precisely the wrong outcomes.

None of this argues against faith formation in higher education. It argues that the distinction between formation and indoctrination cannot be drawn by the forming institution alone, and that the practical test is procedural rather than doctrinal: can a student dissent, decline or leave without losing standing, funding or relationship? Institutions that can answer yes have a defensible formative practice. Those that cannot are exercising power and should stop describing it as care.

3. Civic Responsibility and Academic Leadership

3.1 Civic Identity and the Question of Which Polity

Civic identity in higher education is usually theorised as a developmental achievement: the student comes to see herself as belonging to a political community and as owing it something. Torney-Purta et al. (2015) separate civic competency from civic engagement and treat knowledge, analytic and participatory skills, motivations and democratic norms as interdependent, which is a sensible framework and a partial one. It presupposes the polity.

Owen, Krell and McCarron (2019), working with first-generation college students in the United States, describe civic development as movement from charity towards solidarity, from episodic helping towards structural understanding and identification. That is a real and demanding shift, and it depends on the student having a community she recognises as hers. Muddiman (2020), comparing business and sociology students in the United Kingdom, found that disciplinary culture shaped how students understood social obligation and the purposes of higher education, which suggests civic formation is happening in departments whether or

not anyone intends it. Alcantar (2023) shows for Latinx students in American higher education that pre-college experience, community assets and institutional characteristics shape what civic engagement even looks like; a model that recognises only electoral participation and formal volunteering will score whole populations as disengaged while they are running mutual-aid networks.

Yet the evidence that university attendance produces engaged citizens is weaker than the rhetoric. Van den Wijngaard et al. (2024), studying Dutch students, found political interest and political agency following different developmental paths, which undercuts any assumption that exposure to campus life uniformly generates civic capacity. Anjum et al. (2024), surveying universities in Southern Punjab, Pakistan, found uneven civic responsibility among students and argued that institutions had to build it deliberately. Ogunbayo and Emua (2026) report Nigerian undergraduates holding favourable dispositions towards democratic values while lacking the programmes that would convert disposition into practice. The pattern across all three is the same: attitudes are cheap and widely held; capacities are expensive and unevenly distributed.

Where civic formation does bite, it often does so through channels the curriculum does not control. Badaru and Adu (2020) found university students' media use positively associated with political participation in South Africa. Ngoka et al. (2026), studying University of Nigeria, Nsukka students during the 2023 presidential election, found WhatsApp campaigning influencing voting behaviour. Owusu-Agyeman and Fourie-Malherbe (2021) show in Ghana that treating students as partners, rather than as recipients of civic instruction, strengthened civic participation. Headrick (2024) reports American students describing civic leadership in terms of bridge-building and service while naming practical barriers that keep them out. Cantón Balcázar (2024) documents citizenship competencies as an explicit outcome expectation across universities in Chile, Colombia and Mexico.

Now the question the framework avoids. Ugwuozor and Mbaji (2024) assess Nigerian youths' capacity to demand accountability from their leaders and find real potential alongside a shortage of peaceful channels through which to exercise it. Set that beside Honwana's (2012) waithood and beside graduate labour markets discussed in section 4, and civic formation in much of the Global South is being offered to young people who are simultaneously being told, by every economic signal available, that their future lies elsewhere. A university that forms students for citizenship in a polity many will leave is doing one of three things: preparing them for the polity they will join, which requires a transnational rather than national civic curriculum; preparing them to stay, which requires arguing with the labour

market rather than ignoring it; or preparing them for a duty it has not thought through. Most institutions are doing the third.

The corresponding American problem is not emigration but legitimacy. Confidence among United States adults in higher education, measured by Gallup as a great deal or quite a lot, fell from 57 per cent in 2015 to 36 per cent in 2023 and 2024, recovered to 42 per cent in 2025, and sat at 38 per cent in 2026, with the share expressing very little or no confidence rising from 10 to 25 per cent across the same decade (Jones, 2026). A university whose civic authority is doubted by a quarter of the public cannot form civic identity by assertion. It has to earn the standing to do so, which is a different institutional task from writing a learning outcome.

3.2 Scholarship as Public Work

Engaged scholarship is the mechanism through which academic formation is supposed to acquire civic consequence, and it is the part of the model most vulnerable to self-congratulation. Hicks Peterson (2009) sets the terms: engagement that proceeds from deficit assumptions about communities reproduces the inequality it claims to address, and reciprocity is not a mood but a structure.

The student-side evidence is reasonably good. Caspersz and Olaru (2017), surveying Australian students, found service-learning valued for citizenship skills and for learning that ran past technical competence. Choi, Han and Kim (2026) report South Korean students describing learning through authentic problems, project design, collaboration, responsibility and the management of discomfort. Roso (2022) argues that service-learning places faith integration inside concrete ethical encounters rather than leaving it at the level of assent.

Community-side evidence is thinner and less flattering. Mtawa and Nkhoma (2020) found South African service-learning developing capabilities associated with affiliation, critical consciousness and local citizenship, while noting that student learning did not follow institutional intentions reliably. Nanyanzi et al. (2021), assessing stakeholder perceptions in Uganda, found reciprocity dependent on structures, time, money and communication that institutions frequently do not provide. Onwuemele (2018) identifies the underlying reason in Nigerian universities: community engagement is not recognised in promotion and reward systems as legitimate scholarship, so it is performed by the committed and ignored by the strategic.

Put those together and a claim emerges that much of the service-learning literature avoids. Service-learning is well evidenced as a student development intervention and poorly evidenced as a community development intervention. Both things can be true, and the honest

institutional position is to say which one is being purchased. A programme that describes itself as serving communities while measuring only student outcomes has confused its beneficiary with its customer.

The obvious rejoinder is that this sets an unreasonable bar. Universities are educational institutions; expecting a semester-long placement to shift a community's material conditions is expecting the wrong thing, and the reciprocity literature can slide into a purism that would cancel every partnership rather than run an imperfect one. Fair enough. But Hicks Peterson's (2009) point was never that imperfect partnerships should stop. It was that the asymmetry should be named in the design, in the budget and to the students, who otherwise learn from the experience exactly the lesson the programme intended to unteach: that the educated arrive, help, and leave.

Provenance returns here as a live question. If scholarship is to be public work, the public in question has some claim on what counts as good scholarship. Laakso and Hallberg Adu (2024) found African political scientists reporting that the real decolonising work happened in lecture halls, through contextualising Western theory with local material, while formal curriculum revision was throttled by quality-assurance bodies, publication incentives and foreign funding dependence. Pineda and Mishra (2023) show that shared vocabulary conceals divergence: diversity means substantially different things in Global North and Global South higher education because the histories that produced the word differ. A scholar-leader formed to serve a public must at some point be told that the standards by which her work will be judged have a history, and that the history is not neutral.

3.3 Character, Vocation and the Servant-leadership Evidence Base

Servant leadership does an enormous amount of work in the literature on faith-informed leadership formation. It supplies the vocabulary, the normative warrant and, increasingly, the measurement instruments. It is also the weakest empirical structure in this review, and treating it credulously damages the argument it is meant to support.

Begin with what the construct has going for it. Hoch et al. (2018), meta-analysing whether ethical, authentic and servant leadership explain variance beyond transformational leadership, concluded that authentic and ethical leadership added little, being too highly correlated with transformational leadership to justify separate treatment, while servant leadership showed more promise as a stand-alone approach capable of explaining a wide range of outcomes. That is a genuine result and it should be reported.

Now the problems. Eva et al. (2019), reviewing 285 servant leadership articles published between 1998 and 2018, found the field sufficiently confused about its own object that they

proposed a new definition, and they catalogued sixteen separate measurement instruments in circulation. Sixteen. A construct measured sixteen ways is not one construct — it is a family of overlapping ideas sharing a name, and meta-analytic pooling across them inherits that ambiguity. Lemoine, Hartnell and Leroy (2019) describe exactly this proliferation across the moral leadership constructs and argue for integration rather than further multiplication.

The deeper issue is causal. Antonakis et al. (2010) document how routinely leadership research makes causal claims that its designs cannot support, through omitted variables, simultaneity, common-source bias and measurement error. Most servant leadership studies are cross-sectional, ask the same respondents to rate both the leader's servanthood and their own outcomes, and report correlations as if they were effects. The studies cited in this review illustrate the pattern rather than escaping it. Dami et al. (2025) developed and validated a servant leadership scale in Indonesian Christian higher education with pretest and post-test data, which is better than most. Shula, van Wyk and Heystek (2022) describe servant leadership practice in South African faith-based schools through developing others, building relationships and sharing responsibility, which is descriptive rather than causal. Jegede (2026) reports perceived preparedness, not behaviour.

There is also a power problem that the empirical literature does not touch. Tangen (2019) examines how Greenleaf, Bradley and Marshall each connect power to servant leadership and shows that the tradition has never settled whether coercive power is admissible and under what conditions. This matters acutely in confessional institutions, where servanthood language can describe a leader who genuinely subordinates his interests to others and can equally describe a leader whose authority is rendered unquestionable by being framed as service. Ogundipe's (2026) analysis of nepotism at Nigerian Christian institutions of higher education shows what the second version produces: a servant-leadership framework invoked by people appointing their relatives.

What survives this? Rather more than it might appear. The case for character formation in scholar-leaders does not actually depend on servant leadership being a validated construct with demonstrated causal effects. It depends on the narrower and better-supported claim that dispositions can be cultivated and that institutions transmit them whether or not they intend to. Zhang et al. (2023) found among Chinese graduate students that supervisors' ethical leadership reduced acceptance of academic misconduct, with moral efficacy and team ethical climate as mechanisms. Gollagari, Beyene and Mishra (2022) found ethical leadership associated with employee commitment in Ethiopian public universities, mediated by perceived good governance. Koudela and Strong (2026) report gains in leadership self-

efficacy and ethical understanding from a collegiate ethics course in the United States; Blaich, Kenny and Jimenez (2023) report similar gains in preparedness to recognise and voice ethical concerns among Australian health science students.

Vocation supplies the direction that competence lacks. Boyles and Pittman (2021) argue that undergraduate vocational formation is strengthened when calling is discerned within Christian community rather than treated as a private career decision, and Nmah (2013) insists from the Nigerian context that theological education must produce persons whose learning shows in conduct. Fahm and Ibrahim (2026) document how communities in Northern Nigeria evaluate leaders against moral expectations of trust, justice and public duty amid insecurity and inequality, which is a reminder that the standards by which a graduate's leadership will actually be judged are set outside the university.

The payoff is this. Faith-informed leadership education should stop citing servant leadership as though it were settled science and start defending it as what it is: a normative tradition with theological warrant, contested internal logic, and a research literature that has not yet earned the right to make causal claims. That is a defensible position. The current one is not.

4. Formation Across Contexts: American and Global South Models in Contact

4.1 What American Models are Organised Around

American collegiate leadership education has a well-developed theoretical spine. The Leadership Identity Development model traces students from viewing leaders as external figures towards seeing themselves within relational leadership processes (Komives et al., 2006). The Social Change Model frames leadership as collaborative work towards positive social change rather than positional authority (Adams, Patterson & Skendall, 2023). Relational approaches and the Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership have been used to structure peer leadership, experiential assignments and reflective assessment (Holder & Pursley, 2023). Odom and Dunn (2023) show leadership identity being cultivated inside majors, minors and certificates rather than only alongside them. Eich (2008), grounding a theory of high-quality programmes, identified developmental experiences, meaningful relationships and enabling programme structures as the components that recur.

The system is also expensive in a specific currency. It assumes residential campuses, low student-staff ratios, co-curricular infrastructure and, above all, student time. Haber-Curran and Pierre (2023) note that involvement in student organisations, government, Greek life and athletics contributes to leadership identity only when mentoring and structured reflection

accompany it. Reflection is the mechanism, and reflection requires hours that are not spent earning money.

What is scarce in this system is not opportunity. Three things are: attention, meaning and institutional legitimacy. The Healthy Minds Study's 2024-2025 national data report, covering 84,735 students at 135 institutions, found 37 per cent screening positive for any depression, 33 per cent for any anxiety, 11 per cent reporting past-year suicidal ideation, and 38 per cent meeting the threshold for positive mental health on the Flourishing Scale (Healthy Minds Network, 2025). Fewer than two in five students are flourishing — in the system whose comparative advantage is supposed to be its formative environment. Alongside that, public confidence in higher education has fallen by nineteen points in a decade (Jones, 2026). American leadership education is therefore operating with abundant structure and a shortage of the conditions that make structure work: students with the bandwidth to reflect, and an institution whose account of the good life carries authority.

Access is uneven too. Chang (2023), studying student leaders of colour, found culturally relevant courses, identity-based organisations and dedicated institutional spaces necessary for social justice leadership development, and concluded that nominally universal programmes encode dominant assumptions unless diversity is addressed deliberately. Crawford, Lewis and Kelder (2024), testing structural models across Australian student populations, found students in leadership roles scoring higher on authentic leadership attributes while individual and contextual differences moderated development, which is consistent with selection effects doing some of the work that programmes claim credit for.

4.2 What Global South Models are Organised Around

The contrast usually drawn here is cultural: individualism against communalism, Western against indigenous. That contrast is real but shallow, and it flatters both sides.

Substantive material from these settings is strong. Agu and Nwachukwu (2020) describe the Igbo Traditional Business School, an apprenticeship system in which emerging entrepreneurs progress through observation, graduated responsibility and eventual independent establishment, a developmental logic with a longer track record than most university leadership certificates. Seale (2025) shows how the African Leadership University builds applied leadership education from local histories, storytelling and Ubuntu ethics. Wang (2026) reads Fei Xiaotong's *chaxu geju* as a relational epistemology in which authority is differentiated by relationship rather than standardised. Anderson et al. (2024) document the election of the first female SRC president at KNUST in Ghana as a contest over who may represent, rather than a contest over leadership style. Masungu (2024) treats student activism

across the Global South as a site where political capabilities are formed, and Pule and May (2021) show South African student leaders negotiating apartheid's institutional residue alongside the ordinary demands of office. Hlatshwayo and Mfeka (2024) render the experience in student representatives' own idiom, *kunzima*, it is not for the fainthearted, which conveys more about the role than a competency framework does. Sokhela and Murhula (2022) trace developmental, transformational and transactional dynamics interacting as students become leaders. Zhang and Thien (2026) show Chinese student leadership practice mediated by motivation to lead and shaped by core self-evaluation. Shomotova and Ibrahim (2025) find in the United Arab Emirates that academic and extracurricular engagement is positively associated with leadership potential and self-perceived employability.

Scarcity here is of a different order, and it is material. The gross tertiary enrolment ratio in Sub-Saharan Africa stands at 9.4 per cent against a global average near 38 per cent, with roughly nine million students enrolled across the region, representing about 4 per cent of global tertiary enrolment; the region contributes under 1 per cent of global research output; 30 per cent of tertiary students have home internet access and 42 per cent own a personal computer, while 97 per cent own a mobile phone (World Bank, 2021). The global tertiary gross enrolment ratio had reached 39 per cent and was climbing by roughly a percentage point a year (UNESCO, 2022). The gap is not narrowing quickly.

Demand outstrips capacity by margins that make the American conversation about programme design look like a different subject. Nigeria's admissions system has for years processed roughly two million candidates for something in the order of 750,000 places across universities, polytechnics and colleges of education, against a population of which some 62 per cent is aged twenty-four or younger (Parr, 2018). Afatakpa and Okedare (2022), studying undergraduates at Dominion University, Ibadan, identify inadequate leadership training, limited institutional support and contested perceptions of student authority as the binding constraints. Abdullahi (2022) finds Nigerian student leadership judged by welfare advocacy, information dissemination, orientation and sports provision, which are service-delivery functions rather than developmental ones. Altynbassov et al. (2024), reviewing a decade of Global South higher education leadership research, caution against importing Global North frameworks without adaptation.

And the graduate labour market sets the frame. In South Africa, unemployment among degree holders rose from 5.8 per cent in 2008 to 11.8 per cent in 2023, easing to 10.2 per cent by the final quarter of 2024, with African graduates at 18 per cent in 2023 against 3.7 per cent for white graduates, and women graduates 4.5 percentage points above men (McGinty &

Whitelaw, 2025). Those are not marginal disparities. A leadership formation programme that promises influence and service to a cohort facing an 18 per cent unemployment rate is making a promise that the economy may not honour.

4.3 Putting the Two in Contact

The two systems are now usually compared by listing parallel features, which is what section 4.1 and 4.2 would amount to if left standing. The comparison earns its place only when it identifies what each context can do that the other cannot, and where transfer predictably fails. Take reflection first. American models treat structured reflection as the mechanism converting experience into leadership identity (Haber-Curran & Pierre, 2023; Komives et al., 2006). Reflection is time-intensive and presupposes a student who is not simultaneously supporting a household. Transplanted into an institution where lectures are oversubscribed, where staff carry teaching loads that leave no room for the out-of-class faculty contact that Chen and Chan (2022) identify as the active ingredient in moral reasoning growth, and where students commute, reflection becomes a worksheet. The pedagogy does not fail because the culture rejects it. It fails because its input costs were never priced.

Now run the transfer the other way. Apprenticeship models of the kind Agu and Nwachukwu (2020) describe, and the graduated-responsibility logic embedded in Ubuntu-informed programmes (Seale, 2025), have something American leadership education mostly lacks: consequence. The apprentice's decisions affect a real enterprise. Much American co-curricular leadership is rehearsal, which is precisely why reflection has to be manufactured to supply the meaning that consequence would otherwise provide. Haniff and Daya (2023) show distributed leadership giving South African students genuine stake in institutional processes; Oni and Adetoro (2015), comparing twelve universities in south-west Nigeria, associate meaningful student involvement in decision-making with leadership effectiveness and improved student-management relations. Both point the same way. Give students decisions that matter and less reflective scaffolding is required.

Three asymmetries deserve naming directly.

Resources. The World Bank (2021) figures are not a footnote to the comparison; they are the comparison. An institution allocating scarce laboratory and library capacity is not in a position to run leadership certificates, and a recommendation that it should do so is a recommendation to move money from teaching. Xaba (2025), proposing the GX Framework for evaluating student leadership development in South African universities, is doing something more useful than importing a model: insisting that programmes demonstrate impact before they consume resources.

Brain drain. Every successful Global South leadership formation programme faces an uncomfortable possibility: the better it works, the more employable its graduates become internationally, and the more likely the formed leader is to lead somewhere else. Shomotova and Ibrahim (2025) measure leadership potential alongside self-perceived employability as though they were complementary. In a labour market like South Africa's (McGinty & Whitelaw, 2025), or in the conditions Honwana (2012) describes, they are in tension. The civic formation literature has no serious answer to this, and its silence is conspicuous.

Curricular provenance. Laakso and Hallberg Adu's (2024) twenty-six political scientists were not blocked by cultural resistance; they were blocked by accreditation timelines, publication incentives and funders. Pineda and Mishra (2023) show that shared terminology masks divergent meanings. Guthrie and Davies (2025) argue that leadership programme design must account for the environments in which students interpret leadership. The conclusion these support is stronger than contextualisation: a leadership curriculum inherited from a colonial university system carries assumptions about authority, expertise and the proper relation between the educated and the governed, and forming students in it without examining those assumptions is itself a political act.

Faith formation occupies an awkward position within this account. It travels more easily than the pedagogy does, and that is a mixed blessing. Ahn and Calley (2025) propose Global Kingdom Citizenship as a model of holistic intercultural competence development, and Irfan and Kalim (2025) show international students in Chinese higher education developing openness and adaptability through multicultural participation. Both suggest the religious vocabulary crosses borders. But the vocabulary crossing borders is exactly what produces the *whose discipleship* problem, because what travels is the word and what stays behind is the local argument about what the word requires. Theron (2013), reporting from Christian higher education in Mozambique, and McCain (2026), pressing Nigerian Christian academics towards holistic rather than ornamental faith integration, are describing local settlements of that argument, not applications of a general model.

Against all this, a reader might object that the cultural account is being dismissed too quickly. Ubuntu is not a coping strategy for poverty; *chaxu geju* is not a workaround for thin institutions; both are substantive moral anthropologies, and reducing them to adaptations to scarcity is its own form of condescension. The objection lands, and the claim here should be stated precisely to meet it. Values differ, and Seale (2025) and Wang (2026) are describing real philosophical alternatives rather than local colour. What the values do not do is explain the failure pattern. Programmes rarely fail because a Ghanaian cohort found relational

leadership alien. They fail because nobody costed the staff hours, or because the graduates left. Scarcity is not the deeper truth behind the values; it is the variable that predicts transfer failure, and the one that comparative work keeps omitting.

The analytical payoff of this section is a single claim. American and Global South leadership formation do not differ principally in what they value. They differ in what is scarce, and formation programmes encode assumptions about scarcity that are invisible until the programme is moved. The American model assumes time and institutional capacity and is short of meaning and public trust. The Global South models assume consequence and communal obligation and are short of places, staff and jobs. Transfer in either direction should begin by asking which scarcity the receiving institution faces.

5. Strengthening Young Scholar-Leader Development

5.1 Designing for Conflict Rather than Synthesis

If the three questions of section 1.2 cannot be dissolved, the design task changes. The aim is not a programme in which discipleship, scholarship and citizenship agree. It is a programme in which students learn to hold them when they do not.

That is a curricular proposal, and it is more specific than it sounds. It means putting the conflicts on the syllabus. A student being formed for Christian leadership in a religiously plural society should at some point be required to articulate, in writing and under assessment, what her tradition asks of her that her civic obligations do not, and what she proposes to do about the gap. Panotto (2026), arguing from Latin American political theology that Christian universities can cultivate democratic imagination through spaces for critical reflection and plural engagement, is describing the same move. Guthrie (2018) supplies the theological resource in a Christian account of the common good that connects biblical allegiance to public commitment without collapsing into partisanship. Droege and Ferrari (2012), measuring faith and civic engagement together, find the two capable of coexisting and reinforcing one another, which is a finding about possibility rather than a guarantee.

The integration literature usually stops at asserting coherence. Lo (2025) proposes strengthening faith-integrated pedagogy in Indonesian Christian higher education through the scholarship of teaching and learning, systematic reflection on teaching and evidence of student learning. That is genuinely useful, and it is a method for improving instruction rather than a method for handling disagreement. What is missing across this literature is any treatment of formation as an argument the student joins rather than a synthesis the student receives.

A counter-argument deserves a hearing. Teaching eighteen-year-olds the contradictions in their institution's own commitments may produce cynicism rather than maturity, and there is a defensible pastoral case for establishing a tradition before subjecting it to examination. The developmental evidence cuts against this. Sabri et al. (2008) found that students denied room to explore the tension learned to speak in two registers rather than to think in one. Aune et al. (2026) found that provocative encounters challenging students' assumptions were the strongest predictors of growth in pluralism, and that coercion predicted the opposite. Students who are protected from the conflicts do not fail to notice them; they learn that the institution cannot discuss them.

5.2 What Institutions Owe students: Mentoring, Governance, Assessment

Three institutional commitments follow, and each is more demanding than the recommendation it replaces.

Mentoring, resourced rather than exhorted. Chen and Chan (2022) identify sustained out-of-class faculty contact as associated with moral reasoning growth. Miner and Beilharz (2023) argue from Australian Christian higher education that mentoring must be sensitive to cultural background and developmental stage, and that it does not happen by encouragement. The binding constraint is staff time, which is precisely what is scarcest in the systems described by the World Bank (2021). An institution that lists mentoring as a formation strategy without reducing a teaching load or funding a post has written an aspiration, not a plan.

Governance as the site of consequence. Haniff and Daya (2023) make the case for distributed leadership giving students genuine participation, and Oni and Adetoro (2015) supply supporting evidence from twelve Nigerian universities. Krauss and Abdul Hamid (2015), studying Malaysian undergraduates, found perceived campus support, programme quality, available opportunity and staff engagement predicting motivation to lead; the common factor is credibility. Students can tell the difference between consultation and decision. Hlatshwayo and Mfeka (2024) describe what happens when they are given the role without the authority: representatives carry the reputational cost of decisions they did not make.

Assessment that risks disconfirmation. This is where the field is weakest. Leadership programmes routinely claim effects on character, civic agency and identity while measuring satisfaction. Bureau and Lawhead (2018) argue for connecting intended outcomes to evidence and using findings for improvement rather than accountability theatre. Ueda and Kezar (2024), systematically reviewing formal college leadership programmes, find different pedagogies producing different outcomes, which means programme design should begin from stated developmental purposes. Coetzee, Bickmore-Brand and Greentree (2025) report

that Christian graduate attributes in Australian providers are difficult to embed and assess unless faculty translate them into actual curricular activity. Xaba's (2025) GX Framework offers evaluation dimensions for South African universities. Simanjuntak, Heriyanto and Hasibuan (2023) apply learning-organisation thinking to Indonesian Christian higher education, locating improvement in institutional reflection.

The methodological demand implied by section 3.3 is uncomfortable and should be stated. Antonakis et al. (2010) show why self-reported outcomes collected from programme participants by programme staff cannot support the claims routinely made from them. Institutions serious about formation should be willing to run designs capable of returning a null result: longitudinal follow-up after graduation, behavioural rather than attitudinal measures, feedback from community partners who are not dependent on the university, and comparison with students who did not participate. Most will not do this, because the answer might be that the programme does little. That possibility is the reason to look.

5.3 What We Do not Know

Four gaps are large enough to constrain what any institution can responsibly claim.

The first is duration. Almost nothing in this literature follows students past graduation. Whether formation programmes change how a thirty-five-year-old behaves in a hospital, a ministry of education or a church board is unknown, and the field has been content with proxies for two decades.

The second is the disengaged student. Research recruits from the involved. Students who decline chapel, skip the service placement and never stand for office are the ones whose formation would be most informative and are almost entirely absent from the evidence base.

The third is the interaction between faith formation and the developmental conditions described in section 2.2. Watanabe and Todd (2025) and Stoppa and Lefkowitz (2010) give a picture of religious change in emerging adulthood drawn largely from American samples. What the equivalent trajectories look like for students in waitthood conditions (Honwana, 2012), or in religiously plural West African institutions, is not established.

The fourth is technology, which the field has rushed to discuss without much evidence. Acheson (2026) sets out imperatives for student leadership development in a generative-AI environment, and Lopez-Lopez et al. (2026) propose competencies for AI-integrated leadership development. Both are conceptual. The prior question is whether tools that generate plausible reasoning on demand interfere with the slow acquisition of judgement that formation depends on, and that question has not been studied in the populations this review concerns.

What follows for research design is straightforward and rarely done: multi-institutional, longitudinal, comparative work spanning American and Global South universities, with behavioural outcomes, community-partner data and enough statistical power to detect the modest effects that are the realistic expectation. Anything less continues to produce the literature this review has had to work with.

CONCLUSION

The young scholar-leader is a figure that higher education finds easy to describe and hard to produce. This review has argued that the difficulty is not organisational. Discipleship, scholarship and civic formation sit in separate offices because each protects itself, by that separation, from a question it would otherwise have to answer: whose discipleship, citizenship of which polity, excellence by whose standards. Integration is valuable to the extent that it forces those questions into the open, and worthless to the extent that it papers over them with a coherent-sounding graduate attribute.

Three consequences run through the argument. Age matters, and the literature has under-used it. Emerging adulthood is a period in which identity is unusually available for shaping, which is what makes formation work and what obliges institutions to treat their own authority over students as a problem rather than a resource. The test of whether formation has become indoctrination is procedural: whether a student can dissent, decline or depart without losing standing. Institutions that cannot pass that test should stop calling what they do formation.

Context matters differently than the comparative literature assumes. American and Global South universities are not opposed on values. They are organised around different scarcities, attention, meaning and public trust in one case, places, staff and jobs in the other, and formation programmes that cross between them fail when their assumptions about scarcity go unexamined. A reflection-intensive pedagogy transplanted into an oversubscribed faculty becomes paperwork; an apprenticeship logic transplanted into an American co-curriculum loses the consequence that made it work.

Evidence matters most of all, and here the field must accept a demotion. Servant leadership, the tradition that carries most of the normative weight in faith-informed leadership education, is measured sixteen ways, studied mostly through cross-sectional self-report, and defended with causal language its designs cannot support. The correct response is not to abandon it but to argue for it honestly, as a theological and normative commitment with a thin empirical literature attached, and then to build the studies that would test it. A university that says this plainly to its students is already modelling the intellectual virtue it hopes to form in them,

which may be the most direct route to the scholar-leader it has been trying to produce by other means.

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