

Article

The illusion of virtue. Systemic reconceptualization of positive action leadership and proposal for common good leadership in universities



Manuel Alejandro Gutiérrez González

PhD in Human Sciences from the University Center of Mexico City. He is a doctoral researcher in the humanities and an academic scholar at Universidad Anáhuac Querétaro, where he contributes to research coordination, curriculum development, and the advancement of interdisciplinary academic initiatives. His scholarly work lies at the intersection of moral philosophy, metaethics, virtue ethics, leadership studies, and the humanities–technology dialogue, with particular emphasis on the common good, moral judgment, digital literacy, and the ethical implications of artificial intelligence in higher education. He has developed and promoted institutional projects related to integral human formation, bioethics, science and religion, open reason, and character-based leadership, as well as initiatives for the creation of research chairs, academic centers, and editorial platforms. ORCID: 0000-0002-0799-5421. E-mail: manuel.gutierrezgon@anahuac.mx.

Received 06 March 2025, Accepted 31 March 2025

KEYWORDS:

Congruence Gap,
Perception Gap,
Relational Virtue,
Systems Theory,
University
Leadership.

ABSTRACT:

The expansion of leadership programs in higher education has produced a normative overload that emphasizes the individual's moral intention over the social effectiveness of leadership. This article critically examines the Positive Action Leadership (PAL) model, dominant in an international network of universities, and argues that it represents a pre-scientific stage of institutional leadership. Drawing on Aristotle's four causes and systems theory, the study contends that PAL prioritizes the formation of personal virtues but fails to clearly define the mechanisms that translate that ideal into verifiable collective practices. Based on a sample of 655 university students, two gaps are identified: one between ideal and reality, and another of perception. Although students internalize the ethical discourse, they show weaknesses in resilience, congruence, and social agency. As an alternative, the article proposes the Leadership for the Common Good (LCG) model, validated through CB-SEM, focused on relational, assessable, and structurally mediated dimensions.

PALABRAS CLAVES:

Brecha de Congruencia, Brecha de Percepción, Liderazgo Universitario, Teoría de Sistemas, Virtud Relacional.

RESUMEN:

La expansión de los programas de liderazgo en la educación superior ha generado una sobrecarga normativa que prioriza la intención moral del individuo por encima de la eficacia social del liderazgo. Este artículo examina críticamente el modelo de Liderazgo de Acción Positiva (PAL), predominante en una red internacional de universidades, y sostiene que representa una etapa precientífica del liderazgo institucional. Basándose en las cuatro causas de Aristóteles y en la teoría de sistemas, el estudio sostiene que el PAL prioriza la formación de virtudes personales, pero no logra definir claramente los mecanismos que traducen ese ideal en prácticas colectivas verificables. A partir de una muestra de 655 estudiantes universitarios, se identifican dos brechas: una entre el ideal y la realidad, y otra de percepción. Aunque los estudiantes internalizan el discurso ético, muestran debilidades en resiliencia, congruencia y agencia social. Como alternativa, el artículo propone el modelo de Liderazgo para el Bien Común (LCG), validado mediante el CB-SEM, centrado en dimensiones relacionales, evaluables y mediadas estructuralmente

MOTS CLES :

Écart de congruence, Écart de perception, Leadership universitaire, Théorie de systèmes, Vertu relationnelle.

RESUME :

Le développement des programmes de leadership dans l'enseignement supérieur a entraîné une surcharge normative qui privilégie l'intention morale de l'individu au détriment de l'efficacité sociale du leadership. Cet article examine de manière critique le modèle du Leadership par l'action positive (LAP), dominant au sein d'un réseau international d'universités, et soutient qu'il représente un stade pré-scientifique du leadership institutionnel. S'appuyant sur les quatre causes d'Aristote et la théorie des systèmes, l'étude soutient que le PAL privilégie la formation des vertus personnelles mais ne parvient pas à définir clairement les mécanismes qui traduisent cet idéal en pratiques collectives vérifiables. Sur la base d'un échantillon de 655 étudiants universitaires, deux écarts sont identifiés : l'un entre l'idéal et la réalité, et l'autre au niveau de la perception. Bien que les étudiants intériorisent le discours éthique, ils présentent des faiblesses en matière de résilience, de congruence et d'action sociale. Comme alternative, l'article propose le modèle Leadership au service du bien commun (LBC), validé par le modèle CB-SEM, axé sur des dimensions relationnelles, évaluables et structurées

CREATIVE COMMONS LICENSE

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Contents:

1 INTRODUCTION; 2 THE FALLACY OF SOLIPSTIC VIRTUE VERSUS RELATIONAL VIRTUE; 3 PAL THROUGH THE ARISTOTELIAN CAUSES; 4 THE GAPS; 4.1 THE IDEAL–REAL GAP; 4.2 THE PERCEPTION GAP; 5 CONCLUSIONS; 6 REFERENCES

1 INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of leadership programs across Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) has produced a form of semantic saturation that conceals a deeper crisis of effectiveness. As universities compete to promote holistic formation models, leadership has progressively lost operational precision and become a ubiquitous rhetorical signifier—one that tends to overestimate moral intention while underestimating concrete praxis (Skalicky et al., 2020). At the same time, Edwards and Taylor (2024) identify a structural weakness in contemporary leadership education: many leadership educators lack specialized training in the field, with the result that leadership formation often remains superficial, fragmented, or insufficiently systematized. This, in turn, generates inconsistencies both in program design and in the educational aims such programs are expected to achieve.

Contemporary leadership discourse thus appears trapped in a romanticized paradigm. Universities teach leadership as an idealized moral horizon, whereas students frequently inhabit and enact a markedly different, often solipsistic, social reality. In this framework, the character of the leader is privileged over the community within which leadership is exercised. Given these problems, and the broader stagnation of leadership theory and practice in higher education, several questions become unavoidable: are university leadership programs genuinely effective? What elements are actually required for leadership to be real rather than merely aspirational?

One of the leadership models implemented within an international network of universities is Positive Action Leadership (PAL).¹ This model seeks to cultivate students' will in an upright manner so that they may respond to social problems. However, its primary emphasis on individual intention overlooks a more fundamental fact: leadership does not reside exclusively in the subject, but in the structures of relational mediation through which action acquires social efficacy. Put differently, an individual may display the traits of a positive leader at the personal level while still proving detrimental to the common good. This raises the central question of the present study: can a university leadership model grounded primarily in individual moral formation adequately explain and predict the praxis of the good—that is, real and socially consequential action—or does it require a systematic reconceptualization supported by psychometric validation and a relational framework? The hypothesis advanced here is that a leader's good intentions are largely irrelevant in the absence of a mediating social structure capable of translating moral aspiration into effective common action.

To address this question, the article proceeds in three stages. First, it argues that PAL treats leadership as a fundamentally private property of the individual and contrasts this view with models in which virtue emerges through social interaction and relational embeddedness. Second, it examines PAL through the framework of the Aristotelian causes, proposed here as a comprehensive and systemic analytical lens capable of overcoming technical reductionism. Finally, it identifies two structural gaps generated by PAL: first, a gap between the ideal and the real; and second, a gap of perception.

2 THE FALLACY OF SOLIPSISTIC VIRTUE VERSUS RELATIONAL VIRTUE

The virtue model underlying PAL begins from an emphatically anthropological and intentional definition of leadership. Leadership is defined as “influencing, through one's

¹ The universities are located in Mexico, the United States, Chile, Spain, and Rome.

actions, the people around oneself in order to sow the greatest possible good” (Universidad Anáhuac campus México, 2020, p. 16). Likewise, the positive action leader is described as one who, “committed to the good and the truth, aware of the surrounding context, exercises his or her vocation of service by inspiring and transforming other people” (Universidad Anáhuac campus México, 2020, p. 43). In both formulations, the emphasis falls on the subject’s interiority: commitment, awareness, vocation, and right intention. Leadership thus appears primarily as a quality rooted in the individual’s moral constitution.

This subject-centered orientation is reinforced when PAL is described as the outcome of an integral formation aimed at the perfection of personal faculties. Leadership education is said to require “the right formation of intelligence, conscience, and will” (Vega Masso, 2023, p. 100), leading to the fulfillment of one’s life project. Similarly, human formation is defined as “the formation of conscience according to right reason and the Gospel, in the forging of character through the virtues” (Monzón, 2023, p. 53).

Within this framework, virtue is conceived as a perfective habit of the individual powers (Vega Masso, 2023, p. 102), thereby reinforcing the idea that leadership is a property that is acquired and possessed. Even when particular virtues are specified, like prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance, humility, magnanimity, and charity, they are presented as qualities that enable the individual to act in accordance with the good (Exposito & Aranguren, 2023, pp. 113–118).

The formulation of PAL is extensive and detailed, as shown in Table 1, which considers its central proposal, anthropological grounding (where present), defining characteristics, and operative emphasis. It is therefore important to note that PAL is not understood uniformly by all authors or institutions; indeed, different interpretations frequently yield different lists of core virtues.

Table 1. Characteristics of PAL according to different authors and universities.

Author	University	Central Proposal	Anthropological foundation	Characteristics of PAL	Operative emphasis
Monzón (2023)	UPRA	PAL as positive action oriented toward the common good from a transcendent vision	Leadership as a free and intentional act oriented toward the good (Aristotle, 1098b33). Integral formation in four areas: intellectual, human, social, and spiritual	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Influence oriented toward change- Positive action directed to the common good- Openness to transcendence- Service to society- Moral formation through the virtues	Integral personal development as the foundation of leadership. Formation of cognitive and moral habits leading to intellectual, human, social, and spiritual leadership.
de-la-Sota-Riva-Echánove y Zainos-García-Cano (2023)	UAM	Personalist leadership as service and attentiveness to the collaborator’s needs	The person as a relational being who finds unity in common causes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Service as vocation- Deep empathy- Open-mindedness- Optimism and enthusiasm- Building unity for the common good	The centrality of interpersonal encounter and accompaniment as the core of leadership. Leadership is understood here as the integration of common causes through personal relationship.
Vega-Masso (2023)	UFT	Integration of transformational leadership and PAL within a Christian humanist framework	Integral formation grounded in the right formation of intelligence, conscience, and will	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Pursuit of truth and the good- Service inspired by transcendence	Education understood as accompaniment toward virtue (a perfective habit). Leadership is conceived as the outcome of the subject’s moral and spiritual maturity.

				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prudence and responsibility in the exercise of freedom - Leadership as praxis (not mere poiesis) - Inspiring and transforming others 	
Riquelme-Castañeda (2023)	UFT	PAL applied to the resolution of complex problems oriented toward the common good	Leadership contexts in of complexity: integration of verticality and horizontality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Positive action with observable results - Resolution of “tame” and complex problems - Harmonization of conflicts - Sensible and objective dialogue - Adequate management of people’s involvement 	PAL understood not only as ethical intention, but as the capacity to produce concrete results in complex environments. Emphasis on practical effectiveness and relational management.
López-González (2025)	UFV	Leadership is understood as the human act of guiding others toward a common good and is analyzed through its “causes,” with particular emphasis on the final cause (the common good)	Relational teleology: the end of leadership is connected to communion with God and with others; the community (its culture and practices) conditions leadership roles; the legitimacy of power depends on its orientation toward the common good	Leadership oriented toward the common good; it involves educable virtues and competencies; it recognizes the diversity of bonds (legal, religious, familial, educational) and their ethical weight; it underscores that the community makes leadership roles possible and conditions them	It operationalizes PAL as a teleological framework: the evaluative (normative) criterion is orientation toward the common good and moral legitimacy.
Caballero-de-la-Fuente (2025)	UAQ	Transforming the university experience into a school of leadership for the Social Sciences through technological integration; it proposes a hybrid model (digital competencies + traditional leadership)	The text operates within a professional and technological formation framework, without articulating an underlying philosophical anthropology	PAL functions as an institutional formative horizon, but may remain insufficient if it does not incorporate concrete mediations (tools/environments) for leading in digitalized contexts	Structural transformation of educational programs; digitalization proposals based on qualitative case studies; emphasis on the “reform of the educational approach.”
López-González et al.(2025)	UFV	They present measurement findings and the LID model: three domains (understanding reality, relating to others, and dedication to the task) with educable axes; a metamodel integrating situational, servant, ethical, transformational, and authentic leadership	An anthropology of educable development: leadership is grounded in capacities that can be cultivated across three domains—cognitive (reality), relational (others), and practical (task)—with emphasis on the formation of habits and competencies	It defines the traits of educable leadership (perception, deliberation, vision; inspiration, harmonization, accompaniment; commitment, resilience, self-mastery) and grounds them in virtue and competence as conditions of good leadership	Emphasis on formative architecture (domains/axes) and on measurement (questionnaire) as a means of assessing leadership education.

		approaches; good leadership requires both virtue and competence			
Villafán-Amezcuca (2025)	UAP	It contrasts the concept of leadership promoted by the institution (PAL) with the leadership students actually recognize, finding a separation between the two, with only slight overlaps	It is a descriptive study of the discrepancy between the traits promoted by PAL and students' perceptions, rather than a study grounded in a formal philosophical anthropology	PAL appears as a normative institutional construct (ethics, empathy, social commitment) that may not coincide with students' own understanding of leadership	It is operationalized through focus groups (faculty/students) and a comparison of traits (faculty define PAL traits; students define perceived leadership traits).
Ramos-Pérez (2025)	UAV	It grounds integral formation and leadership in the Anáhuac Universities Network (RUA) in Aristotle: balance and virtue (the mean); virtue is not innate but cultivated through action and education; leadership is understood as part of the development of intelligence, conscience, and will	An anthropology of moral perfectibility: the person is fulfilled through the cultivation of virtue (not innate) and through education; it integrates Christian humanism with Aristotelian thought toward a virtuous moral life	PAL is presented as the promotion of a "virtuous moral life" oriented toward the common good through integral formation (intelligence, conscience, and will)	Emphasis on philosophical grounding (Aristotle) together with its institutional translation into "formative axes" oriented toward the development of human faculties.
Virués-Macías (2025)	UAQ	Leadership is understood as a pillar for building community (alongside a shared mission, communication, and trust); the leader's credibility is central; success is defined not only by results but by positive impact on people	It approaches the construction of leadership through an organizational vocabulary, though without explicitly articulating a formal philosophical anthropology	PAL is aligned with contemporary moralized leadership theories (integrity, ethics, congruence, virtues, service, concern for others); integral leadership is presented as a condition of credibility	It is operationalized through the attributes of the credible leader (character, competence, commitment, concern for others, trust, communication, and consistency) and through the design of communal environments.
Aldrete-Elizondo & Llanos-Reynoso (2025)	UAC	They analyze the difference between leadership capacity and the frequency of actions; drawing on self-efficacy theory (Bandura; LSE), leadership is measured through behavior: perceived self-efficacy and actual practice	A psychological anthropology of perceived agency	PAL is placed under tension by the gap between "perceived capacity" and actual practice; it therefore requires strategies for the practical application of leadership skills	Emphasis on behavioral measurement and the psychology of agency (48 items), as well as on domains of action (ethics, humanism, social commitment, teamwork, communication, and self-management) in order to assess practice in relation to capacity.

Alvarado-Pérez (2025)	UAQ	Teaching leadership is understood as a synergy that fosters cohesion, collaboration, and innovation; it integrates a model based on understanding reality, relating to others, and dedication to the task, linking it to the cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance)	It connects teaching leadership with cohesion and synergy and invokes the cardinal virtues, though its underlying support remains primarily functional and educational	PAL is expressed as the formation of virtues for educating and guiding others through a holistic and ethical vision oriented toward the common good and the well-being of the team and the educational community	It is operationalized through managerial strategies for cohesion and collaboration; leadership is assessed in terms of its capacity to produce efficient collaborative work, shared projects, and empowerment.
-----------------------	-----	--	--	--	--

Note: UFV = Universidad Francisco de Vitoria; UAQ = Universidad Anáhuac Querétaro; UAP = Universidad Anáhuac Puebla; UAV = Universidad Anáhuac Veracruz (with two campuses: Córdoba-Orizaba and Xalapa); UAC = Universidad Anáhuac Cancún; UFT = Universidad Finis Terrae; UAM = Universidad Anáhuac México (with two campuses: North and South); UPR = Pontifical Athenaeum Regina Apostolorum.

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on [Monzón \(2023\)](#), [de-la-Sota-Riva-Echánove and Zainos-García-Cano \(2023\)](#), [Vega-Masso \(2023\)](#), [Riquelme-Castañeda \(2023\)](#), [López-González \(2025\)](#), [Caballero-de-la-Fuente \(2025\)](#), [López-González et al. \(2025\)](#), [Villafán-Amezcuca \(2025\)](#), [Ramos-Pérez \(2025\)](#), [Virués-Macías \(2025\)](#), [Aldrette-Elizondo and Llanos-Reynoso \(2025\)](#), and [Alvarado-Pérez \(2025\)](#).

Table 1 makes it explicit that the effective unit of analysis in the PAL model is the individual, despite its recurrent references to the common good. As can be observed, different PAL theorists place emphasis on private elements or virtues such as prudence, temperance, fortitude, open-mindedness, optimism, management, commitment, the use of technological tools, and, above all, praxis, outcomes, the subject's intention, and success. If leadership is essentially mediation, however, it cannot be reduced to the agent's internal qualities. A model whose causal logic is exhausted in subjective formation can therefore explain only personal dispositions, not actually realized dynamics of leadership.

In this sense, PAL can be described more precisely as a model of private moral property. Virtue is defined as a "perfective habit of the individual powers" ([López-González and Landero-Gutiérrez, 2023](#); [López-González, 2025](#); [Vega-Masso, 2023](#); [Ramos-Pérez, 2025](#)), and this is not a neutral formulation, since it establishes an ontology centered on the individual as the primary locus of perfection and, by extension, of leadership. The logical consequence is that leadership appears as something that is acquired, possessed, and projected, while its validation remains within the sphere of the subject. In this way, the common good functions as a conceptual embellishment rather than as a normative and structural criterion of verification ([Riordan, 2017](#)). Under this view, leadership is conceived as an internal quality of the virtuous agent; yet if leadership is verified only in relational mediation, then an approach privileging the individual powers is unable to explain how common practices effectively oriented toward shared goods are generated, sustained, and regulated.

There is no doubt that without prudence, justice, fortitude, or temperance, leadership degenerates into mere technique or into the instrumental exercise of power. In this respect, the virtues are conditions of possibility for leadership, insofar as they dispose the subject to deliberate well, to sustain difficult decisions, and to direct action toward morally worthy ends. The problem emerges, however, when these internal and personal dispositions are treated as a sufficient criterion for validating leadership. In the Thomistic tradition, the cardinal

virtues do indeed structure the moral order of the person, but not in a homogeneous manner. Prudence perfects practical reason; fortitude stabilizes the subject in the face of adversity; temperance moderates the sensible appetites; and justice regulates one's relation to others (Aquinas, 2003, *Quaestiones disputatae de virtutibus*, aa. 4–6). Thomas Aquinas maintains that, whereas prudence, fortitude, and temperance primarily perfect the subject in his or her interiority, justice possesses a distinct formal character because it is the virtue whose direct object is the other and the other's due. This means that even within the classical scheme of the virtues, not all possess the same structural orientation, since only justice constitutively introduces the relational and political dimension of the good. If leadership is defined as mediation ordered to the common good, then virtues that perfect the agent in isolation are not enough; virtues are required whose formal structure includes alterity as an essential element.

By insisting on the formation of perfective habits of the individual powers, PAL rightly emphasizes the dispositional dimension of character, but it tends to homogenize the status of the virtues as though all of them validated leadership equally. In my view, however, the core of the problem lies in the fact that different authors define virtue in individualistic terms, whether following Aristotle (1982a), as noted above, or as a “mean”², or by falling into a Cartesian trap whereby virtues are acquired individually and cannot be taught (Baehr, 2011). For this reason, Thomas Aquinas's definition of virtue enables us to break with individualism, for he states that “virtue is a good quality of the mind, by which one lives rightly, of which no one makes bad use, and which God works in us, without us” (*Quaestiones disputatae de virtutibus*, q. 1, a. 2). This definition leads us toward a second-person perspective, one that breaks with the illusion of moral self-sufficiency, because to be virtuous is not merely to possess an interior habit, but to participate in practices in which the other is constitutive of action. Virtue may be acquired individually insofar as it is a habit, but its status as virtue, that is, as a normative and political principle of academic life, stabilizes only when it is embodied in forms of interaction sustained by joint attention and collective habits (Gutiérrez-González, 2025). From this perspective, certain moral virtues, such as temperance, are not learned through mere introspection or private repetition, but in concrete social contexts that determine when, what, how, and with whom one acts.

Thus, in Thomistic terms, only when virtue formally opens itself to the other can one speak of an order that transcends interiority, as in the case of justice, which introduces a common measure, an objective criterion, and reference to shared structures, or temperance, which depends upon a social context of interaction. For this reason, it is untenable to suppose that university leadership, which by definition involves coordination, governance, and collective orientation, can be validated within the subject's interiority alone. In a common-goods framework, virtue is not merely a habit of the self, but a shared habit that organizes relationships. Consequently, leadership is not accredited by the private possession of moral dispositions, but by the capacity to generate and sustain dynamics of agency and equity effectively experienced by the community.

3 PAL THROUGH THE ARISTOTELIAN CAUSES

As noted above, PAL theorists affirm that the ultimate end of this model is the common good (López-González, 2025; López-González et al., 2025; Ramos-Pérez, 2025; Virués-Macías, 2025;

² This is one of Aristotle's most famous definitions of virtue; however, he offers several different definitions of virtue, all of which point only to individual perfection: (1) “virtue is the utmost limit of a power” (Aristotle, 1996, 281a14); (2) “virtue is that which makes its possessor good and renders his work good” (Aristotle, 1982a, 1106a15); (3) “virtue is a disposition of that which is perfect [...] in relation to what is best” (Aristotle, 1982b, 246a11); and (4) “a state concerned with choice, consisting in a mean relative to us, determined by reason and by that by which the prudent person would determine it” (Aristotle, 1982a, 1106b35).

Alvarado-Pérez, 2025; López-González and Landero-Gutiérrez, 2023; Aldrette-Elizondo, 2023; Monzón, 2023; de-la-Sota-Riva-Echánove and Zainos-García-Cano, 2023; Exposito-Sáez and Aranguren-Echevarría, 2023; Riquelme-Castañeda, 2023; Vega-Masso, 2023). However, as Montaudon-Tomas et al. (2022) observe, leadership models that claim to be oriented toward the common good often fail to explain how the common good is actually attained; and, as shown in the previous section, an exclusive emphasis on individual virtues ultimately obstructs its realization.

In order to better understand this problem, PAL is analyzed here through the Aristotelian causes, employed as a comprehensive and systemic framework of analysis capable of overcoming technical reductionism. As López-González (2025) states, “the final cause of leadership is the common good toward which both leader and followers tend” (p. 26). The Aristotelian causes should not be understood in the modern sense of physical causation, but rather as explanatory dimensions that make it possible to grasp the structure and dynamism of a given reality. Material cause refers to that out of which something is made; formal cause to that which gives a thing its structure, essence, or configuration; efficient cause to the agent or process that brings about its actualization; and final cause to the end or purpose toward which it tends (Aristotle, 2022).

The material upon which PAL operates is fundamentally the student’s moral self-image: conscience, intention, and disposition. This becomes particularly problematic when leadership is measured, because the literature has shown that scales centered on moral self-perception are contaminated by the moral goodness bias, according to which individuals tend to regard themselves as morally good (Ferretti et al., 2016; Feld et al., 2017; Boussaidi, 2020). If leadership is evaluated primarily in terms of declared virtue, the instrument captures aspirational ideality more than effective action. Thus, the model’s material cause hinders the detection of real deficits in agency, management, or resilience.

With respect to formal cause, PAL offers a normative architecture whose emphasis remains fixed on the transformation of the agent, effectively taking refuge in this cause alone, since it confines itself to defining the profile of the ideal leader through the cardinal virtues. The form thus presents the good leader, who is above all the form of the good subject. From the perspective of causality, this means that PAL once again remains at the level of the individual’s internal configuration and does not specify how this form is translated into operative structures capable of producing verifiable common goods. One might argue, however, that there is a more sophisticated and self-critical version of PAL, since López-González et al. (2024) recognize that measuring virtues through self-report has important limitations and, for this reason, propose triangulation and constellations of virtues, precisely because the construct is not trivially verifiable through self-perception alone. Even so, the unit of analysis remains the individual and the cardinal virtues.

The critical point appears at the level of efficient cause. Within PAL itself, education is described as a process in which the student is “the efficient cause of learning” and the teacher a “coadjuvant efficient cause” (Vega-Masso, 2023, p. 102). Yet this notion of efficiency remains on the cognitive-formative plane: the issue is the actualization of intellectual powers, not the design of institutional mechanisms capable of converting ideals into collective practices, and thus it is simply assumed that the good leader will somehow act well. As López-González (2024) observes, action is not a private act enclosed within the subject’s interiority, but an intentional and situated process conditioned by environment, circumstances, and social stimuli. Moreover, human agency incorporates an intuition akin to systems theory in recognizing that thoughts, feelings, and decisions are shaped by multiple social stimuli; human action is thus described as a complex dynamism in which personal dispositions and contextual factors converge. López-González even engages situationist objections, showing that conduct cannot be explained either by pure interiority or by pure environment, but rather by the interaction between the two (López-González, 2024). In these terms, if virtue depends

on contexts, structures, and interactions, then leadership education cannot be limited to forming the right intention; it must also design environments that favor the actualization of the common good.

The fundamental error of PAL lies in its teleological pretension. By positing the common good as its final cause (López-González, 2025), the model falls into a fallacy of sufficiency, because it assumes that having the correct destination is equivalent to possessing the vehicle required to reach it. In Aristotelian terms, PAL claims the end but, as we have seen, lacks the efficient cause necessary to attain it. The problem, therefore, is not that PAL possesses a final cause, in fact, this is one of its greatest theoretical strengths, but rather that this final cause is weak, because it functions as a teleological statement disconnected from the formal and efficient causes. If the common good is the end, then the material, formal, and efficient conditions that produce it must be identified. Without this complete causal articulation, the final cause risks becoming mere rhetoric. Hence, in the absence of measurable mechanisms of management, equity, and social agency, the common good in PAL is not a political objective but a pious wish; it is a teleological illusion that confuses ethical aspiration with the real production of shared goods. It is akin to attempting to build a city simply by wishing citizens to be just, while forgetting that “it is by building houses that we become builders, and by playing the lyre that we become lyre-players. Similarly, by practicing justice we become just” (Aristotle, 1982a, 1103a 31–45).

4 THE GAPS

From the foregoing, it becomes clear that PAL is an educationally incomplete approach, since students may possess the ideal of the common good (formal cause) while lacking the prosocial virtues necessary to live out the common good (efficient cause). This section examines the two gaps generated by PAL: the first between the ideal and the real, and the second at the level of perception.

4.1 THE IDEAL—REAL GAP

Empirical evidence from one university within this international network confirms this first gap (Ávila-Valdez and Gutiérrez-González, 2025). The Common Good Leadership (CGL) scale, grounded in a relational anthropology, the Aristotelian causes (Gutiérrez-González, 2021), the second-person perspective (Gutiérrez-González, 2025), and the dynamics of common goods (Nebel et al., 2022), explicitly distinguishes between ideal and real dimensions, thereby generating a gap analysis between what students consider important and what they actually enact (Montaudon-Tomas et al., 2022).

The CGL model introduces a systemic operationalization. Inspired by the normative triggers of common-goods dynamics—agency, governance, justice, stability, and humanity (Nebel et al., 2022; Montaudon-Tomas, 2022)—as well as by Thomistic political philosophy and Catholic Social Teaching, it proposes ten virtues oriented toward the common good: (1) solidarity and the logic of gift, understood as a stable disposition to recognize the other as a co-participant in the common project and to act with the impact on the community in view, thus transforming individual interests into shared co-responsibility; (2) self-mastery, understood as operational self-governance that enables the regulation of impulses, emotions, and power in relational contexts, preventing impulsive or egocentric decisions from destabilizing the community; (3) sustainability, a long-term orientation that integrates social, economic, and environmental dimensions into decision-making, thereby protecting the continuity of the system and avoiding immediate benefits that erode future conditions of shared life; (4) congruence, the visible coherence between proclaimed values and institutional practices, without which discourse about the common good loses public legitimacy; (5) collaboration,

the capacity to work with others by integrating diverse talents and perspectives toward common goals; (6) management, the competence to organize resources, people, and processes efficiently and in ways oriented toward shared outcomes, thus connecting intention with execution; (7) resilience, the capacity to sustain collective projects in the face of conflict, failure, or external pressure, thereby protecting the stability of the system and preventing the collapse of the common good in times of crisis; (8) responsibility, the disposition to assume the consequences of decisions and render account before the community, thereby introducing procedural justice and preventing the impunity that erodes collective trust; (9) equity, the habit of structuring relationships and processes so as to ensure fair treatment and real opportunities for all, without which the common good becomes the privilege of a few; and (10) flourishing, the orientation to promote the integral development of persons within the community, thereby defining the telos of the system, since the common good is not organizational efficiency but the set of conditions that enable all to develop their capacities (Malcón-Cervera et al., 2022; Ávila-Valdez and Gutiérrez-González, 2025).

While institutional models persist in emphasizing the perfection of the will, empirical evidence obtained from a sample of 655 university students reveals a critical fracture in formation. Based on the CGL model, the students' comparative results show a predominantly idealistic tendency; that is, there are significant negative gaps in dimensions such as resilience (-0.64), congruence (-0.40), and self-mastery (-0.43) (Gutiérrez-González and Ávila-Valdez, forthcoming). In other words, students possess the formal cause but lack the efficient cause in terms of management, sustainability, and practical resilience. The distance between the ideal and concrete action demonstrates that an approach centered on the formation of the will is educationally incomplete.

The statistical evidence further reveals that participation in institutional leadership groups produces a selective and limited impact, primarily restricted to the dimensions of solidarity and flourishing, where a significant reduction is observed in the gap between perceived performance and the ideal. This finding suggests that such spaces function more as ecosystems of group cohesion and superficial adaptability than as genuine forges of character. Although members perceive an improvement in their capacity for connection and responsiveness to change, the analysis shows no statistically significant differences in critical dimensions such as congruence, resilience, or self-mastery (Gutiérrez-González and Ávila-Valdez, forthcoming). Consequently, participation in these groups appears to foster a bubble of relational identity that reduces dissonance in affective and social dimensions while remaining powerless in the face of the structural gap in integrity and operative firmness. This confirms that the current model prioritizes the feeling of belonging over the robustness of praxis oriented toward the common good.

The congruence gap detected is the symptom of a model functioning as a moral placebo. By emphasizing positive action as an act of individual will, the formation of systemic agency has been neglected. The result is a graduate endowed with high moral self-esteem but low capacity to respond to frustration and conflict. The opportunity cost of maintaining this pedagogy of idealism is the sacrifice of social efficacy, since it forms leaders who break down, lacking resilience, when reality fails to conform to the schemes of virtue learned in the classroom.

CGL proposes a paradigm shift by moving from leadership as a property of the subject to leadership as a relational systemic dynamic. Unlike PAL, CGL is grounded in an exoreferential structure validated through covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM). The model demonstrates robust fit (RMSEA = 0.04; CFI = 0.98; TLI = 0.97) (Ávila-Valdez and Gutiérrez-González, forthcoming) and shows significant relationships among management, collaboration, solidarity, and equity. Here, efficient cause is no longer introspective but relational; that is, leadership is verified in the generation of equity,

congruence, and sustainability capable of transforming the surrounding environment. In these terms, CGL completes the causal circuit, because it not only declares the telos or designs the form of the subject, but also specifies and measures the mechanisms through which common goods are effectively produced within the university system.

4.2 THE PERCEPTION GAP

The second gap identified is perceptual in nature and reveals a profound fracture between the leader of institutional design and the de facto leader of university life. Whereas the PAL narrative seeks to forge an ethical, humanistic profile oriented toward the common good, the student imaginary operates according to a different logic, namely that of symbolic capital and digital visibility. For students, leadership is not recognized in the cultivation of virtues, but in communicative ability, social media presence, and success in high-exposure arenas such as sports (Villafán-Amezcuá, 2025). This dissonance shows that visibility has been confused with real influence and that two irreconcilable narratives therefore coexist: on the one hand, an institutional deontology; on the other, a phenomenology of charisma and performance.

In the same vein, the study by Aldrette-Elizondo and Llanos-Reynoso (2025) deepens this gap by analyzing the difference between perceived leadership capacity or self-efficacy and the frequency of actual actions. Their findings indicate that PAL is structurally strained by the gap between perceived capacity and real practice. A student may perceive himself or herself as highly competent in leadership because of the formation of inner character, while displaying a low frequency of concrete prosocial actions. This validates the hypothesis that a leader's good intentions are irrelevant in the absence of a structure of social mediation. Individual perception of virtue does not guarantee the production of common goods. If leadership resides in relational mediation rather than in the subject, then any measure based primarily on the subject's self-perception, as in PAL, will inevitably be biased with respect to the actual phenomenon of leadership.

This distortion is confirmed by the results of the CGL scale. They show that students have internalized ethical discourse but lack social agency because their formation has proceeded from solipsistic virtues. Respondents score highly on dimensions of theoretical morality, demonstrating that PAL discourse has been effective only as a veneer of civility. However, when the capacity to sustain collective projects under pressure or to generate conditions of equity is measured, the results drop sharply. PAL, centered on the isolated moral formation of the subject, has succeeded in teaching students what to say in controlled environments, but it has failed to produce the operative mechanism capable of converting that aspiration into transformative praxis.

The CGL model attempts to close this perception gap by shifting the focus from introspection to interaction. CGL does not ask only, "How virtuous do you perceive yourself to be?" but rather, "What dynamics of equity, collaboration, and sustainability are you generating?" By operationalizing leadership through observable and relational dimensions, like management, collaboration, solidarity, and equity, CGL reduces the margin for self-perception bias. The validation of leadership thus ceases to be a matter of private conscience, where the perception gap can remain concealed, and becomes instead a matter of structural evidence, where the gap is rendered visible. Overcoming the perception gap therefore requires moving from a subjective validation of virtue to an intersubjective validation of justice and of the effective common good.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The conceptual and empirical evidence presented in this study allows us to conclude that PAL represents a pre-scientific stage in the development of institutional leadership. As a predominantly deontological model, PAL has confined itself to constructing an internal ought-to-be, anchored in the formation of individual virtues which, while ethically desirable, are operationally insufficient. The evidence presented here shows that centering leadership on the character of the subject, a form of moral solipsism, ignores the complexity of the social systems in which leadership actually takes place. PAL has functioned as an ethical aspiration lacking the technical infrastructure necessary to guarantee results, producing what the data reveal to be an inoperative idealism. Students display high moral self-perception, but a critical incapacity for social mediation.

CGL, by contrast, represents a necessary evolution toward an applied social science of leadership. It does not abandon ethics, but relocates it within a systemic architecture. Leadership thus ceases to be understood as private moral property and is instead conceived as the relational capacity to generate agency, equity, and cohesion. The common good is no longer a subjective intention or a merely normative ideal, but a latent variable manifested in structured and measurable practices. The move from PAL to CGL is therefore not a moral rupture, but an epistemological displacement: from declared virtue to verifiable efficacy.

The fundamental limitation of PAL lies in its moral reductionism. By focusing exclusively on the subject and on internal dispositions (material and formal cause), the model ignores the principles of systems theory, particularly the interdependence between the agent and the environment. As the analysis of the Aristotelian causes has shown, declaring the common good as the final cause does not guarantee its actualization if no efficient mechanisms of relational mediation exist. PAL's failure to close the gaps of perception and praxis demonstrates that character formation, although necessary, is insufficient unless accompanied by structures that facilitate shared agency.

Moreover, PAL's failure is not moral but theoretical; by reducing leadership to the subject's character, it overlooks the fact that human action is situated, relational, and structurally conditioned. In this way, it forms the desire for the common good, but not the means by which it can be produced. The result is a persistent gap between ideal and execution, between conscience and praxis.

Contemporary leadership requires that this reductionism be overcome. University institutions do not need merely virtuous leaders in the abstract, but architects of common dynamics capable of sustaining distributive justice, cooperation, and resilience in complex contexts. The shift from the leader's character to the ecology of the common good implies recognizing that ethics is not verified in interiority, but in the effective transformation of the social environment. In this sense, CGL does not replace virtue; it situates virtue in its proper place: as the motor of a collective praxis oriented toward shared ends.

Institutional leadership can no longer be limited to forming good subjects; it must form agents capable of producing the common good. Only through this transition from moral solipsism to structural responsibility will it be possible to close the gaps identified here and ensure that leadership education effectively contributes to the production of real, rather than merely declarative, common goods.

6 REFERENCES

- Aldrette Elizondo, A. de J. (2023). Aproximación a los fundamentos teóricos del liderazgo de acción positiva. En J. López González, N. Picazo Villaseñor, y E. A. Martínez, *Liderazgo de acción positiva* (pp. 27-46). Octaedro.
- Aldrette Elizondo, A., y Llanos Reynoso, L. F. (2025). Diferencia significativa en la capacidad de liderazgo de los jóvenes que estudian en la Universidad Anáhuac Cancún. En J. López-González, R. Virués, S. Escobar, D. Arboleda, S. Acevedo (Eds.), *Educación en liderazgo. Actas II Congreso Internacional de Liderazgo*, (pp. 121-126). Octaedro.
- Alvarado Pérez, J. C. (2025). Sinergia en el liderazgo docente: estrategias directivas para fomentar la cohesión, el trabajo colaborativo y la innovación en la educación superior: una mirada desde el quehacer docente. En J. López-González, R. Virués, S. Escobar, D. Arboleda, S. Acevedo (Eds.), *Educación en liderazgo. Actas II Congreso Internacional de Liderazgo*, (pp. 127-131). Octaedro.
- de Aquino, T. (2003). *Opúsculos y cuestiones selectas II*. Gredos.
- Aristóteles. (1982a). *Ética*. Gredos.
- Aristóteles. (1982b). *Física*. Gredos.
- Aristóteles. (1996). *Acerca del cielo*. Gredos.
- Aristóteles. (2022). *Metafísica*. Gredos.
- Ávila-Valdez, J. L., y Gutiérrez-González, M. A. (Forthcoming). Modelo estructural del liderazgo para el bien común.
- Baehr, J. (2011). *The Inquiring Mind: On Intellectual Virtues and Virtue Epistemology*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199604074.001.0001>
- Boussaidi, R. (2020). Implications of the overconfidence bias in presence of private information: Evidence from MENA stock markets. *International Journal of Finance & Economics*, 27(3), 3660-3678. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ijfe.2343>
- Caballero de la Fuente, E. G. (2025). De estudiantes a líderes: transformando la experiencia universitaria en una escuela de liderazgo ante los desafíos digitales de las ciencias sociales. En J. López-González, R. Virués, S. Escobar, D. Arboleda, S. Acevedo (Eds.), *Educación en liderazgo. Actas II Congreso Internacional de Liderazgo*, (pp. 29-32). Octaedro.
- Edwards, S. R., & Taylor, J. K. (2024). Training the trainers: The work of student affairs professionals in leadership training. *New Directions for Student Leadership*, (184), 33-42. <https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.20638>
- Exposito Sáez, L., y Aranguren Echevarría, J. (2023). El liderazgo virtuoso y su relación con el liderazgo de acción positiva. En J. López González, N. Picazo Villaseñor, y E. A. Martínez, *Liderazgo de acción positiva* (pp. 112-128). Octaedro.
- Feld, J., Sauermann, J., & De Grip, A. (2017). Estimating the relationship between skill and overconfidence. *Journal of behavioral and experimental economics*, 68, 18-24. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socec.2017.03.002>
- Ferretti, V., Guney, S., Montibeller, G., & von Winterfeldt, D. (2016). Testing best practices to reduce the overconfidence bias in multi-criteria decision analysis. 49th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS), pp. 1547-1555. IEEE. <https://doi.org/10.1109/HICSS.2016.195>
- Gutiérrez-González, M. A. (2021). El bien común desde las causas aristotélicas. *Metafísica y persona*, 25, 117-145. <https://doi.org/10.24310/Metyper.2021.vi25.11674>
- Gutiérrez-González, M. A. (2025). Las virtudes intelectuales como horizonte normativo de las dinámicas de bienes comunes en las universidades. En M. Nebel y M. A. Gutiérrez-González (Eds.), *Universidades y bien común. Métrica de la calidad educativa desde un enfoque de bien común* (pp. 229-276). Tirant lo Blanch.
- Gutiérrez-González, M. A., y Ávila-Valdez, J. L. (Forthcoming). Liderazgo para el bien común en estudiantes de una universidad privada en Querétaro, México.
- López-González, J. (2024). Dynamism of human action as a key to understanding virtue education. *International Studies in Catholic Education*, 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19422539.2024.2363317>
- López-González, J. (2025). El liderazgo y sus causas desde una perspectiva aristotélico-tomista. En J. López-González, R. Virués, S. Escobar, D. Arboleda, S. Acevedo (Eds.), *Educación en liderazgo. Actas II Congreso Internacional de Liderazgo*, (pp. 25- 28). Octaedro.

- López-González, J., y Landero-Gutiérrez, A. (2023). Análisis del concepto de liderazgo de acción positiva en documentos institucionales de la Red de Universidades Anáhuac. En J. López González, N. Picazo Villaseñor, y E. A. Martínez, *Liderazgo de acción positiva* (pp. 11-26). Octaedro.
- López-González, J., Fernández-Espinosa, V., & Ortiz-de-Montellano, S. (2024) A virtue-based model of leadership education. *Journal of Moral Education*, 53(3), 433-449. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2023.2218058>
- López-González, J., Ortiz-de-Montellano, S., y Tapia-Cortés, C. (2025). Hallazgos en la medición de la educación en liderazgo: el cuestionario liderazgo basado en virtudes. En J. López-González, R. Virués, S. Escobar, D. Arboleda, S. Acevedo (Eds.), *Educación en liderazgo. Actas II Congreso Internacional de Liderazgo*, (pp. 43-47). Octaedro.
- Malcón-Cervera, C., Montaudon-Tomas, C. M., Pinto-López, I. N., & Gutiérrez-González, M. A. (2022). Design and Validation of a Scale to Evaluate Common Good Leadership. *Ethics, Economics and Common Goods*, 18(2), 80-109.
- Montaudon-Tomas, C. M., Gutiérrez-González, M. A., Pinto-López, I. N., & Malcón-Cervera, C. (2022). Identifying the theoretical foundations for Common Good Leadership. *Ethics, Economics and Common Good*, 18 (2), 41-79. <https://journal.upaep.mx/index.php/EthicsEconomicsandCommonGoods/ar8cle/view/19>
- Monzón, G. (2023). El liderazgo de acción positiva y la formación integral. En J. López González, N. Picazo Villaseñor, y E. A. Martínez, *Liderazgo de acción positiva* (pp. 47-59). Octaedro.
- Ramos Pérez, R. (2025). Del fundamento filosófico aristotélico de formación integral y liderazgo en la Red de Universidades Anáhuac. En J. López-González, R. Virués, S. Escobar, D. Arboleda, S. Acevedo (Eds.), *Educación en liderazgo. Actas II Congreso Internacional de Liderazgo*, (pp. 89-92). Octaedro.
- Riordan, P. (2017). *Recovering the Common Goods*. Veritas.
- Riquelme Castañeda, J. (2023). Liderazgo transformacional y liderazgo de acción positiva: hacia un liderazgo integral. En J. López González, N. Picazo Villaseñor, y E. A. Martínez, *Liderazgo de acción positiva* (pp. 129-144). Octaedro.
- Skalicky, J., Warr Pedersen, K., van der Meer, J., Fuglsang, S., Dawson, P., & Stewart, S. (2020). A framework for developing and supporting student leadership in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 45(1), 100–116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1522624>
- de la Sota Riva Echánove, M., y Zainos García Cano, E. (2023). Liderazgo personalista y liderazgo de acción positiva. En J. López González, N. Picazo Villaseñor, y E. A. Martínez, *Liderazgo de acción positiva* (pp. 78-92). Octaedro.
- Universidad Anáhuac campus México. (2020). *Formación integral Anáhuac. Documento de trabajo* [documento inédito].
- Vega Masso, R. (2023). Liderazgo transformacional y liderazgo de acción positiva: hacia un liderazgo integral. En J. López González, N. Picazo Villaseñor, y E. A. Martínez, *Liderazgo de acción positiva* (pp. 93-111). Octaedro.
- Villafán Amezcua, L. A. (2025). Modelo institucional vs. constructo real: análisis del liderazgo estudiantil desde su concepción y su aprendizaje. En J. López-González, R. Virués, S. Escobar, D. Arboleda, S. Acevedo (Eds.), *Educación en liderazgo. Actas II Congreso Internacional de Liderazgo*, (pp. 75-82). Octaedro.
- Virués Macías, R. (2025). Un liderazgo con credibilidad: camino para construir comunidad. En J. López-González, R. Virués, S. Escobar, D. Arboleda, S. Acevedo (Eds.), *Educación en liderazgo. Actas II Congreso Internacional de Liderazgo*, (pp. 93-96). Octaedro.