

What Makes an Academic Leader Top of the Class?

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Abstract: The increasingly data-driven research on leadership continues to explore the question of what constitutes effective leadership in the eyes of subordinates. One major challenge in this field lies in the limited availability of systematic and publicly accessible data on upward feedback. While prior research has extensively examined leadership effectiveness in private sector contexts – especially concerning CEOs – there remains a notable gap regarding top-level academic leadership, particularly university presidents. This study addresses that gap by analysing a unique and novel data source: publicly available ratings of German university presidents (rectors) submitted by their subordinate faculty members between 2009 and 2025 (N = 785). These ratings provide a rare, large-scale form of upward feedback and allow for an empirical investigation into the factors that shape perceptions of leadership effectiveness within higher education institutions. The analysis of possible determinants of the rectors' performance ratings operates on both the individual and organizational levels. On the individual level, we include detailed measures of the rectors' specific human capital, such as the years of working experience, internal organizational experience, external promotions and prior higher education management experience. On the organizational level, we draw on a set of performance indicators, including third-party funding volumes, student data and university rankings. The empirical strategy relies on panel data models with ordered logit fixed effects estimations. Our preliminary findings strongly indicate that institutional research performance is among the most significant predictors of positive performance evaluations. These findings highlight the importance of aligning academic leadership with institutional performance goals and suggest that perceptions of effective leadership of academic staff are closely tied to quantifiable organizational success. By leveraging publicly available evaluation data and combining it with institutional performance metrics, this study contributes to a better understanding of leadership effectiveness in the academic sector and opens new avenues for empirical leadership research.

Keywords: Leadership effectiveness, Performance management, Higher education management, Human capital

1. Introduction

In the face of the growing complexity of the international academic landscape and increasing external pressure on higher education institutions, the question of the right fit for leaders in higher education becomes increasingly relevant. It is shown that job expectations of modern university presidents changed drastically from the role of respected scholars to quasi-heroic leaders of continuously changing organizations (Lavigne, Cowley & Sá, 2021). Crises like the Covid pandemic (e.g., Pekkola et al., 2021), sociopolitical challenges, such as recent politically motivated budget cuts in the US (Brooks & Shakil, 2025), and rapid technological adaptation needs, especially the AI revolution (e.g., Ting & Wan, 2023), further emphasize the need for capable and resilient academic leadership. While recent studies highlight drastically differing leadership effectiveness of university presidents (e.g., Christensen, 2024), research on academic leadership performance remains limited – especially when compared to the extensive literature on CEOs in the private sector (e.g., Månsson, Qasim & Söderberg, 2025; Kleindienst et al., 2024). Universities are multimillion-dollar institutions with their performance largely depending on the human capital of their staff. Despite this – and several studies showing the relevance of upward feedback for performance outcomes (e.g., Cotrim & Da Silva Gomes, 2024; Gimbar, Saucedo & Wright, 2024; Souki, Aaad & Karkoulian, 2025) – little attention has been paid to executive evaluations of academic leaders by their academic staff. Systematic literature overviews on academic leadership, such as Tight (2022) and Mantry et al. (2023), similarly observe a lack of literature on several key aspects of leadership effectiveness. Scholars further criticize the stark focus on qualitative research (Badillo-Vega, Krücken & Pineda, 2021) as well as the predominant focus on university presidents from Anglo-Saxon countries (Liu et al. 2020).

This study addresses this research gap by analysing panel data on German university presidents' performance evaluations by academic staff. The dataset covers 16 years (2009 to 2025) and 785 average grade rates, encompassing more than 100 university presidents. While the data-driven research on leadership is usually constrained by the lack of publicly available data on executive evaluations, the German Association of University Professors and Lecturers (DHV) publishes annual results of their feedback survey (Krüger & Rudinger, 2025). This provides a rare opportunity to examine upward feedback in academia, long demanded by researchers (e.g., Gruber et al., 2007), even though the nationally specific context may limit the generalizability of results to other higher education systems. In order to examine the research question of which individual characteristics and organizational key performance indicators influence leadership evaluations, this study employs panel data analysis using fixed effects models. The study provides context-sensitive, empirically robust evidence for

research on university management and leadership, while also generating exploratory insights for the broader field.

2. Theoretical and Empirical Foundations

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Economic theory provides theoretical insights on the question of why some university presidents might have superior leadership effectiveness than others. According to the well-established Human Capital Theory by Gary S. Becker (1964), knowledge, skills, competencies and other characteristics relevant to a person's economic activity not only increase their income, but also their labor productivity. While general human capital, such as formal education, is relatively homogenous among university presidents, specific human capital can differ widely. These factors remain central in recent studies on successful academic leadership (Lavigne & Sá, 2022; Pekkola et al., 2021; Baruch et al., 2025). In general, the theory suggests that more experienced or better-qualified leaders should demonstrate stronger performance as reflected in their evaluations. However, the causal link between leadership traits and organizational outcomes remains contested. The Upper Echelon Theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984) states that top executives shape performance outcomes through their characteristics and decisions. Though refined by the authors themselves (Hambrick, 2007) and expanded by a substantial body of literature (Abatecola & Cristofaro, 2020), empirical studies show mixed results. Some studies detect a CEO effect on firm performance (e.g., Månsson, Qasim & Söderberg, 2025), while others find the effect overstated (e.g., Rönkko, Maheshwaree & Schmidt, 2023) or statistically insignificant (e.g., Shimaio et al., 2023). In the academic context, similar inconsistencies prevail. While some studies report a link between university presidents' traits and institutional outcomes (e.g., Yu et al., 2024; Ioannidis, 2025), others do not (Breakwell & Tytherleigh, 2010). According to the theories mentioned above, the individual human capital might be a determinant of the work performance of a university president and top management effectiveness can be seen as a partially proven influential factor on organizational performance. Therefore, one might consider these as possible determining factors influencing objective leadership evaluations.

2.2 Empirical Background and Development of Hypotheses

Empirical studies on the human capital of university and college presidents present a relatively homogeneous picture regarding educational backgrounds while also highlighting a clear set of expected core competencies for effective leadership. Although most hold third-level degrees, there is a marked dominance of Ivy League graduates in the United States (Selingo, Chheng & Clark, 2017) and of Oxford or Cambridge alumni in the United Kingdom (Breakwell & Tytherleigh, 2010). With regard to essential capabilities, the literature points to an increasing emphasis on strategic management competencies (Gearhart, Nadler & Miller, 2020; Lavigne, Cowley & Sá, 2022). In addition, the results of a survey of U.S. college and university presidents by Burmicky, McClure and Ryu (2024) highlight the importance of internal communication management skills. In regard to the students' perspective, the findings by Corder and Timm (2021) align with these results. A recent bibliometric analysis of higher education leadership research further identifies management skills as the key competencies for academic leaders (Ghasemy, Siwei & Sirat, 2023), supported by the findings of Perich et al. (2024). Regarding German academic top management, calls for a further emphasis on hands-on managerial and interpersonal skills rather than research expertise have been addressed in the literature for decades (e.g., Nickel & Ziegele, 2006; Kleinmann, 2017; Scherm, 2019). Based on the theoretical framework of the Human Capital Theory and the empirical evidence presented, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H1: The higher the management-specific human capital of a university president, the higher their performance evaluation.

Studies applying Upper Echelons Theory to academic leadership yield heterogeneous results. For instance, Breakwell and Tytherleigh (2010) found no direct link between the leadership of British university presidents and key performance indicators such as research funding, research quality and student completion rates. This stands in contrast to other studies finding significant influences of proactive leadership on long-term research performance (Leih & Teece, 2016). Whereas charismatic leadership by college presidents in the US has been identified as a significant determinant of student applications and alumni donations (Bastedo, Samuels & Kleinman, 2014). Recent quantitative studies link the university presidents' leadership effectiveness as a direct factor of institutional performance (Christensen, 2024). Similarly, studies focusing on German universities report a direct influence of university presidents on academic staff performance (Freyaldenhoven, 2015). Recent qualitative research emphasizes strategic alignment and institutional transformation as considerable spheres of influence of university presidents rather than direct performance metrics (Bennett, Papatsiba & Stephens,

2024). Overall, these findings in the academic context reflect the varying results of studies on the CEO effect in the private sector. As the majority of the findings still show a tendency favoring the theoretical framework, we posit that:

H2: The better the universities' key performance indicators, the higher the university presidents' performance ratings.

3. Empirical Analysis

3.1 Data and Descriptive Statistics

The data on the average evaluation grade of university professors is based on the annual ranking published by the German Association of University Professors and Lecturers (Krüger & Rudinger, 2025). Each German university president is eligible for evaluation, provided they receive at least 30 votes from their academic staff. As Scherm (2024) describes, these are more indicative of upward feedback from subordinates than an external ranking, which makes the data suitable for our purposes. Individual data on university presidents was extracted from official university websites and public CVs. Key performance indicators on the organizational level were partly inspired by Breakwell and Tytherleigh (2010), Christensen (2024) and the German Centre for Higher Education (CHE 2024). Official data on research funding and students was collected from the Federal Statistical Office of Germany database. Information on the Excellence Initiative of the German Council of Science and Humanities and the German Research Foundation (DFG) as well as data on the Times Higher Education Ranking was gathered from the respective official websites.

In this study, the average grade functions as the dependent variable. Table 1 shows 785 evaluations of 134 German university presidents, based on several thousand individual grades by their respective academic staff. The mean is 2.73, with a best average of 1.39 and a lowest of 3.81. The distribution is near normal, with a relatively small standard deviation of 0.57. Around 28% of presidents were externally appointed, indicating a trend toward external promotion compared to earlier findings (e.g., Rübken, 2006). Just over 3% had previous experience as president at another institution. The average tenure is 6.63 years (SD = 4.33), ranging from one to 24 years. Regarding organizational key performance indicators, 18% of universities were granted by the German Universities Excellence Initiative at the time of evaluation. Research performance was further measured via third-party funding granted by the German Research Foundation over three years. Grants varied widely, averaging 114 million euros (SD = 98.99 million). Some grant values were averaged due to non-matchable institutional data. Student entrant numbers, a debated issue in German higher education due to declining enrollments, averaged 3,666 per year (SD = 1,518.89). Missing data in the last three variables reduced the number of valid observations.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Data on University Presidents						
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max	Scaling	N
Evaluation/Grade (0 to 6)	2.73	0.57	1.39	3.81	Ordinal	785
External (if yes = 1; otherwise = 0)	0.28	0.45			Dummy	785
Years in Office	6.63	4.33	1	24	Metric	785
Former University President Elsewhere (if yes = 1; else = 0)	0.03	0.17			Dummy	785
Excellent Research University (if yes = 1; else = 0)	0.18	0.39			Dummy	785
Third-Party Research Funds (in Mio. €)	114.29	98.99	4.95	369	Metric	687
University Ranking	24.49	13.73	1	47	Ordinal	737
University Entrants	3665.82	1518.89	332	9085	Metric	727

3.2 Method and Empirical Model

A series of model specification tests determined the most appropriate empirical strategy for our panel data. As determinants of the average grades of the executive evaluations are examined, the ordinal scaling of the

dependent variable has to be considered. The Breusch-Pagan Lagrange Multiplier test as well as the F-test provided strong evidence that fixed effects and random effects are respectively preferred over a pooled OLS model. The subsequent Hausman test did not reject the null hypothesis, suggesting that the random effect estimator could be valid. However, given that within-unit relationships are the focus of our analysis and fixed-effects models generally provide more robust estimates, a fixed-effect ordered logit model was used in this study. Due to the model selection for the research question, time-invariant variables relating to individual characteristics such as personality traits, which can influence certain leadership styles, are excluded from the model. In regard to the independent variables, management-specific human capital is proxied as years of working experience as a university president in an institution as well as the status of being a university president prior at another university. Although this measure represents an imperfect proxy and poses interpretive challenges, it was adopted in consideration of data availability, model design, and the orientation of the research question. The fact of whether they were promoted internally or externally is considered to account for further knowledge of internal processes and its possible influence on their performance evaluation. Furthermore, research performance as one of the proxies for key performance indicators is operationalized by the status as an excellent research university and third-party research funds. Still, it has to be taken into account that third-party research funds are often driven by faculty- or field-level activities. Further, first-year student entrants are used as a proxy for study attractiveness. Lastly, the comparative overall university rankings of German universities in the Times Higher Education Ranking should serve as a combinatory proxy for research and teaching quality. Given the contested nature of the ranking, however, it should be interpreted primarily as a proxy for visibility and perception, while also serving as an imperfect indicator of quality.

3.3 Empirical Results and Discussion

Table 2 displays the results of our fixed-effects ordered logit models. Model 1 includes the individual characteristics, providing a variety of significant effects on the performance evaluation. Firstly, externally appointed presidents are significantly more likely to receive lower performance ratings ($p < 0.1$), initially suggesting an influence of internal knowledge. However, this significant effect diminishes in Model 2, which indicates that the relationship between mode of recruitment and leadership evaluation is mediated or confounded by the organizational key performance indicators. A notable effect emerges for years in office, which shows a statistically significant increase in the log-odds of receiving a lower rating by 0.193 ($p < 0.01$) in Model 1 and by 0.161 ($p < 0.05$) in Model 2. As longer tenure could entail more years of organization-specific work experience and leadership experience – thus interpreted as a proxy for management-specific human capital in our models – this finding challenges our Hypothesis 1. One potential explanation is that longer tenure is not necessarily linked to leadership effectiveness but may instead reflect reappointment decisions not based on performance criteria. Nonetheless, tenure represents only one possible proxy for management-specific human capital, while additional variables not included thus far could yield further insights for a more robust confirmation of Hypothesis 1. Generally, these findings are in line with critiques of rigid governance structures in German academia (Scherer, 2019; Kleinmann, 2017).

Table 2: Fixed effects ordered logit models

VARIABLES	(1) Performance Evaluation	(2) Performance Evaluation
<i>Individual Characteristics:</i>		
External (if yes = 1; otherwise = 0)	3.273* (1.754)	0.00437 (1.600)
Years in Office	0.193*** (0.0496)	0.161** (0.0661)
Former University President Elsewhere (if yes = 1; else = 0)	-3.414*** (1.312)	-3.794** (1.623)
<i>Organizational KPIs:</i>		
Excellent Research University (if yes = 1; else = 0)		-1.373* (0.718)
University Ranking		0.0697*** (0.0263)

VARIABLES	(1) Performance Evaluation	(2) Performance Evaluation
Third-Party Research Funds (in Mio. €)		0.00407 (0.00637)
University Entrants		9.09e-05 (0.000249)
<i>Observations</i>	764	615
Robust standard errors in parentheses		
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1		

Contrastingly, having served as a university president at another institution is strongly associated with better performance evaluations. The negative coefficients, -3.414 in Model 1 and -3.794 in Model 2, indicate a substantially lower likelihood of receiving poor ratings. This highlights the potential value of transferable executive experience and supports the argument that management-specific human capital proxied by prior top-level leadership is positively recognized in performance assessments. This finding is in line with recent research emphasizing the relevance of practical leadership skills (Burmicky, McClure & Ryu, 2024; Corder & Timm, 2021; Gearhart, Nadler & Miller, 2020; Ghasemy, Siwei & Sirat, 2023). In sum, the findings concerning individual characteristics provide ambiguous results and do not allow for a precise confirmation of Hypothesis 1. The persistent, significantly positive effect of prior academic leadership experience might indicate that the quality of leadership experience outweighs mere time in office, especially since tenure duration might also be skewed by rigid or even nepotistic reassignment processes. This is in line with literature focusing on the need for a more complex framework of leadership qualities and context-sensitive managerial expertise in academia (Breakwell & Tytherleigh, 2010; Bennett, Papatsiba & Stephens, 2024; Christensen, 2024).

Regarding organizational key performance indicators, the status as an excellent research university under the German Excellence Initiative shows a significant effect on more favorable leadership evaluations in Model 2. The title of an excellent research university corresponds to a 1.373 decrease in the log-odds of receiving a lower performance rating ($p<0.1$). This is in line with the findings of Leih and Teece (2016), stating that capable academic leadership can significantly improve research performance. Similarly, worse positions in the institutional ranking significantly increase the log-odds of receiving poorer performance ratings by 0.0697 ($p<0.01$). These results are consistent with the expectations outlined in Hypothesis 2, as both measures of organizational reputation significantly influence the university presidents' performance assessments. It should be acknowledged that both the Excellence Strategy and the THE rankings are subject to controversy and can only be regarded in this context as proxies for research quality and visibility. This further supports the findings of Bennett, Papatsiba and Stephens (2024) that emphasize the essential relevance of visibility for university presidents.

Nevertheless, third-party research funding does not exhibit a statistically significant effect, which is in agreement with the findings of Breakwell in Tytherleigh (2010). One possible explanation is that the accumulation of research funding is such a complex dynamic and is often raised at the professorial and faculty-level level, leading subordinates to not associate it directly with the individual leadership performance of the university presidents. Despite ongoing public and political debates around declining student enrollment in German universities, the number of annual new student entrants likewise does not show significant effects on the university presidents' performance evaluation.

This relationship might be taken into further consideration in future studies, as Bastedo, Samuels and Kleinmann (2014) concluded that charismatic leaders increase student applications. More broadly, leadership styles and communication may constitute important determinants warranting further investigation in future studies. In summary, the effects of proxied key performance indicators on the university presidents' performance evaluations partially confirm Hypothesis 2. Whereas prestige-orientated indicators are clearly influencing the executive evaluations, third-party research funding and enrollment figures do not show similar significant effects. On the one hand, the context-dependency of research funding and mediating factors affecting basic enrollment figures could explain the absence of significant effects for these institutional performance indicators. On the other hand, the academic staff may place greater emphasis on institutional prestige as well as visibility and attribute it more directly to the university president as the institutional figurehead.

4. Conclusion

As external pressures and job expectations on academic top management increase rapidly, this study provides novel empirical insights on what makes a successful academic leader in the eyes of their subordinates. We analyze the influence of relevant individual characteristics and organizational key performance indicators on 16 years of performance evaluation of over 100 German university presidents. Our findings suggest that transferable leadership skills of university presidents with prior experience in the same position at another university are associated with significantly better performance evaluations. Whereas longer tenure leads to increases in the likelihood of worse performance evaluations. Taken both together, these findings align with scholarly calls for performance-based appointments that prioritize actual managerial experience over traditional reappointments made out of habit rather than conviction. Research funding and student entrants do not show significant effects. Whereas prestige-related determinants, such as excellence status and ranking positions, significantly increase the likelihood of better performance evaluations. This suggests the critical importance of organizational reputation for the perceived performance of university presidents. As a whole, our findings strongly support the argument of university presidents are increasingly expected to navigate an expanding set of managerial responsibilities instead of just being outstanding scholars. With the results showing how especially prestige-orientated key performance is directly associated with the executive evaluations, we can further identify an inherent representative role of academic leaders. Focusing on practical implications, our results indicate a substantial need for more performance-orientated appointment processes in academic top management. When interpreting the results, it should be noted that the study is embedded in a national context and cannot be readily transferred from the German case to the international higher education landscape. Owing to the available data, not all relevant factors could be considered and some important variables had to be approximated. Future insights may be gained by incorporating additional rankings and reliable reputation measures, as well as a broader set of management competencies. Moreover, leadership behaviors and communication styles represent promising areas for further exploration, for which mixed-methods designs appear particularly suitable. Future research could further expand the study on other possible determinants, study longitudinal trends in institutional performance and further analyze cross-national differences.

Ethics declaration: This study is based exclusively on secondary data from publicly available sources. The research was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines.

AI declaration: All ideas, writing, analyses and interpretations were conducted by the authors themselves. To support the writing process, standard tools such as Microsoft Word and Scribbr were used for grammar and spelling checks. DeepL was consulted for the translation of individual terms where needed and ChatGPT was occasionally used to explore synonyms. No content generated by AI tools was directly adopted without authorial review and adaptation.

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