

ENHANCING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' STUDY SUCCESS THROUGH CARING LEADERSHIP

Satu Uusiautti, PhD, Specialist
University of Lapland, Finland

Kaarina Maatta, PhD, Professor
University of Lapland, Finland

Abstract:

Today's educational policies aim at making higher education more effective. However, in order to realize this in practice more attention should be paid on university students' study processes as a whole. In this article, we discuss the factors that comprise student teachers' study processes at universities. Especially focus will be on what are such activities in higher education administration that could enhance university students' study success? This study is a part of a larger research project in which university leaders (n = 13) in Finland and USA were interviewed in 2012. They were asked to describe their perceptions of caring leadership at universities. In this research, the connection between caring leadership and students' study processes was studied. According to the results, caring leadership can enhance students' study success. We argue that universities, their leaders and educators, should be more thoughtful and willing to genuinely help and confront students as individuals. A multidimensional framework of factors affecting students' study paths with caring leadership as the empowering element is introduced as the conclusion.

Key Words: Love-based leadership, student well-being, study process, university leadership, caring leadership

Introduction:

At the time when increasing demands on efficient and productive higher education and high numbers of student drop-outs (e.g., Kuh et al., 2008; Määttä & Uusiautti, 2011b; OECD, 2010) and prolonged university studies (OECD, 2010; San Antonio, 2008; Schoon et al., 2010) does not seem to go in the same directions, new ways of considering higher education are needed. How to make university students' study paths smooth and have them succeed in their studies?

In this paper, we discuss how the goals of education could be achieved by employing caring leadership in higher education. This study was a part of the research project called "Love-based leadership – an interdisciplinary approach" (www.ulapland.fi/lovebasedleadership). We think that a particular positive and caring viewpoint could be something that today's higher education would need. For example, Cruce, Wolniak, Seifer, and Pascarella (2006) suggest that good practices in education have a unique, positive impact on student development as they can affect, for example, student engagement which can be seen as one main pillar in successful and meaningful study path. Kezar and Kinzie (2006) have introduced features of a quality undergraduate education which has been associated with student engagement: quality begins with an organizational culture that values high expectations, respect for diverse learning styles, and emphasis on the early years of study; quality undergraduate curriculum requires coherence in learning, synthesizing experiences, on-going practice of learned skills, and integrating education with experience; and quality undergraduate instruction builds in active learning, assessment and prompt feedback, collaboration, adequate time on task, and out of class contact with faculty (see also Kuh, 2003). Likewise, Theilheimer (1991) have presented a detailed list of five factors that contribute to a positive learning environment: 1) comfort (creating a feeling of safety, accommodating errors, giving students the freedom of expressing themselves without constraints, creating the feeling of belonging to peer group); 2) clarity (providing clear instructions, breaking down material to smaller chunks to maintain the feeling of accomplishment,

however small); 3) respect (mutual respect between students and the teacher); 4) relationships (particularly caring relationships between the teacher and individual students, teacher attending each student individually); 5) responsibility (giving students a degree of control over decisions concerning their learning).

Of its theoretical basis, our study is based on the phenomenon of love. Love means deep caring for others making life worth living. In other words, love is an emotion of strong affection and personal attachment and still, it is difficult to define love comprehensively (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2013). Furthermore, love can be seen as a virtue or strength representing human kindness, compassion, and affection (e.g., Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). In this study, we combine the fundamental idea of love with leadership in higher education which we call caring leadership (see also Uusiautti, 2013; Uusiautti et al., 2012). In the study this article is based on, our purpose was to analyze how caring leadership in higher education can be employed to make students' study paths smoother and what its relationship with other factors affecting students' study success is like. Thus, we review love in university leaders' work from the point of view of the students' study processes.

Caldwell and Dixon (2009) have defined love, forgiveness, and trust as organizational constructs that are freedom producing, empowering, and vital to enhancing followers' self-efficacy. When leaders consistently exhibit love, forgiveness, and trust in relationships, their employees respond with increased commitment and loyalty. Moreover, happiness can be directly translated into engagement, productivity, and satisfaction (Prewitt, 2003; see also Rego et al., 2011). It has been argued that sensitive leaders develop a culture that demonstrates concern for individual needs (Fairholm, & Fairholm, 2000; Popper & Amit, 2009). Happiness not only produces a quantitative improvement by increasing efficiency but also qualitative one by making a better product or outcome by virtue of pride, belief, and commitment. Emotions and emotional intelligence have even been considered as the heart of effective leadership (Goleman, 2006). Furthermore, an ethic of caring establishes a moral touchstone for decision making (Hoyle, 2002) as leaders' elicitation of love regards other people as the cause, target, or third-party observer of these emotions (Fischer & van Kleef, 2010).

Given this perspective on love and leadership, we were interested in researching how university leaders talk about the connection between caring leadership and students' study success. This viewpoint contributes to the overall knowledge about caring leadership practices but specifically to awareness of the multidimensional nature of higher education organizations and factors affecting the smoothness of university students' study processes. Finally, the study makes a contribution to the particularly salient focus of our research project which is to determine how the love-based aspect might be used in elaborating research models for re-thinking and designing caring learning environment, students' psychosocial well-being, and for developing the models of caring and love-based leadership in education context.

Method:

In this qualitative research, 13 university leaders were interviewed (Patton, 1990). The interviewees included: deans and associate deans (N=5); and department chairs or department managers (N= 8). Seven participants (three women and four men) were from a general university and a university of applied sciences in Finland, while six (all men) were from one university in the USA; the purpose of including participants from two countries was to collect experiences that were as diverse as possible. The participants were recruited by email, which also gave them information about the research project and an outline of the interview.

As the interviewees worked in universities, their work was closely connected to not only their followers but also to university students. Therefore, leaders discussed their leadership in relation to the study opportunities and conditions among students at their universities. For this paper, we analyzed how the university leaders actually perceived their role in promoting university students' study success and fluent study processes. The specific research question set for this study was as follows: How did university leaders perceive caring leadership as means of enhancing university students' study success?

In this study, university leaders revealed a rich store of personal perceptions and experiences, although the qualitative nature of the study did not permit generalizations to be made. Data were

organized and described in an inductive manner in order to identify categories that represented university leaders' perceptions of caring leadership and its influence on students' study processes (Mayring, 2000). All their perceptions were first categorized into themes according to the way leadership was discussed in relation to students (e.g., leadership actions for the students, providing resources and quality teaching). Then, the perceptions were re-categorized into three main categories that represented the leaders' perceptions the best: using caring leadership for (1) providing resources for quality education, (2) seeing students as equal group and promoting the sense of solidarity, and (3) treating students as customers.

In reporting the results, excerpts from the interviews were added to retain the interviewees' voices and help readers to follow the analysis and conclusions. The code after each quotation identifies the interviewee, for example, "F1W" means "participant number 1, woman, Finland," and "U5M" means "participant number 5, man, USA."

Results:

The manner in which university leaders' contemplated the nature of caring leadership and their action as leaders in relation to students' successful study processes could be divided into three viewpoints. According to the university leaders' perceptions, they could use caring leadership for (1) providing resources for quality education, (2) seeing students as equal group and promoting the sense of solidarity, and (3) treating students as customers.

Caring Leaders Provide Resources for Quality Education

The first category refers to the relationship between outer factors affecting education and the way the education is realized in practice and provided to students. The current educational policies regarding funding in universities were reflected by the university leaders. They were aware of the pressure of doing research and having students graduate:

The pressure within the public university environment has really focused more and more around money.--- [Universities] have to be doing more research, they have to be taking more students, they have to be generating more programs. (U2M)

At this level, in a university, those kinds of push for excellence and productivity make it pretty difficult to be I think a loving leadership model. (U4M)

Although they realized that the demands of competition and productivity can make it more difficult to employ caring leadership in universities, the university leaders could see their position and possibilities of making the use of their leadership. They seemed to consider themselves responsible for ensuring the high quality education and support for students.

I mean, your [the leader's] job is to make life better for all the faculty and students so they can do what they need to do: their research, their teaching, and the students, so they learn and get their degree, go out there and make us all proud. To do that, you got to be a leader. (U5M)

A lot of times, that requires that you're going to make sure that the quality of the education that the students get is going to be the highest possible. (U6M)

In practice, caring leadership appeared in wish to guarantee as quality education for students as possible by using the available resources in a purposeful manner, reallocating it to activities that would benefit students' study processes (e.g., by decreasing teachers' and professors' administrative work), and enhancing the spirit of everybody doing their share and best for the students and the university.

We have to guarantee such resources that the quality of education is considerably better than it is now, that the operation is meaningful and we can take the best possible care of students. That will also benefit work life. (F6M)

I find it surprising that we so much administrative work at the university... Teachers have to send emails to various pupils, and they do a little bit of this and that? That's administrative work. And if we had an employee to do that work, it would be much more logical. (F7M)

Caring Leaders Promote the Sense of Solidarity among Students and Faculty

The second viewpoint expressed by the university leaders was related to the atmosphere at the unit. They considered it important for the students' study success, commitment, and overall

satisfaction that the people at each unit and at the university would share the sense of togetherness and solidarity.

The caring that I have my organization, I got 700 employees, about 18,000 students. The caring I have is for all of them, and so, everybody gets treated that way. (U1M)

You can have more family-orientation. - - We are only interested in our own research and we hardly ever collaborate. I think that at the individual level, you know, I think working with your own doctoral students, we can have more personal caring relationship. The stress of competition is not good but working with individual students and dissertations, that's more satisfying, working with students in the classroom. (U4M)

As the latter of the aforementioned data excerpts show, the sense of togetherness was also seen as the answer to the ever-increasing pressures of productivity and individual success. Working together could benefit not only students and the faculty but the whole organization. Moreover, the university leaders named actual measures that they themselves used in practice in order to improve the spirit of collaboration at their units. The leaders talked about treating everyone equally and promoting open and informal interaction among the faculty and students.

Our community; we have students who are equal members of this work unit in their own role, and we have the personnel... This [university] is quite a world of its own compared to the normal units. (F6M)

Management by walking around and I think it is insane that teachers for example sit in a separate cabinet away from students or where leaders sit on a different table than employees. I can affect in those daily situations in which I can mold in the community and stick together with them. (F7M)

We're trying to re-develop the area around the university to build more coffee shops, restaurants, bars, music places ... I think that leadership is all about getting people to feel connected and engaged... A research university - - should make a very clear connection with the practical world of the community and the faculty and the students. (U1M)

According to the findings, the students' study processes could be enhanced by increasing open interaction and collaboration in units. Caring leadership thus could be seen the means of showing example by spending time with people, discussing problems, and initiating actual proposals for actions, be they small-scale collaborative actions such as the faculty and students having coffee in the same table, or larger scale measures, such as improving offerings within the overall education environment. Caring university leaders thus pay attention to their followers' and students' overall well-being. They realize that a well-functioning unit with a good and inspiring spirit can offer the best premises for students' study success and through this, the success of the whole unit and the university as well.

Caring Leaders Perceive Students as Customers

The previous category described how the sense of solidarity could support students' study paths. The third category takes the thought at the personal level by seeing students as the customers. According to the results, the university leaders' way of perceiving students resembles a whole new way of defining customership. It is not just demands expressed by the customers but merely collaboration and desire to find out what is the best for them through reciprocal interaction: students as customers are simultaneously seen as partners, too. From this point of view, caring leadership was considered a means of paying attention to students as individuals, taking care of them at the personal level, and respecting them as the most valuable part of the university. The university leaders expressed this idea as follows:

In academics, you need to be very careful that the students should come first. And I think that's a big difference between academics, a leader in academics and a leader in industry. - - I really try to do what is best for the students first. And then I try to do what is best for the faculty and the college. (U6M)

Here, where you don't necessarily have a product, per se. You are not making televisions, but the other thing is: What is the product of higher education? You might think the student, I'm saying, no. You can't claim another human being as your product. - - No, the curriculum is your product. I just refuse to think, if you use business analogy and you're a dealer, a car dealer. It's not the customer

that's your product, it's your car. So, since when, if we look at that, why not students are our customers. (U5M)

The university leaders described that when students are perceived as customers of higher education, they can feel they are being supported and heard. Caring leadership was manifested in personal relationships with students:

I have a good, direct, and open relationship with students. I hope at least, and sense that I am approachable and they come to discuss their problems and studies, and quite openly have confided in me. (F1W)

In addition to direct interaction with students, some university leaders perceived their position as a possibility to support their followers, department chairs, professors, and other faculty, in creating the favorable relationship with students and supporting them in their studies. Caring leaders thus could see their support and guidance they provide to their followers as the way of supporting students' study processes.

I empower my team of chairs, they're the ones that I really want out there leading and getting feedback and I want to support them. So I try to work through them, so I've spent a lot of time pruning that group, developing that group, trying to coach those people. And I see their success as really my success. - - [I want to] support the chairs really connecting with students. (U1M)

From time to time, I've sent them [the faculty] reminders about why we are working here and how important it is to work together despite the fact that your work loads are heavier because of the financial times but remember why you're here: It's the students' smile when they leave your office. You know it's working and reminding them of that ultimate goal. (U3M)

The way caring university leaders can show their support to their ultimate customers, students, is to make sure that people working at the unit are aware of the purpose of their work. This was also the question of respecting students. One of the leaders described the situation by giving an example:

If you have an office and you open at 8, it's not just good at all, not good for the students, not good for the whole college, if you're not there at 8 o'clock. - - If there is no one there, we are not respectful to them. (U6M)

The leader continued with the example as he considered that it is also the caring leader's task to make sure that not only the followers are aware of their responsibility for students and have accepted them as their customers, but also they have to be on a first-name basis with their jobs. If they still do not find their work meaningful, the leader's task, for the sake of the students and the employee himself or herself, is to help the employee find the meaning in the job or reconsider the job description.

If you say I don't like my work, I'm just shuffling papers, then I can explain, ok, there's the reason why you're shuffling this paper, because the students need this, the students. Maybe there are some forms that students need. - - But sometimes people are not in the jobs. You have an opportunity to identify that like when you really explain why some things have to be done and still that individual does not find it meaningful, then I would engage in little better professional planning. (U6M)

Discussion:

The results of this study complement our previous studies of factors directing university students' study processes (Määttä, 2012; Määttä & Uusiautti, 2011a; 2011b; 2012; Uusiautti, 2013; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2013). We have previously described the teacher student's study process as a sum of factors at the student's personal level, the unit level, and the overall regulations, values, and cultural traditions that control education. Although they do not explain a successful study processes alone, their development and significance should be paid more and more attention at universities. Figure 1 illustrates the interconnectedness of students' study processes and factors affecting it. We consider caring leadership the fundamental enabling and empowering element influencing all levels of study processes.

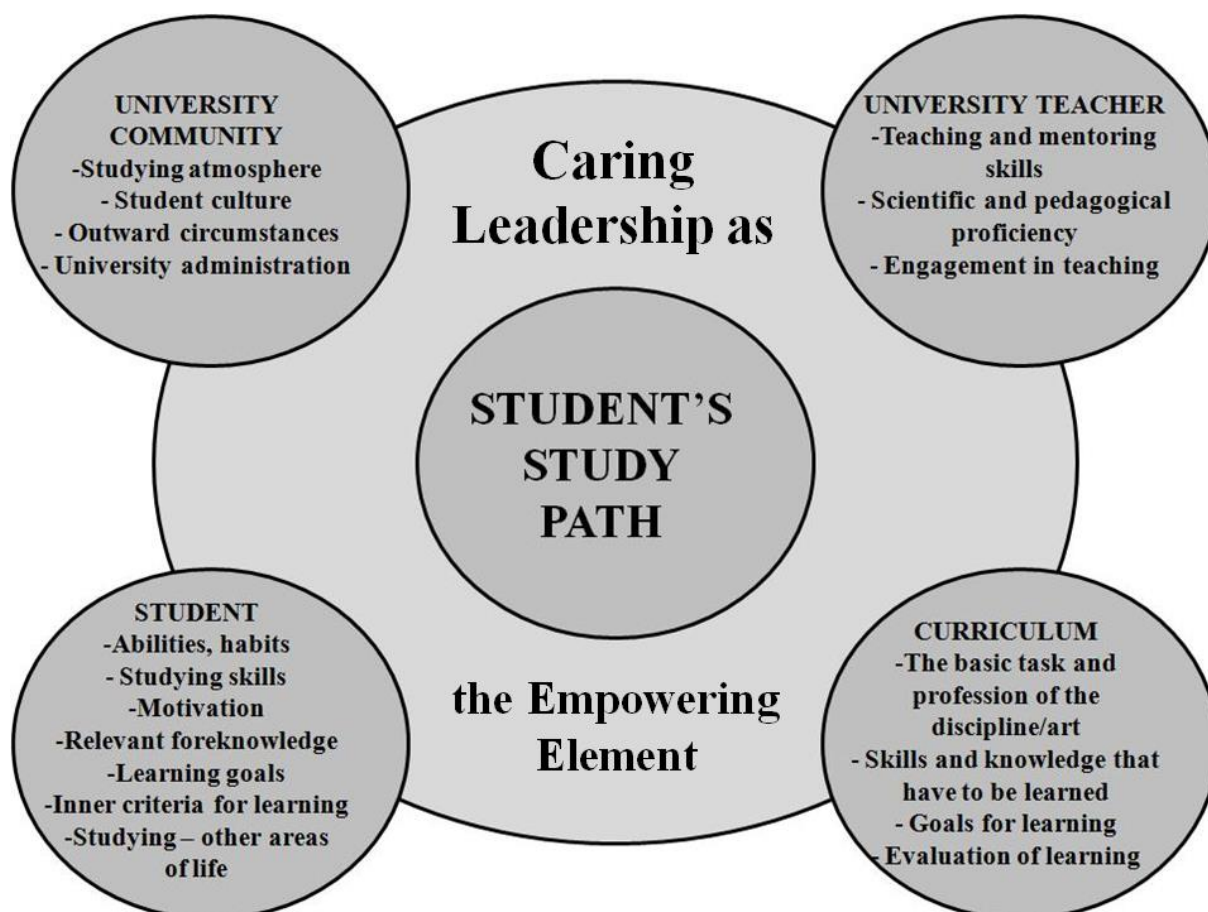


Figure 1. University students' study path in relation to its core factors (adapted and molded from Määttä & Uusiautti, 2011a, p. 52)

In this study, caring leadership was considered in relation to students' study success. At the personal level, students' study processes vary greatly depending on their backgrounds, starting points, study skills, and experiences they get during their education. Students have certain abilities and habits related to their learning history and experiences and that can strengthen their knowledge and self-efficacy. This conception is either strengthened or dashed at the university (Biggs, 1987; Cassidy & Eachus, 2000; Gettinger & Seibert, 2002; Lindblom-Ylänne & Pihlajamäki, 2003). On the other hand, we want to emphasize students' motivation which reflects in their way of seizing studies and persistence (Allen, 1999; Mäkinen, 2000). Certainly, outer rewards matter too. Receiving positive and encouraging feedback on one's own progress is important as it improves one's receptiveness to new learning experiences and tolerance of failures whereas the perceived feeling of insufficiency, poor performance level, and teachers' inadequate guidance and disinterest decrease motivation (Pajares, 2001).

In this study, university leaders talked about considering students as customers. From the students' perspective, this means that they are valued and noticed at the university. They received support and guidance when needed and feel respected as an important part of the university. In addition to sufficient support and guidance, there are other means to enhance students' well-being, too. Studies should also be in balance with other areas of life: interesting hobbies, good human relationships and family life, versatile and relaxing leisure time act as a good counterbalance to studying (e.g., Lowe & Gayle, 2007). Some university leaders talked about mutual free-time activities that could be provided at or nearby the campus. Participating in these kinds of activities would also increase student engagement. For example, Kuh's (2003) framework for student engagement is based on five benchmarks: level of academic challenge, enriching educational experiences, supportive campus environment, student-faculty interaction, and active and collaborative learning. Therefore, it seems that engagement is one basic concept when considering successful studying.

Naturally, everyone also perceives success in studies subjectively and evaluates personal achievements in different ways (Maddux, 2002). Expectations for the future affect greatly how people react on changes and challenges (Carver & Scheier, 2002) and there are various strategies that lie behind the one that leads to active and meaningful studying. From the perspective of university students' success, it seemed that caring leadership can function as a means to support students at their personal level and enable them to find and employ their personal characteristics, talents and strengths, in the best possible manner during their studies.

The leaders in this research talked about the sense of solidarity and communality among the faculty and the students. At the unit level, the educators' pedagogical and scientific professionalism, curricula, and the atmosphere and conditions of the unit (see Määttä & Uusiautti, 2011a; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2013) can be named the core factors.

According to the findings, if the students were regarded as customers, the curriculum was named the product. It should fulfill the promises of education and thus be cutting-edge. Basically, the curriculum provides both teachers and students with a clear goal. It answers the questions of what kinds of expertise students will have in the training program and what kinds of study entities they will study along with the study units. Five stages can be distinguished in curriculum work (see Alaoutinen et al., 2009): (1) to define the basic task and profession of the education/discipline/art, to evaluate the need for education; (2) to define required competencies and general goals of teaching; (3) to define the model of curriculum; (4) to define the goals, contents, workload, and methods for study entities and units; (5) to determine the communication in the curriculum; and (6) to evaluate the curriculum and the proficiency produced by it and its constant development. Learning goals in the curriculum tell what students are expected to know after taking a certain study unit, and they also direct working and the way learning, teaching, and studying are being evaluated.

When pursuing the valued outcomes, students need special support and guidance. What was highlighted in the university leaders' interviews was the importance of equal and open interaction between the faculty and students. This is how the new kind of perceiving students as customers was manifested in leaders' thinking: leaders seemed to perceive themselves as eternal students as they wanted to learn more about leadership and how to promote the well-being of the whole unit including the faculty and students. Therefore, their customership implication appeared as reciprocal relationship with students. Namely, university leaders highlighted the importance of seeing students as an equally important group of people at the university and open and positive atmosphere.

More detailed lists of the nature of support and guidance have been given, too (e.g., Haapaniemi, Voutilainen, & Ikäheimonen, 2001). Määttä (2012) has divided the resources of a good supervisor into four dimensions. In her illustration, (A) Will: A supervisor's commitment to supervision, (B) Knowledge: substance knowledge and/or the mastery and ability to comprehend the overall structure, (C) Actions: Ensuring that the contents meet the scientific quality requirements, and (D) Proficiency: positive and supportive supervision methods and personality constitute the four fundamental features of supervision. The length of the square's sides varies with the supervision situation. Nor does the area remain the same. A supervisor can emphasize different features depending on his or her own style and on a student's work habits and needs. Supervision is not likely to succeed if one of the aforementioned resources is completely missing.

Many characteristics of university community either enhance or hinder students' smooth progress on their study process. Studying atmosphere can vary from open and vivid dealings between students and teachers and other personnel to distant, minimal, and formal relationships between the above-mentioned groups. Indeed, the meaning of informal student-faculty contacts and learning outcomes has been noted already three decades ago (see Pascarella, 1980). Finding studying meaningful has been noted to have a positive relationship with students' perceptions of academic atmosphere at the unit (see e.g., Kezar & Kinzie, 2006; Mayya & Roff, 2004; Pimparyon et al., 2000).

Ultimately, the completion of an academic degree is students' responsibility because even the most skillful teacher cannot learn on students' behalf. Yet, teaching skills, teachers' abilities to be in an appreciating interaction with students and to guide students make a salient impetus – or pitfall – in university education. This was noted by the university leaders in this study, too. Today's good university teachers bear the responsibility both for the discipline they represent and are concerned of their students and their success.

The conditions of the teacher training department covers the outward conditions including studying facilities and their location, the number of teachers in proportion to the number of students, social, economic, and health services, library services (the availability of books, opening times), ICT facilities and their sufficiency, the length of studying days, the accumulation of lectures versus even division by weekdays and time. It is a known fact (e.g., Greenwald, Hedges, & Laine, 1996) that a broad range of resources are positively related to student outcome (see also Atjonen, 2007). Indeed, this resembles the third perspective brought out by university leaders in this study. As the funding of universities strongly depends on the number of graduates, research programs, publications, in other words measurable outcomes, the pressures of productivity is high. The university leaders in this study considered these outer factors hindering the realization of caring leadership but considered it as the basic principle for making decisions that would benefit the students the most and allocating money for purposes that would ensure them with as high-quality education as possible.

Conclusion:

In modern world, student groups are more heterogeneous than ever (e.g., San Antonio, 2008; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2008) and thus their study processes should be paid attention more than ever. Consequently, university educators' work is demanding and important, and requires resources, time, and concentration. Caring leadership in higher education can enhance the students' study processes by highlighting some fundamental principles of higher education. Universities are liable for students meaning that the promises given in the universities application guides must be fulfilled so that every student feels welcome and becomes convinced that he or she made a good choice when applying for education. On the other hand, the most far-reaching and rewarding part of teaching and mentoring is to make students interested and seize the questions of their discipline, and finally become enthusiastic about working for the continuity and development of science (Schunk & Pajares, 2005). Finally, quality guidance and teaching make a central, valuable part of the whole sphere of academic work. As manifested in the university leaders' perceptions, caring for students is the lifeline of the quality and profitability of higher education.

Daniel Goleman (2006) has wisely said: "Leading a school to create a warmer and more connected school culture need not mean sacrificing academic rigor. Instead, socially intelligent leaders help schools better fulfill their main mission: teaching" (p. 81). This concerns university-level education too. And, based on the results of this study, we would like to continue Goleman's thought by adding that by using the leadership position for fulfilling the teaching mission, caring leaders also help students and enhance their study processes.

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