Education Reform and Development, 2024, Volume 6, Issue 8
https://ojs.bbwpublisher.com/index.php/ERD
Online ISSN: 2652-5372
Print ISSN: 2652-5364

The Absence of the Moderating Role of Positive Attribution: Can Positive Attribution Buffer the Impact of Negative Feedback on the Proactivity of Student Leaders in Higher Education?

Xing Tang*, Li Liao

Xiangnan University, Chenzhou 423000, China

Corresponding author: Xing Tang, 3441239565@qq.com

Abstract: The proactivity of college student leaders is essential for their individual growth, team synergy and the enhancement of campus culture. Given that many student affairs management teachers in Chinese higher education institutions primarily employ negative feedback as a developmental tool for student leaders, this study explores whether such feedback diminishes the proactivity of student leaders and whether positive attribution can effectively mitigate this adverse effect. The findings reveal that negative feedback from student affairs management teachers significantly undermines the proactivity of student leaders, and surprisingly, the practice of positive attribution does not ameliorate this trend. This study underscores the necessity for student affairs management teachers to refrain from utilizing negative feedback when evaluating the outcomes of activities and facilitating reflection among student leaders. Instead, it advocates for fostering a positive and supportive communication environment to encourage the proactivity and personal development of student leaders.

Keywords: Student affairs management teachers; Student leaders; Proactivity; Negative feedback; Positive attribution

Online publication: August 23, 2024

1. Introduction

In traditional Chinese perspectives, negative feedback is often regarded as an educational approach akin to "strict teachers produce outstanding students," which implies that by pointing out deficiencies, it can promote the growth and progress of Xiangnan University, China students. However, with the evolution of educational concepts, an increasing number of studies have begun to question the effectiveness of this practice [1,2]. In the current university environment, a considerable portion of student affairs management teachers still use negative feedback as a motivational tool when assessing the performance of student cadres and providing feedback. Despite sometimes feeling the students' dissatisfaction with this, they still believe that "I am doing this for your good," which they consider a responsible behavior towards students. Is this really the case?

Contradicting this traditional Chinese perception, existing research has found that the supervisory

style significantly impacts the initiative of subordinates [3], especially that support and recognition can more effectively motivate the initiative of student cadres [4]. Effective, constructive, timely and credible feedback is key to promoting student learning [2,5,6]. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct empirical research to explore the actual situation. This study investigates the impact of negative feedback on the initiative of student cadres in a low-ranking university in China through a cluster sampling survey and also explores whether positive attribution has a moderating effect.

2. Research hypotheses

2.1. Negative feedback and student cadre proactivity

In higher education institutions, the role of student cadres is crucial. They are not only the bridge between students and the school management but also the key force in driving campus cultural development and organizing student activities. However, the negative feedback from student affairs management teachers may have a significant impact on the proactivity of student cadres, which has attracted widespread attention in the field of educational management [7]. Although the relationship between feedback from student affairs management teachers and the behavior of student cadres has always been a hot topic of research, there is little research on how negative feedback affects the proactive behavior of student cadres.

Klueger AN (1996) pointed out that the effectiveness of negative feedback is influenced by a combination of factors such as the way feedback is provided, individual personality traits, and the organizational environment [8]. Luan K *et al.* (2021) further studied and pointed out that an individual's psychological entitlement and attribution style play an important role in dealing with negative feedback, which may affect their emotional and behavioral responses [9]. The Expectancy Theory framework also indicates that positive and negative feedback are important factors affecting motivation and job performance [10]. Vroom VH (1964) analyzes from the perspective of affective, continuance, and normative commitment that negative feedback may affect the student cadres' emotional investment in the organization and their commitment, thereby reducing their positive attitudes and participation in the organization [11]. These factors affect student cadres through different mechanisms, influencing their adaptability and response to negative feedback [12,13]. Based on this, the following hypothesis is proposed in this study:

H1: There is a negative correlation between negative feedback from student affairs management teachers and the proactive behavior of student cadres.

2.2. The moderating role of positive attribution

Positive attribution, as a key psychological mechanism, may play a significant moderating role in the relationship between negative feedback from student affairs management teachers and the proactivity of student cadres. According to Weiner B's (1986) attribution theory, the way individuals attribute success or failure profoundly affects their subsequent behavior and emotional responses [14]. In the context of student cadres, facing negative feedback from student affairs management teachers, adopting a positive attributional stance, that is, viewing challenges as opportunities for growth and improvement, can not only promote emotional regulation but also stimulate intrinsic motivation, thereby potentially enhancing their proactive behavior [15,16].

Regarding the moderating role of positive attribution between negative feedback and the proactivity of student cadres, existing research offers various perspectives and theoretical foundations. Especially in the context of negative feedback from student affairs management teachers, positive attribution may play a crucial role in stimulating the proactive behavior of student cadres. Emotional states have a significant impact on cognitive processes, such as memory and thinking, and positive emotions have been shown to enhance

individuals' psychological resources, including self-efficacy and emotional regulation capabilities, which directly affect behavioral performance [17,18]. Furthermore, the close relationship between positive attribution and emotional states suggests that positive emotions may indirectly affect individuals' behavioral performance by enhancing their ability to seek and accept social support [19].

Although some theories, such as Skinner's operant conditioning theory, consider negative feedback as a punishment mechanism to reduce undesirable behavior, negative feedback is not always as effective as expected in practical applications. Contingency theory points out that student affairs management teachers' style and management methods should be adjusted according to specific situations and environments, indicating that negative feedback is not universally applicable [20,21]. Specifically, in the case of student cadres, they may not engage in positive attribution and thus enhance proactivity simply because the intention behind the negative feedback from student affairs management teachers is good. For instance, research by Stake JE (1982) points out that negative feedback can undermine employees' learning motivation and work enthusiasm in many cases, especially when employees cannot perceive it as constructive advice [22]. Therefore, while positive attribution, to some extent, helps individuals deal with negative feedback, it cannot eliminate its negative impact on proactivity. Student cadres may not engage in positive attribution and thus enhance proactivity simply because the intention behind the negative feedback from student affairs management teachers is good. Based on this, the following hypotheses are proposed in this study:

H2a: Positive attribution moderates the relationship between negative feedback and the proactivity of student cadres.

H2b: Positive attribution does not moderate the relationship between negative feedback and the proactivity of student cadres.

3. Research design

3.1. Questionnaire design

This study employs a survey method to assess the impact of negative feedback from student affairs management teachers on the proactivity of student cadres. The questionnaire is divided into three sections: The first section primarily investigates the respondents' understanding of the negative feedback from student affairs management teachers and its effects, thereby screening the sample to ensure that participants have sufficient awareness and experience of the research topic (this section is required). The second section consists of measurement items for the research variables in the model, specifically including negative feedback from student affairs management teachers, positive attribution, and proactive behavior. The specific measurement items and reference sources for the research variables are detailed in **Table 1**. The third section pertains to the demographic characteristics of the respondents, including aspects such as gender, year of study, status as a student cadre, tenure in the position and the duration of collaboration with the supervising teacher.

Table 1. Research variables and reference sources

Research variable	Definition	Reference source
Negative feedback from Student Affairs Management teachers	The feedback informs student cadres that there is a gap between their current performance and the target from student affairs management teachers.	Kim YJ *et al.* [23]
positive attribution	The causal inference made by students regarding the reasons behind the negative feedback from student affairs management teachers and the attribution for performance improvement.	Liu D *et al.* [24]
Proactive behavior	The initiative and enthusiasm demonstrated by students in their work, such as actively solving problems.	Frese M *et al.* [25]

3.2. Variable measurement

To ensure the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, the scales used in this study are derived from established scales in the literature and have been slightly modified to fit the context of this study. Except for demographic variables, the measurement items are assessed using a 7-point Likert scale, asking respondents to rate their agreement with statements ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" based on their actual situation. The negative feedback scale from student affairs management teachers, for instance, draws on the scale of Kim YJ *et al.* (2020) and includes two items modified to suit this study's context [23]. The positive attribution scale is adapted from the scale developed by Liu D *et al.* (2012) and consists of three items [24]. The proactive behavior scale uses the scale developed by Frese M *et al.* (1997), which is composed of three items [25].

To ensure the questionnaire's content validity and prevent misunderstandings, this study conducted a pre-test using focus group discussions, inviting eight students to participate. Through steps such as questionnaire distribution, understanding of measurement items, discussion of item meanings, in-depth interviews on difficult or ambiguous items, and classification and wording revisions of the questions, the clarity and comprehensibility of the questionnaire were enhanced. Feedback from the pre-test was used to refine the questionnaire design, ensuring the accuracy of the survey. The revised questionnaire items are detailed in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Variables and measurement items

Variable	Measurement Items	Reference literature
Negative feedback from student affairs management teachers	1. The teacher who has the greatest impact on my work enthusiasm usually gives me negative evaluations of my work outcomes.	Kim YJ *et al.* [23]
	2. This teacher often points out areas in my work that need improvement.	
Positive attribution	3. I feel that the negative evaluations given by this teacher are intended to motivate me to improve.	Liu D *et al.* [24]
	4. I believe this teacher's feedback helps me improve my work.	
	5. I trust that this teacher's feedback promotes my personal growth.	
Proactive behavior	6. In student work, I often take the initiative to solve problems.	Frese M *et al.* [25]
	7. In student work, I often propose innovative work plans or suggestions.	
	8. In student work, I am willing to take on additional work tasks.	

To ensure the questionnaire's reliability and validity, the scales for this study are adapted from literature-established scales and adjusted to align with our research objectives. The negative feedback scale, informed by Kim YJ *et al.*'s (2020) research, is slightly modified for contextual fit, with a Cronbach's α of 0.85, exceeding the benchmark of 0.7 [23]. It includes items such as "The teacher most impactful on my work enthusiasm often gives me negative feedback on my work outcomes" and "This teacher frequently identifies areas for improvement in my work" [1,2].

The positive attribution scale, developed by Liu D *et al.*'s (2012) [24], has a Cronbach's α of 0.92 and consists of items like "I perceive the teacher's negative evaluations as intended to motivate me," "I trust that the teacher's feedback aids my work improvement," and "I believe this teacher's feedback fosters my personal growth" [3–5].

The proactive behavior scale, from Frese M *et al.*'s (1997) [25], also has a Cronbach's α of 0.85 and includes items such as "I often take the initiative to solve problems in student work," "I frequently propose innovative plans or suggestions in student work," and "I am willing to undertake additional tasks in student work" [6–8].

The KMO measure for the survey is 0.86, suitable for factor analysis, with a P-value < 0.05, indicating

statistical significance. These rigorously selected and refined scales provide a robust foundation for our study, ensuring the precision and authenticity of the findings.

3.3. Research sample and data collection

This study focuses on student leaders in colleges and universities, employing a cluster sampling method at a university with a lower ranking. To ensure the rigor of the questionnaire, research team members provided one-on-one guidance to participants, ensuring the accuracy of the responses. The collection of questionnaires was swift and timely. A total of 123 questionnaires were distributed and all were successfully collected, achieving a 100% collection rate. After screening, all questionnaires were found to be valid, with a validity rate also reaching 100%. The demographic information of the participants is detailed in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Demographic characteristics of the sample (n = 123)

Category	Option range	Frequency	Valid percentage (%)
Gender	Male	67	54.50%
	Female	56	45.50%
Grade	Freshman	22	17.9%
	Sophomore	40	32.5%
	Junior	51	41.5%
	Senior	10	8.1%
Student cadre identity	Current	67	54.5%
	Former	56	45.5%
Duration in student work	1 year	61	49.6%
	2 years	35	28.5%
	3 years	25	20.3%
	4 years	2	1.6%
Duration working with the most influential teacher	1 year	71	57.7%
	2 years	30	24.4%
	3 years	21	17.1%
	4 years	1	0.8%

4. Research results

In this study, SPSS 16.0 was utilized to perform reliability analysis on the questionnaires to examine the internal consistency of the latent variables and exploratory factor analysis using the principal component method was conducted for each variable to identify key dimensions. The structural equation model's validity, reliability and model fit were tested using Amos 24.0 software to explore the interrelationships among the variables. The collected data were processed in the following steps:

(1) The reliability and validity of the important variables were tested;

(2) The impact of negative feedback on the proactive behavior of student cadres was explored;

(3) The moderating effect of positive attribution was examined;

(4) Robustness tests were conducted to further examine all proposed hypotheses.

4.1. Reliability and validity testing

The reliability and validity of the scales were measured using SPSS 16.0. Five common factors were extracted based on the eigenvalue method, with all factor loadings above 0.6, indicating that the five dimensions can be effectively reflected by the respective measurement indicators, as shown in **Table 4**. The Cronbach's α coefficients for each dimension were all higher than the standard value of 0.7, indicating good internal consistency among the measurement items within each dimension. The composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) values were all above the standard values of 0.7 and 0.5, respectively, indicating good convergent validity of the model, as shown in **Table 4**. According to Fornell C *et al.* (1981), discriminant validity exists between constructs when the square root of the AVE of a construct is greater than its correlation with other constructs [26]. In this study, the square root of the AVE for each construct was greater than its correlation with other constructs, thus indicating good discriminant validity among the constructs.

Table 4. Standard factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha, CR, and AVE values for constructs

Latent Variable	Indicator	Standard factor loading	Cronbach's α	CR (Approximate)	AVE (Approximate)
Proactive behavior	Proactive behavior 1	0.875	0.868	0.8919	0.7337
	Proactive behavior 2	0.891			
	Proactive behavior 3	0.801			
Negative feedback	Negative feedback 1	-0.749	0.773	0.6588	0.4924
	Negative feedback 2	-0.651			
Positive attribution	Promotion attribution 1	0.865	0.937	0.9309	0.818
	Promotion attribution 2	0.924			

4.2. The impact of negative feedback on student cadre proactivity

This section elaborates on the results of the baseline regression model, aiming to examine the impact of negative feedback from student affairs management teachers on the proactivity of student cadres in colleges and universities. **Table 5** presents the detailed results of the regression analysis.

Table 5. Regression analysis results

Coefficient	Unstandardized coefficient β	Standard error	Standardized coefficient β	*t*-value	Significance *p*
Constant	4.742	0.170		27.919	0.000
Negative feedback	-0.487	0.088	-0.451	-5.561	0.000

The constant term of the regression model is 4.742, indicating the baseline level of proactive behavior among college student cadres in the absence of any negative feedback. The unstandardized coefficient for negative feedback is -0.487, suggesting that an increase of one unit in negative feedback is associated with an expected decrease of 0.487 units in the proactive behavior of student cadres. The standard error is 0.088, indicating high precision in the estimate. The standardized coefficient Beta value is -0.451, indicating a moderate to large negative impact of negative feedback on proactive behavior. The *t*-value is -5.561, and the significance level (*p*-value) is less than 0.001, which statistically strongly indicates a significant negative correlation between negative feedback and the proactive behavior of student cadres.

The results of the baseline regression analysis clearly show that negative feedback significantly reduces the proactive behavior of college student cadres. This finding supports the research hypothesis that negative

feedback from student affairs management teachers may weaken the willingness and frequency of action taken by student cadres, adversely affecting their proactive behavior.

4.3. Examination of the moderating effect of positive attribution

This study used "positive attribution" as a moderating variable to test whether it has a moderating effect on the relationship between "negative feedback" and "student cadre proactive behavior." In the regression analysis, "negative feedback" was set as the independent variable, "proactive behavior" as the dependent variable and "positive attribution" was included as the moderating variable, constructing an interaction term of negative feedback × positive attribution. The analysis results are shown in **Table 6**, indicating that the interaction term of positive attribution and negative feedback does not significantly moderate proactive behavior. The unstandardized coefficient is -0.067, with a *p*-value greater than 0.05, indicating a non-significant moderating effect. Moreover, although the introduction of the interaction term increased R^2, the ΔR^2 value is 0.005, and the corresponding ΔF value and *p*-value did not provide significant improvement, further indicating that the moderating effect of positive attribution is not significant.

Table 6. Regression analysis results of the moderating effect of positive attribution

Variable	Unstandardized coefficient β	Standard error	Standardized coefficient β	*t*-value	Significance *p*
Negative feedback	-0.318	0.154	-0.294	-2.059	0.042
Feedback × Attribution	-0.067	0.050	-0.190	-1.333	0.185

This study also explored the impact of demographic characteristics such as gender and grade on the proactive behavior of college student cadres through regression analysis. The analysis results, shown in **Table 7**, indicate that the impact of gender on proactive behavior is close to the level of significance (β = -0.244, *p* = 0.064), suggesting that gender may be a potential factor worth considering. The impact of grade, student cadre status, work duration and collaboration duration on proactive behavior is not significant (all $p > 0.05$), indicating that these factors may not be key demographic characteristics affecting proactive behavior. Gender may be a demographic factor affecting the proactive behavior of college student cadres, while other examined characteristics do not significantly affect proactive behavior. That is, regardless of gender, grade, student cadre status, work duration and collaboration duration, they will not enhance the proactive behavior of student cadres simply because the intention behind the negative feedback from student affairs management teachers is good.

Table 7. Regression analysis results of the impact of demographic characteristics on proactive behavior

Variable	Coefficient β	Standard error	*t*-value	Significance *p*
Gender	-0.244	0.131	-1.866	0.064
Grade	-0.006	0.076	-0.075	0.940
Cadre status	0.005	0.132	0.039	0.969
Work duration	0.028	0.079	0.359	0.720
Collaboration duration	-0.029	0.083	-0.354	0.724

4.4. Robustness test

In college student organizations, student cadres' proactivity is a key factor in driving team development and addressing challenges. Negative feedback from the team of student affairs management teachers may impact

them, and positive attribution may serve as a psychological adjustment mechanism, helping student cadres handle such feedback with a more positive attitude. Therefore, conducting a robustness test of this impact mechanism is crucial for ensuring the reliability and generalizability of the research findings.

To enhance the robustness of the research findings, this study adopted a change in the analytical method. Considering the multi-category nature of the dependent variable "Proactive Behavior 1," this study employed a multinomial logistic regression analysis method, replacing the original linear regression model, to accommodate the multi-category nature of the dependent variable. This change aims to more accurately capture the non-linear relationship between the independent and dependent variables, thereby enhancing the applicability and robustness of the model.

Table 8 shows the impact of different categories of negative feedback on proactive behavior after changing the analytical method. The results indicate that even under different model settings, the impact of negative feedback on proactive behavior remains significant. The results of the robustness test consistently support the effectiveness of positive attribution in countering the adverse impact of negative feedback on the proactivity of college student cadres.

Table 8. Results of robustness test

Category of negative feedback	Intercept	Proactive behavior 1 [Proactive = 1]	Proactive behavior 1 [Proactive = 2]	Proactive behavior 1 [Proactive = 3]	Proactive behavior 1 [Proactive = 4]
Very Inconsistent	20.399	1.159	0.627	3.458E-9	1.798E-8
Inconsistent	17.141	6.953E-7	6.953E-7	3.057E-7	1.438E-6
Neutral	1.609	1.000	45343205.788	1.000	0.800

Parameters: Standard error = 2152.799; Wald = 0.000; Significance = 0.992–0.995.

5. Conclusion

The main objective of this study is to explore the impact of negative feedback on the proactivity of student cadres and whether positive attribution can mitigate this impact. Through a cluster sampling survey of student cadres from a low-ranking university in China, the study constructed a model of "negative feedback from student affairs management teachers, positive attribution, proactive behavior" and empirically examined the influence mechanism of negative feedback from student affairs management teachers on the proactivity of student cadres in colleges and universities. The study also introduced positive attribution as a moderating variable to reveal the factors affecting proactive behavior. The main conclusions are as follows:

(1) The relationship between negative feedback and proactive behavior: There is a negative correlation between negative feedback from student affairs management teachers and the proactive behavior of student cadres. This is consistent with relevant theories in educational psychology, emphasizing the importance of balancing feedback in educational and management practices.

(2) The moderating role of positive attribution: Positive attribution does not play a moderating role in the relationship between negative feedback and the proactivity of student cadres. Although positive attribution is intended to have a positive impact on individuals, it did not significantly mitigate the potential negative impact of negative feedback on the proactivity of student cadres in practical application. This may be jointly influenced by individual differences, organizational culture, and other factors, and at the same time, there is still a lack of in-depth understanding of positive attribution in existing research.

(3) The impact of demographic characteristics: Demographic characteristics such as gender have

some impact on the proactive behavior of student cadres, but this impact is not significant. This suggests that in the interaction between student affairs management teachers and student cadres, the nature and manner of feedback may be more critical than demographic characteristics. Even if the negative feedback from student affairs management teachers is well-intentioned, these demographic characteristics will not enhance the proactive behavior of student cadres as a result.

Compared with previous studies, this study shows differences in the role of positive attribution, which may be related to cultural background, individual psychological characteristics, and the specific feedback manner. The conclusions of this study have important value for educational practice, indicating that educators should avoid using negative feedback in assessment and feedback and instead create a positive and encouraging communication atmosphere.

However, this study also has limitations, such as the representativeness of the sample and its cross-cultural applicability. Future research can further explore the role of positive attribution in different cultural backgrounds and how to more effectively combine positive attribution to enhance the proactivity of student cadres. In addition, an in-depth understanding of positive attribution and its optimized application in educational and management practices is also an important direction for future research.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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