

Organizational Identification of Teachers in Private Higher Education: Insights from a Mixed-Methods Study

ABSTRACT

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Teachers' organizational identification is particularly important for maintaining institutional stability and development. However, due to the limitation in governance structure, resource availability, and employment models, private higher education institutions confront higher challenges than those of public institutions. To strengthen teachers' organizational identification, this study aims to propose effective strategies by examining its current status, group differences, and relevant contextual influences. Based on a three-factor framework encompassing existence, belongingness, and success, the ERG theory is adopted and a questionnaire is developed to collect quantitative data involving 268 teachers. Also, semi-structured qualitative interviews of 11 teachers are complemented to explore an in-depth understanding. Results show that teachers' organizational identification in private higher education institutions is generally at a moderate level, and the identification degree in descending order is belongingness, success, and existence. Note that age, educational level, academic title, and establishment status may bring minor differences, whereas gender, full-time status, or administrative duties have no significant impact. The contextualize and pattern explanations can be drawn from interviews, as well as additional insights for the development of targeted improvement strategies. Lastly, this study proposes three key management steps: implementing coordinated strategies to enhance existence identification, building a supportive climate for belongingness identification, and expanding resources to boost success identification.

Keywords: Organizational Identification, Private Higher Education, Teachers, ERG Theory, Mixed Methods.

1. Introduction

Higher education is gradually moving towards a trend of diversified funding sources and market oriented management models. Unlike public institutions that have stable public financial support and well established governance structures, private colleges and universities are more directly exposed to market competition, resource fluctuations, and employment uncertainties (Buckner, 2025). They rely more heavily on effective institutional management and organizational support to survive and achieve sustainable development. As one of the core competitive advantages of higher education institutions, teachers' stability and commitment have become essential to achieving broader strategic goals. In the context of limited resources in private higher education institutions, enhancing teachers' identification with the organization has become an important governance strategy (Weisman et al., 2023; Christopher & Divya, 2024).

Organizational identification is generally regarded as the cognitive and emotional psychological bond between individuals and their organization, which develops a sense of belonging and incorporates it into their own self-perception (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Christopher & Divya, 2024; Weisman et al., 2023). For private higher education institutions that have limited resources and are under the pressure of market competition, improving teachers' organizational identification is not only a psychological requirement, but also a crucial management task. If institutional decision-makers lack a thorough understanding of these mechanisms, their intervention strategies may fail to meet teachers' needs, which could lead to organizational disintegration (Hu & Ghasemy, 2024). However, despite its considerable strategic importance, empirical evidence remains limited on how to manage organizational identification among teachers in private colleges and universities. This gap may expose institutions' development to substantial risks. Therefore, it is important to investigate teachers' organizational identification for improving management practices and ensuring the long-term stability and development of private higher education institutions.

In order to provide evidence-based foundations for institutional leaders, this study focuses on teachers in China's private higher education institutions and explores their organizational identification from a context-sensitive perspective. As one of the largest and most rapidly evolving private higher education systems globally, China serves as a representative case. In particular, Chinese private higher education is undergoing a transformation from rapid scale expansion to quality development, teachers' organizational identification becomes more critical to institutional success (State Council of the PRC, 2021; Hu & Ghasemy, 2024; Peng, 2025).

This study also seeks to provide valuable insights for other higher education systems beyond China. Similar patterns can be observed in countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines, where private institutions are playing an increasingly important role in expanding the accessibility of higher education. In these contexts, private higher education institutions often face similar challenges related to resource constraints, governance capabilities, and teacher retention (Nair et al., 2024; Mohamad & Majid, 2025; Wiyono et al., 2025). Therefore, the findings of this study may provide useful references for institutional leaders seeking to enhance organizational support and improve institutional stability.

To guide the research, this study explores the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1: What is the current status and the detailed dimensional structure of teachers' organizational identification in private higher education?

RQ2: How does teachers' organizational identification differ across demographic and positional characteristics?

RQ3: What contextual factors help explaining variations in teachers' organizational identification in private higher education?

RQ4: What management and leadership strategies can be derived to enhance teachers' organizational identification and support institutional development?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Importance of Organizational Identification in Private Higher Education

Among teachers in higher education, organizational identification has been linked to a wide set of outcomes. According to prior studies, it correlates positively with organizational citizenship behavior, work engagement, and performance (Sidorenkov & Muchinsky, 2023; Khanal & Arora, 2024; Pugliese et al., 2024). Stronger identification is associated with greater discretionary effort in teaching reform, curriculum development, talent cultivation, and teamwork (Li, 2024; Pugliese et al., 2024). It also shows a positive association with job satisfaction, emotional investment, and career commitment, which can relieve stress, enhance well-being and resilience (Jun et al., 2023; Wang, 2025). Furthermore, it has a negative correlation with turnover intention, indicating that it plays a more significant role in promoting long-term retention and stability (Feng et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2025). Overall, prior studies have reported largely consistent positive outcomes, but relatively limited attention has been given to how organizational identification develops among teachers in higher education.

In recent years, research on organizational identification in higher education has been continuously expanding in various contexts. For instance, Chen et al. (2025) analysed survey data from 283 higher education faculty members and examined organizational identification across three dimensions: cohesion, group influence, and group relationships. Similarly, Borlaug et al. (2023) investigated organizational identification among academic staff during the merger of higher education institutions using a mixed-method design, showing that institutional restructuring and access to organizational resources played an important role in shaping staff identification.

Although these efforts are constantly increasing, research specifically targeting teachers at private colleges and universities remains limited. Firstly, the reliance on a undifferentiated sample of higher education obscures the unique governance structure specific to private institutions, preventing leaders from obtaining governance solutions tailored to this particular field. Secondly, the scales or questionnaires originally designed for corporate or general organizational contexts cannot accurately reflect the unique concepts of private higher education, resulting in a disconnection between the measurement results and the actual situation, and thereby misleading policy-making. Thirdly, the fragmentary understanding of demographics hinders the formulation of targeted management strategies for different groups of teachers. Finally, the excessive reliance on descriptive indicators fails to examine the actual experiences of teachers, thereby masking the underlying reasons that lead to teachers' feelings of alienation.

These research gaps have brought continuous challenges to institutional management, as the lack of evidence tailored to specific situations may lead to administrative decisions not fully aligning with the professional needs of teachers.

2.2. ERG Theory

In 1969, based on Maslow's need hierarchy theory from the perspective of humanism, Clayton P. Alderfer proposed a new needs theory – ERG theory (Alderfer, 1969; 1972). Alderfer (1972) proposed three core categories of human needs, including existence (E), relatedness (R), and growth (G). The existence needs refer to the physiological and material requirements, including salary, benefits, working conditions, safety and stability. The relatedness needs, on the other hand, are generated through interaction in life and work, such as interpersonal relationships, teamwork, fairness in procedures and distribution, respect, and a sense of belonging within the organization. The driving force for growth needs stems from the desire for self-improvement and development. This desire manifests as an inherent spirit of enterprise, which is a strong urge to progress, to realize personal value, and to achieve success (Yang & Ling, 2023).

The ERG theory is based on four assumptions. First, satisfaction of lower-level needs is not a prerequisite for the pursuit of higher-level needs. Individuals can simultaneously pursue multiple levels, rather than following a strictly linear sequence. For instance, a teacher whose compensation is not yet fully satisfactory may nonetheless strongly seek academic development and professional accomplishments. Second, the frustration–regression mechanism: when the pursuit of higher-level needs (e.g., growth) is blocked, individuals may turn to lower-level needs (e.g., existence or relatedness) for compensatory satisfaction to maintain motivational equilibrium. Third, needs are not fixed. The dominant needs at a given stage can shape behavior for a period. Once certain needs are met, the person may proceed to higher-level needs or remain at the current stage due to contextual constraints. Fourth, even after partial satisfaction, the expectation level for a given need may continue to rise rather than diminish (Alderfer, 1972; Yang & Ling, 2023).

Within private colleges and universities, teachers likewise require multifaceted need satisfaction from the organization to activate development motives and form stable organizational attitudes. In ERG terms, the three need categories can operate concurrently, jointly shaping work experiences and identity linkage. When existence needs (e.g., compensation and job stability) are adequately met, attention is more readily directed toward relatedness (e.g., collegial collaboration) and growth (e.g., development opportunities). Conversely, when growth channels are obstructed or organizational support is lacking, frustration–regression can occur, with teachers seeking compensation along existence and relatedness dimensions (e.g., stronger concern for pay equity, and team climate). ERG theory therefore does not treat needs as rigid. It highlights dynamic reversibility and stage sensitivity, features that fit the fluctuating need profiles of teachers in private colleges and universities across career stages, positions, and institutional arrangements.

In this study, ERG theory is adopted as the theoretical basis for explaining how need-related feelings shape teachers' organizational identification in private higher education. However, organizational identification has been predominantly studied through the lens of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), Self-categorization Theory (Turner et al., 1987), or Person-organization Fit Theory (Kristof, 1996). These perspectives emphasize self-categorization and psychological attachment to the organization. While they explain the social and cognitive processes underlying identification, ERG theory focuses on how the satisfaction of existence, relatedness, and growth needs influences employees' attitudes toward their organization. In the context of private colleges and universities, teachers' perceptions of compensation, interpersonal atmosphere, and development opportunities are closely related to their daily work experiences. Therefore, a needs-based framework provides a practical perspective for understanding the formation of organizational identification. By linking teachers' needs to existence, relatedness, and growth, institutions can better identify deficiencies in organizational support and develop targeted strategies related to workload, professional development, and participatory governance.

2.3. Three-Factor Model of Organizational Identification

On the basis of ERG theory, Wang (2005) proposed a three-factor model of organizational identification tailored to Chinese organizational settings, comprising existence identification, belongingness identification, and success identification. Based on the inherent logic formed by elements such as identity, institutions and resources in the organizational context of China, this model divides the members' sense of identification with the organization into three interrelated but distinct psychological perceptions. The existence identification refers to the subjective perception and recognition of members regarding the organizational support that can provide personal life and work security, including material guarantees, salary and benefits, and job stability. The belongingness identification refers to the emotional connection and sense of belonging that is formed in various situations such as interpersonal interactions, organizational culture, procedural fairness, leadership support, and teamwork. The success identification refers to the positive psychological experience and value cognition that individuals develop when they recognize improvements in their own abilities, access to resources, and career advancement. While primarily validated within Chinese organizational settings, this three-factor model

has gained widespread recognition in subsequent research and has shown good discriminant power and structural validity (Li et al., 2008; Yang et al., 2019; Li et al., 2023; Feng et al., 2025).

The reason why this model has a good theoretical correlation with the ERG theory lies in the fact that they share a high degree of consistency in terms of structural meaning and mechanism. The existence, relatedness, and growth in the ERG theory can correspond to the recognition of existence, belongingness, and success identification. Taking into account the professional ecology and organizational characteristics of teachers in private colleges and universities, the connotations of these three factors can be specifically expressed as follows. Existence identification emphasizes the sense of being properly secured by material and institutional support, such as the adequacy and fairness of pay and benefits, the stability of posts and contracts, and the reliability of working conditions and institutional safeguards, which corresponds to the existence needs in ERG theory. Belongingness identification emphasizes the relational and affective linkage formed in organizations, including fairness in procedures and processes, leadership support and respect, collegial trust and collaboration, and consistency between organizational culture and values, which corresponds to the relatedness needs in ERG theory. Success identification emphasizes the experience of achievement and development under organizational support, such as the provision of academic and teaching resources, training and promotion channels, external cooperation and platform opportunities, and recognition and incentive mechanisms, which corresponds to the growth needs in ERG theory.

Table 1. ERG Theory and the Three-Factor Model of Organizational Identification

ERG components	Three-factor model	Conceptual meaning
Existence	Existence identification	Perceived security and material support provided by the institution
Relatedness	Belongingness identification	Emotional connection and sense of belonging formed through organization interaction
Growth	Success identification	Perceived opportunities for professional development and achievement within the organization

Thus, the analytical framework of this study is established, as illustrated in Table 1. ERG theory serves as the underlying logic of needs satisfaction and motivational activation, and the three-factor model serves as the operational vehicle for the structured presentation of organizational identification. The two are integrated to explain the status and difference characteristics of organizational identification among teachers in private higher education, and to provide a theoretical basis for subsequent contextual interpretation and governance recommendations. Their integration enables to gain a deeper understanding of how motivational needs, leadership practices, and governance arrangements collectively shape the identification patterns of teachers in private higher education institutions.

3. Methodology

Based on a review of the relevant literature on teacher organizational identification, this study adopted a mixed-method design, combining questionnaire surveys with semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire survey comprehensively reflects the level and structure of teachers' organizational identification, as well as the group differences. The interviews are used to explore potential factors and propose context-specific suggestions. Through the mixed-method design, this study not only captured the breadth of the identification patterns through quantitative indicators, but also revealed the depth of personal experiences through qualitative narratives. Thus, the proposed strategies are both empirically grounded and context sensitive. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ethics Review Committee of the Asia-Pacific Social Innovation Research Institute (Approval No. APSIRI-ERC-2025-1F78).

3.1. Questionnaire Survey

3.1.1. Instrument

The questionnaire on teacher organizational identification in private higher education is divided into two parts. The first part is used to measure organizational identification. This part draws on the Organizational Identification Scale developed by Wang (2005), which has been adapted based on previous research and initial teacher interviews, to suit the actual situation of private colleges and universities. The second part of the questionnaire collects basic information about teachers. Expert guidance is considered crucial for ensuring the applicability, completeness and accuracy of the questionnaire items (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021). Based on the expert’s guidance, those redundant, ambiguous or not closely related to the organizational identification of teachers in private higher education were revised or deleted. Subsequently, the questionnaire was piloted on 51 teachers to test the reliability and validity of the instrument, and to provide a basis for further improvement. For the first part of the questionnaire measuring organizational identification, the pretest indicators, including item discrimination, internal consistency, and exploratory factor analysis, were generally satisfactory, although several items presented problems and required revision or deletion. For example, item 3 was deleted due to poor item discrimination, and three items (9, 10, 11) were removed due to factor misloading or cross-loadings. A summary of the reliability and validity results is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Reliability and Validity Analysis

Factor	Item	Factor loading	Communality	Cronbach’s α	KMO value	Bartlett’s test	Total variance explained
Existence identification	1	0.846	0.721	0.872	0.858	$\chi^2=796.556;$ $p < 0.01$	71.511%
	2	0.935	0.899				
	4	0.742	0.800				
	5	0.614	0.711				
Belongingness identification	6	0.805	0.735	0.921			
	7	0.650	0.672				
	8	0.738	0.692				
	9	0.477	0.704				
	10	0.504	0.695				
	11	0.516	0.607				
	12	0.639	0.702				
	13	0.662	0.611				
Success identification	14	0.635	0.667	0.917			
	15	0.764	0.652				
	16	0.710	0.655				
	17	0.806	0.732				
	18	0.875	0.795				
	19	0.819	0.729				
	20	0.742	0.807				

Note: Exploratory factor analysis was conducted using principal component analysis with Varimax rotation.

After revision, the formal questionnaire showed high reliability coefficients (the overall reliability coefficient for organizational identification was 0.938, and those for the three dimensions were 0.814, 0.904, and 0.886). Each dimension of teachers’ organizational identification showed a strong correlation with the total score ($p < 0.01$), and the dimensions were also substantially correlated with one another, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Pearson correlations of organizational identification dimensions (N = 268)

	Total	Existence identification	Belongingness identification	Success identification
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Total	—			
Existence identification	0.825 ($p<0.001$)	—		
Belongingness identification	0.925 ($p<0.001$)	0.644 ($p<0.001$)	—	
Success identification	0.919 ($p<0.001$)	0.623 ($p<0.001$)	0.801 ($p<0.001$)	—

The final formal questionnaire retained 16 items in the first part (teachers’ organizational identification), including 4 items for existence identification, 6 items for belongingness identification, and 6 items for success identification. All items adopted a five-point Likert scale (1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”), with higher scores indicating stronger organizational identification. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of 7 items on basic information, including gender, age, educational level, academic title, full-time status, administrative duty, and establishment status. Taken together, the final questionnaire contained 23 items.

3.1.2. Data Collection

The formal questionnaire was administered through the Wenjuanxing online survey platform to teachers from private colleges and universities in Shanghai, using a convenience sampling approach. The survey link was distributed via WeChat in May 2025. To protect anonymity and personal privacy, respondents were invited, but not required, to indicate their institution. Based on the available responses, teachers from 14 private higher education institutions in Shanghai were identified. A total of 280 questionnaires were collected, of which 268 were valid, yielding a valid response rate of 95.7%. The sample information is presented in Table 4. As institutional identification was optional, participation by individual institutions is not reported.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of the Survey Sample (N = 268)

Basic information	Category	Count	Percentage
Gender	Male	52	19.4%
	Female	216	80.6%
Age	30 and below	96	35.8%
	31—40	122	45.5%
	41—50	40	14.9%
	51 and above	10	3.7%
Educational level	Bachelor and below	37	13.8%
	Master	187	69.8%
	Doctor	44	16.4%
Academic title	Assistant and below	108	40.3%
	Lecturer	116	43.3%
	Associate Professor	41	15.3%
	Professor	3	1.1%
Full-time status	Yes	234	87.3%
	No	34	12.7%
Administrative duty	Yes	115	42.9%
	No	153	57.1%
Establishment status	Yes	23	8.6%
	No	245	91.4%

3.1.3. Data Analysis

SPSS was used to analyze the data from the questionnaire survey. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were calculated for the overall organizational identification score and for each of

the three dimensions. Independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare organizational identification across binary groups (e.g., gender, full-time status, administrative duty, establishment status). One-way ANOVA was used to test group differences for variables with more than two categories (e.g., age groups, educational level, academic title). When the omnibus ANOVA indicated a statistically significant difference, post-hoc pairwise comparisons were conducted using the Games-Howell procedure, which does not assume equal variances and is suitable for unequal sample sizes. Furthermore, to address the risk of Type I error inflation from multiple comparisons (28 tests in total), the Benjamini-Hochberg false discovery rate (FDR) correction procedure was applied using a false discovery rate of 0.05.

3.2 Semi-structured Interviews

3.2.1. Interview Protocol

The interview protocol was structured into three sections with 9 open-ended questions. The first gathered background details to contextualize participants' current experiences and inform later strategic analysis. The second explored their perceptions of the organization. The third elicited suggestions for institutional improvements. After drafting the protocol, two teachers from private higher education were selected for pilot interviews, and the questions and wording were further revised and refined.

3.2.2. Data Collection

All interviewees were teachers from private higher education in Shanghai. Through purposive sampling with snowball recruitment, the scope of interviewees was expanded as much as possible across different institutions and years of service. Based on the principle of data saturation, although relatively sufficient material had been obtained by the time eight interviews had been completed, interviews with three additional teachers were conducted to further verify and supplement the information gathered. Basic information on the interviewees is shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Basic Information of Interviewees

No.	Gender	Educational level	Years of service (approx., year)
1	Male	Master	3
2	Female	Master	4
3	Male	Master	3
4	Female	Doctor	11
5	Female	Master	2
6	Male	Doctor	2
7	Male	Master	1.5
8	Male	Master	7
9	Female	Master	0.5
10	Female	Master	5
11	Female	Master	6

According to the interviewees' preferences, telephone interviews were conducted in June 2025. Original materials were collected by combining note-taking with audio recording. Before each interview, full communication was conducted to explain the research purpose and obtain informed consent. It was promised that no personal privacy would be involved and that all data would be kept confidential to ensure the richness and authenticity of the information obtained. Interviewees are referred to in the text as Teacher followed by a number (such as Teacher 1, Teacher 2), consistent with the identifiers in Table 5, and real names are not used.

3.2.3. Data Analysis

Within twenty-four hours after each interview, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were organized and archived in NVivo. The analysis followed a conventional content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). During data processing, the recordings were repeatedly reviewed, and interpretations were checked and refined against the transcripts to ensure accuracy in the analysis of the textual materials. The primary researcher conducted the coding and identified themes from the interview data. To enhance accuracy, the coding process was carried out in two rounds. The preliminary interpretations were then discussed among the research team to reach agreement. Participants were not asked to review or comment on the findings. In addition, the interview excerpts cited in the findings were translated into English from the original Chinese to facilitate reporting. Efforts were made to preserve the participants' intended meanings during translation, and the translated excerpts were reviewed by a bilingual researcher for accuracy.

4. Findings

4.1. Current Status of Teachers' Organizational Identification

According to the high or low scores obtained in each part of the questionnaire, the corresponding strength of teachers' organizational identification can be indicated. The mean score of organizational identification was obtained by summing the item scores and dividing by the number of items, which allows understanding of the overall situation of organizational identification and each dimension.

4.1.1 Overall Level of Organizational Identification

Organizational identification reflects teachers' psychological perceptions of the institution. By calculating the mean scores, the overall level of organizational identification among teachers in private higher education can be understood, and the identification status for each dimension can also be further examined. The specific scores are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics of Teachers' Organizational Identification (N = 268)

Dimension	Organizational identification (total)	Existence identification	Belongingness identification	Success identification
Mean	3.517	2.759	3.878	3.661
Standard deviation	0.740	0.943	0.788	0.789

Table 6 reveals a mean organizational identification score of 3.517, slightly above the midpoint of the five-point Likert scale, suggesting a moderate overall level. The mean score of belongingness identification is the highest at 3.878, which is higher than the overall mean. This indicates that teachers show a relatively strong sense of belongingness identification with private colleges and universities. However, the mean of belongingness identification does not reach 4.000, which indicates that the perceived belongingness identification is still not strong enough. The mean score of success identification is 3.661, which is also higher than the overall mean and falls in the upper-middle range, indicating that the perception of success identification is not ideal either. In addition, existence identification has the lowest mean score at 2.759, which is far below the overall mean. This indicates that the low level of existence identification is a primary factor leading to the overall level of organizational identification not being high in private higher education.

To understand the situation in more detail, the mean scores of the items under each dimension are examined separately. Where appropriate, qualitative interview data are used to contextualize and explain specific quantitative patterns.

4.1.2. Existence Identification

Existence identification refers to teachers' psychological perception that the institution provides material support to meet basic livelihood needs. For teachers in private higher education, establishment status influences income to some extent and may also affect perceived job stability, which in turn shapes organizational identification. Therefore, existence identification mainly involves perceived job stability and compensation. Job stability covers two items, Q1 and Q2, and compensation covers two items, Q3 and Q4. The scores are shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics for Items of Existence Identification (N = 268)

Item	Mean	Standard deviation
Q1	2.28	1.214
Q2	3.00	1.275
Q3	2.78	1.098
Q4	2.98	1.110

As shown in Table 7, Q1 has the lowest mean score at 2.28. This indicates that teachers care about formal establishment status, and the fact that most teachers in private higher education do not have it weakens their organizational identification. Interviews show that teachers may consider establishment status unimportant before entry or shortly after entry, but its salience tends to increase as they work longer and understand the system more fully. Some focus on the benefits associated with establishment status, as noted by one teacher:

“Our housing fund and social insurance cannot compare with those of teachers on establishment. Private colleges are indeed lacking in this respect, which is exactly why they have trouble retaining teachers. Young teachers especially face survival pressure.” (Teacher 3)

Others focus more on stability:

“I used to think establishment status was not important, but now I really think it matters. I feel it brings a stronger sense of security and belonging.” (Teacher 5)

Although Q2 is at a general level in absolute terms, it is the highest within this dimension. This suggests that the labor contract partly meets teachers' need for stability and thus raises organizational identification. As one teacher stated:

“I do not have establishment status, but I do not think stability is a big problem. As long as you do not make serious mistakes, the school will not easily dismiss a teacher. The labor contract law is there. I do not have many concerns about stability.” (Teacher 11)

The mean scores of Q3 and Q4 are both below 3.00. This indicates dissatisfaction with pay and benefits, which reduces organizational identification. Almost all interviewees expressed dissatisfaction with compensation or benefits:

“Salaries of teachers in private colleges and universities are far behind public ones. Our workload is two or three times that of public universities, while our pay is about one half or one third.” (Teacher 7)

“The salary and benefits of teachers at private colleges and universities are low. For locals

like me in Shanghai, after daily expenses there is little left. If you have a family and rely on this single income, the pressure is heavy. For non-locals, with rent or a mortgage, the pressure is even greater.” (Teacher 8)

4.1.3. Belongingness identification

Belongingness identification refers to the psychological perception formed in interpersonal interaction and affective exchange. For teachers in private higher education, belongingness identification arises partly from the institution-level experiences and partly from colleagues. The institution-related aspect includes three items (Q5, Q6, Q7). The colleague-related aspect includes three items (Q8, Q9, Q10). The scores are shown in Table 8.

Table 8. Descriptive Statistics for Items of Belongingness Identification (N = 268)

Item	Mean	Standard deviation
Q5	3.68	0.975
Q6	3.73	1.004
Q7	3.82	1.000
Q8	3.81	1.043
Q9	4.29	0.759
Q10	3.93	0.941

As shown in Table 8, the three items under the colleague-related aspect all have mean scores above 3.80, indicating a relatively high level of identification. Q9 has the highest mean at 4.29, which exceeds the fourth level on the five-point Likert scale and is clearly higher than the other items. This suggests that a strong sense of belongingness identification mainly comes from good collegial relations. As one teacher noted:

“We are not just colleagues; we chat, and sometimes go out together. I think our relationships are pretty good.” (Teacher 9)

The mean score of Q10 is the second highest at 3.93, which indicates that teachers not only get along well but also find like-minded partners for collaboration based on interests or development goals. This supports stronger identification and benefits both individual and group development. As one teacher observed:

“There is competition among young teachers, but there is more cooperation. We encourage one another to apply for projects together. Senior teachers also care about young teachers’ growth, offering help to first-time project members.” (Teacher 3)

Within this dimension, Q8 has the lowest mean, indicating that relationships with leaders are not as close as relationships among peers and that leaders need to show more care and support. As one teacher put it:

“Leaders should think more from teachers’ perspective, whether about professional planning and development or about compensation and welfare benefits. They should think more for us, rather than considering things from a profit-oriented angle. It can be disheartening.” (Teacher 5)

For the institution-related aspect, all three means are above 3.60, which indicates an upper-middle level of identification. Q7 has the highest mean at 3.82, suggesting general satisfaction with the overall environment. As some teachers emphasized:

“Our working environment is quite good and humane. In private colleges, if implementation is too rigid without considering teachers’ feelings, many will leave. Because the environment is comfortable, and there are not many additional demands, teachers just want to do their work well.” (Teacher 1)

“The cultural and learning atmosphere is good among both students and teachers. As young teachers, we have a strong desire to develop, and the environment naturally motivates us. My inertia is worn down and my drive is stimulated, so I maintain an upward state in both work and study.” (Teacher 3)

The means of Q5 and Q6 are relatively lower within this dimension, which indicates that teachers’ willingness to remain in the same school for a long time is not very strong. As one teacher commented:

“I heard that half of the faculty in a certain college left. How can the college keep running? If teachers feel uncomfortable at work, face heavy pressure, and receive poor compensation, many will leave if they have better opportunities.” (Teacher 7)

4.1.4. Success Identification

Success identification refers to the psychological perception formed as teachers develop and improve themselves with support from the institution. For teachers in private higher education, it is mainly influenced by institution resource support and personal development. The resource-related aspect includes Q11, Q12, and Q13. The personal-development aspect includes Q14, Q15, and Q16. The scores are shown in Table 9.

Table 9. Descriptive Statistics for Items of Success Identification (N = 268)

Item	Mean	Standard deviation
Q11	3.61	1.073
Q12	3.38	1.103
Q13	3.38	1.041
Q14	3.96	0.858
Q15	3.84	0.907
Q16	3.79	0.925

As shown in Table 9, the highest mean among the three resource-related items is 3.61, which is lower than the lowest mean among the three personal-development items (3.79). This suggests that teachers generally acknowledge that the institution facilitates personal development, but limited resources constrain development to some extent and weaken success identification. Q11 has a mean of 3.61, indicating an upper-general level. It shows that the institution provides some training opportunities, though issues remain with content and delivery. As one teacher noted:

“The institution offers quite a few training opportunities, especially when we first join, but the quality is often not ideal. The better programs usually have very few places and tend to go to middle managers or to those with longer tenure, so junior teachers have limited access.” (Teacher 2)

Q12 and Q13 share the same mean of 3.38, which is relatively low. This indicates shortages in electronic and library resources and in collaboration with external professional bodies. Examples shared by teachers include:

“Our library holdings are limited, and electronic databases are not as rich. We still do not subscribe to CNKI (a Chinese academic literature database) due to cost, which creates problems for literature retrieval in research and teaching.” (Teacher 3)

“Cooperation with enterprises is insufficient. If strengthened, it would greatly help both our discipline and students’ development.” (Teacher 8)

Within the personal-development aspect, Q14 has the highest mean at 3.96, indicating considerable alignment between teachers’ and the school’s development goals. As one teacher remarked:

“Our program is new and challenging, but the school has provided strong support, from funding to project applications, and that has helped us grow. I am very grateful for the school’s attention to our development.” (Teacher 3)

The means of Q15 and Q16 are around 3.80, showing that teachers recognize the value of their work for applying skills and for personal growth, while also facing obstacles:

“Private higher education provides a relatively free platform. For practice-based creative work, the school supports us with venues, equipment, studios, and personnel, and there is flexibility in what we create.” (Teacher 9)

“Young teachers often take on administrative tasks. Teaching already brings heavy pressure, and additional administrative duties increase the burden and hinder development.” (Teacher 2)

4.2. Differences in Organizational Identification

4.2.1. Differences by Gender

Using gender as the grouping variable, organizational identification and its three dimensions as the test variables, independent-samples t tests were conducted. The results are shown in Table 10.

Table 10. Differences in Organizational Identification by Gender (N = 268)

	Gender	Mean	SD	t	P	Cohen’s d	95% CI
Organizational identification (total)	Male	3.546	0.749	0.311	0.756	0.048	[-0.194, 0.265]
	Female	3.510	0.739				
Existence identification	Male	2.813	1.020	0.452	0.651	0.070	[-0.243, 0.375]
	Female	2.747	0.925				
Belongingness identification	Male	3.869	0.820	-0.097	0.923	0.015	[-0.262, 0.238]
	Female	3.880	0.782				
Success identification	Male	3.711	0.804	0.513	0.608	0.079	[-0.184, 0.309]
	Female	3.649	0.787				

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

No significant differences were found between male and female teachers on the total score of organizational identification or on any of the three dimensions. This suggests that male and female

teachers in private higher education exhibit similar levels of organizational identification. The result is consistent with findings reported by Zhou (2018) on university teachers’ organizational identification.

4.2.2. Differences by Age

Using age as the grouping variable, one-way ANOVA was conducted on the total score of organizational identification and its three dimensions. The results are shown in Table 11.

Table 11. Differences in Organizational Identification by Age (N = 268)

	Age	Mean	SD	95% CI	F	p	η^2
Organizational identification (total)	30 and below	3.516	0.692	[3.376, 3.656]	2.407	0.068	0.027
	31—40	3.515	0.722	[3.386, 3.644]			
	41—50	3.384	0.830	[3.119, 3.649]			
	51and above	4.081	0.871	[3.449, 4.713]			
Existence identification	30 and below	2.849	0.905	[2.665, 3.033]	2.707	0.046*	0.030
	31—40	2.674	0.910	[2.511, 2.837]			
	41—50	2.631	1.000	[2.312, 2.950]			
	51and above	3.450	1.212	[2.570, 4.330]			
Belongingness identification	30 and below	3.873	0.766	[3.718, 4.028]	1.894	0.131	0.021
	31—40	3.908	0.739	[3.776, 4.040]			
	41—50	3.688	0.909	[3.399, 3.977]			
	51and above	4.317	0.954	[3.620, 5.014]			
Success identification	30 and below	3.604	0.730	[3.456, 3.752]	2.321	0.076	0.026
	31—40	3.682	0.801	[3.539, 3.825]			
	41—50	3.583	0.858	[3.310, 3.856]			
	51and above	4.267	0.746	[3.732, 4.802]			

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

As indicated in Table 11, the total score of organizational identification does not differ significantly across age groups. At the dimensional level, only existence identification shows a significant difference at the 0.05 level, although the effect size was small ($\eta^2 = 0.030$). Comparison of means suggests that teachers aged 51 and above report notably higher existence identification than teachers in the other age groups. Post-hoc comparisons using the Games-Howell procedure further indicated that teachers aged 51 and above reported significantly higher existence identification than those aged 31–40 ($p=0.032$) and 41–50 ($p=0.043$). This pattern may stem from older teachers’ longer tenure or senior hires as experts or professors, which often come with greater job security and better pay. For the other age groups, the mean scores of existence identification are all below 3.00, indicating a level lower than general agreement. This pattern may reflect the absence of establishment status for most teachers in private higher education and comparatively lower pay and benefits, which in turn weakens existence identification.

4.2.3. Differences by Educational Level

Using educational level as the grouping variable, one-way ANOVA was conducted on the total score of organizational identification and its three dimensions. The results are shown in Table 12.

Table 12. Differences in Organizational Identification by Educational Level (N = 268)

	Educational level	Mean	SD	95% CI	F	p	η^2
Organizational identification (total)	Bachelor and below	3.963	0.647	[3.748, 4.178]	9.405	0.000**	0.066
	Master	3.411	0.735	[3.305, 3.517]			
	Doctor	3.591	0.697	[3.380, 3.802]			
	Bachelor and below	3.358	0.906	[3.057, 3.659]			

Existence identification	Master	2.630	0.934	[2.495, 2.765]			
	Doctor	2.807	0.823	[2.557, 3.057]			
Belongingness identification	Bachelor and below	4.248	0.693	[4.018, 4.478]	6.220	0.002**	0.045
	Master	3.779	0.790	[3.665, 3.893]			
	Doctor	3.989	0.759	[3.759, 4.219]			
Success identification	Bachelor and below	4.081	0.749	[3.833, 4.329]	7.036	0.001**	0.050
	Master	3.565	0.768	[3.454, 3.676]			
	Doctor	3.716	0.807	[3.471, 3.961]			

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

As indicated in Table 12, the total score and all three dimensions differ significantly across degree groups at the 0.01 level, with small to medium effect sizes ($\eta^2 = 0.045-0.070$). Post-hoc comparisons further indicated that teachers with a bachelor’s degree or below scored significantly higher than those with a master’s degree on the total score and all three dimensions (all $p < 0.01$). Significant differences were also observed between teachers with a bachelor’s degree or below and those with a doctoral degree for the total score ($p = 0.033$) and existence identification ($p = 0.006$), while no significant differences were found for the other dimensions.

Mean comparisons also show consistently higher scores among teachers with a bachelor’s degree or below. One plausible explanation is that, as higher education has expanded in China and the supply of master’s and doctoral graduates has increased, private higher education have raised hiring requirements. For teachers with only a bachelor’s degree or below, obtaining a college position may already meet expectations, so their demands on the institution are lower and identification is correspondingly higher. Although no statistically significant differences were observed between teachers with doctoral and master’s degrees, mean scores were slightly higher among doctorates across the total and all dimensions. This pattern may reflect the relatively scarce supply of doctoral holders in private higher education (16.4% in this study) and the more favorable employment conditions often offered to attract them.

4.2.4. Differences by Academic Title

Using academic title as the grouping variable, one-way ANOVA was conducted on the organizational identification total score and its three dimensions. The results are shown in Table 13.

Table 13. Differences in Organizational Identification by Academic Title (N = 268)

	Academic title	Mean	SD	95% CI	F	p	η^2
Organizational identification (total)	Assistant and below	3.595	0.679	[3.466, 3.724]	3.753	0.011*	0.041
	Lecturer	3.387	0.724	[3.254, 3.520]			
	Associate Professor	3.607	0.872	[3.333, 3.881]			
	Professor	4.521	0.036	[4.428, 4.614]			
Existence identification	Assistant and below	2.917	0.909	[2.744, 3.090]	4.290	0.006**	0.046
	Lecturer	2.580	0.863	[2.421, 2.739]			
	Associate Professor	2.762	1.140	[2.403, 3.121]			
	Professor	4.000	0.250	[3.472, 4.528]			
Belongingness identification	Assistant and below	3.929	0.759	[3.785, 4.073]	2.607	0.052	0.029
	Lecturer	3.778	0.781	[3.634, 3.920]			
	Associate Professor	3.955	0.853	[3.687, 4.223]			
	Professor	4.889	0.192	[4.472, 5.306]			
Success identification	Assistant and below	3.713	0.721	[3.576, 3.850]	2.904	0.035*	0.032
	Lecturer	3.534	0.792	[3.389, 3.679]			
	Associate Professor	3.821	0.910	[3.535, 4.107]			
	Professor	4.500	0.167	[4.072, 4.928]			

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

As indicated in Table 13, except for belongingness identification, the organizational identification total score and the other two dimensions show significant differences across academic titles. However, the effect sizes ($\eta^2 = 0.029-0.046$) suggest that the observed differences are statistically small. Post-hoc comparisons indicated that professors reported significantly higher organizational identification than the other academic title groups on the total score and existence identification (all $p < 0.05$). Mean comparisons further show that professors report the strongest organizational identification, with mean scores above 4.00, indicating a high level of identification. By contrast, teachers with the lecturer title generally report the lowest means on the organizational identification total and all dimensions. A significant difference for success identification was also observed only between professors and lecturers ($p = 0.020$). This likely reflects that lecturers tend to be at a relatively lower level in terms of salary and perceived recognition, and face greater difficulty in promotion, which may depress their organizational identification at this stage. This pattern is consistent with career-stage perspectives, which suggest that early-career teachers often face greater uncertainty and weaker organizational attachment (Bennett et al., 2018).

4.2.5. Differences by Full-Time Status

Using full-time status as the grouping variable, independent-samples t tests were conducted on the organizational identification total score and its three dimensions. The results are reported in Table 14.

Table 14. Differences in Organizational Identification by Full-time Status (N = 268)

	Full-time status	Mean	SD	95% CI	t	p	Cohen's d
Organizational identification (total)	Yes	3.511	0.747	[3.415, 3.607]	-0.321	0.748	0.059
	No	3.555	0.696	[3.314, 3.796]			
Existence identification	Yes	2.740	0.957	[2.617, 2.863]	-0.862	0.389	0.158
	No	2.890	0.840	[2.599, 3.181]			
Belongingness identification	Yes	3.881	0.786	[3.780, 3.982]	0.160	0.873	0.029
	No	3.858	0.815	[3.576, 4.140]			
Success identification	Yes	3.656	0.790	[3.555, 3.757]	0.276	0.782	0.051
	No	3.696	0.793	[3.422, 3.970]			

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

As shown in Table 14, no significant differences were found on the total score or on any dimension, indicating that full-time and part-time teachers in private higher education exhibit similar levels of organizational identification.

4.2.6. Differences by Administrative Duty

Using whether a teacher holds an administrative duty as the grouping variable, independent-samples t tests were performed on the total score of organizational identification and its three dimensions. The results are shown in Table 15.

Table 15. Differences in Organizational Identification by Administrative Duty (N = 268)

	Administrative duty	Mean	SD	95% CI	t	p	Cohen's d
Organizational identification (total)	Yes	3.550	0.661	[3.428, 3.672]	0.649	0.517	0.078
	No	3.492	0.795	[3.365, 3.619]			
Existence identification	Yes	2.744	0.895	[2.578, 2.908]	-0.238	0.812	0.029
	No	2.771	0.980	[2.615, 2.927]			
Belongingness identification	Yes	3.933	0.703	[3.804, 4.062]	1.021	0.308	0.123
	No	3.837	0.846	[3.702, 3.972]			

Success identification	Yes	3.704	0.736	[3.568, 3.840]	0.791	0.430	0.096
	No	3.629	0.828	[3.497, 3.761]			

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

As shown in Table 15, no significant differences emerged for the total score or for any dimension. Holding an administrative duty does not appear to have a significant effect on organizational identification among teachers in private higher education.

4.2.7. Differences by Establishment Status

Using establishment status as the grouping variable, independent-samples t tests were conducted on the total score of organizational identification and its three dimensions. The results are shown in Table 16.

Table 16. Differences in Organizational Identification by Establishment Status (N = 268)

	Establishment status	Mean	SD	95% CI	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Organizational identification (total)	Yes	3.807	0.776	[3.472, 4.142]	1.978	0.049*	0.431
	No	3.490	0.732	[3.398, 3.582]			
Existence identification	Yes	2.990	1.029	[2.546, 3.432]	1.224	0.222	0.267
	No	2.738	0.934	[2.621, 2.855]			
Belongingness identification	Yes	4.152	0.767	[3.819, 4.485]	1.752	0.081	0.382
	No	3.852	0.786	[3.753, 3.951]			
Success identification	Yes	4.007	0.837	[3.650, 4.364]	2.217	0.027*	0.483
	No	3.629	0.778	[3.531, 3.727]			

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

As shown in Table 16, the total score of organizational identification and success identification differ significantly at the 0.05 level ($d = 0.431$ and 0.483), with teachers having establishment scoring higher than those without. Although existence identification and belongingness identification do not reach statistical significance, the means are also higher for the establishment group, suggesting generally stronger organizational identification.

4.2.8. Multiple Comparisons Correction

Given the relatively large number of group difference tests conducted in this study, a multiple comparisons correction was applied to control the risk of increased Type I errors. Specifically, the Benjamini–Hochberg false discovery rate (FDR) procedure with a false discovery rate of 0.05 was used in all statistical tests. This approach can control false positives while maintaining statistical power in studies involving multiple comparisons.

Table 17. Summary of Results Before and After Benjamini-Hochberg FDR Correction

Variable	Dimension	Uncorrected <i>p</i>	FDR-adjusted <i>p</i>	Significant after FDR	Final Classification
Education level	Overall identification	0.000	0.001	Yes	Significant
Education level	Existence identification	0.000	0.001	Yes	Significant
Education level	Belongingness identification	0.002	0.014	Yes	Significant
Education level	Success identification	0.001	0.009	Yes	Significant
Academic title	Existence identification	0.006	0.033	Yes	Significant
Academic title	Overall identification	0.011	0.051	No	Exploratory trend
Academic title	Success identification	0.035	0.122	No	Exploratory trend
Establishment status	Overall identification	0.049	0.132	No	Exploratory trend

Establishment status	Success identification	0.027	0.108	No	Exploratory trend
Age	Existence identification	0.046	0.132	No	Exploratory trend

Note: The false discovery rate was set at 0.05. Only tests that were originally significant or marginally significant are presented. All other tests were non-significant before and after correction.

The results of the FDR adjustment are presented in Table 17. After correction, the differences associated with educational level remained statistically significant for the total organizational identification score and all three dimensions. In contrast, only the difference in existence identification across academic titles remained significant, whereas the differences in total and success identification by academic title were no longer statistically significant. In addition, the initially significant differences related to establishment status and age did not remain significant after the FDR adjustment and are therefore treated as exploratory trends rather than confirmed group differences. These findings should be interpreted with caution in practice, as they may reflect unstable patterns that require further verification in studies with larger samples.

5. Discussion

5.1 Discussion of the Findings

The results of this study offer a nuanced conceptual understanding of organizational identification among teachers in private higher education. Overall, the survey indicates that teachers in private higher education exhibit only moderate organizational identification. This level appears lower than those reported in some recent studies of teachers’ organizational identification in higher education settings (Cui & Suntrayuth, 2023; Khanal & Arora, 2024), suggesting that institutional conditions in private higher education may pose additional challenges for sustaining strong identification. Across dimensions, the levels are unbalanced. The mean level of existence identification is too low, which is the principal reason for the overall level being modest. Although the indicators of belonging and success are relatively high, both scores are below 4.00, indicating that the identification in these two dimensions is not particularly strong. These findings not only indicate that the teachers of private higher education lack a sufficient sense of organizational identification, but also reveal numerous practical difficulties existing in the school’s organizational management.

Early organizational identification research usually focuses on psychological belonging or value alignment (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Christopher & Divya, 2024). However, in the special context of private higher education, this study found that existence identification is not only the foundation of the identification structure but also a key condition shaping the overall sense of identification. Teachers are usually dissatisfied with salary and welfare benefits and attach considerable importance to establishment status, which they view as bringing better benefits and job stability. Although the signing of labor contracts partially compensates for the pursuit of stability, other deficiencies still require sufficient attention from school administrators. Especially when teachers encounter obstacles in their pursuit of career achievements, they will exhibit extreme sensitivity to their survival needs. This phenomenon is consistent with the frustration–regression mechanism of the ERG theory, suggesting that when achievement needs are frustrated, teachers may shift their attention toward survival and belonging concerns. (Alderfer, 1972). This means that organizational identification is not a static psychological state of teachers, but rather a dynamic process of constant negotiation between survival guarantees and self-actualization.

Although the existence identification was at a low point, belongingness identification received the highest score. This coexistence of high belongingness identification and low existence identification reveals a unique emotional compensation mechanism within private higher education. A similar pattern has been observed among university teachers, where strong collegial support helps maintain organizational identification even when material rewards and job stability are limited (Chen et al., 2025).

In this study, belongingness identification appears to be closely associated with positive collegial relationships. Teachers get along well and can find like-minded partners for collaboration based on interests or development goals. When institutional support is insufficient, teachers tend to seek informal support within small groups. However, leaders' care and support for teachers are perceived as insufficient. This localized form of identification may help maintain organizational functioning, but if this horizontal colleague identification fails to transform into vertical organizational trust, it is unlikely to develop into a stronger, institution-wide identification. This explains another finding of this study: while teachers are generally satisfied with the overall institutional environment, their willingness to remain at the same institution for a long time is not strong. The persistence of this phenomenon over time may easily lead to the formation of subgroup cultures, thereby weakening the organizational cohesion and long-term collective commitment (Rovetta et al., 2025).

For success identification, the results show that although the mean value is higher than that of existence identification, it still does not reach the level of strong identification. This indicates a form of vision mismatch between the teachers' professional growth and institutions' goals. While teachers believe that their institutions provide some training opportunities, problems exist in the content and delivery of these programs. Shortages are also reported in library and electronic resources and in collaboration with external professional organizations. Although teachers tend to agree with the institutional development goals and with the value of their work, the exercise and development of personal capabilities are still constrained in several ways. This lack of professional satisfaction may hinder teachers' long-term commitment and reduce institutions' ability to retain staff with academic ambitions (Wu, 2024). From this perspective, success identification should not be reduced to a matter of short-term performance incentives, but rather understood as a form of value-based alignment between institutional leadership and teachers.

In addition to the imbalance across identification dimensions, the observed differences among teacher groups may reflect the uneven distribution of institutional resources within private higher education. According to the difference analyses, no significant differences appear by gender, full-time status, or administrative duty. Teachers aged 51 and above tended to report higher existence identification than other age groups. Teachers with a bachelor's degree or below score significantly higher than those with a master's degree on organizational identification and its dimensions, while teachers with a doctoral degree generally report slightly higher scores than those with a master's degree. Teachers with the professor title show stronger existence identification than other teachers and tend to report higher scores on the other dimensions, while those with the lecturer title report the lowest mean scores on the total and across dimensions. Teachers with establishment status tended to report higher success identification than those without, and they also showed relatively higher scores on existence and success identification overall.

These patterns suggest that uniform management approaches may be insufficient. Instead, institutional leaders should consider differentiated strategies that address the distinct needs and identification profiles of diverse teacher groups. It should also be noted that several statistically significant differences in this study were associated with relatively small effect sizes ($\eta^2 < 0.05$), indicating that the magnitude of these differences was limited. In this sense, institutional responses may be better directed toward targeted support measures rather than broad structural adjustments.

In conclusion, institutional leaders should recognize that the generally moderate level of teachers' organizational identification is a signal of long-term strategic risk for the school. The differentiation of teachers' organizational identification can serve as a starting point for targeted governance intervention measures. Enhancing overall identification should not rely on symbolic appeals, but should be regarded as a systematic governance process that aligns institutional structures, leadership practices, and teachers' professional trajectories.

5.2. Implications

Based on the above findings, this study proposes the following governance and leadership implications to enhance teachers' organizational identification in private higher education institutions.

5.2.1. Implementing Coordinated Strategies to Enhance Existence Identification

From a strategic management perspective, institutional leaders must prioritize the stabilization of the teachers' existence needs as a prerequisite for long-term governance (Zhan et al., 2023; Xu & Pang, 2024). Although it is difficult in the short term to raise salaries in private colleges and universities to an ideal level and establishment status is hard to resolve, leadership can still improve existence identification through refined administrative mechanisms.

First, optimize performance leadership and appraisal systems. To effectively motivate teachers' work and development, leadership should build more rational and systematic performance appraisal systems that truly guide and incentivize. When teachers' work is reasonably quantified and appropriately rewarded, income will naturally increase and motivation for work and development will be strengthened. Performance indicators for teaching, research, and social service should be refined, tailored to the characteristics of faculties and even specific programs, and avoid one-size-fits-all arrangements. If administrative duties cannot be avoided in the short run, performance rewards for teachers who shoulder such duties should be increased to prevent dissatisfaction caused by mismatched effort and return. In addition, young teachers deserve greater recognition and support. Although their salaries and hourly wages are often relatively low, they usually demonstrate strong initiative and ambition. Educational leaders should take these development characteristics into account. For instance, this goal can be achieved by increasing the research rewards for early career personnel. For senior teachers, a performance-based reward system can motivate them to play exemplary roles and make contributions in teaching, research, and social services. This not only increases their income but also enhances the overall quality of the faculty. In short, leaders should promptly improve the evaluation system and ensure that the rewards are commensurate with the efforts through effective institutional incentives.

Secondly, strengthening welfare management serves as a key means for stability. In the Chinese public sector, establishment status implies higher welfare benefits and greater stability. Therefore, leaders in the private sector should regard welfare benefits as a strategic tool to enhance their existence identification. The leadership should attach importance to holiday benefits, and more importantly, increase the contribution ratio to social insurance and housing provident funds, which are key components of employment benefits in the Chinese institutional context. Among them, the contribution ratio of housing provident fund is particularly worthy of attention, as it not only reflects the level of benefits but also directly affects housing pressure, thereby influencing teachers' perception of job stability. If stability linked to establishment status cannot be provided, the leadership should focus on addressing the housing issue. Increasing the contribution rate of housing provident funds or providing housing subsidies can effectively retain talents and ensure the healthy development of the teachers. For young teachers with accommodation needs, reasonable-priced and well-equipped on-campus housing or subsidized housing should be provided.

5.2.2. Building A Supportive Climate for Belongingness Identification

Educational leaders should act as the builders of the institutional culture, creating a positive organizational atmosphere as the foundation for belongingness. A strong sense of belonging can enable teachers to collaborate with each other and make progress together, which is a key competitive advantage in the management of private higher education. This is both the appeal of private higher education institutions and an aspect that can be effectively improved. To create such an atmosphere, the joint efforts of teachers and leaders are required.

First, it is necessary to lead the establishment of a harmonious and mutually supportive working environment. Despite numerous institutional flaws, many teachers can still find solace in the supportive and mutually helping relationships among their colleagues. Therefore, the leadership should cultivate a unique organizational culture, strengthen it as an advantage, attract loyal and cooperative teachers to join this team, and create a relaxed, harmonious and beneficial atmosphere through interaction, thereby stimulating the collective development momentum (Plaku et al., 2025). On one hand, institutions can regularly organize cultural and recreational activities and competitions to relieve work pressure and enhance teamwork spirit. On the other hand, the leadership should improve the office environment and add leisure facilities, so that teachers can maintain a good mental state and have convenient communication spaces. Cooperation should be encouraged, and senior teachers should play a guiding role in instructing new teachers, thereby inheriting the mutual assistance norms and forming a good faculty culture.

Second, build mutual trust between leaders and teachers. Leaders should extend more humanistic care so that teachers feel the warmth of the community, cultivate a sense of ownership, and become more willing to contribute while also finding satisfaction in the process. Care should not be limited to the work matters. Difficulties in life and family also require attention and timely assistance. Management should be flexible and people-oriented. It should respect the opinions of teachers, so that administrative work can serve teaching, research and social services, rather than being restricted or burdened merely for convenience. Fairness is important in aspects such as task allocation, promotion of positions, and distribution of training opportunities. The relevant processes should be objective, fair and transparent, and free from any favoritism. The institution should also establish an effective communication platform, such as holding regular reception days attended by senior leaders and teacher representatives, so that teachers can express their ideas, reduce communication barriers, and create a harmonious and equal atmosphere. Leaders should treat teachers of different titles and educational levels equally and with respect. Master's-degree holders and lecturers remain a backbone of institutional development; overemphasizing doctorates and professors while neglecting others can generate perceived inequity. Only when mutual trust is established can teachers fully integrate into the institutional community, cooperate effectively with leadership, and even participate in governance.

5.2.3. Expanding Resources to Boost Success Identification

Private colleges and universities are platforms for teachers' professional development. Institutional leadership should provide all available internal and external resources and opportunities for learning and collaboration. When teachers perceive strong institutional support for professional growth, success identification strengthens and developmental motivation increases.

First, align institutional resources with teachers' professional needs. Leadership should improve training quality by shifting from a quantity-driven to a quality-oriented developmental approach. Given the nature of academic work, professional development spans the entire career. With rapid knowledge renewal and social change, faculty must learn in a timely manner and participate in training. Since needs differ by discipline and career stage, training should reflect actual needs to encourage genuine participation. If leaders pursue training quotas while neglecting outcomes, resources will be wasted. Flexible training options should be provided so that teachers can choose programs according to their work schedules and needs. At the same time, infrastructure leadership must address hardware and e-resource constraints that hinder teachers' development. Teaching, research, and service equipment should be updated and supplemented in a timely manner to avoid hardware bottlenecks. With improved facilities, collaboration with external organizations and enterprises will also be strengthened. By facilitating access to needed e-resources, exemplified by national academic databases such as the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) in China or equivalent scholarly resources in other systems, can help ease difficulties in literature retrieval.

Second, implement autonomous management and reasonable workload distribution. Highly educated staff tend to value autonomy, and whether this need is met affects the application of their abilities (Yang, 2013). Teachers in private higher education also hope to enjoy job autonomy comparable to that in public universities, so they can choose to prioritize teaching, research, or social service. Leaders should therefore adopt flexible and trust-based management and make teachers' work and development more convenient. For example, where appropriate, the fixed on-duty system can be adjusted so that teachers without classes are not required to remain in the office. To genuinely secure discretionary time, workloads should be lightened and responsibilities clearly defined. Many interviewees reported heavy teaching loads in private colleges and universities, often combined with administrative tasks, which consume excessive time and energy. To genuinely secure discretionary time for professional growth, leadership must actively recruit to expand the faculty, distribute teaching tasks reasonably, and define responsibilities clearly to avoid assigning unnecessary administrative duties that consume excessive energy.

In conclusion, the strategies proposed in this study constitute a governance oriented framework for private higher education in China. Aspects such as welfare enhancement through housing provident funds and specific performance systems are closely tied to Chinese policy and institutional structures. The broader ideas, such as fostering a supportive organizational climate, building leader-teacher trust, and aligning resources with professional development needs, may provide useful reference points for enhancing teachers' organizational identification among private higher education institutions in other countries. However, any transfer of these recommendations requires careful local adaptation. Differences in national policies, labor markets, funding mechanisms, and cultural expectations mean that direct application without contextual adjustment may limit effectiveness.

6. Conclusion

This study examined teachers' organizational identification in Chinese private higher education institutions using a mixed-methods approach grounded in ERG theory and the three-factor model. The quantitative findings described the overall status of teachers' organizational identification and identified differences across teacher groups, reflecting variations associated with institutional conditions. The qualitative findings provided contextual explanations for these patterns and deepened understanding of teachers' experiences within their institutional environment. Together, these findings contribute to a clearer understanding of how existence, belongingness, and success needs shape teachers' identification with their institutions in private higher education. The study also offers practical guidance for institutional leaders by outlining governance strategies to strengthen organizational support, build trust, and promote professional development.

While the study provides meaningful insights into teachers' organizational identification in private higher education, several limitations need to be acknowledged. First, the analysis in this study is mainly descriptive and comparative. Instead of modeling the interactions among multiple factors, the analysis focuses on the general trends and group variations in teachers' organizational identification. Despite being appropriate for the study's exploratory purpose, this study does not allow for the examination of causal relationships among the related factors and organizational identification. Multivariate or structural modeling techniques can be used in future studies to examine the relationships among these variables.

Second, the sampling strategy of this study mainly employs convenience sampling and snowball sampling. While this method helps to reach teachers from private higher education institutions, it also limits the representativeness of the sample. The participants are more likely to come from accessible networks and institutions that are more willing to participate in this research. This may limit the representation of teachers who are less accessible through institutional or professional networks. Future research can address this limitation by adopting a broader sampling framework, thereby enhancing the representativeness of the sample and supporting more reliable inferences.

Third, this study was conducted in Shanghai, one of the most economically developed cities in China. The local labor market is relatively active, and employment opportunities are abundant. Teachers in this context may have different expectations regarding job stability and organizational support. This may partly explain the relatively low level of existence identification observed in this study. The findings may not fully represent private colleges and universities in less affluent regions.

Fourth, another limitation concerns the qualitative component of the study. Although interview data was carefully coded and reviewed, formal inter-rater reliability statistics were not calculated. Future studies may strengthen methodological rigor by involving multiple coders and reporting inter-rater agreement to enhance the transparency and reliability of qualitative analysis.

Finally, this study focuses on China's private higher education institutions, which have distinctive features such as unique governance structures, employment arrangements, and regulatory environments. The private higher education in China therefore represents a specific analytical context, and the findings should be interpreted with caution when generalized to other countries or institutional settings. Comparative studies of different private higher education systems will help clarify which aspects of organizational identification are context-specific and which may be more broadly applicable.

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