Cura Personalis for Custodial Personnel? Examining Marquette University’s Relationship with Its Custodial Staff

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Research Question: How are custodians part of the Marquette community, and how can we assure full membership and dignity to these employees?

Introduction

During my time at Marquette, I have become starkly aware of my privilege as a student at a private university in a city that is plagued by poverty. Living in Milwaukee requires us to interact with those of lesser privilege on a daily basis, and many find this uncomfortable.

Despite our efforts, it is still easy to be detached from the Milwaukee community in general. Understanding that this friction that can occur outside Marquette, I questioned whether we’re overlooking members inside our own campus as well. It seems that blue-collar staff such as custodians sometimes fly under the radar, keeping our campus clean and functioning without much recognition.

Therefore, I wanted to take a closer look at the experience of custodians and their relationship both with the university and with students.

Methods

Research Design

This was a mixed-methods, qualitative project that attempted to incorporate varying perspectives for a holistic view of custodians’ experiences. Methods consisted of existing scholarly literature, interviews, and field observations.

Data Collection

• 7 Interviews
  • 2 administrative staff members involved with custodial employment
  • 1 resident assistant (RA)
  • 4 custodians from across campus
• Field Observations
• Auto-Ethnographic Observations

Findings

• The data I collected was conflicted. Both the administrative staff and custodians seemed to have a positive view of Marquette’s relationship with the employees
  • Both groups generally agreed, though, that the university is understaffed, and that this causes stress to current custodians
  • However, the RA I interviewed told of excessive damage and uncleanness demonstrated by students that suggests a general disregard for custodians
  • They believed relationships between custodians and students are strained
  • Perhaps attitudes of students must be a focus for change
• Interviews with custodians still felt awkward, and may need to be conducted on a deeper level
• Field observations recorded behaviors that promote custodial invisibility

Proposals for Change

• The Residence Hall Association (RHA) should work with custodians to provide opportunities for students to meet the people who clean their building
• Finding the means to hire more custodians would help take strain off the current staff
• Students and faculty should feel comfortable engaging in open communication with any staff on campus

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Abstract

Campus custodians are a vital part of any university that often gets overlooked and underappreciated. Considering Marquette’s emphasis of Jesuit values, it is necessary to examine the relationship between the university and its custodians to ensure that these employees receive equal dignity to any other members of the Marquette community. The custodial experience is explored in this qualitative study through interviews, field notes, and auto-ethnographic observations. It is found that administrative and custodial perceptions are positive, but student and auto-ethnographic perceptions suggest areas in need of improvement.

*Keywords:* campus custodians, janitors, higher education, mentors, custodial invisibility, community, student perceptions
Introduction

Motivations for Research

During my time at Marquette, I have become starkly aware of my status and privilege as a student at a private university in what CBS called the second poorest city in America (“America’s 11 poorest cities”, 2015). There exists a clear, expansive gap between the well-off and those who have barely enough to get by. I have noticed how much discomfort and tension arise when the two different sides of this dichotomy interact. This is exemplified in an encounter I once had, which is sure to happen daily across Marquette’s campus: a man stopped my friends and me to ask for money, and when we didn’t have anything to give him, he got upset.

“Hundreds of thousands of dollars of tuition a year, and you don’t have a few bucks you can give me?” he asked incredulously. He had a point. There is a clear and unfortunate division of wealth between the city and the school. Though I do believe we make an effort at Marquette to “break the Marquette bubble,” it often seems there is a breach between “formal” service and more “informal” involvement with the community. It is true that we have plenty of great programs that allow students to do service and outreach, such as Midnight Run and service learning. These opportunities are coordinated by Marquette staff and connect students to specific service sites.

Yet this formal service does not necessarily make students more comfortable with informal encounters in the community. Even though the Milwaukee Public Library is directly across the street from Straz, for example, I only know a handful of my peers who have set foot in there. It’s a great resource, but something — perhaps the people who often frequent the front steps of the building — deters students from using it. I have heard people refuse to use the bus
system because it’s “dirty,” or because too many “sketchy” people use it. There is still friction when students face unstructured interactions with people such as the man I met. Living in Milwaukee requires us to interact with those of lesser privilege on a daily basis, and many find this awkward. Despite our efforts, it is still easy to be detached from the Milwaukee community in general.

Understanding that this friction that can occur outside of Marquette, I began to question whether we’re overlooking members inside our own campus as well. It seems that custodial, maintenance, and other blue-collar staff sometimes fly under the radar, keeping our campus clean and functioning without much recognition. I feel undertones of that same privilege and discomfort when I am leaving my dorm in the morning, and occasionally have to walk over the floor one of the custodians just washed. As he’s standing right there, I try give some sort of apology and say good morning, but I often feel there is a social barrier preventing me from making more of a connection than that. This is not true for all custodians; there are those who are outgoing and friendly, whose names everyone knows. But others are sometimes uncomfortable making eye contact, or seem to want to stay in the background and out of my way. I don’t know even the most basic information about the custodians in my building, like their names, much less how their days are going or what their stories are. I don’t like this — I interact with my peers, coworkers, and professors naturally. Yet some social protocol separates me from this other class of employees.

As I considered this discomfort and tried to work towards a research question, I attempted to put myself in the place of staff who work behind the scenes. I am sure that, more
often than not, nothing could be more disgusting than having to clean a dorm bathroom or dining hall. I have seen plenty of trash left on floors and tables by students who should know better and pick up after themselves. I’ve seen shoe prints on the walls, and elevators filled with wadded-up scraps of paper as a prank. With so many people living in one place, it can get messy, of course, and accidents happen. But when the person who made the mess is not the person to clean it up, therein lies the harm.

More importantly, however, I wondered about the added indignity of the wide status gap that may exist between staff and students. I know if I were a custodian, it would be easy to feel resentful towards students if I perceived them to be wealthier than me, especially if I were a person of color working at a campus that is over 70% white (marquette.edu, 2015). It is important to note that plenty of students at Marquette are not at all wealthy or white, and that many under-recognized employees are satisfied with their wage and position, but it is the opposing stereotypes of both groups that create an even larger division. There still appears to be tension within cross-racial interactions, especially when there is a perceived power relationship. How can we ease this tension?

In 2015, a student at Georgetown University began a Facebook page to raise money for staff who needed it (“How a handshake”, 2015). This not only proved to be a very useful resource for the staff, but also aided in connecting a community that had divisions between students and employees. Febin Bellamy, the student heading the project, felt that there was a barrier between himself and the janitors at Georgetown; a distinct invisibility existed among custodial staff (“The janitor felt invisible”, 2016). After his Facebook page, Unsung Heroes, began gaining recognition and donations, staff and students at the university reported a greater
awareness and appreciation for each other (2016). Bellamy spoke of how recognizing the needs of the whole community supports the Jesuit practice of service. If Marquette, too, takes pride in its service and status as a Jesuit institution, it is crucial that we extend those ideals to all the branches of our community.

When I began reviewing the literature for this project, I found that there was a dearth of research related to custodians in general, but especially custodians who work in an educational setting. The literature that does exist oftentimes focuses only on corporate settings. There is an umbrella category of blue-collar work, which includes custodial/janitorial staff but does not focus on them exclusively. However, these studies and the handful of studies that related directly to my research question built a firm foundation about the experience of custodians. Previous findings were not surprising; custodians are a class of employees that is less privileged when it comes to job security, satisfaction, and flexibility (Cowan & Bochantin, 2011). Magolda and Delman (2016) similarly found that blue-collar campus workers are often regarded with suspicion and judgment, and that delinquent students are sometimes even required to do custodial work as a punishment.

In light of my own experiences and the experiences of students and custodians at other universities, I decided I needed to gain a better understanding of Marquette’s relationship with its own custodial faculty. Many of the school’s behind-the-scenes staff are native to Milwaukee. Others’ backgrounds are unknown and underappreciated. What does the university pay these employees — what benefits are they offered, and are they satisfied with their work? Specifically, how can we make a better effort to include them in our community? Through a qualitative analysis of observations and interviews, I wanted to gain a greater understanding of all these
facets and figure out how connections could be improved. It was found that while the administration has positive views of the university’s relationship with custodians, responsibility may fall on students to engage with these employees and integrate them further into the Marquette community.

Methods

This was a mixed-methods, qualitative project in which I did my best to include a variety of data sources. Along with my review of scholarly literature, these included field observations, auto-ethnographic observations, and interviews with students and faculty of Marquette. In this way, I attempted to gain a broad perspective of the custodian experience at this university.

Observations and Field Notes

Aside from reviewing scholarly articles, the first portion of my self-directed research consisted of roughly three hours of field observations, recorded around various areas of campus. This was partially modeled after Levitin (1964) and Reed’s (2016) methods. I initially tried to choose an area where I had seen custodians working before, and set aside time to remain in that spot and observe. However, I soon realized that this would not yield many results; without knowing custodians’ work schedules, the chances that I would be in the right place at the right time to observe them cleaning were small. When they did show up, they often worked very quickly before moving to a different area. In short, it was difficult to predict when and where I could observe a custodian in action.

Therefore, I decided to shift my plan and take field observations sporadically, whenever I encountered a custodian throughout my day. Though this did not necessarily give me the best
and most comprehensive view of a custodian’s experience, I was fortunately able to see a wide range of times and work spaces.

In addition to the data I collected while observing custodians, I also recorded my own auto-ethnographic observations. As a student and researcher who was somewhat in a position of power during my interactions, I believed it was important to take note of how I personally felt — whether I considered the interviews to have gone smoothly, whether I perceived them to be comfortable or uncomfortable, and so forth.

Interviews

The bulk of my research, however, was made up of seven interviews, similar to the methods of Magolda and Delman (2016). These interviews included three general groups: two administrative faculty members who are involved with custodial employment, one student resident assistant (RA), and four custodians. The interviews with the administrative faculty and RA were routine, but the custodial interviews again gave me difficulty. At first, I attempted to gain contact information for several custodians from the administrative staff I spoke with, so I could email them myself and avoid pressure that might come from their employers.

However, it was sometimes hard to coordinate with the administrators, and I learned that most custodians do not use email. This made the situation especially tricky as I wanted the custodians to feel comfortable and know that their participation was completely voluntary. As it began to be late in the semester, I resorted to approaching custodians around campus, explaining the project, and asking if they would be willing to talk about their experience. I felt that it was imperative to get their side of the story, because I did not want to make assumptions about their experience without representing their perspective in this project. I often walked with the
custodians as they worked, trying to be as unobtrusive as possible. Pseudonyms have been assigned to protect the identities of participants.

**Coding**

In order to quantify types of responses I received in some way, I developed a coding system for the data I collected from interviews. I focused primarily on perceptions that were expressed. This can be seen in Figure 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding Key</th>
<th>Corresponding Color</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions about custodians’ experience</td>
<td>Blue</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceptions about own relationship with custodians</td>
<td>Green</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions about students’ relationships with custodians</td>
<td>Red</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perception of custodial satisfaction</td>
<td>Yellow</td>
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*Figure 1: Qualitative coding for interviews*

**Findings and Discussion**

The mixed-methods data I collected had some conflicting components. I would like to first present each perspective of the different groups before examining them as a whole. I begin by concentrating on the general administrative perspective that is held by representatives of the
university, then narrow my focus to that of custodians and students. I end with my own auto-ethnographic observations and field notes before evaluating all perspectives holistically.

Administrative Perspectives

Starting with the broader scope of the university’s perspectives, based on my interviews with administrative faculty who are involved in custodial employment and represent Marquette, it was evident that the university perceives a positive relationship between custodians and itself. I first met with Sarah to talk about the corporate side of custodial work — how the hiring process is run, what benefits are offered to employees, and so forth. These benefits include health, dental, vision, and retirement — of which employees pay 5%, and Marquette pays 8%. Sarah was able to highlight some good opportunities that are available to custodians:

We do offer what we call Grow classes, and Grow at Marquette can be any type of training opportunities. So there’s a lot of IT-type classes that are offered to employees; it might be Microsoft word, or including your abilities on Excel, or learning more about Snapchat . . . The Faber Center offers lots of opportunities for employees to either go on a silent retreat, or . . . have book readings . . . I want to say one of the biggest things we’re going to develop is helping managers be managers here at Marquette and interviewing skills — that’s just something people get really skittish about, and it doesn’t always come very natural to help develop people. (2017)

Based upon our interview, it appears that there are many opportunities for employees to develop both their leadership skills and education. The HR department recently hired a Director of Organization Development to work with staff. They also have the option to take tours of
campus, audit classes, and receive tuition remission if they or their family members enroll. Sarah seemed to perceive a high level of job satisfaction for custodians, and spoke passionately of her own observations:

But they are very — they are so committed to the work, and they love it here, and are so full of pride. We’ve had custodians retire from their jobs, and have come back a month later, saying, “I missed it so much, I just want to come back” . . .

It’s like oh, but you were going to retire! And they’re like, “This is where I want to be. This is home.” (2017)

This is a very positive statement, but it reflects what I heard several times in both my interviews with administrative faculty and with custodians. It seems the general feeling is that without the students, custodians and other faculty members would not be here. Might this type of thinking that exalts students lead custodians to overlook less-than-ideal work conditions to avoid seeming ungrateful?

However, this connection to the students highlights the importance of Reed’s (2015) work that emphasizes custodians’ potential to be mentors. Speaking as an alum, Sarah attested to the impact that custodial staff had on her as an undergraduate, and how this can extend to any student:

Their role is so important here; I remember my custodians when I was a student, and their smile makes a huge difference. You could be coming back from a stressful test, and just having someone say, “Hey, how are you?” And they — they’re impactful, and I want to make sure they know that. Every chance I get I share that with them. (2017)
Evidently, Sarah understands the importance of discussion with and recognition of the custodial staff. However, it is important to ensure that the rest of the Marquette community is equally involved, and that students themselves are able to share their appreciation with custodians sooner rather than later.

My interview with Tom, another member of the administration who is involved with custodian employment, yielded similar sentiments. On the degree to which Marquette welcomes custodians into its community, he too was satisfied:

I think that Marquette makes an effort to make ALL employees feel welcome. Many of the departments invite and involve the custodians from their buildings in parties and functions that take place. People take the time to get to know their custodian on a personal level. I often get asked about how one of my team members is feeling or recovering from an injury. There are very few complaints about disrespect towards custodians, but it does occur at times. (email correspondence, 2017)

Tom is apparently one of the faculty members who tries to make custodians feel included in the community and appreciated. He attested that he himself will take tools in hand and help out when the workload becomes excessive. This was a statement that was reflected in both this interview and those with custodians — that custodians are understaffed. Tom admitted that this needs to be resolved, but financial resources are not available at the moment to hire more employees. Relating to this, he spoke of how rigorous the work schedule was: “We’re never always off … if it snows, we’re here … this place is never shut down. Never” (2017). This
dedication is wonderful and much appreciated, but it is unfortunate that custodial work can require so much more overtime work than other careers at the university.

Custodian Perspectives

The interviews I conducted with custodians were arguably the most important and necessary parts of this project. It would have been ethically reckless to research the experience of campus custodians without including their perspectives. Through both scheduled appointments and approaching custodians as they worked, I was able to speak with John, Mary, Sally, and Rick. For the most part, their responses generally agreed. Each had chosen to work at Marquette because the university offers good benefits and has, in general, a good work environment. There was a particular theme of gratefulness that was evident when they talked about this subject. Sally was gratified because, as she exclaimed, “Who’s going to hire me at [my age]?"

The most common sentiments, however, were expressions of indebtedness towards the students:

- “Without the students, there is no me” (Rick)
- “It’s important to protect the students - they are special, and you must do an excellent job, excellent work for them. Sometimes they are a problem, but you have to remember they’re stressed” (John)
- “If the students are happy, I’m happy” (Mary)
- “Those are my kids”; she feels they respect her and that she has real friendships with them (Sally)
It is evident from these statements that custodians generally seem to perceive a close, friendly relationship with students. This would be an especially important relationship to cultivate while working on a university campus as opposed to a corporate one. This again hearkens to Reed’s (2015) research on how the relationships that students share with campus custodians can be mutually beneficial, and how educational institutions should consider installing custodians as formal mentors. Ample research, too, has been done on the importance of students having non-parental adults in their lives whom they can respect, learn from, and trust (Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002; Haddad, Chen, & Greenberger, 2010).

Custodians seemed pleased with the benefits and care they receive from the university. Especially popular is the “gift of time” — a paid break over the Christmas and New Year holidays — though it is questionable whether this can always be used, based on Tom’s statements in my administrative interviews. Sally had a particularly poignant story of a financial gift the university made to a relative of hers who was in need. Two of them named Dr. Lovell, specifically, as someone who is involved with the employees and does his best to get to know them.

Responses differed somewhat when I asked each custodian how they felt they were involved in the community. Some seemed to know about the personal development opportunities put forth by administration; for example, Rick is involved with a social justice group that discusses what it’s like being a person of color or different ethnicity on a predominantly white campus. Yet others, like Sally, didn’t seem to know or care about programs such as this. When I asked if she took advantage of any involvement opportunities on campus, she said, “Not here.
There’s not much here”, although she does volunteer at her church. John thought the community, in particular, is good.

I ended interviews by asking what the custodians would change if they could improve their experience at Marquette. John, Rick, and Mary gave somewhat non-responses, simply shrugging and saying they were happy as long as everyone else was. Sally had specific feedback: she reiterated Tom’s statement that custodians are understaffed. “Floor work” — replacing and cleaning carpets and waxing — is especially strenuous, according to her, and involves lots of hands on deck and manual labor. It was interesting, too, to hear some undertones of dissatisfaction with other custodians from Sally, as well as Rick. Sally spoke in terms of “guys” and “girls”, expressing frustration that when the girls go on vacation, the guys don’t keep up with the work. This requires the girls to work twice as hard when they return. Rick echoed this, saying that when some people slack or take time off, others have to do their job and can’t always do it as well. I also found it intriguing that he expressed disappointment in his co-workers, who sometimes have negative attitudes. He seemed to believe that unhappiness and dissatisfaction are choices; that custodians have the choice of being discontent with their jobs, or they can be grateful for what they’ve got.

While this point of view is admirable, and seems to keep Rick happy, it is not exactly conducive to enacting change. His statements indicate that there is perhaps more dissatisfaction among the custodial staff than I was able to glean from these brief interviews. Additionally, Rick’s attitudes may be widespread throughout the staff. They have a relatively stable job that provides them with a living wage, good benefits, and a community of some sort. Any complaints may seem unwarranted or ungrateful because, of course, it could always be worse.
Student Perspective

For the most part, it was good to hear satisfactory accounts of custodians’ experiences and their involvement with the community. This may show that the university, at the very least, has basic levels of care and involvement in place for its custodians. However, I must acknowledge some limitations of the interviews with administrative and custodial staff. Whether consciously or unconsciously, administrative faculty is likely conditioned to speak positively and professionally about the university. Especially considering the fact that these employees are closely involved with the employment of custodians, there would be little motivation to disclose anything negative about the custodial experience. Similarly, as comfortable and anonymous as I tried to make the interviews with custodians, the fact remains that I was a stranger who had no time to earn trust. Again, they would have no motivation to criticize the university, and this paired with the possible risk of getting in trouble with their superiors may have produced enthusiastic responses.

Therefore, I wanted to be sure to include a student perspective. I was on the same level academically and socially as Emily, the resident assistant (RA) that I interviewed. Because of this, it may have been easier for her to be open with me about her opinions and experiences. Emily presented a very different, much more negative view of the custodial experience, especially in the way that it relates to students. She was able to recall many instances of excessive messiness and damage caused by students in the dorm, and considered there to be a general disrespect for the employees who have to clean up after them:
They would kick in the baseboard … there would be holes in the wall just from people kicking them. Which makes no sense, like why you would do that? … And they’d rip up the carpet and stuff … there’d just be big holes, like every weekend on the fourth floor. And then this semester the eighth floor likes to break the ceiling … on National Marquette Day, literally like every single ceiling panel was broken and scattered on the ground. And they ripped out a light fixture. (2017)

Emily also connected the general destruction and vandalism to her perception of students’ relationships with their custodians. This was exemplified in one case, when a student vomited in a pizza box, and left it in the hall:

[The custodian] was like, “I don’t understand.” Because this was the third time he had to do this . . . he does it because it’s his job, and I get that it’s his job, but at the same time, like — why? . . . Why do we have to have someone on call because everybody’s being garbage? That makes zero sense . . . I don’t think they (the students) realize there’s a person too, who’s cleaning up their messes. Like, they definitely see them, but I don’t think they care. (2017)

Concerning, too, was her opinion of how the custodial staff fit into the community, and how they view students. “I’m pretty sure they hate us, to be honest,” she said. “I think they have good support from each other, but I think the only reason why they stay is because of each other” (2017). Her perspective on the friendships of custodians calls to mind Levitin’s (1964) findings that people in low-status applications form close relationships in order to benefit each other.

Emily’s perceptions, especially concerning students, contrast drastically from those of the
administrative staff and custodians. Perhaps, then, the responsibility to enact change and improvement lies on the shoulders of the students.

Auto-Ethnographic Observations

I decided, then, that it was necessary to include my own feelings and observations as both a student and a researcher. A number of my field notes, taken while observing custodians at work, supported the idea that the employees are not sufficiently recognized. The majority of the custodians I observed worked alone, though there was occasionally another custodian nearby. As they worked, there were almost no instances in which a student and custodian communicated with each other. Students tended to move around custodians, leaving them to do their work but not giving much more acknowledgement. This contrasts with Sarah’s earlier statements — certainly, it may be great to come back after a hard day and have friendly staff working in your building. But is there any discussion about this beyond what Sarah tells her employees? Are custodians across campus made aware that they can have an important impact on students? Perhaps there needs to be more conversation about this, and more interaction between these groups.

Similarly, it was difficult to schedule times to complete observations, as I was unsure when custodians worked. I wondered if this was perhaps further proof of invisibility, or even my own ignorance. This particular invisibility may be purposeful, as schedules may work around times of low student traffic. Most telling was the fact that I almost missed out on one observation of a custodian in the entrance of the library. Though I had been watching for opportunities to observe all week, it was as if I was conditioned to overlook her. I didn’t realize she was there
until her work was almost finished. Another encounter that concerned me happened when I was in the bathroom one morning, and a custodian came in with her cart to clean. When she saw me, she apologized profusely and backed out the door. I was in her way, yet she acted as if she was at fault. This could be a manifestation of invisibility that custodians have internalized, perhaps mixed with the semi-glorification of students that was a theme in custodial interviews.

The interviews with custodians were especially difficult to conduct. I felt the need to simultaneously treat this group as a vulnerable population, and as a population that was equal to the other groups I interviewed. While I was apprehensive when approaching custodians, I was much more comfortable with administrative and authoritative figures. I knew where we stood with each other and felt like I was on equal footing with them. But with custodians, I felt very self-conscious; I didn’t want to offend them, impose upon their time, or make them nervous. I was much more careful in the way I conducted myself when interacting with custodians than I was with the other groups I interviewed. It didn’t help that I couldn’t reach them through email; it made them seem elusive and put them on a different level than the other interviewees.

Custodians’ behavior in response to me as a student and researcher varied as well. Rick was the most enthusiastic and felt comfortable chatting even after the interview was over, while Sally was much more reserved. Though I told her I could walk with her as we worked, and that she shouldn’t let me interfere, she paused after every question as if waiting for me to give permission to continue. It was only after I would say, “Oh, please feel free to keep going” that she would resume her work. In this way, I felt that she had assigned me some sort of authority that I was not completely comfortable with. The other custodians, similarly, seemed wary of me and less willing to engage.
As has been a common theme throughout this paper, some factors that support this behavior may include socioeconomic status differences, privilege differences, and race. Exactly half (50%; Marquette University, 2017) of the custodial workforce is considered an ethnic minority, so it seemed important to consider race as well. All four custodians I interviewed were included in the minority half, with one being Filipino and the others African American. There were low instances of interracial interaction. The custodian working with Mary on her shift was also African American, and as I was talking with Sally, an African American professor came up to chat with her. They seemed to be comfortable with each other, and he told me, “She’s my evening friend; she gives me a perspective on life”. Their relationship appeared to be close and amicable, although other white professors working in the same building did not even know Sally’s name.

Rick, on the other hand, did seem to interact with others regardless of race. During my time with him he waved to and chatted with three faculty members, all white. However, he shared some interesting information about his own experiences with race. As previously mentioned, Rick is a member of a social justice group on campus which he says discusses what it’s like to be a person of color at Marquette. I asked if he’d experienced any different treatment or discrimination on campus because of his job or ethnicity. He shook his head and told me that you have to put blinders on, because if you approach your life with that negative view, you’ll get angry. His answer, though evasive, suggests that there may be discrimination on campus that employees of color choose to ignore.
Overview of Perspectives

It is difficult to name any sound conclusions that can be taken from these findings. In general, administrative faculty and custodians evidently shared positive perceptions of custodians’ experiences with the university as well as the community. These perceptions were contrasted with student and auto-ethnographic perceptions, which highlighted potentially problematic — but reparable — behaviors in and towards custodians.

At times I became concerned that I was formulating a problem between custodians and the university where one didn’t exist. I would like to note that it is perfectly possible that many custodians are satisfied with their positions, and that the university is admirable in many of the ways it treats its employees. I do not at all wish to discount or discredit the perspectives of those who took time to speak with me about their opinions and experiences. However, I do believe there is always room for improvement, and there were more questions and concerns that developed as I conducted this research.

There were, of course, limitations to this study that I have alluded to already. My field observations are minimal and could be expanded upon. The interviews primarily risked socially desirable responses; answers that are given in the hopes of presenting oneself favorably (Tracey, 2016). There may be a tendency to respond positively in interviews, just as we have been conditioned to reply “good” when someone asks us how we are. Since I was not a peer to the custodians, there may have been a lack of trust that could have prevented them from responding candidly. They had no complaints about faculty who had authority over them or students for whom they cleaned. It was, however, intriguing that they felt comfortable critiquing each other; this is an opposing view to Emily’s assumptions that custodians only get along with other
custodians. Perhaps it demonstrates the community that custodians share with each other — they consider themselves to be on the same level, so they can speak honestly about their relationships with their peers.

**Proposals for Change and Concluding Thoughts**

The results of this particular research project cannot point to any obvious, immediate changes that need to be made on the administrative side of the custodial experience, aside from hiring more staff. Further research is needed to develop concrete plans for improvement. However, there are clear improvements that could be made in students’ behavior towards custodians.

*In the Residence Halls*

Magolda and Delman’s (2016) study told of a custodian, Vida, who left a letter in the bathroom at the beginning of every year telling students about herself, her experiences, and her family. It encouraged students to talk with her and use her as a resource. Magolda and Delman said that Vida’s letter “conveyed her commitment to forging substantive personal relationships, maintaining a clean residence hall, and supporting and educating residents” (2016). At minimum, a letter like this would allow students to know the names of their building’s custodians and a little bit about them, which is far more than many students know now.

Yet custodians should not have to take the initiative themselves; an event that allows students and custodians to formally interact could be extremely beneficial for building relationships and a healthy working/living environment for both groups. At the beginning of each semester or year, Marquette’s Residence Hall Association (RHA) could work with RAs and hall
staff to organize small get-togethers so students can recognize there is a human with a name and a face cleaning up after them. Ideally, this may lead to decreased destruction and disorderliness.

On Campus

Outside of the residence halls, students should remain open to engaging with custodians during everyday interactions. It took enough courage for me to approach custodians during interviews, and I am probably not the only student to feel this way. If we can treat custodians with acknowledgement and friendliness like we would treat any other person we meet, these interactions may be smoothed. If it is possible to formulate a type of mentor program between students and custodians, this may also be beneficial.

Concluding Thoughts

Custodians are just as crucial a piece of Marquette’s community as students, professors, and President Lovell. As a privileged university and Jesuit institution, it is crucial that we help custodians recognize their worth and necessity in this community. Change is gradual and not always obvious, but it is essential. By deepening the question of what needs to be improved and listening critically to the experiences of custodians, it may be possible to enhance and strengthen our Marquette community even more than we think.
References


Appendix A: Consent Form for Interviews Conducted Prior to IRB Approval

MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET

Remembering Our Own Community: Marquette University’s Engagement with its Custodial Staff
Abby Vakulskas
English Department

You were recently asked to participate in a research study. The researcher conducting this study would now like to use your responses for further research. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the relationship between Marquette’s custodial staff and the Marquette community as a whole. The researcher would like to take the responses you gave in your interview and compare them with future data. Your name and/or other identifying information was collected in the interview for the purpose of the class project, but it will be kept confidential and you will not be identified. Your responses will also be kept confidential. The risks associated with the use of your responses are minimal and there are no direct benefits to you. Your decision to allow or prevent the use of these responses is completely voluntary, and will not impact your relationship with Marquette University or your employers.

If you have any questions about this study, you can contact Abby Vakulskas at 651-338-5908 or abby.vakulskas@marquette.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you can contact Marquette University’s Office of Research Compliance at (414) 288-7570.

Thank you for your participation.
Appendix B: Consent Form for Interviews Conducted After IRB Approval

MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET
Remembering Our Own Community: Marquette University’s Engagement with its Custodial Staff
Abby Vakulskas
English Department

You have been asked to participate in a research study. You must be age 18 or older to participate. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the relationship between Marquette’s custodial staff and the Marquette community as a whole. The study involves an interview that will take less than one hour to complete. You will be asked to answer questions about your experiences with custodial staff and your opinions concerning Marquette’s relationship with its custodial staff. Your name and other identifying information will not be collected. This interview will be kept in a password-protected file only the researcher has access to. Your responses will be kept confidential. The risks associated with this project are minimal and there are no direct benefits to you. Your participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. You can skip any questions you do not wish to answer. Your decision to participate will not impact your relationship with Marquette University or your employers.

If you have any questions about this study, you can contact Abby Vakulskas at 651-338-5908 or abby.vakulskas@marquette.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you can contact Marquette University’s Office of Research Compliance at (414) 288-7570.

Thank you for your participation.
Appendix C: Interview Script for Administrative Faculty 1

1. Roughly how may people are employed by Marquette?

2. Can you describe the process of hiring different types of employees — professors, student workers, custodial staff, etc.?

3. Is the hiring process organized differently throughout the university/by department?

4. Can you explain the concept of exemption/non-exemption?

5. From what I understand, non-exempt employees do not qualify for overtime pay. What happens in cases of overtime work that must be done, such as emergency maintenance or cleaning?

6. What benefits does Marquette offer to employees? Insurance, vacation, maternity/paternity leave, etc.?

7. What types employees get what benefits? How does that differ across positions?

8. Are there any opportunities for staff development, such as leadership courses or the opportunity to take a class?

9. I’ve also heard that Marquette gives tuition assistance to employees whose children are students here. Can you tell me a little bit more about how this works?

10. What happens in the event that the parent is let go from their position?

11. If possible, tell me a little bit more about the custodial staff in particular. Can you tell me about the demographics of the applicants?

12. Do you have any measure of employee satisfaction here at Marquette? If so, do you know how satisfied the custodial staff is in general?

13. Are there ways the university makes an effort to connect staff with the students and community?

14. How do ensure that Marquette incorporates Jesuit values, such as cura personalis or forming and educating agents of change, into the workplace for all employees (particularly custodians)?

15. Is there anything else you’d like to talk about that is important to know? Anything I didn’t bring up?
Appendix D: Interview Script for Administrative Faculty 2

1. To start, tell me a little bit about your position. What does this look like on a day-to-day basis?

2. Tell me about your involvement with custodial, grounds, and trucking staff. Are you part of the hiring process, overseeing staff in general, etc?

3. In particular, what is your relationship with custodial staff?

4. How are custodians assigned to particular buildings and managers?

5. What are some opportunities that custodians have to connect with either the Marquette and/or Milwaukee community?

6. In your opinion, what are some ways the university does a good job of involving custodial staff in the Marquette community? What are some areas that could be improved upon?

7. What are some common things you find custodians appreciate about their positions at Marquette? What are some common complaints?

8. How do you ensure that Marquette incorporates Jesuit values, such as *cura personalis* or *forming and educating agents of change*, into the workplace for custodians?

9. Are there any custodians that I could speak with in order to get their perspective as well?

10. Is there anything else you think is important for me to know that we didn’t get to?
Appendix E: Interview Script for Resident Assistant (RA)

1. As an RA, what kind of relationship do you have with the custodial staff?

2. Can you tell me a little bit about the custodians in your building, specifically? How well do you know them?

3. What are some situations a custodian might have to deal with in a residence hall?

4. Have you seen any instances of excessive messiness or damage? If so, can you describe them?

5. How do you feel your residents view the custodians?

6. In general, how do you feel custodians fit in with the rest of the Marquette community?

7. In your opinion, are there any ways the Residence Hall Association (RHA) could better integrate custodians into the community? Are there any ways Marquette, as a whole, could do this?

8. Is there anything else you feel is important for me to know that we didn’t cover?
Appendix F: Interview Script for Custodians

1. What made you decide to work at Marquette?

2. What is your average day like?

3. In what ways are you satisfied or unsatisfied with your position at Marquette? What do you find challenging about your work?

4. Have you participated in any social/community events that allow you to interact with students? If so, please tell me about your experiences with these events.

5. How do you feel students view you as a custodian?

6. Have you heard of the Marquette bubble? If so, what are your thoughts on it, and have you seen it reflected in your interactions with students?

7. How, if at all, do you feel that you are a part of the Marquette community?

8. What are some things that would improve your experience at Marquette, if you could choose to change anything?

9. Is there anything else you’d like to talk about that we didn’t cover?