

Understanding the experiences of residence hall custodians

by

Rebecca Peterson

B.A., Marquette University, 2005
M.S., Oklahoma State University, 2007

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Special Education, Counseling, and Student Affairs
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

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Abstract

This qualitative research study explored the experiences of residence hall custodians at public 4-year institutions located within the Midwest. The study focused on participants' interactions, motivations, training, and expectations related to their work as a custodian in the residence halls. The following research questions framed this study: (1) How do residence hall custodians describe the ways in which they interact with the students living in the buildings where they work?, (2) How do residence hall custodians describe their motivation to support students?, and (3) How do residence hall custodians describe the training and/or expectations that are provided by the custodial supervisory staff regarding relationship building with students? The research methodology used an interpretive study where 14 custodians participated in semistructured in-person interviews and a walk-through of their work areas. Photographs were captured during the walk-throughs, and relevant documents were provided. Analysis of the interviews, photographic memos, and documents allowed four themes to emerge from the data analysis: (a) Adaptive Practices and Unacknowledged Labor, (B) "I'm Here for the Students, (C) Community Contributions While Being Seen and Valued, and (D) "I Think the Building Would Probably Have Trouble Sticking Together If We Weren't Here." The findings suggest a disconnect between the work custodial staff provide in addition to cleaning and the mismatch between employee experiences and supervisor expectations. The findings enhance understanding of how custodial staff articulate their interactions with students and their motivations for engaging with residents. Understanding the experiences of an often-understudied population helps elevate the voices of campus service workers while helping to identify and understand their contributions to the campus enterprise.

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Approved by:

Major Professor
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Dedication

For my family. The ones who came before me lighting the way, the ones who have journeyed alongside me, and those whose futures inspire me. Love you.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Custodial work is a vital and necessary component of university life, and it meets basic needs to have a safe and clean environment to work, study, and live within. For most students living in residence halls, custodians are often older than the residents in the building and are seen on a regular basis, and their work focuses on meeting students' basic needs by keeping the hall clean. As such, understanding custodians' contributions beyond cleaning tasks to explore how they may enhance student learning and campus enrichment must be explored further to identify if there are intangible ways custodians are integral to the university's and students' success. Understanding the contributions custodians may make to student success could help higher education evolve, better serve student populations, and strategically use that information to consider investing in or reinvest both financial and people resources in a way that assists the institution in achieving their goals. This study sought to provide space for this narrative to be explored within higher education and the residence hall learning environment to improve custodial training and student success models.

Background and Orientation

Residence halls serve as the university bedroom, a place where students sleep, study, and engage with their peers. This unique living experience allows students to negotiate interpersonal interactions with their peers, supports the development of their identities, and generally enhances their connection to the university (Blimling, 2015). Most residence halls usually have a staff team comprised of people designed to assist students in their learning and development as well as aid in their transition to campus life. This in-hall team includes student staff paraprofessionals, referred to as resident or community assistants, who live on the floor or wing with residents; a residence hall director who is typically a graduate student or professional staff member who

oversees the day-to-day operations of the hall; and maintenance and custodial staff members who are responsible for the overall upkeep and cleanliness of the building. Residence hall custodial staff are typically full-time university employees who participate in the inner workings of a residence hall and have a unique vantage point from which to view and interact with its occupants.

Custodial work is considered blue-collar work and is one of the lower paid positions within the academy. Residence hall custodians are one of the lowest paid employees within an institution and their contributions are minimally researched with the data on these contributions being limited. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023) noted the mean hourly salary for custodians working in a residence hall was \$15.67 during 2023. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023) report also shared, in May 2023, 2,480 people worked in residence halls in the cleaning workers role within the rooming and boarding houses, dormitories, and workers' camps category. Understanding custodial work, its impact, and the motivation for such work could assist higher education administrators in deepening the knowledge and understanding of the skill sets low-wage workers bring to the academy and thus potentially use that knowledge to serve as solutions for other challenges within higher education. Understanding how custodial staff support students in their individual needs and advance institutional goals could help campuses understand the broader impact of service worker contributions.

Residence hall custodians assist in the daily management of the halls and could be advancing student learning informally through their relationships with students. Blimling (2015) asserted learning occurs in formal and informal ways in the residence halls. For custodians, this could be realized through informal interactions and supporting moments through which they may advance student learning and development. Gaining insight into the experiences of support staff

such as custodians is necessary due to the direct day-to-day connection they have with students. Higher education faces unique pressures such as shrinking state-supported funding, resource competition, and increased success related to student persistence and retention. It is necessary to examine and understand the ways in which custodial staff may support closing achievement gaps within higher education.

The college campus custodian serves in a service role within higher education; however, as Gilsdorf (2018) asserted, “Some of the key impacts made by custodians are overlooked and undervalued by the campus community” (p. 13). Magolda’s (2014) article shared the stories of four campus custodians that demonstrated the disconnect within higher education of who the keepers of knowledge are. Specifically, Magolda (2014) asked, “Do some members of the academy still believe that wisdom is exclusive to particular professions or classes of people” (p. 2)? It is also necessary to identify some assumptions within the literature regarding blue-collar work. Lucas and Buzzanell’s (2004) study raised questions regarding the assumption that blue-collar workers do not want a traditional career. These assumptions could be a limiting factor as to why research regarding blue-collar work on campuses of higher education has not been well documented or explored. Amah and Escobedo (2022) argued institutions of higher education should move campus service workers and their knowledge to be more central to the institution and not just support the day-to-day operations. Amah and Escobedo stated, “It is imperative that higher education institutions work to position campus workers as central rather than peripheral stakeholders in helpful foster first-generation college students’ academic excellence” (p. 120). An argument could be made that higher education leaders have not yet discovered the educational and student outcomes impact of custodial staff. Understanding the role of custodial

staff in higher education could help identify if custodial staff play a role in supporting student success.

Rationale for the Study

This study engaged with residence hall custodians to understand, through their stories, the ways they built relationships, were motivated to support students, and received training related to their experiences with students in the halls in which they work. Focusing on this topic provides insight into understanding the role custodians play in supporting students participating in higher education. This type of knowledge and support is not typically understood within the traditional hierarchy of the university structure. Additionally, it would be helpful to learn if custodians' hidden or unnoticed contributions provide informal learning for students and support their success.

The literature regarding custodial experiences is minimal. What exists in the literature only provides short stories and glimpses into the experiences of custodians but does not identify the ways in which custodians interact with students. At Stanford University, Freedman (2005) shared the story of an immigrant custodian learning English through the help of a university student tutor. The contrast between the employee and the student tutor is stark in that their experiences, expectations, and financial means within their institution are vastly different. Freedman (2006) stated, "He earns \$10.14 an hour at a university whose students pay nearly \$40,000 a year in tuition, fees, and room and board" (para. 2). This example represents a custodian's story and their work; however, Freedman did not explore the student–custodian interaction and the impact of that relationship. Research on the experiences of support staff within higher education is lacking and those working in higher education would benefit from knowledge in this area.

Within the university system, the institution is designed in a way to value the experiences of faculty; however, there are many support staff that provide valuable learning experiences and opportunities for students. In many ways, these staff may advance student development as effectively as a faculty member or student affairs professional, but because of the social hierarchy within the institution, their experiences are not represented or acknowledged. For this study, I examined the role of residence hall custodians exclusively. By understanding these experiences within this context, future research can draw upon them and understand the custodians' realities and use this knowledge to break apart social structures. As a result of this study, residence hall administrators will understand custodial experiences further and use that knowledge to consider the ways their custodial staff could contribute to their organizations beyond daily cleaning tasks. Understanding the experiences and potential contributions of residence hall custodians could assist in helping higher education institutions in leveraging the knowledge, expertise, and contributions of low-wage and blue-collar workers on campuses. This knowledge might support institutions in advancing their recruitment, retention, and persistence goals and leveraging knowledge in new ways.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study was to identify the ways residence hall custodians assist in supporting students within the university environment while exploring the participants' motivations, training, and expectations regarding student interactions. In this study, support is defined as informal mentoring (Janssen et al., 2016; Ragins & Cotton, 1999), coaching, crisis response, assisting with needs outside of structured cleaning tasks, and being an identified university staff member who can answer questions residents raise. The ACUHO-I Core Curriculum (2024) identified 13 core competencies to provide specific skill and knowledge

guidance that best prepare campus housing professionals. These competencies do not call out specific behaviors for custodians but do focus on crisis response and resident support. By understanding the relationships that exist between custodial staff and students, one can identify the ways in which custodial staff support the university student experience. As Magolda (2016) stated, “The universities privilege custodians’ cleaning performance, paying less attention to the intangible and hidden contributions that custodians make each day to the campus community” (p. 84).

Magolda (2016) outlined the intricacies of custodial work and what is valued by the organization and identified that custodial employees provide often unknown contributions to campus. Understanding the lived experiences of custodians will help identify their contributions to student success and support, which ultimately supports the institutional mission and goals. More importantly, this research identified the work custodians accomplished beyond the perceived day-to-day cleaning routines. The three research questions focused on the primary elements of this study, the students with whom custodians interact, their motivation to do so, and how they were prepared for this level of interaction. All three of these research questions intersected to provide an understanding of what drives their interaction experiences. Understanding what those interactions produce by way of support for residents was also crucial to the study.

Research Questions

This study focused on the following research questions:

1. How do residence hall custodians describe the ways in which they interact with the students living in the buildings where they work?
2. How do residence hall custodians describe their motivation to support students?

3. How do residence hall custodians describe the training and/or expectations that are provided by the custodial supervisory staff regarding relationship building with students?

Operational Definitions

Custodian: According to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2024), custodians are “janitors or cleaning workers who typically maintain institutional facilities, such as school or hospitals” (para. 9). Additional synonyms include housekeeper, janitor, or caretaker.

Support: For the purpose of this study, support is defined as informal mentoring (Janssen et al., 2016; Ragins & Cotton, 1999), coaching, crisis response, assisting with student needs outside of structured cleaning tasks, and being an identified university staff member who can answer questions residents raise. The ACUHO-I Core Competencies (2014) identified crisis management, resident educational services, and student facilities management as part of the 13 competencies needed for housing professionals.

Student Development: The act of growing because of a specific event, task, or deepening one’s identity development. One of the content areas of student development theories focuses on psychosocial theory. King and Howard-Hamilton (2000) stated, “Psychosocial theories focus on the specific issues that people address at different times in their lives, the ‘what’ of development” (p. 30). This occurs at various points throughout the collegiate career.

Organizational Theory and Framework

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of university custodians as they provide informal support to university students while exploring the participants’ motivations, training, and experiences regarding student interactions. Several theories and frameworks could have been used to understand this study. Approaching this study

from an organizational theoretical perspective allowed me to understand the individual custodian within the organizational construct. As a result, the most relevant theories identified included Manning's (2013, 2024) feminist frame; Helgesen's (1995) web of inclusion, which was the basis of Manning's (2013, 2024) feminist frame; and Lipman-Blumen's (1992) connective leadership, which influenced Manning's (2024) work. Each of these theories overlap and weave together to inform and create the theoretical perspective informing this study. All three of these theories work together with Manning's (2013, 2024) feminist frame serving as the overarching umbrella informed by these other theories, as Manning (2013, 2024) identified both Helgesen's (1995) and Lipman-Blumen's (1992) work to be a part of the feminist approach to organizational theory in higher education. I used these frameworks to inform the research process. In particular, the feminist frame sought to flatten organizational hierarchy, which informed the decision to use semistructured interviews. The feminist frame and connective leadership informed the participant walk-throughs in that the participants led the researcher through their spaces based on what resonated most with their experiences as a residence hall custodian. The interview questions were designed around the theoretical frameworks and were then analyzed through that lens. Understanding the lived experiences and work of custodial staff in a residence hall helped me identify and understand if these custodians were contributors to student success in the residence halls.

Methodology

This study was grounded in qualitative research and used the foundational principles of this research method. Qualitative research was most appropriate for this study as it allowed me, as the researcher, the ability to dive deeper into individual knowledge to have a greater understanding of the participants' experiences, knowledge, and stories. Qualitative research

focuses on human experiences and the ways in which people make meaning out of those experiences (Bhattacharya, 2017). Data were collected from a variety of sources including first-person interviews, building walk-throughs, and artifacts provided by participants to gain a richer understanding of their experiences as residence hall custodians and their relationships with students. Data for this study additionally included (a) document reviews for any documents provided by the participants or their supervisor, including position descriptions, staff expectations, and evaluation materials, (b) any artifacts provided by the participants, and (c) photographic analytic memos.

This study used interpretivism as the epistemology and a basic qualitative study as the methodological framework. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that the researcher is oriented toward addressing the following in a basic qualitative study “(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purpose is to *understand* how people make sense of their lives and their experiences” (p. 24). Through the study of residence hall custodial experiences and the meanings participants attribute to their experiences, the current study sought to uncover individual truths that will provide new insight into the role of custodians. The interpretive methodology allowed participants to share their experiences, beliefs, and how they made sense of their work related to their specific experience as a residence hall custodian.

The basic interpretive qualitative methodology allowed me to uncover the participants’ experiences to gain insight into their role as a custodian and understand how they create meaning regarding their roles. Through learning more about participants’ experiences, I identified themes from the data and uncovered new perspectives into the work of a custodian in the residence halls. This enabled me to provide new insight into the work of custodians and if they added value to

the student development experience. Use of open interviews provided me with the opportunity to let the participants guide the conversation to uncover richer insights into their experiences in the residence halls that I may not have been able to uncover otherwise as the researcher.

Significance of the Study

The impact of this study could be far reaching, as the Association of College and University Housing Officers International (2024) reported 1.2 million students lived on campus worldwide and over 17,000 professionals supported these students living in on campus housing. Understanding further how residence hall custodians impact students' lives will assist in understanding nontraditional supports students receive and how the work of the custodial staff members advances institutional goals. This research study helped to uncover the ways custodians aid in learning and provide student support. This study sought to add to the body of knowledge on custodial staff experiences. This is an underdeveloped area of research that needs to be explored further. Understanding the institutional impact of someone who is classified as a so-called blue-collar employee could potentially advance support, training, and recognition for the work that custodial staff provide on campus. This study sought to provide the ability for change to have a more holistic understanding of the role custodians play within the residence hall community and how their responsibilities impact student learning and development.

It is necessary to understand the scope of how many individuals are employed as campus and residence hall custodians. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports annually on employment data and the job market. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' (2023) report on colleges, universities, and professional schools indicated there were 65,150 people working in May 2023 in the "building cleaning workers" category with a mean hourly wage of \$18.77. This same report provided data to show 9,970 residential advisors were working at colleges,

universities, and professional schools. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023) report on Rooming and Boarding Houses, Dormitories, and Workers' Camps cited, in May 2023, 2,480 people worked in the building cleaning workers role with a mean hourly wage of \$15.67. These data helped provide the overall context for the scope of this study, specifically how expansive a building cleaning worker reach was and how narrow their purview was within a residence hall. The juxtaposition between low-wage workers employed at an institution of higher education and the significant amount institution charge students for attendance cannot be ignored.

Although the research is limited in higher education, some adjacent studies and information exist within the K–12 educational realm. These studies and information can be used to provide insight into the role of a custodian. According to the National Education Association (2022), custodial and maintenance staff members “keep schools safe and clean for the students, staff, and community” (p. 1); however, the handout described the ways they perform additional service tasks such as clearing snow, managing spills, maintaining HVAC equipment, and ensuring schools are cooled and heated properly. The National Education Association’s (2022) annual membership survey of education support professional ($n = 261$), which included school custodial and maintenance professionals, found of those who responded, “half (49%) volunteered their time to support a wide range of educational activities that assist students and benefit their community, such as reading books to students or lobbying for the benefit of education” and “1 out of 5 (22%) have supported a parent organization, and 18% have coached or supported a sports team” (p. 2). Strikingly, this handout showed the disconnect between what the National Education Association cited as the role of the custodian and maintenance employees; yet, half of the people who responded who did this work were volunteering their time to support educational

activities. Thus, more research is needed within this area to understand the impact of educational support that custodial staff provide.

Summary

By expanding what is known about residence hall custodial staff and how they could be supporting students could provide higher education the opportunity to enhance staff skills, use resource more effectively, and reward employees based upon their advancement of university goals. This basic qualitative research study aided in providing understanding of the role custodial staff play within higher education. Identifying custodian's interactions, motivations, expectations, and training assisted in answering the research questions. These research questions were informed by the information discovered during the literature review. The next chapter focuses on relevant literature to the study, specifically research related to custodial staff, invisible labor, and the theoretical framework. The relevant literature assists in understanding the appropriate background knowledge while framing the research questions.

Chapter 2 - Review of the Literature

This literature review was conducted using several academic databases to search for relevant literature. Words used in the search process included blue-collar workers, custodians, community, higher education, invisible labor, belonging, and student success. Although the amount of data was limited specifically to higher education, a few relevant adjacent students within the K–12 educational area aided in a greater understanding of this topic. By understanding the literature, this study was better informed and identified the gaps in the current knowledge to seek to fill one of those gaps. The main topics of the literature view included invisible labor, dirty work, blue-collar labor, customer service, custodial work in education, student success and belonging, and the organizational theory and framework.

Invisible Labor, Dirty Work, and Blue-Collar Labor

This study showed several intersections that cannot be ignored, specifically the intersection between low-wage employees' supporting those pursuing higher education and the potential class interactions that might exist. Higher education administrators might not be able to articulate the student success impact of those living out the day-to-day work of the university as support staff. Understanding the narratives of blue-collar workers, specifically custodial staff, is essential to identifying the unintended impact of their work.

Stratification by position, wage, and responsibilities exists within higher education. Wiegard (2013) articulated the disparity between tenured faculty and contract or adjunct faculty by stating, "Contingent faculty belong to the servant class with other support staff who service students" (p. 225); and yet, adjunct faculty are expected to act and behave like full faculty members. However, they are afforded none of the same benefits of faculty. This stratification also exists among blue-collar workers and those they are supporting. Wiegard (2013) asserted

contingent faculty must choose to either “pretend they are true members of the family” to fully engage within the academy of their institution or “choose to accept the life of servitude” (p. 230) whereby they have the knowledge necessary to get them through the workday. Although Wiegard’s argument was quite limiting, it could be asserted that contingent faculty, like custodial staff, provide invisible and undocumented labor to the institution and these two employee groups are connected to the institution but not engrained within it due to their position and existing stratification.

One thread from Wiegard’s (2013) article named anonymity as an intersecting concept related to the experiences contract faculty have, specifically stating, “Many socially awkward moments ensue from the anonymity imposed upon them” (p. 231). Wiegard used a faculty training experience to highlight this example; however, one could draw parallels between this example and the invisible nature of custodial staff (e.g., cleaning when buildings are less occupied or overnight, ensuring spaces are orderly and conducive to learning). This invisible nature of the custodial position and potentially of the academic and emotional support these staff members provide should be explored further.

Invisible Labor

Invisible labor and undocumented custodial impact exist within the K–12 arena. Maxwell et al. (2009) researched the case of one custodian, known as Mr. John, who worked in a rural school district for 53 years; the authors used distributed leadership as their theoretical framework. Maxwell et al. (2009) identified how they arrived at their theoretical framework, stating, “This research did not initially focus on distributed leadership; this theme emerged from the data” (p. 478). Many different definitions of distributed leadership exist; the researchers focused their definition as “distributed leadership exemplifies itself as leadership through task

orientation, leadership through interaction, and leadership through trust” (Maxwell et al., 2009, p. 474). The primary goal of Maxwell et al.’s (2009) research was to “understand what were the characteristics and abilities that made him revered as a school leader in his role of custodian” (p. 475). By researching these characteristics, the authors deepened their understanding of what role support staff play in advancing school leadership. One example of Mr. John’s leadership was demonstrated through his technical skills (e.g., boiler maintenance, knowledge of underground utilities), which kept the school running when others did not have nor could develop that expertise. Further, “The respect that Mr. John’s coworkers had for his task orientation, as facilitated by his work ethic, earned him status as a revered informal school leader” (Maxwell et al., p. 481). This school’s leadership status was outside the traditionally viewed bounds of leadership within education. Maxwell et al.’s (2009) findings indicated:

The data in this study and the three strong themes of communication, task, and trust orientation provide for triangulation, thus making a strong contribution to our collective understanding of what constitutes leadership (specifically, distributed leadership) and more, moreover broadening the scope of who is capable of doing leadership. (p. 488)

This broader scope of leadership opens the doors for exploring how informal and distributed leadership impacts school environments. Maxwell et al. (2009) highlighted how Mr. John’s informal leadership role impacted the school, specifically “by his ability to recognize task concerns, brainstorm solutions, and implement these solutions . . . leaving formal administrators in the district free and unencumbered to wrangle with their own school issues” (p. 489) and how this distributed leadership made the school better. Maxwell et al. (2009) argued, “Support staff who accelerate the success of their organizations by providing substantial leadership from their formal subordinate roles should be acknowledged as key leaders in schools” (p. 489). This

argument lends itself to expanding the literature to understand the role custodial staff play in advancing institutional goals in all levels of education and specifically understanding how they contribute as leaders within the organization. This research and understanding would help higher education move beyond the traditionally ascribed leadership roles and acknowledge the impact of all staff on student support and success.

Through use of the critical race theory in education, Amah and Escobedo's (2022) research encompassed the impact of one individual, the building's longstanding senior custodian, Señor Mauricio, and his impact on three of critical race theory in education's tenets: "(2) the challenge to dominant ideology, (3) the commitment to social justice, (4), the centrality of experiential knowledge" (p. 113). Using an open-ended survey with 26 individuals who interacted with Señor Mauricio and an hour-long interview with him, Amah and Escobedo (2022) identified the theme of community educator as the most prominent in their findings. Amah and Escobedo's (2022) findings included:

Mauricio continually leverages his position as a community educator to transform Campbell Hall into a "home away from home"...he reminds us that honest dialogue and careful listening are pedagogical tools that campus service workers can draw upon should they be interested in helping cultivate educational spaces that affirm and are welcoming to first-generation college students. (p. 117)

Amah and Escobedo (2022) called for their work to be expanded by encouraging researchers to ask the question, "How else do campus service workers function as institutional agents, mentors, and/or advisors to students, especially during critical times" (p. 122)? Amah and Escobedo (2022) asserted institutions should bring forth the knowledge that service workers have to specifically learn "the various forms of knowledge that they bring to the educational space

because they model what it looks like for academic and student affairs personnel to offer genuine and tangible support to first-generation students” (p. 120). There are several layers to invisible labor, specifically who is doing the work, why they are doing the work, and what type of work is occurring. The argument could be made that one occurrence of invisible labor happening within higher education is the mentorship, support, and caretaking provided by blue-collar custodians.

Dirty Work

The layers of blue-collar work should be explored. Ashforth and Kreiner’s (1999) study focused on dirty work and those who perform that work through roles considered less desirable, morally fraught, or degrading. In their research, Ashforth and Kreiner (2014) sought to answer the research question, “How do members of dirty work occupations seek and security social affirmation for what they do when society tends to deny them affirmation” (p. 413)? In their research, Ashforth and Kreiner (2014) brought forward the perception of society on this type of work and the inherit disconnect between the value of the work and how the worker is perceived, specifically:

Dirty work is frequently not viewed by societies as unimportant or trivial. The stigma comes from the view of the work as distasteful if not disgusting...Although people may applaud certain dirty work as noble (e.g., counseling the terminally ill), they generally remain psychologically and behaviorally distanced from that work and those who do it, glad that it is someone else. (p. 416)

In higher education, it is likely that campus custodians would be considered employees who do dirty work.

This perception of people performing dirty work in higher education might influence the lack of research regarding support positions within higher education. To better understand these

workers within the academy and their contributions to student success, the research must move closer to the worker, not further from them. Ashforth and Kreiner (2014) identified that occupational identity is a part of the stigma of dirty work, specifically stating, “Organization members are largely known by their occupations and come to situate themselves in terms of their occupations” (p. 417). Ashforth and Kreiner (2014) identified that outside of the work realm “ice-breaking rituals often institutionalize the exchange of occupational information,” (p. 417) and can serve as someone introduction of themselves and this exchange can impact the identity of the worker.

For those doing “dirty work,” this identity development could be more salient. In higher education, the work culture is subdivided into several distinct categories, usually hierarchically (e.g., faculty, staff, classified staff). Wiggins (2021) reinforced, “The unequal access to higher education has contributed to the creation of distinct subgroups such as students, faculty, administrative staff, and blue-collar workers on college campuses” (p. 33). These subgroups have created stratification within higher education and thus impact the student and employee experiences.

Blue-Collar Labor

Lucas and Buzzanell (2004) used occupational narratives to understand how blue-collar workers make meaning of their work; the researchers specifically used the framework of organizational stories to frame their results. As Lucas and Buzzanell (2004) stated, the “three major functions of these stories are reducing uncertainty by providing information about organizational activities, managing meaning by framing activities in terms of organizational values, and bonding members by presenting points of shared identity” (p. 277). By using shared narratives, researchers can use this method to enhance their data to better understand the impact

of blue-collar employee experiences and how they perceive their work. This can offer additional insights into motivation, intentions, and how blue-collar workers within higher education view their role within the greater collegiate context.

Campus administrators must understand the invisible labor that is being provided by campus custodians. Wiggins (2022) stated, “Administrators who do not leverage custodial proximity to, and enthusiasm for, interacting with college students miss valuable and fruitful opportunities to enhance overall college student success” (p. 43) and further made the case that, at large higher education institutions, a custodian might be the only person a student interacts in that close of a manner. Understanding the impact of custodians will give campuses the opportunity to improve their training, supports, and knowledge regarding the invisible labor that custodians provide.

The context of both blue-collar and white-collar workers within higher education who are supporting the institutional mission cannot be ignored. Additionally, students coming to institutions bring with them a variety of identities that enhance their educational experience. These identities and communities must be contextualized within the research. In a blog, Miles (2018) shared their story as a first-generation student from a working-class background who identified more with their residence hall custodian because of the type of work the custodian was engaging in as opposed to a professor; their shared backgrounds encouraged Miles to reach out more readily when she needed support and had questions regarding the campus.

Hennequin’s (2007) study regarding blue-collar workers and career success demonstrated how blue-collar workers define individual work success, specifically noting one area of success: interpersonal success. They found, “Blue-collar workers evolve in a community or team, and they establish relations with their colleagues, interacting with other people is already an element

of satisfaction” (Hennequin, 2007, p. 575). Hennequin’s research was lacking in that it only discussed interactions with their colleagues; however, it did raise the question related to interactions with customers. One may wonder, because residence halls are naturally communal places, whether custodians have greater satisfaction with their work environment because they are interacting with those living in the building.

Montoya (2020) identified a need for a call to action for campuses to value of service workers on campus, specifically stating, “We as educators must, therefore, acknowledge where our campuses sit, who built/builds our campuses, and who maintains them,” and this urgency continued, “Ignoring the efforts of our campus service workers is a function of a failing academic foundation” (p. 29). These statements bring forward the importance of the campus service worker, specifically blue-collar workers, and call for their inclusion as a member of the higher education academy and not a servant to it. Guzmán (2022), as an undergraduate student, formed relationships with campus service workers, specifically residence hall custodians and food service workers, and came to realize “that humanizing workers and engaging them in dialogue disrupted the status quo” (p. 151). The disruption of studying campus custodians will only increase higher education’s knowledge of how employees across the institution support student success beyond the traditional trappings of their title and responsibilities.

Customer Service

The expectations and demands of higher education consumers continue to increase related to their experiences in their physical campus environment. Customer service training and experiential outcomes for custodial staff are paramount to the educational enterprise. APPA: Leadership in Educational Facilities organization serves as a leader in higher education facilities management by providing training, education, and support to its membership. Facilities

management personnel use the *APPA Body of Knowledge* (Pinney, n.d.) as a guiding document for facilities management in higher education. One area of facilities management that receives a substantial amount of attention and training is customer service. Pinney's (n.d.) writings in the *APPA Body of Knowledge* chapter on customer service demonstrated the intersection of limited resources and the impact of high-quality service on those consuming higher education. Pinney (n.d.) stated:

Most education-related entities are endeavoring to survive with very limited resources.

The rising cost of the educational enterprise has become a prime issue for both public and private institutions . . . in a service industry what you really have to market is service, and that service must be top-notch. (para. 3)

Customer service impacts the student experience in higher education and higher education continues to concern itself with rising costs and necessary structures to sustain student enrollment. Irwin et al.'s (2023) report for the National Center for Education Statistics reported "between academic years 2010-11 and 2021-2022, average annual undergraduate tuition and required fees for full-time students across all degree-granting postsecondary institutions increased by 17 percent" while "38% of first-time, full-time degree/certificate-seeking undergraduate students overall were awarded loan aid in 2020-21, a 12 percentage point decrease from 2010-11 (50 percent)" (p. 27). High quality programs and on-campus experiences support retention and recruitment of students. When students are effectively recruited and retained, the financial health of the institution is sustained.

University custodians have several points of contact with students throughout their experiences on campus. Pinney's (n.d.) chapter on customer service in the *APPA Body of Knowledge* identified the sheer quantity of customer contacts that occur in facilities

management; through those customer contacts, there is an opportunity for both positive and negative interactions. Within the residence halls, these contacts could provide positive student support interactions and connections between custodial staff and students. Acknowledgement and identification of these interactions could enhance the overall university experience for students and employees.

Noe's (2013) *Employee Training and Development* asserted, "Strategic training and development initiatives are learning-related actions that a company should take to help it achieve its business strategy" (p. 68) to advance the organizations direction and goals. For higher education, one of the organizational goals for colleges and universities is student knowledge acquisition and graduation. Understanding how custodians are trained on overarching university goals will assist in identifying gaps.

Customer service training is a component of most facilities-related work. Customer service training is a core belief woven into the *APPA Body of Knowledge* and the importance of making sure the team is trained on customer service, as APPA stated, "Basic customer communication is a critical component of team development" (Pinney, n.d., para. 14). Student support services also value communicating effectively. Higher education can help provide translation between the languages of customer service and student support and vice versa. There is an opportunity to help staff see the overlap between these two areas or to enhance both areas by highlighting where they come together to support students.

APPA encouraged the development of functional and service philosophies in higher education facilities management organizations. In APPA's guiding document on creating such philosophies, the organization asked higher education organizations to consider the following questions, "What added value do those you serve receive? What contribution is your

organization making to society as a whole?” (Pinney, n.d., para. 1). Within the service philosophy, APPA asked facilities and higher education leaders to reflect upon, “How you will approach service and interactions with others” and “the mindset used to approach interactions” (Pinney, n.d., para. 18). These questions provide insight into APPA’s belief that there is more beyond traditional facilities work of cleaning a building that supports the student experience.

Custodial work extends beyond cleaning tasks; specifically, Wiggins (2021) noted, “Custodial staff actions require observational and critical thinking skills. Custodians do ongoing work to protect the physical safety of students and provide them with clean and sanitary living and social environments” (p. 42). This finding widens the scope of the custodial role beyond the narrow context through which one might view their work.

Custodial Work in Education

K–12 Research

Research within elementary and secondary (K–12) educational systems can also provide insight into the roles of support workers such as secretaries, custodians, and cafeteria workers. Allen-Mendez (2003) completed a self-perception study on secretaries and custodians in the K–12 school system on job satisfaction and what items influence their level of satisfaction. The study also sought to identify perceptions of how custodians and secretaries felt like they were treated. The data were collected via questionnaire across 10 school districts in southern California and included 185 completed questionnaires (Allen-Mendez, 2003). Allen-Mendez (2003) identified, “Recognition, selection of new hires, good communication, membership on committees, and information shared openly and honestly” (pp. 70–71) are of significant concern to respondents and should be addressed by administrators. Allen-Mendez (2003) also noted:

Educational systems rely heavily upon the skills and knowledge provided daily by the classified service. Effective school secretaries and custodians can play a vital part in the lives of students, parents, teachers, and administrators alike. They can also be the link to a successful school team and the continuing growth of a school community. (p. 65)

Higher education administrators' deepening their understanding of how custodial staff perceive their role and impact on student success could assist in identifying how custodial and support staff enhance the student success mission of higher education institutions.

Caruso and Rosenthal (2022) used data collected from prior research to analyze the data from the lens of school connectedness to identify care provided by noninstructional staff, specifically cafeteria workers in the K–12 setting. Caruso and Rosenthal's initial research was designed to understand the experiences of stakeholders related to serving healthier and regional foods in school cafeterias. The initial data set included 22 different school districts; from this dataset, Caruso and Rosenthal took a convenience sample from six of the school districts to conduct qualitative interviews. Caruso and Rosenthal's (2022) findings showed, "School foodservice staff care for and about students" and "caring about their students motivates foodservice staff to not only do their job but also to work hard" (pp. 517–518). The perception of care was identified by student participants as well, as the students "valued acts of care when staff knew their names and preferences or when they perceived staff as being care in the presentation and service of food" (Caruso & Rosenthal, 2022, p. 523). Furthermore, the authors recommended, "School foodservice staff should be considered by faculty and administrators as members of the school community who can have an impact on students and included in training, professional development, and other activities for teachers and support staff" (Caruso & Rosenthal, 2022, p. 524). The parallel between the school cafeteria worker and the custodian can

be drawn due to the interpersonal interactions between learner and staff within the learning environments.

Scott's (2007) ethnography of custodial work sought to identify the associations between the custodians and children in elementary school settings. Scott collected data in three different elementary schools distinctly marked by their differing socioeconomic statuses (poorest, middle-income, and affluent); data collection occurred over the course of 2 years through observation, informal conversations, and semistructured interviews. In the school with the lowest socioeconomic status, Scott observed that the custodial team was highly integrated into the school setting in a variety of ways, including participating in the superintendent's administrative council, and the school administrators showed support for the custodians by extending their role beyond cleaning. In addition, Scott (2007) stated their work went beyond cleaning, in that the "Marcus Garvey men actively participate in the supervision of lunchtime, assisting children by opening cartons of milk, walking around the tables to ensure that all the children have food, and disciplining the students" (p. 244). This observation extended the role of a custodian beyond the cleaning duties in this elementary setting, as "the Marcus Garvey custodians view themselves as social educators" (Scott, 2007, p. 245). Understanding how custodians view themselves in their role is likely to influence how they complete their duties and to what degree they build relationships with those around them.

In the middle-income school, Scott (2007) identified the custodian "is allowed sufficient room to pursue his own agenda as long as it complements the school's focus" (p. 248). Tony, the custodian who worked at the middle-income school, did not help as directly in the lunchroom as the custodians at the lower-income school with specific tasks; he interacted with the children in a way that extended beyond his custodial duties. As a result, Tony started his own tutoring

program for second-grade readers, and school leadership showed support of these efforts as long as they did not hinder custodial tasks from being accomplished (Scott, 2007). This extension beyond the custodial duties provided a holistic way for Tony to support student and school success.

In the third school, the most affluent one, the custodians were discouraged from and did not seek interactions with the students and the “custodians are quite clear as to the limited nature of their job” (Scott, 2007, p. 251). In this third setting, the custodians were viewed and expected to perform their day-to-day tasks and discouraged from improving the school environment beyond that role. Scott’s (2007) findings suggested, “Custodians are more adept than many people would believe at accomplishing tasks other than cleaning” and educators and administrators “may want to consider how a custodian’s integration in the school culture informs the community as a whole and its individual members” (p. 253). Most importantly, Scott (2007) identified the environments created at the first two schools nurtured relationships between the students and the custodians that “include reciprocal respect, admiration, and care” (p. 253); this type of atmosphere provided benefit to both the custodian and student and enhanced their sense of belonging. Although Scott’s study occurred in the elementary educational setting, parallels could be drawn between supportive environments, belonging, and relationships between custodians in elementary schools and within the custodian and student relationship in higher education. Further exploration is warranted to understand the custodial impact within higher education.

Custodial Work in Higher Education

Within the literature, minimal studies have sought to understand the impact of the custodial role within higher education. Reed’s (2015) case study of four custodial staff

experiences sought to answer the following questions: “In what ways do four campus custodians interact with students during their workday at a large public university? . . . “In what ways do these custodians talk about students and their interactions with students” (p. v)? The specific location and focus for Reed’s research was university residence halls and the impact custodial staff have on students at that university. This study reported that mutual benefits existed for custodians and residence hall students based upon their interactions. These benefits included positive feelings toward one job, supporting the success of students, and receiving support through informal mentorship (Reed, 2015). The study revealed custodial personnel performed student success tasks that enhanced the student experience (Reed, 2015). Reed’s findings identified the need for further research on the relationship between custodial work and student success.

Through 60-minute interviews with 12 Latina/o custodians, Montoya (2020) researched their educational and career aspirations. The site of this study was at a 4-year public higher education institution, and all employees worked in on-campus housing. One of the elements Montoya (2020) identified in their study was, “There is a fixed perception of the role custodial staff play in educational settings” (p. 3). Understanding the perception of custodial staff allowed for a nuanced view of their role within higher education. Research on custodial staff is scarce, and Montoya (2020) indicated, “Custodial staff have limited interactions with student services, and their roles and responsibilities are typically completed silently” (p. 16). Silent supporters within higher education believe, value, and support student success; however, limited research and resources exist to support this type of employee so they can live out their beliefs. Conducting research on silent supporters will aid in understanding their impact within higher education. As Montoya (2020) asserted, “It is not uncommon for an individual with a position that does not

require extensive schooling or college degree to have their intelligence and competency questioned” and these assumptions “lead to unfair treatment that result in raising concerns on worker’s dignity and respect in the workplace” (p. 24). The intersection of employment status and dignity can have a profound impact on the workplace experience, and the perception of the role custodial staff could play in supporting student success in the residence halls.

Ayllon’s (2016) study sought to generate knowledge on the personal and professional experiences for historically marginalized workers within higher education who identified as Latino/a. Ayllon’s study focused on nonacademic employees within a university, specifically using qualitative methodology to interview two Latino/a employees at the University of Missouri who were employed as a custodian and as a kitchen assistant. Ayllon (2016) asserted that their study “has shown that nonacademic employees have deeper stories and can offer more to the campus community than merely cleaning toilets or washing dishes” and that “future studies can be pursued on the role that non-academic support staff play in the retention and success of students at MU” (p. 129). Ayllon’s research highlighted the importance of studying the contributions of nonacademic staff (i.e., those who are nonfaculty and support students in a variety of roles) to institutional efforts and understanding these contributions could assist higher education institutions in providing greater training for staff and more visible ways of support by nonacademic staff for college attendees.

Gilsdorf’s (2018) review of relevant literature sought to identify the behaviors custodial staff use in their roles and the impact of those behaviors on student success. Gildorf (2018) revealed research articles where custodians were “taking a personal interest in helping students and wanting to assist them by being examples to them and sharing stories with them” (p. 15). Secondly, Gilsdorf (2018) identified another assumed behavior which was “custodian’s

empathy that leads them to students in need” (p. 15). Empathy, personal interest, acting in a parental role, and mentoring are behaviors Gilsdorf’s study highlighted as necessary for supporting student success in higher education. Working toward identifying motivators for custodial staff identified as student success behaviors would inform training materials for custodial staff.

Magolda and Delman (2016) stated, “Campus custodians are members of an ordinary, invisible, and seldom-studied campus subculture” and identified, “Higher education scholars . . . seldom deem campus custodians are research worthy” (p. 247) when compared to other subcultures within higher education. Magolda’s (2016) ethnographic field study of campus custodians during his sabbatical was grounded in his belief that “neither decision makers nor campus community members know very much about custodians or why they do what they do” (p. 11). Magolda used two different research sites for his study, Harrison University, a rural midwestern college and primarily residential campus of around 16,000 students, with the majority of them being undergraduates. The custodians Magolda interviewed and shadowed in this study cleaned academic buildings and nonresidence halls. The second institution, Compton University, was a private, highly selective institution located within a major city. Compton University had around 12,000 students with half of them being undergraduate students. The custodial staff who participated in Magolda’s study were residence hall custodians. When conducting the study, Magolda engaged in interviews, shadowing, and working alongside custodial staff at both institutions. These data allowed Magolda to collect a deep and rich understanding of the custodial staff experiences on two distinct institutions.

Magolda’s (2016) study invited campus custodians to share their stories beyond their day-to-day responsibilities to invite others to think more deeply about the role of custodians on a

college campus and their contributions to the greater university. Magolda and Delman (2016) argued, through their research on specific custodial experiences, “Case studies analyses reveal the benefits of tending to and scrutinizing subculture scripts, paying particular attention to issues of power and authority, and crossing borders to learn from The Other, rupturing existing impermeable castes” (p. 260). In the current study, identifying aspects of the custodial experience that support student success while acknowledging their role in the higher education enterprise is crucial to understanding ways in which custodians support overarching institutional goals.

Magolda’s (2014) article highlighted some ways in which campus custodians provided their knowledge to better their campus community. One custodian, Delores, observed the paintings depicting social justice heroes hanging in the building she cleaned and wrote to the artist to share a story about someone who should be painted. The artist responded, took the time to meet with Delores, and learned the story about the individual Delores recommended for the wall. The artist, Robert Shetterly, was so moved that two paintings were eventually put on the wall: the individual Delores recommended, Elizabeth Freeman, and one of Delores. Another custodian, Vida, shared her knowledge with her campus by building community with students in her residence hall and eventually addressing concerns with individuals as they arose. Vida also responded to a letter to the editor who accused custodians of stealing from residents. These two individuals’ knowledge shared with others to improve their campus and the learning of others articulated the need to acknowledge the work of those in custodial roles. Although not a formal study, Magolda’s insights into the roles of campus custodians demonstrate how their day-to-day work extends beyond cleaning tasks into much more than is traditionally expected.

Wiggins's (2022) chapter on custodial staff sought to "serve as a hedge against or counterbalance to the invisibility of the varying roles of custodial staff at a large public university's campus" (p. 33). She focused her research on the experiences of 20 custodial staff at a predominately white institution located on the East coast of the United States who worked in the residence hall communities dedicated to first-generation students and identity floors constructed around racial identity. Uncovering the invisible labor of custodial staff could move the needle on the knowledge regarding roles on college campuses that support student persistence and retention. Through in-depth semistructured interviews, Wiggins (2022) discovered, "Custodial staff mentored undergraduates in the following ways: emotionally, socially, academically, and professionally" (p. 36). One of the specific factors that was called out was "custodians' approachable, sincere, and nonjudgemental demeanor that was particularly conducive to budding nurturing relationships with students" (Wiggins, 2022, p. 38). This broadening of the scope of the work custodial staff perform is crucial.

Through interviews, Wiggins (2022) highlighted how the participants helped students in their building with skills such as tying a tie, encouraging them to prioritize sleep, assisting with academic work such as practicing with flash cards for exams, and providing advice on their careers. One of the participants stated it best by saying, "Sometimes these students need someone backing them, in their corner, telling them it's gonna be alright, they'll figure it all out, and it's okay to make mistakes" (Wiggins, 2022, p. 40). Wiggins (2022) articulated:

The custodians in this study interacted with first-generation and students of color in ways that indirectly and directly supported the Strategic Plan and mission of State School, which is to create a diverse and inclusive community that advances education for all by providing access and opportunity. (p. 40)

Indirect support of overarching institutional goals from custodial staff was lacking within the literature. Through additional, research administrators can work to understand the impact of these staff members' contributions to student success and belonging.

Student Success and Belonging

Several studies have identified tenets of student success in higher education.

Relationships are one concept heavily cited within higher education. Boettcher et al. (2019) studied how students of color formed networks of support in a residence hall while attending a predominately White institution. Using six hour-long focus groups with 19 undergraduate students of color who had lived on campus for 1–5 semesters, Boettcher et al.'s findings determined custodial staff enhanced the sense of connection between students of color and both their residence and campus. Specifically, the participants connected with custodians on a personal level and “the exchanges built trust and promoted the student’s self-efficacy as he actively engaged with the staff member . . . making the custodian a key individual in the student’s network of support” (Boettcher et al., 2019, p. 37).

The relationships that occur between staff and students cannot be underemphasized, as studies have demonstrated the positive impact between students and faculty (Cuseo, 2018; Guzzardo et al., 2020) have clearly articulated how these relationships support persistence and retention. Boettcher et al.'s (2019) study identified participants valued the work of custodial staff in their buildings and “having adults in the community who discussed their lives outside of work while showing care for students matters to participants” (p. 39). Because of this, students sought to form relationships with custodial staff to enhance their networks of support.

Bowman and Felix's (2017) study focused on the concept of identity centrality, specifically one's identity as a college student, as an important factor in influencing a student's

intention to persist. Bowman and Felix surveyed 449 undergraduate students who were enrolled in an introductory psychology course at a large public midwestern university. This study underscored the importance of student relationships with university faculty and staff, specifically stating, “Students who are high in student identity centrality may be more likely to . . . interact with faculty and staff” which aids in their persistence throughout college when faced with challenging situations (Bowman & Felix, 2017, p. 237). After completing the survey, Bowman and Felix (2017) found, “Validation from faculty and staff was positively associated with goal and institutional commitment, . . . receiving validation from faculty and staff may contribute to a perception of a more positive campus climate,” and validation serves as a “significant predictor of commitment and intention to persist” (p. 244). The validation factor from faculty and staff in this study was statistically significant and demonstrated the positive factors of interactions with university staff on student persistence.

Manning et al. (2014) identified both traditional and innovative models for student affairs practice that emphasize student success and support. The models presented by Manning et al. were based upon the authors’ in-depth site visits and research on 20 educationally effective institutions as identified as a part of Project DEEP (Documenting Effective Educational Practices) and student affairs research and literature. Two of the student engagement models identified supported involving other staff into the educational process on a college campus. The first model was the learning-centered traditional model known as the seamless learning model. The seamless learning model emphasizes the “institutional philosophy that student learning has the potential to result from virtually all student experiences” (Manning et al., 2014, p. 118) including those that occur outside of the classroom. This learning model articulates that “every member of the institution can contribute to learning” and that “one’s contributions is not linked

to one's formal institutional role" (Manning et al., 2014, p. 124). Manning et al. then described an example of how a food service worker, or a grounds employee can contribute to the learning enterprise. This model serves as a traditional approach where all employees of the institutions are integrated into the learning experience and guided by the philosophy that anyone can contribute and enhance student learning regardless of their position or positionality.

The second model Manning et al. (2014) identified is an innovative model and called the ethic of care model that "focuses on care and relationships" (p. 132). The ethic of care model is grounded in the belief that "educators, therefore must provide personal attention and support to demonstrate to students that they are cared about, and that someone else will empathize with their failures and successes" (Manning et al., 2014, p. 135). One of the critiques that Manning et al. provided of the model was that it is labor and time intensive. However, if everyone across the institution framed their work, including custodial staff, from a perspective of care, one may wonder if they would be an impact on student success. Manning et al. (2014) shared, "Validation is particularly relevant for understanding students who may enter college uncertain" and that these expressions of validation "delivered by faculty, student affairs educators, and staff help students develop confidence in their capacity to learn, increase feelings of self-worth, and reassure students that they have something to offer to the academic community" (p. 135). In addition to Manning et al.'s research and data, this ethic of care is also demonstrated in several of the essays within Guzmán et al.'s (2022) *Campus Service Workers Supporting First-Generation Students*. The ethic of care model could provide the language with which to support, train, and influence supportive behaviors by custodians in the residence halls.

Kahu et al.'s (2022) longitudinal qualitative study on belonging in higher education focused on identifying how students within their first year of university talk about developing a

sense of belonging and how belonging supports student engagement and student success. The researchers followed 18 students studying at an Australian regional university throughout their transitional year from high school to college. Prior to starting university, Kahu et al. conducted hour-long individual interviews and then followed up weekly throughout the academic year with short weekly interviews. Although Kahu et al. (2022) underscored the complexity of belonging, their findings demonstrated, “Familiarity is a necessary precursor to deeper interpersonal and academic belonging” and “students need to develop an understanding of the everyday practices of the university, a sense of grounding to the physical environment, and feeling known by those around them” (p. 16). Students living in a residence hall and the custodian who cleans that building spend a significant amount of time in shared spaces which could encourage both groups of people knowing one another. Given the appropriate training and support, custodians could play a role in helping enhance belonging on a college campus.

In Guzmán et al.’s (2022) book, they sought to create a “unique collection of testimonials, critical essays, and first-hand accounts” to demonstrate the “significant contribution of campus service workers in supporting the retention and success of first-generation students” (para. 1). The essays provided stories of impact within higher education between campus service workers and students, and how “campus service workers help serve as a bridge that helps students stay connected to their homes and feel more comfortable—with a greater sense of belonging - in the university environment” (Guzmán et al., 2022, p. 2). As Wiggins’s (2022) study revealed, “Those cleaning and maintaining actions indirectly support the student success mission of the institution” (p. 45).

Relationships between custodial staff and students can have profound individual impacts. Fausto-Vicencio (2022) shared her personal story as an undergraduate student regarding the

relationship she built with Alba, a university custodian who cleaned the building where Fausto-Vicencio took most of their major classes on campus. Fausto-Vicencio (2022) shared how “the chemistry building had felt like a cold and unwelcoming place until [she] met Alba;” the relationship the two women built helped her “rebuild [her] self-confidence,” and “Alba became a crucial person that helped [her] do so” (pp. 89–90). Fausto-Vicencio and Alba were paired through a student–employee tutoring program where Alba was being tutored in English language skills. Their shared identities and experiences provided Alba the space to mentor Fausto-Vicencio and helped restore her academic self-confidence. This type of relationship is outside of the traditional bonds of a custodian and student; however, it highlights the importance of building cross-collaborative relationships within the institution, and this specific relationship gave Fausto-Vicencio (2022) the ability to “regain [her] confidence as a student” (p. 91).

Magolda (2014) identified knowledge transfer as valuable between varieties of employees, not just faculty or advisors, and students. Relationships are a key element of knowledge transfer; regarding a campus custodian, Magolda (2014) stated, “Vida understands the importance of establishing relationships, teaching, and learning beyond the classroom, and supporting students” (p. 5). This extension of the learning into nonclassroom spaces was researched from a residential perspective and through living-learning community research (Blimling, 2015); however, the research has not extended to how knowledge transfer occurs from staff in supporting roles, like a custodian, to a student. Understanding the how this learning occurs, and impact of this learning will only enhance the following notion:

Learning occurs both inside and outside of the classrooms, and faculty are not the only wise individuals capable of educating. Student affairs educators recognize and subscribe to this ideology; yet efforts to promote the cocurriculum (i.e., educational opportunities

outside of the classroom) historically have concentrated on narrowly on initiatives designed and sponsored by student affairs staffs, seldom acknowledging the potential educational opportunities that involve nonfaculty colleagues such as custodians.

(Magolda, 2014, p. 6)

Reaching out to engage in learning outside of the narrowly constructed spaces forces educators to flip the script on where knowledge is gained and who can teach that knowledge.

Lim's (2022) essay shared his experiences as an undergraduate student tutoring a university custodian, Young Duck Yun, on English language skills and the profound impact this experience had on him. When working with Young Duck Yun, Lim (2022) stated, "I didn't need to speak or act a certain way; with him, I could be my most comfortable, genuine self that, in the past, I could only be in front of family" and that these moments "all filled me with a warmth I had not felt elsewhere on campus" (p. 72). More pointedly, Lim (2022) stated that his tutoring partner "taught [him] how to belong" (p. 73). Although the experience between a tutor and a tutee could be seen as one directional, Lim's experience demonstrated that the tutor gained a sense of belonging and mattering at his university from an unlikely place, a custodian.

Guzmán's (2022) autoethnographic essay recounted the stark contrast of experiences specifically, growing up as first-generation Chicana woman of immigrant parents and then being a first-year student at the privileged and predominately white campus of University of California, Los Angeles. Guzmán (2022) described this juxtaposition of worlds by stating, "Ironically, going to college and being made to feel alienated there made me grow closer to the very people from whom I had sought to distance myself" (p. 144). Guzmán (2022) chronicled her first year by stating, "That first year, no one spoke to me and I didn't speak up in classes" (p. 147) and that it was not until interacting with campus service workers, residence hall custodians and food service

workers, who held the same identities as Guzmán, that she begin to find her footing at University of California, Los Angeles. Guzmán articulated wanting to drop out, but the campus service workers took notice of her and engaged with Guzmán in a way that helped her be seen.

Specifically, Guzmán (2022) stated:

Their small acts of recognition may not seem like a lot, but to a lonely, rejected, and homesick first-gen Chicana student, it made a world of difference to be seen and be included as part of a collective. I no longer felt far from home because the workers brought home to me. (p. 149)

This relational impact between Guzmán and a residence hall custodian and food service workers helped her feel seen, included, and a part of the campus community. These relationships had a positive impact on Guzmán's persistence at the institution and helped shape her identity.

The concept of mentoring could be used to imply the interaction between custodial staff and residence hall students, as Hansman (2020) stated, "Mentoring relationships have the potential to promote critical reflection and transformative learning among all those involved in the relationships" (p. 11). However, Hansman (2020) shared, "Mentors typically have more power in mentoring relationships through their positions within organizations or professional networks than do their protégés, which contributes to the creation of unequal relationships" (p. 16). The power differential between an individual pursuing higher education and an hourly staff member whose role is to clean their environment does not align with Hansman's (2020) reflection regarding power. As a result, mentoring was not explored; however, the use of the phrase informal mentoring occurred within this literature review. Hansman (2020) identified, "Informal mentoring relationships develop when mentors and proteges have common interests that bring them to work together to achieve personal or professional goals" (p. 12).

Amah and Escobedo (2022) used the language of informal mentorship when talking about Señor Mauricio's impact on students and staff in Campbell Hall. Amah and Escobedo (2022) asserted, "[The] informal mentorship opportunity that took place in the lively hallways of Campbell Hall had a similar effect to those which might emerge from conversations held in a counselor's or faculty member's office" (p. 116). Residence hall students and campus custodians who clean on-campus housing share a common interest: residence hall life; however, their personal or professional goals might not intersect with one another.

Chambliss and Takacs (2014) conducted a longitudinal study from 1999 to June 2010 at one institution, Hamilton College, as an individual institutional case to identify the "crucial experiences of a good undergraduate education" and took that knowledge to provide "methods for improvement" (p. 1). Both Chambliss and Takacs were intimately connected to the institution as one researcher was an undergraduate student there and the other had taught there since 1981. Hamilton College was a private liberal arts institution based in Clinton, New York that enrolled just over 1,800 students at the time of the publication. Chambliss and Takacs used data from the student perspective, not the institutional lens, to guide their research. This started with alumni interviews that guided Chambliss and Takacs with a random sample of 100 students from the 2001 graduating undergraduate class. The researchers then followed this class throughout their undergraduate careers and at least 5 years postgraduation.

In 2011, 84 of the original participants remained in Chambliss and Takacs's (2014) study. The study also used data from the annual institutional senior survey that was designed by the Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium, student essays collected over 5 years and focus groups with selected populations. Based upon their findings, Chambliss and Takacs (2014) provided students with advice regarding the college experience, specifically, "spend time with

good people” (p. 162) and “a great mentor - a trusted adult advisor - if one can be found, adds a tremendous advantage” (p. 163). As demonstrated in the literature introduced previously, there are times in which custodial staff serve as mentors to students in higher education. Chambliss and Takacs’s (2014) advice for students included the concept of “pick your places” (p. 164), which reinforced the notion that living on campus is beneficial to overall student outcomes. By researching residence hall custodians, a greater understanding of their impact within the university housing context could be improved.

Organizational Theory and Framework

Several theories and frameworks could have been used to understand the current study. As the researcher, the most relevant theories I identified included Manning’s (2013, 2024) feminist frame; Helgesen’s (1995) web of inclusion, which was the basis of Manning’s (2013, 2024) feminist frame; and Lipman-Blumen’s (1992) connective leadership. Each of these provided a different perspective, while each had the same central theme of valuing underrepresented voices and approaching and viewing leadership from a perspective that is different than the prevailing and popular approaches. Manning’s feminist frame served as the overarching umbrella under which the other theories can be tucked within as Manning identified both Helgesen’s and Lipman-Blumen’s work to be a part of the feminist approach to organizational theory in higher education.

Manning’s (2013, 2024) theory of organizational leadership, the feminist frame, was informed by Helgesen’s (1995) web of inclusion and Lipman-Blumen’s (1992) connective leadership model. Manning’s feminist frame served as the overarching theoretical framework this study as it related to both the individual and the organization. Custodial staff serve both as members of organizations and as individuals within that group, both connected and separate.

Understanding Manning's frame, the web of inclusion, and connective leadership assisted in framing the lived experiences and understanding the work of residence hall custodians.

Manning's Feminist Organizational Frame

Manning (2013, 2024) highlighted the impact of the feminist influence on traditional organizational theory in that "the feminist perspective on organizational theory challenged entrenched male-situated assumptions and values that drove structure, planning, priorities, incentives, values, policies, and practices" (p. 84). Manning's work focused on Helgesen's (1995) web of inclusion, which provides one way to organize institutions and organizations and the web "enlist different forms of communication, leadership, and power to change the norms and ways of operating" (p. 87). Specifically, the environment within a web is flexible, open, and responds to its environment. Communication within the web of inclusion is not seen as a source for power as communication "emanates from all directions and across all levels" (Manning, 2024, p. 88). This communication adjustment provides support to those at all levels within the organization. Understanding the feminist approaches to organizations might provide understanding of the experiences of those working within complex organizations as Manning (2024) shared, "Feminist approaches to organizations provide insights to anyone who feels outside of or alienated by bureaucratic, collegial, political, and other traditional approaches to organizations" (p. 96). Feminist theory seeks to inform organizational behaviors in a way that makes them more "inclusive, open, and collaborative" (Manning, 2024, p. 96). Using this theory provided insight into the custodial staff experience related to both their day-to-day work, but also as a member of a larger organizational structure.

Manning (2013, 2024) used feminist perspectives and thinking to view organizational leadership; thus, the feminist approach to organizational theory was explored as a part of this

study. Manning's work was heavily influenced by Helgesen's (1995) work on webs of inclusion. Manning (2024) described this concept as a feminist frame for organizational leadership and used Helgesen's metaphor of a web to represent "a transformed and transforming organizational structure" within this theory (p. 87). The feminist frame or web was described by Manning (2024) as, "Webs are adaptable, open, and responsive; with open communication processes as part of their functioning" (p. 87). The responsiveness of the feminist frame was noted by the way in which power shifts, specifically, "Administrative roles, lines of authority communication patterns, and other organizational features are not fixed but change according to the circumstance and task at hand" (Manning, 2024, p. 87). This shifting of leadership acknowledges there is not one set way of doing things and that people within and across the organization can lead. Reframing how custodians are viewed as leaders on campuses might assist in understanding their greater impact on the campus community.

Within Manning's (2024) feminist organizational theory rests the web of inclusion that was described by Helgesen (1995) as both a "pattern, a model for coherently ordering people and their tasks; and as a process, a way of thinking and acting, of behaviors and solving problems" (p. 19) that serves as a model for assembling organizations, power, and leadership that moves away from traditional hierarchical structures. The web of inclusion changes based upon the characteristics of the organization and the ability level and skills of those within the group (Helgesen, 1995). The flexibility within the web allows for flexibility within among the individuals within the organization.

Helgesen's Web of Inclusion

The web of inclusion was created by Helgesen (1995) as a response to traditional top-down leadership structures in organizations and to adapt to changing environments from both

internal and external forces. Helgesen's web seeks to flatten the organizational structures, value the experiences of all team members, and create improved places for individuals to work. The web, as designed by Helgesen (1995), "works as the spider does, by ceaselessly spinning new tendrils of connection, while also continually strengthen those that already exist" (p. 13).

Understanding the connections that custodial staff make with residents will assist in knowing how or if the web of inclusion exists within this environment. Understanding training and supervisory expectations will aid in learning more about the organizational structure within which the custodial staff work.

Understanding the nature of the web of inclusion is necessary as there are six characteristics that define Helgesen's (1995) web of inclusion:

1. Webs operate by means of open communication across all levels
2. Webs blur distinctions between conception and execution
3. Webs create lasting networks that redistribute power in the organization
4. Webs serve as a vehicle for constant reorganization
5. Webs embrace the world outside the organization
6. Webs evolve through a process of trial and error (pp. 24–31)

These six characteristics provide the foundation for the web of inclusion and describe how they operate in practice. The use of this theory in practice means web-style leaders lead and saturate "their organizations with a collegial atmosphere, which in turn enables people to focus on *what* needs to be done rather than *who* has the authority to do it" (Helgesen, 1995, pp. 20–21). This flattening and rewriting of who has authority, who owns the task, and how the knowledge is shared and created seeks to elevate the voices who had historically been at the bottom of a hierarchical organization chart. Traditionally, custodial staff are at the bottom of that chart due to

their positionality and their task orientation. Understanding the web of inclusion in relationship to this study assists in framing when and how custodians might interact with residence hall students.

Helgesen (1995) made several references to information as power when discussing the web, specifically that “web-style leaders infuses their organizations with a collegial atmosphere, which in turn enables people to focus upon what needs to be done rather than who has the authority to do it” (pp. 20–21). This decentralization of authority and power could increase the amount of flexibility and autonomy within custodial staff members’ hands and could identify ways in which custodial staff could or do support the overarching educational mission of institutions. Helgesen (1995) emphasized leadership roles, power, and the use of information as a weapon as working against a web structure by stating, “Those below the leadership level are given narrow information, just enough to enable them to perform their jobs, while information available to those at the top is very broad” (p. 21), which serves as one reason why leaders might not be willing to use this style of leadership to advance their organizational goals.

Hierarchy exists within higher education and in blue-collar work. Helgesen (1995) highlighted the role that positional power plays within organizations and its influence, “purely positional power leads many organizations to fall pretty to a heroes-and drones syndrome, which deprives those who have not achieved top rank both autonomy and support” (p. 13). Helgesen’s web works against the hierarchical model by building from the center of the organization outward and creating connections across the organization regardless of positionality within the group. If the web could be applied within the custodial role and higher education, would this enhance the educational outcomes of students?

Lipman-Blumen's Connective Leadership Theory

Lipman-Blumen's (1992) connective leadership theory identifies this leadership theory and the three instrumental styles that define it as relational, direct, and instrumental. This theory embraces the instrumental skills of empowering, networks, and persuasion to enhance leadership skills towards the collective good. In practice, "Connective leadership . . . connects individuals creatively to their tasks and visions, to one another, to the immediate group and the larger network, empowering others and instilling confidence, represents a crucial set of strategies for success" (Lipman-Blumen, 1992, p. 187). The research questions explored in the current study aligned with the concepts in this theory, specifically the role of connection, community, and empowerment.

Lipman-Blumen's (1992) connective leadership theory also influenced Manning's (2024) feminist organizational frame. The connective leadership style works against traditional reward structures and works to identify the role that supporters play within group or community success. As Lipman-Blumen (1992) identified, "Despite repeated calls for teamwork, the reward structure of American institutions favors primarily individual achievers, that is, stars, not their helpers" (p. 198). In higher education this type of reward structure is visible, and custodial staff are typically seen as "helpers."

Lipman-Blumen's (1992) connective leadership highlights the importance of interdependence within communities, specifically stating:

Connective leadership, which connects individuals creatively to their tasks and visions, to one another, to the immediate group and the larger network, empowering others and instilling confidence, represents a crucial set of strategies for success, not only in the workplace, but in our interdependent world community. (p. 187)

The residence hall community is typically a diverse space where multiple people approach the hall living experience differently; the paraprofessional resident assistant is usually assigned the formal leadership role on the floor, the resident is typically viewed as a community member or knowledge receiver of whatever information the resident advisor is dispensing, and the residence hall custodian is the service provider of any shared living space. Connective leadership could be used as a way in which to view the contributions of the hall community members, specifically, the custodial staff, differently. Manning (2024) argued for a new organizational view by stating, “People’s frustration with the inequitable power structures and disillusionment born when talents are un- or under-used provides an argument and justification for the inclusion of organizational forms beyond the traditional” (p. 96). The feminist organizational theory frame as informed by connective leadership and the web of inclusion provides a new perspective through which to study the contributions of custodial staff in higher education. These theories were used to develop the research questions and as the framework from which to analyze the data.

Summary

Through exploration of the literature related to custodial staff it provides an understanding of where the gaps are within the research and how this study supports expanding the body of knowledge related to custodians in higher education. The theoretical framework of Manning’s (2013, 2024) frame provided a way to align custodial experiences and the research topic with a theoretical position. Deepening the knowledge about the role custodial staff contributes to higher education, specifically in their support of on campus residents, could assist in understanding how staff further university goals. The next chapter focuses on the methodology of the study, specifically exploring the relevance of the methodology selection to the intended research topic as well as data sources, trustworthiness of research, and handling of data.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

This chapter focuses on the research questions, my positionality as a researcher, methods, data sources, data analysis, and ethical considerations. Qualitative rigor is addressed in Chapter 3 using Tracy's (2010) article and is embedded within each section to address qualitative quality within this study. My research topic required me to disarm my previously assumed knowledge and to check my researcher bias to accurately represent the narrative of the custodians as opposed to my own perceptions.

Research Questions

The research questions explored through participant interviews are outlined in this section. The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of residence hall custodians. These questions were used to guide interviews, document collection, and walk-throughs while serving as a guidepost when coding the data and used in the analysis of the documents and walk through photographs. These questions were as follows:

1. How do residence hall custodians describe the ways in which they interact with the students living in the buildings where they work?
2. How do residence hall custodians describe their motivation to support students?
3. How do residence hall custodians describe the training or expectations that are provided by the custodial supervisory staff regarding relationship building with students?

Resonance serves as a guidepost for high quality qualitative research to “meaningfully reverberate and affect an audience” (Tracy, 2010, p. 844). Understanding the lived experience of residence hall custodial staff may equip higher education administrators to improve their retention, training, and staffing practices on their campus. If conducted well, the resonance of

this study could occur through improved training, expectations, transferability, and formalized universality (Tracy, 2010). Researching custodial experiences assists higher education professionals in understanding the ways in which campus support professionals build relationships with students and what expectations or training they have received to assist them in that process. In addition to resonance, the significance of the study would be, as Tracy (2010) stated, “practically significant” in that it “serves to enhance and cultivate critical intelligence that leads to the capacity to engage in moral critique” (p. 846). Engaging in thoughtful research provided me, as the researcher, with the capacity to ask further questions regarding both the custodial experience, the student experience, and how those impact the educational enterprise.

Positionality Statement

As a researcher, my approach to this topic was layered and multifaceted. As a seasoned practitioner in higher education who worked in campus housing, I knew focusing on this research could make the on-campus housing experience better for both employees and students. As a former live-in professional, the custodial staff taught me about hard work, making a community better from behind the scenes, and doing the building’s dirty work where “an occupancy is either directly associated with garbage” or is “performed under particularly noxious or dangerous conditions” (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 415). As a student, I had no knowledge of who cleaned the dining hall in the building where I lived, vacuumed the corridors, cleaned the bathrooms, or made the building function. As an undergraduate student, these people’s work was invisible to me, and I did not connect the impact of their work to my experiences as a student. While working as a graduate student hall director, the custodial staff’s work was made more visible to me because I was responsible for a residence hall and one custodial staff member was dedicated to that hall. Although I did not interact with the custodian in an intentional way, our

interactions were positive and meaningful and provided me with reassurance as a new graduate student. In my first full-time role, it was clear that the custodian in my building was a leader. They were adored by students, solved problems, and assisted me in navigating tricky situations as a new professional.

My career, my view on residence hall life, and my interest in this topic were rooted in those experiences. Knowing this was my starting point for this study was both an advantage and a challenge. The advantage was this experience was both deeply personal and provided me with meaningful interactions regardless of the research outcomes. The challenge was ensuring I did not assume an answer before one was revealed through the analysis process. Throughout the research process, I used reflexive practices such as self-reflection to unpack my assumptions and experiences to ensure interpretation of the data reflected what was there as opposed to what I assumed I would see. Throughout the analysis process, continually rooting the data in the theoretical frameworks aided in a continual centering of the data as opposed to any predispositions that might have otherwise been present.

The goal of my research was to ensure those doing that work were not rendered invisible. Knowing I approached this study with these biases, I used self-reflexivity to ensure my work was appropriately sincere and “honest about the research process” (Tracy, 2010, p. 842). As Padilla-Díaz (2015) stated, the researcher must “set aside all preconceptions, judgments or prejudices towards a particular topic in order to make an objective analysis of the information participants bring to an investigation” (p. 103). Throughout this study, I worked to understand the assumptions I brought into the study and used reflexive thinking and writing to understand those thoughts. Sincerity is one of the markers of robust qualitative research because “it relates to being earnest and vulnerable” and researchers must “consider not only their own needs but also

those of their participants, readers, coauthors and potential audiences” (Tracy, 2010, p. 842).

This sincerity required me to step back from the study and consider it from multiple perspectives and approaches. My use of field notes, member reflections, and self-reflexivity was critical to ensure care for the research participants’ stories and experiences.

Method

Qualitative research focuses on uncovering data that “tends to be continuous rather than discrete, and the emphasis is on description and explanation more than on measurement and prediction” (Fitch, 1994, p. 32). Qualitative research seeks to understand and make meaning of participants’ knowledge and experiences and is not focused on a singular data point. Rigorous qualitative research requires a framework in which to accurately structure and situate the research methods, protocols, and data. Qualitative research is informed by the philosophical underpinnings of ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology (Creswell, 2013). Understanding each of these components helps situate qualitative study and enhance its rigor.

The research design used the basic qualitative research method. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) articulated:

Qualitative researchers are interested in how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an *understanding* of how people make sense of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience. (p. 15)

Use of interpretivism allowed me to record, analyze, and document how participants made meaning of their experiences as a residence hall custodian. One of the purposes of qualitative research is to uncover the multiple realities that exist throughout the research process, “when

studying individuals, qualitative researchers conduct a study with the intent of reporting these multiple realities” (Creswell, 2013, p. 20). The understanding and naming of multiple realities and perspectives is the ontology of qualitative research. Epistemology within qualitative research helps name how people know what they know through “the subjective experiences of people” (Creswell, 2013, p. 20). For this study, epistemology was informed by the constructivism perspective. The axiological assumption provides qualitative research with the ability to name and acknowledge the researcher biases and the value driven research. This is usually described within the researcher’s positionality statement, and the values guide the research purpose and question (Creswell, 2013). The methodology of qualitative researcher is “inductive, from the ground up, rather than handed down entirely from a theory or from the perspectives of the inquirer” (Creswell, 2013, p. 22). Aligning the appropriate methodology, epistemology, and ontology while naming the values and assumptions made by the researcher undergirds qualitative research and characterizes how it is unique and separate from the positivist perspective.

Tracy’s (2010) criteria for excellent qualitative research was used as a framework through which to guide the research process and to ensure its rigor. Tracy (2010) outlined eight “universal hallmarks for high quality qualitative methods across paradigms” (p. 837). The eight criteria Tracy (2010) described included, “(a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence” (p. 839). Using this framework ensured the identified study added as opposed to detracting from the qualitative body of knowledge.

Epistemology: Constructivism

This study used constructivism as the epistemological framework to guide how knowledge and information were obtained in this study. Using this framework allowed participants to share their experiences, beliefs, and attitudes related to their specific experience as

a residence hall custodian and to make making of those experiences with the researcher. Most qualitative research is grounded in the assumption that “people construct their own meanings based on their interactions with the world” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 11); this way of knowing is called constructivism. Crotty (1998) stated constructionism is the perspective that “all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (p. 42). While Crotty (1998) uses the word constructionism, what is defined is constructivism. Understanding the experiences of residence hall custodians and how they construct meaning of their work and interactions provided rich data from which to draw new insights and perspectives.

As Crotty (1998) highlighted, “Meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (p. 43). For this study, researching the experiences of custodial staff and understanding how they construct meaning of their experiences added to the body of knowledge. The use of constructivism brought together objectivity and subjectivity throughout the research process as human beings engaging in their reality and making sense of it. Crotty (1998) explained, “Because of the essential relationship that human experience bears to its object, no object can be adequately described in isolation from the conscious being experiencing it, nor can any experience be adequately described in isolation from its object” (p. 45). Crotty described the role of the researcher and participant as I, as the researcher, could not adequately describe or attach meaning to the custodian’s experiences without their participation and involvement and engagement in the research process. Qualitative research uses rich descriptive language to describe and show versus numerical factors to categorize.

Data Collection & Sources

This occurred through semistructured and open interview methods in which I asked minimal questions and participants could bring forth follow-up questions related to the topic. As an interviewer, this process required me to engage in conversing; however, the focus of the interview was on allowing the participant to engage and share their own meaning making and for them to share their own experiences. As Crotty (1998) asserted, this approach looks for “culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (p. 67). The role of the researcher is to take the data obtained through this process and “uncover and interpret these meanings” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 25).

Use of open-ended and semistructured interviews was consistent with the interpretivism framework. As Scotland (2012) stated, “Interpretative methods yield insights and understanding of behavior, explain actions from the participant’s perspective, and do not dominate the participants” (p. 12); this was accomplished through a variety of methods including open-ended interviews and open-ended observations. Providing an opportunity for meaning making through open interviews allowed participants the opportunity to share their full experiences, draw conclusions and inferences from their experiences, and engage in the meaning making process. This meant some participants spent time sharing on topics not related to the interview questions; however, this process enhanced the level of trust between the participant and me while allowing for new ideas and concepts to arise in the investigative process.

In addition to interviews, I asked the participants for permission to engage in selected field work observations, specifically asking the participants to walk with me through the communities they cleaned while sharing information and knowledge about the spaces they managed. This field work was documented through recorded conversations and photographs.

Then, the conversations were coded, and the photographs were analyzed via analytic memos. These observations provided a visual narrative for what participants described during the interviews. Participants were asked if they had any artifacts that added to their story as a residence hall custodian (e.g., notes from students or staff, observations and documentation of the spaces in which they worked); however, most participants indicated they did not have any relevant artifacts to the study. The documents, walk-throughs, and analytic memos assisted in answering the research questions by triangulating the information provided during the interview and providing a visual narrative of their work.

Data Sources

This study used data from (a) semistructured first-person interviews; (b) informal open-ended walk-through interviews; (c) documents provided by supervisors or publicly available, including position descriptions, manual, and a daily task list; and (d) photographs taken during the walk through. All of these data provided by participants demonstrated a richer understanding of their experiences as residence hall custodians and their relationships with students. As a researcher, my goal through the interview questions was to ensure the questions provided a jumping off point for participants to identify their experiences and to make meaning of them. As Crotty (1998) stated, “Meaning emerges only when consciousness engages with them” (p. 43). Providing robust questions that serve as a starting point for the interviews ensured reflection, meaning making, and understanding occurred throughout the interview process.

Tracy (2010) identified rigor as a marker of high-quality qualitative research, specifically ensuring researchers should “evidence their due diligence, exercising appropriate time, effort, care, and thoroughness” to their research and data (p. 841). This was accomplished through accurate and timely transcription procedures; use of appropriate data analysis, analytic memos

and reflections; and ensuring the research questions aligned with the purpose of the study. This study included interviews with 14 different residence hall custodians who worked on three different public, 4-year campuses in the Midwest. Interviewing 14 individuals who worked on three different campuses allowed for different perspectives to emerge as they each worked in different campus environments. The collected data included semistructured interviews of no more than 1 hour, recorded optional community walk-throughs with several participants, photographs taken during the community walk-throughs, and researcher observations made via reflexive memos. These data sought to ensure adequate rigor for this study. Participants were recruited through outreach to their campus's director of housing, specifically asking if there were individuals interested in participating. The directors either shared participant names with me, or a custodial supervisor solicited participants and arranged the interviews. Participants' work experiences, ages, and motivations for being a residence hall custodian were varied to ensure a diverse sampling of participants.

In addition to the interview experience, I asked permission to engage in a walk-through of the spaces the custodian cleaned and have them share about their experiences within that space. During this time, I specifically asked them to share about things they referenced during their interview portion. Eleven participants consented to doing a walk-through of their spaces; however, three did not think it would be relevant because they were in the process of summer cleaning and did not know their assignments as they were assigned to their work locations daily. As a result, these participants had a unique perspective as they were not always consistently situated in the same residence hall space.

Participant Data

All research participants had been currently employed as residence hall custodians for at least 1 year at a public, 4-year institution located within the Midwest. The Midwest was selected due to my proximity to data collection sites. To ensure data saturation, the goal was to interview 10–12 participants; however, I engaged in 14 interviews that were up to 1 hour in length. Kim (2016) stated the researchers’ “aim is to gather a sufficient depth of information from various types of data as a way to fully describe the phenomenon being studied, which is necessary for us to achieve richness and depth analysis” (p. 161).

Table 1 includes information about the participants with their pseudonyms. The table includes age range, length of time as a residence hall custodian, and if they worked at any other institutions of higher education.

Table 3.1. Participant Data

Participant pseudonyms	Age range	Years spent as a res hall custodian	Other institutions of higher education
Everett	20–30	1	No
Peter	20–30	1	No
Willow	20–30	4	Worked in dining hall prior
Holly	31–40	9	No
Casey	31–40	1.5	No
Ava	31–40	19	No
Iris	41–50	2	No
Taylor	51–60	12	Worked in dining hall prior
Nadia	51–60	24	No
Louisa	51–60	22	No
Josephine	51–60	13	No
Oliver	51–60	2.5	No
Sophia	60 plus	6	No
Lucy	60 plus	3.5	No

The participants' range for length of work within a residence hall was 1–24 years, with the average years of work as a residence hall custodian being 8.6 years. None of the participants had worked for other institutions of higher education aside from their current employer; however, two participants moved over from another area of campus to work as custodian in a residence hall. The age range of the participants compared to years of service is identified in Table 2.

Table 3.2. Participant Comparison of Age Range and Time as a Residence Hall Custodian

Age range	Number of participants with each age range	Average time as residence hall custodian by age range
20–30	3	2
31–40	3	9.8
41–50	1	2
51–60	5	14.7
60 plus	2	4.75

The three Midwestern campuses ranged in size, location, and institutional mission; however, they all fit the selection criteria of being 4-year, public institutions. This study did not examine institutional differences; thus, this concept was not a focal point of the results section. The participants were spread fairly evenly across institutions; however, four participants each were at two of the campuses and six participants were at the other campus.

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol provided a framework with which to start the interview process and was guided by the research questions. As the study's methodology was interpretivism, the questions served as the starting point, and I assumed a "listening stance" to learn from the participant without being direct in my questioning (Kim, 2016). The use of semistructured

interviews was consistent with the narrative interview process; as Kim (2016) articulated, “You prepare general questions you want to ask, but use them only to guide the interview, helping you maintain its focus rather than dictate its direction” (p. 163). Using different types of qualitative research questions allowed me to include descriptive questions, grand tour questions, and example questions that provided a wide variety of approaches to eliciting responses from participants (Bhattacharya, 2017).

The semistructured interview process aligned with Manning’s (2013, 2024) feminist frame in that it allowed all voices within the web to be elevated. Lipman-Blumen’s (1992) connective leadership also informed questions as I sought to encourage participants to think about their involvement in the community without directly using the word “leadership.” Limiting the questions, focusing on participants’ knowledge and not my knowledge and assumptions, and asking appropriate follow-up questions allowed for the participants to be a partner in the knowledge construction (deMarris, 2004). The following is a list of guided questions I used during the interview process along with follow-up questions for each individual question:

1. Demographic and background questions
 - a. Can you share with me how long you’ve been a custodian?
 - b. How long have you been a custodial staff member working in a residence hall?
 - c. What is your age range (20–30, 31–40, 41–50, 51–60, 60 plus)?
 - d. Have you worked at any other institutions of higher education besides this one?
 - i. If so, do you mind sharing in what capacity?
2. Tell me about your position and the work that you do in your role at work?

- a. What are some specific things that make you excited about your work?
 - b. Why did you choose to work in a residence hall?
- 3. Tell me about some of the students (residents) you work with.
 - a. Are there any particular stories that come to mind when you think about working with the students in your community? Would you be willing to share those stories with me?
 - b. What are some ways in which they have gotten to know you?
 - c. What are some ways in which you have gotten to know them?
- 4. Can you tell me about a time in which you had an impact on students' experience where you work OR what do you think the broader impact of a custodian is on the student experience?
- 5. What sort of training did you receive for your position?
 - a. What kind of training did you receive regarding student interactions or customer service?
 - b. Do you have any training documents that highlight this that you would be willing to share with me?
 - c. What are your supervisor's expectations related to residents either written or unwritten?
- 6. Are there any sort of objects or mementos that help tell your story as a residence hall custodian?
 - a. Tell me about them.
- 7. You have shared a lot of wonderful information with me. What is important for you to share and for me to know that I have not asked.

- a. What is the most memorable event that has happened to you in this position and what are the circumstances that surround that event?
- b. What is your favorite part of the work day?

Throughout the interview, it was necessary for me to be a thoroughly engaged participant and listener. Kim (2016) described the narrative interview process with two distinct phases: the narration phase and the conversation phase. In the narration phase, the researcher's main role is listener and observer, whereas in-depth questioning or interchange is allowed in the conversation phase when more clarification is needed based upon what was shared prior. I asked follow-up questions throughout the semistructured interviews, following a particular thread if something was raised that appeared relevant to the research questions, which is consistent with this data collection method (Bhattacharya, 2017). Early in the interview process, it became clear that Question 5 did not resonate with the participants. I decided to retain to the question for future interviews to maintain consistency; however, I did not anticipate this question would not provide much information. If this study were to be conducted again, Question 5 should be rewritten to be more relevant to the custodial experience and name specific items that could be considered artifacts.

Fieldwork and Artifacts

Through the observational field work, my intent was to better understand where “participants’ experiences and events occurred in the past and/or are taking place in the present” (Kim, 2016, p. 172). The intent of the fieldwork was to have participants walk with me through the areas where they worked to discuss some of the areas they described during the interview. This experience provided the opportunity to conduct informal open-ended interviews while they shared with me the spaces where they worked (Bhattacharya, 2017). This decision was supported

by Manning's (2013, 2024) feminist frame and Lipman-Blumen's (1992) connective leadership as both frameworks support valuing nondominant narratives and elevating and naming the contributions to those outside of traditional hierarchy.

During the first set of interviews, I discovered the walk-through was not the place to ask specific questions as participants were more interested in describing and showing their workspaces. As a result, some questions identified during the proposal were moved into the primary interview and the walk-through focused on specific mention of spaces during the interview and documenting custodial areas to capture their experiences as a residence hall custodian. By situating myself as a learner in these spaces, it elevated the custodian's role as the teacher, leader, and knowledge keeper of that space. This stance aligned directly with the Manning's (2013, 2014) feminist frame and Lipman-Blumen's (1992) connective leadership that seek to elevate nondominant narratives and identify leadership occurring beyond traditional roles. The fieldwork assisted with triangulation, adding a physical space to the participant narratives shared during the interview, and added to the data set by providing data from different sources. The observations I collected during the building walk-throughs were documented by recorded conversations, photographs, and researcher reflections postobservation.

Artifacts were identified as data source opportunity during the proposal phase; however, during the interviews, participants had a difficult time identifying any artifacts that were meaningful to them or that told their story as a custodian. During the walk-through portion, I took several photographs of items of importance for the participants such as a staff photo of those they worked with in the building, thank you notes, or door decorations. I analyzed these photos using analytical memos, and they are detailed further in Chapter 4. These photographs

and memos were used to help add to the stories provided during the interview and assisted in data triangulation.

Supervisors who assisted with participant recruitment provided additional documents or I found documents on a publicly available website. Specific documents provided included position descriptions, a manual, and a shift task list. These documents were analyzed as a part of the analysis process and analytical memos were used to capture relevant data. Coffey (2014) argued, “If we wish to understand how organizations and social setting operate and how people work with/in them, then it makes sense to consider social actors’ various activities as authors and audiences of documents” (p. 368). The documents assisted with understanding the context in which the participant worked and the intersection of their work and the student experience. As Coffey (2014) stated, “Documents and their analyses can also be used to understand personal lives and experiences, and to place biography within an in relation to social context” (p. 369). This additional context assisted in understanding the lived experiences of campus custodians.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process through which I took the data collected and examined it by coding, recoding, theming, and analytic memos I eventually used to describe and represent the data (Kim, 2016). Throughout this process, I engaged in reflection, recursion, and thoughtful analysis of the data, as Kim (2016) highlighted researchers must “engage in a detailed description of what they discover from the analysis, classify the information to the reader (discussing emerging themes), and provide an interpretation of the findings in light of the literature and their theoretical perspectives” (p. 188). The first part of data analysis included a close review of the transcripts and an analysis of photographs and documents. Going through the data multiple times allowed for the most salient themes to emerge from the data. Use of

Polkinghorne's (1995) pragmatic analysis mode allowed me to identify themes that were "inductively derived from the data" (p. 13). Polkinghorne's (1995) pragmatic analysis mode is situated in the concept that "the power of pragmatic thought is to bring order to experience by seeing individual things as belonging to a category" (p. 10). The use of this type of pragmatic analysis is "employed not simply to discover or describe the categories that identify particular occurrences within the data but also to note relationships among categories" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 14). It is this pragmatic thought that allows researchers to make sense of the data through careful analysis to find themes through the coding process but also reaches beyond the individual stories and seeks to make sense of the data as a collective body.

The interviews were transcribed using a computer genderized transcription for the first draft. Then, I cleaned up some of the initial transcriptions. Some of the interviews were sent to a third-party transcription service (i.e., Scribie) for both the computer generation and the cleanup process. After this process was complete, I listened to the interviews alongside the transcripts to ensure they were accurate and captured the nuances of speech, delivery, and storytelling that occurred during the participant interview (Davidson, 2009). The walk-throughs were recorded and paired with any researcher notes and photographs. The data were then analyzed and coded with the use of in vivo and descriptive coding methods for first cycle coding, using some of the participants' own words to organize the data and arrange themes (Saldaña, 2016). This process allowed for the voices of the participants to be present in the coding and the analysis. As a researcher, I deliberately chose this method to allow for elevating participants' narratives due to their perceived "lower-class" role on college campuses. The coding process required reviewing the data both through a first cycle coding method of in vivo coding and descriptive coding, and then using pattern coding as a second cycle method. Use of these methods allowed for the data to

come into focus and to highlight the pervasive themes present in the findings. Analytic memos were used to capture the photographs and documents data. As Coffey (2014) stated, it is “appropriate to undertake a thematic analysis of documentary data” and any documents and artifacts provided underwent the same rigorous process as the interview data (p. 370).

Manning’s (2013, 2024) feminist frame and Helgesen’s (1995) web of inclusion were the theoretical frameworks guiding this study. Both were picked because they identify the leadership contributions of all participants in an organization rather than the named leader and seek to flatten the organizational structure. The third framework, Lipman-Blumen’s (1992) connective leadership model, acknowledges that leadership comes from other positions within the organization beyond just the stated leader. Viewing the custodial role as a potential leader within a residence hall community could advance additional knowledge on the roles custodians provide within a residence hall. Throughout the data analysis, these theories were used to situate the data, serve as a guidepost for analysis, and assist in answering the research questions.

Through interviews, community walkthroughs, photographs, and documents, I used multiple sources of data from which to develop themes within the data and answer the research questions. Triangulation and crystallization assist in ensuring qualitative research is credible (Tracy, 2010). Through this study, the practice of triangulation required “multiple types of data, researcher viewpoints, theoretical frames, and methods of analysis” which “allow different facets of problems to be explored, increases scope, deepens understanding, and encourages consistent (re) interpretation” (Tracy, 2010, p. 843). The use of triangulation and member reflections aided in this study’s credibility.

Photographic Analysis and Evidence

Throughout the walk-through portion of the interview, I captured photographs to assist in answering the research questions. The decision about what and when to photograph was based upon the following criteria: (a) identified importance to the custodian as they were walking through the space; (b) areas or items that were noted during the formal interview portion; or (c) my insight and intuition grounded within the research topic. The photographs were then screened to ensure they met the overarching goals of the study. Removal criteria included duplicative data, or inapplicability to the research questions. In total, I took 105 photos during the walk throughs, and out of those, I wrote 42 analytic memos. The photographs were then analyzed through the process of analytic memo writing that focused on describing the photograph, what was seen or demonstrated within that picture, and surrounding circumstances (Saldaña, 2016). I also analyzed the photographs to see if they answered at least one of the research questions and how they connected to the theoretical framework. Lastly, the reflection included how this photograph connected to other parts of the study.

The photographic memos were then coded through the descriptive first cycle coding method. As coding occurred, a code book was developed and tracked to provide consistency throughout this process. This process was in alignment with Saldaña's (2016) visual data analysis process that states, "Codes within the memo derive *from* the interpretation of the visual *as* the analytic text is composted" (p. 58). Specifically, this means codes came from my interpretation of the photograph as I was writing my analysis of the photograph. My interpretation of the photographs was informed by the walk-through experience with the participant and my prior knowledge of custodial operations and residence hall life. Pattern coding was then used as the second cycle coding method to theme and make sense of the data.

Due to the volume of data, I decided to memo and analyze the photographs independently of the interview data. Although there was overlap in the analysis, this process recognized that the physical environment was separate and discreet from what was described in the interview. In the first cycle of coding, 44 individual codes were used; in total, 123 items of data were coded. The most frequent codes were signage (13), giving staff a name (9), and community expectations (8). The remaining codes had frequencies of five or less. During the second cycle of coding, I took these codes and looked for patterns, specifically inspecting the codes to identify any patterns throughout (Vanover et al., 2022). These codes were then analyzed with the interview coding to identify where they overlapped and intersected. As a result, the photographic data were embedded within the final themes.

Document Analysis and Evidence

Participants and their supervisors were asked to provide any relevant documents that they believed would be relevant to the study. This suggested list of documents to supervisors included position descriptions, staff expectations, evaluation framework, and any training documents. In total, five documents (three position descriptions, one custodial manual, and one shift task list) were provided by supervisors or I found them through a publicly available website. As Saldaña (2016) noted, documents should be “examined critically because they reflect the interests and perspectives of their authors” (p. 61). The authors of these documents drove the custodial work in the residence halls. Identifying relevancy and authenticity were the first steps in ensuring the documents aligned with the research purpose (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I determined the documents were credible because one was available on a public university website and the others were provided by supervisors working at each institution. One of the participants provided a

copy of their summer cleaning rotation to use as a visual to describe how that worked. Analysis of this handout did not occur because it was misaligned with the study's purpose.

All the documents provided underwent content analysis and then were described via analytic memo writing (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). This analysis focused on connecting any items in the documents to the research questions and theoretical frameworks while also identifying if it is connected to other parts of the study. The documents aided in triangulation and answered one of the specific research questions. In particular, the documents helped provide additional data to assist in answering Research Question 3: How do residence hall custodians describe the training and/or expectations that are provided by the custodial supervisory staff regarding relationship building with students?

Both the documents and the analytic memos were then coded with the descriptive first cycle coding method in NVivo. As codes emerged, a code book was developed and tracked to provide cohesion throughout. The coding of analytic memos was consistent with Saldaña's (2016) guide on coding and categorizing analytic memos.

In the first cycle of coding, 17 individual codes were used and in total, five items of data were coded (three position descriptions, one custodial manual, and one shift task list). The most frequent codes were interaction (7), expectations (5), and duties (5). The remaining codes had frequencies of four or less. The second cycle coding of pattern coding then took the first cycle data, looked for patterns, and worked to identify any patterns throughout (Vanover et al., 2022). These codes were then analyzed with the interview and photographic coding to identify where they overlapped and intersected. As a result, the document data analysis was embedded within the final themes.

Interview Analysis and Evidence

In total, 14 interviews occurred with residence hall custodians, in addition to 11 walk-throughs of spaces where they worked. Both the interviews and walk-throughs were analyzed and coded together because the physical spaces were connected and not separate from what was shared during the interviews. I used in vivo and descriptive coding during the first cycle coding method. I made this decision to elevate the voices of the participants and to provide a more evocative approach to the data (Saldaña, 2016). The in vivo method aligned with the methodology of a basic qualitative study and the epistemology of constructivism. Specifically, Crotty (1998) asserted, “Meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (p. 43). In vivo coding uses the participants’ words as they share their experiences. Descriptive codes were used to categorize a particular idea or experience.

I used several descriptive codes used throughout the photographic and document analysis in interview analysis as well. Throughout the first cycle coding process, as codes overlapped, they were organized with border codes. For example, the code “giving staff a name” was used extensively throughout the photographic analysis and was used 3 times as a code during the first cycle of coding of the interviews. Only data directly connected to the research questions were coded (Saldaña, 2016). During the first cycle of coding, as in vivo codes emerged, they were placed within larger descriptive codes as this helped with organization and clarity. Throughout the coding process, a code book was generated to ensure consistency throughout the coding process. After the first cycle of coding, the most frequent codes were motivation (46), role and identity (46), interaction (36), student support (36), and thank you (28).

The second cycle of coding, pattern coding, was then used to identify patterns and themes within the data to respond to the research questions (Vanover et al., 2022). Throughout this

process, each individual code was reviewed to ensure it was contained within the right code and represented the appropriate pattern.

Ethical Considerations

As this study involved human participants, it was important to consider the ethical implications of their participation. This study followed the Kansas State University Institutional Review Board policies and procedures and was approved by the institutional review board (IRB) prior to conducting research. Research participants were informed of the research study, potential consequences because of their participation, and that their involvement was voluntary. All of the data collected were kept on a password-protected computer. I hid personally identifiable information in the final data documentation. Identifying information included the participants' names, place of employment, and other details that were carefully removed to avoid participants being identified. Participants were asked for their consent prior to any photographs being captured. An IRB update was submitted after interviews to seek permission from participants to use a human transcription service, Scribie, to assist with transcription. The IRB update was approved, and some participants were contacted to request their consideration of the updated informed consent.

Tracy (2010) identified two other considerations related to ethics: situational ethics and relational ethics. Situational ethics require researchers to reflect upon their methods and data being exposed to ensure they are ethically sound and do no harm to the participant. Throughout my study, this occurred through researcher reflexivity. Relational ethics occurs when “researchers are mindful of their character, actions, and consequences on others” (Tracy, 2010, p. 847). Relational ethics were supported through building a positive, trusting relationship with the participants. This started by engaging in small talk prior to the interview, being respectful and

nonjudgmental, responding with empathy, being interested in their responses, and engaging in active listening skills (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2013). One situation occurred where the participant acknowledged some potentially challenging situations with their supervisor. I responded by simply asking, “Do you know who you need to talk with about that situation?” The participant shared that they did, and I was able to acknowledge the situation without engaging directly in that topic, thus keeping us focused on the interview questions. By allowing the participants to assist in guiding the research experience, it ensured a balanced approach that was responsive to relational ethics and rooted in the identified methodology and theopoetical frameworks.

Assumptions and Limitations

Some potential limitations exist within this study. Understanding these limitations and assumptions encourages reflexivity and assists in ensuring the study is rigorous. This study only examined the narratives from one position’s viewpoint, specifically the perspective of a residence hall custodian. In framing the research this way, this study limits the knowledge that could be identified through the narratives of residents and custodial supervisors. Having one perspective, specifically centering the custodian’s perspective, provides a better understanding of what is occurring and relates directly to the research questions.

The limited literature in the field is another limitation. In doing the literature review, different areas had to be explored to ensure there was an adequate understanding of the current state. This process included reading and reviewing K–12 literature, blue-collar work, and the limited work that exists within higher education. In higher education, there are few seminal documents such as Magolda’s (2016) book on higher education custodians; however, the research extended to include news articles, dissertations, and master’s-level and undergraduate

work. The lack of literature could be a limiting factor; yet, this study will hopefully add to the literature in this field.

As a researcher and practitioner in student housing, I entered the space in a way that could have situated me in a more powerful position than the participant. Balancing the power dynamic between researcher and participant in the favor of the participant took relationship building, staying true to the interpretivism, and acknowledging this differential. As Bowen (2015) expressed, trustworthiness may be a concern as participants “may say what they think the researcher wants to hear and paint positive pictures of situations that are not altogether positive” (p. 218). To mitigate against participants saying what they hoped the researcher wants to hear, Kim (2016) suggested the importance of building “rapport and a trustworthy relationship” (p. 102). Rapport building occurred through small talk, being an engaged and active listener, and responding with empathy. The first nondemographic question, “Tell me about your position and the work you do in your role?” provided an opportunity for the participants to talk about their work tangibly before moving into questions that had fewer concrete answers. This also aided in building rapport and creating a common ground of knowledge about the custodial position between the researcher and the participants. All of these factors aided in enhancing trustworthiness.

Recruitment could have been a limiting factor as participants were primarily recommended to participate by a supervisor or self-selected into the study. The self-selection criteria assisted in creating a participant/researcher experience as they demonstrated an interest in the topic. One of the delimitations I set as a researcher was participants had to have been employed for at least 1 year as a custodian working in an on-campus housing setting. Higher education is cyclical, and having a participant be employed for a full year ensures they have

witnessed and experienced most of the traditionally cyclical events that occur in the on-campus housing experience. It should also be acknowledged that, as a researcher, I believe custodians do have a positive impact on the resident experience. This belief was notably present in my decision to pick this as a research topic and my theoretical framework decisions in which I sought to flatten organizations and recognize nontraditional leadership contributions. Engaging in reflection and thoughtfully identifying the data versus what I was hoping to identify assisted in this study's validity.

Summary

This study used a basic qualitative study to understand the interactions, motivations, training, and expectations related to custodians and their work with the students within their hall communities. In total, 14 participants participated in in-person interviews and most participated in walk-throughs of the communities where they worked. Throughout the walk-throughs, photographs were captured to provide additional insight into their experiences. These data were then coded using a mixture of in vivo and descriptive coding methods where data were then arranged into patterns. Chapter 4 presents the themes present in the findings and provides greater detail on the analysis.

Chapter 4 - Findings

The current study was conducted using the basic qualitative method (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This chapter shares the findings of this qualitative study seeking to understand the interactions, motivations, training, and expectations of residence hall custodial staff members. The data were collected through interviews, field work observations, and a review of associated documents and photographic evidence. The analysis approach used was inductive (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and used a combination of in vivo coding and descriptive coding for the first cycle method and pattern coding as the second cycle (Saldaña, 2016). The coding style depended upon the data being coded. The findings from the analysis of the data offer new insights into residence hall custodial experiences. The research questions for this study were:

1. How do residence hall custodians describe the ways in which they interact with the students living in the buildings where they work?
2. How do residence hall custodians describe their motivation to support students?
3. How do residence hall custodians describe the training or expectations that are provided by the custodial supervisory staff regarding relationship building with students?

This chapter shares an overview of the data collected, the analysis processes, and the findings identified because of the inductive analysis of the data.

Presentation of Findings

This section presents the themes that emerged from data analysis. The data showed four identified main themes with several subthemes. Although the themes reflect most of the participants' experiences, there were instances where some participants did not articulate data connected to that theme. The themes discussed are (a) Adaptive Practices and Unacknowledged

Labor, (b) “I’m Here for the Students,” (c) Being Seen and Valued in the Community, and (d) “I Think the Building Would Probably Have Trouble Sticking Together if We Weren’t Here.”

Theme 1: Adaptive Practices and Unacknowledged Labor

The first theme, Adaptive Practices and Unacknowledged Labor, shares how the participants talked about their training and supervisor expectations. The training and expectations come together with the ways in which student support was identified by participants throughout the study. The subthemes identified within this theme are (a) training, (b) supportive behaviors provided by custodians, and (c) standards. Figure 1 demonstrates how first cycle coding moved into the patterns, which the resulted in the theme, Adaptive Practices and Unacknowledged Labor. The key within Figure 1 indicates which data source provided the code.

Figure 4.1. Mapping to Theme 1

Theme	Second Cycle: Pattern Coding	First Cycle	Code Frequency
Theme: Adaptive Practices and Unacknowledged Labor	Pattern: Training	Training Elements	21
		Training - Student Interactions	7
	Pattern: Job Duties	Building Focused	1
		Focused on task	1
		Duties	5
		Time on task	1
		Safety and Security	2
		Task Guidance and Execution	1
		Deep cleaning	1
		Work around	1
		Cleaning Up	1
		Work Environment	1
		Functional	1
	Pattern: Non-Cleaning Tasks	Beyond Cleaning	5
		Gifts Given	4
		Student Support	36
		Beyond cleaning	4
		Gifts Given	2
		Encouraging Community	4
	Pattern: Standards	Expectations	4
		Supervisor Expectations	19
		Expectations	5
		Attitude and Behavior	1
		Respect and Trustworthiness	1
		Trust	2

Key:

Interviews	Photographic Memos	Documents
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All participants shared information related to their training that focused exclusively on the tangible aspects of their role, specifically the cleaning duties. Most participants noted the training was hands on and involved either a peer or supervisor showing them how to accomplish their tasks. Ava acknowledged their training experiences while identifying self-directed learning behaviors to support work tasks, stating:

They came with me and were showing me how you clean toilets and stuff, or how they do it, and then you just pick up your own kind of ways. And they did that for probably about a month or so, and kind of showed you their way and how they do stuff, and then you just kind of pick up your own go-to system.

The training they received focused on day-to-day cleaning tasks. A few participants noted the lack of formal training, as Taylor said, “I didn’t get a whole lot of it, I was basically shown where things are at, have at it.” Taylor later acknowledged that the training had improved since they first began. Sophia acknowledged the improvements made with training and demonstrated a positive attitude toward the ongoing training. However, all participants noted they received some form of training and the person they received it from was either a supervisor, fellow custodian, or cleaning partner.

The person who provided the training influenced the participants’ training experiences. The training experiences identified ranged from Josephine’s that included “a room that was the training room . . . it was all hands on” to Taylor’s experience whose training was “a piece of paper.” Oliver noted the importance of others to “rely upon the person you’re working with.”

The custodians’ prior work experience influenced their training, as several custodians worked in other settings doing custodial work. This previous work specifically included work in hospitals, office settings, and dining facilities. This prior knowledge influenced their ability to accomplish the tasks and influenced how they interacted with residents. This wide range of training experiences demonstrates inconsistency with cleaning practices and expectations related to student interactions. It also relies on unwritten practices and expertise to be passed between staff, not formalized in the training program.

Training: Student Interactions

Most participants shared they were not trained specifically in student interactions. In response to this question, Holly shared, “We didn’t. We were just told that we’re supposed to be respectful and if what they need, we’re supposed to get it for them.” Everett shared they were trained on responding to serious matters, “but aside from that . . . [they were] told to be professionally friendly.” Participants referred several times to being respectful toward the residents and of their space; however, they were not provided with tangible ways via training to demonstrate this.

Participants shared fellow custodians provided tips on how to interact with the residents and the consequences of not respecting residents. Specifically, Ava noted, “You don’t want to upset the residents sometimes because they retaliate.” Oliver mentioned the use of adaptive techniques when responding to something upsetting, specifically “if something happens or something is sad. You don’t react to the student in a derogatory manner. If it is bad enough, then you do need to take it to the management.” Throughout the interviews, it was evident that although training on student interactions was minimal or did not occur, staff were sharing tips across their teams and relying upon this knowledge to frame their behavior around student interactions.

In reviewing the documents, references to interactions within two position descriptions included “pleasant, welcoming behavior and attitude toward public, coworkers, students, faculty, staff, etc.” in a position description and “communications with residents and guests to address needs and service requests.” Although general communication, being pleasant, and welcoming were identified as priorities within 2 of the 3 position descriptions, these practices were not realized within the training programs.

Supportive Behaviors Provided by Custodians

Throughout the interviews, the participants described several ways they supported residents. This occurred primarily when discussing student interactions. When describing these supportive behaviors, no custodian expressed displeasure or had concerns about the support provided. Student support was coded across 13 files with 36 references and was found throughout the data sources. Student support is not the primary function of a custodian; however, it occurs as a byproduct of their work within a residence hall. The custodian is connected to the residence hall ecosystem and, as these participants shared, provides a supportive function to the students living within their buildings. The supportive functions identified by participants included encouragement, retention tasks, responding to resident questions, tasks, and crisis response. Participants identified noncleaning duties that demonstrated a depth and breadth of things that go beyond cleaning tasks.

Encouragement. Providing encouragement to students was found within the data. As Taylor noted, “It’s sometimes like moral support, or you get to know them to make them feel comfortable, especially when they’re new. . . I just sort of make them feel warm and welcome.” Taylor then identified that her building had first-year students, and that helping them adjust to campus was necessary. Custodians were welcoming when they articulated their interactions with residents and supervisor's expectations. In their interview, Taylor reaffirmed their primary work duties by stating, “My main objective is to clean up and make sure their living spaces are tidy and fresh and clean and sanitized.” Taylor’s experiences articulated what other participants identified: they provided support and encouragement; however, they recognized their primary job was cleaning. Josephine expressed a similar sentiment by sharing, “Some of them even say that I help them when they’re homesick. But they just come talk to me and they feel better.”

Participant interviews supported the concept of providing encouragement through the transition to college or asking about how residents did on an exam.

Retention Tasks. Throughout the interviews, participants acknowledged behaviors related to retention but did not name them as retention tasks. Specifically, they provided coaching and academic encouragement to residents. Sophia shared two narratives in which they supported students' academic success. She said:

I had one student tell me, like, thank you so much for that time I said, I know college might not be for everyone, I said, but you can really do it if you put your mind to it . . . if you really want to do it, you get it in your heart that you really want to do it, you're going to do it. But if you just lagging, gagging around, you know probably not going to happen . . . but you came here for a reason. What is your reason? Yeah, to have fun, but how much fun? You got to balance everything in this life. And they appreciate that you know, and not that they don't probably hear it from their parents, but sometimes you hear it from another person sometimes.

Sophia identified ways in which they outreached to students regarding their academics, sharing:

Maybe about middle ways, this semester I might say, so how are you coming along? . . . I have some tell me, oh, . . . you don't even want to know, my dad is mad at me, really mad. I said, is it a reason why he's really got to be mad? Yeah, my grades are not looking too good. Oh, well what you came here to . . . for? What did you come for? I know to get my education, what are you majoring in, and they tell me I partied too much. I said, well what you got to do? Pick up the pieces and get back on it, you can do it. That's just me, I'm still cleaning a lot of times, I don't come to a complete stop when I'm talking.

Sophia specifically named ways they supported students' academic success by asking questions, providing feedback, and encouraging them to keep trying and doing their best. Sophia acknowledged that, sometimes, it takes someone beyond a parent to share information, so it is heard on the receiver's end. Another participant, Louisa, identified that they were multilingual and would speak to residents in their native language. Speaking in a native language could provide students with a bit of relational support when on a predominately white campus. Louisa shared that some of the residents called her "auntie," which was a term of endearment in their culture. This cultural connection and bonding could provide support to students who are far from home and assist in their transition to the institution.

Questions. Participants acknowledged the role they played in responding to general student questions. Taylor articulated this by sharing, "If they need help with something, maybe just knowing where something's at or asking a question like where's the bathroom, I guide them in that direction." She further stated, "[We are] not just here to clean, but I'm here for small stuff for the students." Taylor demonstrated this during the interview when someone walked into the space where the interview was occurring. They immediately stood up, went over, answered the person's question, and pointed them in the right direction. In doing this, custodians served as institutional navigators using both their trained and learned knowledge. The learned knowledge includes institutional knowledge to assist with practical items and knowledge about how to support residents.

Holly actively worked to ensure students knew they were there to answer questions and help. Holly shared, "I just make sure if anybody talks to me, . . . just let me know what you need. Tell your friends if they need anything" and then informed students how they could contact Holly. Holly demonstrated curating a supportive environment through creating a relationship

with residents so they can come forward with any needs. Louisa's identified practical skills taught to residents when they were asked to teach residents how to clean. Responding to resident questions demonstrates the interactive nature between residents and custodians while assisting students with the appropriate answers to support their college experience.

Tasks. Participants identified specific tasks they completed to support students and aid in student success. Although some of the tasks were job specific, others went beyond the scope of custodial work. The job-specific tasks highlighted the impact custodians had on the student experience when the building was clean. Three participants stated that a clean environment was supportive to students. As Casey stated:

Giving them a good . . . clean facility to do their thing and study and a good experience with the building. . . . I mean the buildings are old and just keeping a clean facility and giving them a place to feel at home, you know, because a lot of kids are far from home, you know, so being friendly, just setting a good example.

Making the connection between cleaning and student success is insightful and demonstrates how custodians connect their position to overarching institutional goals. One position description expectation stated, "Duties are performed in a manner that promotes a harmonious work environment that espouses civility and the University Principles of Community." The position description analysis highlights that the focus of the position is on cleaning tasks, but the documents do not articulate how it supports student living environments. Nadia highlighted this intersection by sharing, "Just being in a clean environment, . . . that's an impact with itself you know. Them coming somewhere and you know, you have people just working there for you and they're cleaning." Nadia's comments reflect how a residence hall custodian's day-to-day tasks impact the student's experience.

Five of the participants identified lockouts as a specific duty demonstrating student support. One participant shared with residents that they would assist with lockouts because they understood the financial penalty residents would face. Oliver shared the support they provided by assisting students with moving, stating, “They’re moving in or they’re moving out and, you know, got all this stuff. I will stop what I’m doing and go help them” and how they recognized the impact on that person’s life by stopping to help. Based upon the data, custodians interacted with residents through noncleaning supportive tasks.

Crisis Response. Three participants provided examples of a crisis to which they responded. Holly was the first responder to a student who was having a medical emergency and contacted the paramedics to provide support. This incident occurred during a break period and although the student avoided and ignored Holly upon returning from break, they still reflected upon the question, “What if I wasn’t there? What would have happened?” Josephine was the first to respond to two different microwaves fires, the first by hauling it out of the building so as not to make the situation worse and the second educating the resident by stating, “You gotta let us know, we gotta put that out,” when the resident tried to hide the situation due to fear of getting into trouble. Josephine worked in a historic building with limited accessibility that had a lot of steps. On move-in day, she was the first responder to a grandparent who fell down a flight of stairs and was injured. Josephine had also responded to a student with a broken bone in the hall when a resident injured themselves. Throughout the interview, Josephine described how she was present, able to remain calm, and then advocated for more support for those injured. Life in a residence hall does involve crisis management. Without being explicitly asked about crises, 3 out of the 14 participants acknowledged their role in responding to a crisis.

Standards

One of the areas explored in this study was related to expectations from supervisors regarding custodial staff interactions with students. The research question framing the study emphasized relationship building, and this was framed within the interviews related to expectations related to residents. All the responses from the participants acknowledged interactions between residents and custodians. Some of the expectations shared were specific and direct whereas others were vague and generalized. Taylor shared:

The biggest don'ts were like, you're there for the students to socialize, but don't, they really didn't recommend taking it outside of the work. I mean, you could talk, but not to, . . . not to get too chummy, and that's not why we're here. We're here for them, but we're not here to. . . . And she basically just said, a lot of small talk.

For Taylor, this expectation meant custodians were there to socialize, but to be cognizant of professional boundaries and "taking it outside of work." The supervisor in this instance provided an expectation of the level of talk that was expected and gave Taylor clear parameters. Casey experienced something similar regarding expectations from his supervisor, stating:

I think it was more just your basic what to do and what not to do, you know, stuff regarding boundaries, what to do if a student comes to you with this situation or that situation, just stuff that you need to realize, like what you can do and what you can't do. Beyond that, not really a lot . . . she's okay with, you know, having a friendly work acquaintance, little friendly, you know, you get to kind of talk to somebody and get to know them a little bit, but beyond that, I think she trusts us that we wouldn't go any further with anything, that it's just kind of common sense, I would think, but there really wasn't a lot of conversation about that type of thing.

Casey's experience highlights the professionalism and professional judgement that is expected of custodial staff. Two of the position descriptions identified trust and respect as job priorities. One noted the custodian position is a "position of trust – access to vulnerable populations" and the other noted, "Respect for and trustworthy behavior with public and private property." Communicating this within the position description enhances the expectations being communicated via supervisors.

Not every participant had clear expectations like Taylor or Casey. Willow and Peter learned about how to interact with students from their peers as opposed to being given expectations. Willow and Peter navigated their interactions with residents differently than others who were given clear directions. Several participants acknowledged their supervisor in helping them respond to negative situations. Louisa specifically acknowledged, "If something happens" with a resident in a negative way, "don't say anything" to the resident about it, but to let their supervisor know. This statement demonstrates an additional layer within the residence hall community, the workaround that occurs when something negative happens, and the directive to not respond or say anything to the student. Several custodians noted that when other custodians responded to students' negative behavior, there could be consequences from the residents. Not responding demonstrated both an expectation for some and an adaptive behavior to avoid negative consequences for others.

Several participants mentioned directions given by supervisors specifically naming how residents should be treated. Lucy was given the direction to "treat them well," whereas Holly was told to "treat them as they're one of your children." This overlaps with several comments related to being told to respect the residents and to treat students well. Two participants emphasized their supervisors' beliefs related to student relationships. Josephine identified, "But

our supervisor, again, he feels the same way. He wants us to, you know, interact with them as much as we can. It just helps with every situation. It's good to know them." In contrast, Oliver's shared information on management and how the "custodial department does not want [custodians] to build a relationship with the students or the dorm director or the building managers . . . because then the control that [the supervisor] has over [the custodian] is gone." Both Josephine's and Oliver's comments demonstrate the vast disparity between supervisor expectations. As a reminder, the participants came from three distinct campuses, and supervisors were not consistent throughout the study, nor was that the focus. Overall, participants were expected to be friendly, but not too friendly, and to treat the residents well.

Summary

Adaptive practices such as learning from peers, working around negative interactions or behaviors, and sharing knowledge within the custodial team about student behaviors aid custodians in completing both their job duties and performing tasks outside of their position description. Despite the lack of training and expectations, the custodians provided student support through encouragement, retention-related tasks, responding to resident questions, and crisis management. Participants identified how having a clean residence hall supports students' overall well-being. Based upon the data, custodians in this study supported students in both tangible and intangible ways; yet the training and expectations misaligned with this fact.

Theme 2: "I'm Here for the Students"

During their interview, Taylor described their role by stating, "I'm here for the students." This theme identifies custodial communication with students, descriptions of resident interactions, and custodial perspectives on students and the impact of their role in the hall community. The subthemes identified within this theme are (a) interactive exchange, (b) student

connections, and (c) views of students. Figure 2 demonstrates how first cycle coding moved into the patterns which the resulted in the theme, “I’m Here for Students.” The key within Figure 2 indicates which data source provided the code.

Figure 4.2. Mapping to Theme 2

Theme	Second Cycle: Pattern Coding	First Cycle	Code Frequency
Theme: "I'm here for the students"	Pattern: Student Interactions	Interaction	36
		Positive resident interactions	31
		Negative resident interactions	13
		Introduction	7
		Informal interaction	1
		Interaction	7
		Interaction expectations	4
		Personal greeting	2
		Positive relationship	4
		Ownership by residents	2
		Partnership	2
	Pattern: Values	Values alignment	1
		Institutional values	1
		Respect	13
	Pattern: Communication	Communication and interaction	1
		Communication with residents and guests	1
		Communicating expectations	8
		Communication to students	5
		Communication to students	12
		Clear direction	4
		Consequences	2
	Pattern: Communication Tools	Signage	13
		Semipermanent sign	1
		Communication tool	1
		Whiteboard	2
	Pattern: Outcomes of Work	Impact	7
		Accessible	2
	Pattern: Views of Students	Positive student regard	21
		Empathy for students	14

Key:

Interactive Exchange

The data provided several ways in which the participants communicated with students both in direct and indirect ways. Custodians identified providing gifts to residents, the importance of respecting the residents and the participants receiving respect, and the signage present during the walk throughs evidenced indirect communication and resident expectations.

Gifts Given. Two participants shared they spent personal money to buy candy for residents as a thank you. Ava shared, at the end of the academic year, “[they will] leave treats or something in the lobby for the students and staff, just to thank them for everything they did that year. Just to treat them a little bit.” This example highlights how custodians give in a tangible way outside of their work responsibilities and Ava recognizes the positive contributions of the students.

Respect. The concept of respect was woven throughout the data. Some participants noted respect as something given to residents and identified the consequences when custodians are disrespectful. Respect and the lack thereof could influence custodial–resident interactions. Sophia’s beliefs were personal in that “it means a lot on how [Sophia] treat[s] that person” and that residents should be treated positively. Oliver’s views came from their personal beliefs as they said, “This is how I would want to be treated.” For Iris, respect was woven into every aspect of their role, as they shared, “With respect, you know, because they’re students here [they have a] right, to live here. So, I feel like respect is everything, you know?” Oliver identified the importance of “treat[ing students] with respect . . . because this is their home.” Although Oliver’s views were one-directional, Josephine identified the impacts of respect going both ways. The

connection between a personal relationship and the amount of respect given to custodians was what Josephine identified by stating:

I mean, I feel like if the kids know you and they know you are a real person. You're a human being too, they tend to just respect you more. Yeah. You know and not be so dirty and disrespectful. I mean, you still have those kids. You're going to those too. But for the most part, once you get to know them, they're all really good. You know, they want to help you.

Josephine identified respect and students seeing the custodian as a "real person" as part of the conditions for creating a better hall environment. Lucy responded similarly, stating:

I got taught this by another person that has done this for years. Who's been here for 20 plus years . . . that this is their home and you don't want to tick them off. So, you're kind like that. And you say hello to them you greet them. And you say, have a good day or good luck on your test. Because then you're, they treat you better. You know it, I don't know it's respect both ways.

Lucy and Josephine identified some positive outcomes for their working environment when respect was present between residents and custodial staff. Their comments highlight the challenges if residents were not treated respectfully. Lucy indicated, "I feel like some little things happen if they don't like us or we're not giving them their respect." This statement aligns with Peter's thoughts when having to transition to a new building. Peter articulated this environmental interaction well when they shared:

It all depends, I think who that, who that custodian . . . like for me there were some days where I would be in one dorm building and they it keep it up, and then they will move me to a different dorm building and it looks like a disaster because it is either, the custodian,

hasn't been doing a good enough job . . . and the kids don't like it. It's because maybe the custodians doesn't really care for the students . . . I think that's a big difference, I think, between taking care of the kids and then, a custodian, not thinking about the kids and the surroundings or the dorm.

Peter shared their hypothesis of what happens when the custodian does not think about the building nor its occupants. Lucy articulated the impact of coworkers as well, sharing, "If somebody else has been there for a while, you can tell they must not have been very nice because, you know, it'll be bad (laughter)." Although Peter and Lucy indicated the impact of poor resident/coworker interactions, they did not articulate, nor were they asked to expand upon how they would then respond in that new environment.

The data demonstrated that participants did respect residents, and there were mutually beneficial outcomes when the residents respected the custodians. With the limited training data and position descriptions, information existed about interactions; however, staff did not indicate during the interviews how they were encouraged or trained in building positive relationships with residents.

Community Expectations and Communication. During the walk-throughs, several items demonstrated how custodians and hall staff communicate community cleanliness expectations to residents. Peter articulated how the white board located at the entrance to the community restroom was used to share updates, provide reminders to residents, and to highlight important community information. Josephine's community included a whiteboard; however, it was located on a custodial door labeled "sink room." This whiteboard showed how they communicated and received messages from residents. At the time of the photo, the whiteboard read, "Welcome! 😊" This was different than Peter's whiteboard where the management of

communication was unclear. Josephine used their whiteboard to specifically communicate with the resident community.

Throughout several walk-throughs, signs outside of community restrooms indicated the cleaning times. For one campus, the cleaning time indicated exactly when residents could expect their space to be cleaned. For the custodians, it communicated when they needed to do that work and the exact amount of time needed to do it within. One sign was dressed in fancy font articulating, “Thank You, Your Custodian.” This style choice made me question if the designer was attempting to dress up the “dirty work” occurring or to elevate the role the custodian played in making the community look good. This sign additionally indicated the student expectation of “please use a restroom or shower room on another floor during these times.”

On a different campus, the cleaning time sign communicated expectations; however, the approach was different. This sign did not ask residents to use another space during cleaning, but simply read, “Please exercise caution due to cleaning in progress.” Rather than barring students from the restroom during cleaning times, this one took a different approach by making residents aware of what was going on and allowed them to use their best judgement. This sign appeared to balance some of the situational power between residents and custodians by putting the judgement into the students’ hands on what to do with that information. This approach could be considered a more collaborative partnership between residents and custodians.

Other signs communicated expectations with residents beyond cleaning times. One sign was posted in a communal bathroom and indicated all of the expectations for residents in the bathroom. It had a very specific graphic on what should and should not be flushed down the toilet, and how to wash hands properly. It emphasized that the bathroom was shared by everyone, stating, “Please do your part.” This was clearly developed by a marketing team and influenced

by the facilities staff. This sign was a vinyl application and not a paper sign, which suggests that it is a more permanent communication piece. This was an example of communication with students about their shared spaces. It was a one-directional interaction that supported the students by providing clear boundaries and supports the custodians by hopefully addressing things before they became an issue.

As a researcher, understanding the communication of community living expectations between custodians and residents added additional insight into the study. In this study, communication tools enhanced the on-campus living experience by providing clear boundaries, naming the challenging areas that arise from communal living, and bringing residents and custodians together as named partners within the living environment.

Student Connections

Throughout the interviews, participants identified their interactions with residents. These interactions were separate and distinct from staff interactions, which were coded separately. Custodial staff interactions with residents exhibited positive, neutral, and negative interactions. Understanding these interactions helped address the research question.

Introductions. Four participants identified introducing themselves as a behavior they exhibited to help residents and families feel welcome. Taylor enjoyed meeting new people and shared, “Especially at the beginning of the school year, everything’s fresh and new, I always introduce myself.” Sophia used the introductions to extend a welcome, sharing, “I want them to feel very welcome.” The excitement of the start of the year was contagious as Josephine talked about welcoming through the move-in process and finding out “who’s going to be on your floor and your house fellows.” Josephine then said, “To me, that’s always exciting. I love that.” During move-in, Nadia shared, “When I see them, I introduce myself and I just let them know

that I am the custodian of their floors and if they need anything, you know, just let me know.”

Two of the participants reported having a “meet your custodian” event hosted by hall staff to encourage residents to get to know their building’s custodian. Welcoming students to the hall community to the hall community attached the custodian to the hall community in positive ways and communal ways.

Positive. Participants articulated the positive ways in which they interacted with residents in their communities. This experience was coded within the data 31 times as opposed to negative interactions, which were coded 13 times. Taylor articulated a positive interaction with residents, stating:

[When they] make a spill or something and they’re always apologetic most of the time, 90% of the time, “hey, I’m sorry.” They even let you know, “hey, I made a mess over there, do you want me to help you clean it up?” And that’s, I was like, “no, I’ve got it thank you for letting me know.” So to think, it’s a lot of positive interaction with them.

Ava articulated how interacting with residents “makes [a person] feel good.” Sophia articulated how when they needed to talk with residents being in the bathroom during cleaning times, how the residents would “tell [her] they were sorry and they apologized and everything.” Ava said, “And I feel that they were honest about it. If they wasn’t, they sure didn’t do it again.” For Josephine, they encouraged positive interaction “go(ing) out of [her] way to say hi.”

Having students initiate the interaction was received positively from Everett when they shared, “There was one guy who would say good morning to me every day when he saw me, and it was nice.” Nadia referenced students’ interactions by articulating, “Some of them say ‘hi, good morning.’” Holly indicated that residents said hello to them when passing in the hallway because “they already know [her]” which was similar to Lucy’s description of greeting students. Peter

shared that their interactions with residents usually involved the resident interacting first, sharing:

If there's somebody that comes up to me, and they say "good morning" I'll start interacting and we'll just talk about stuff. You know. Stuff, "how's it going in your classes?" Usually, it's just I say, "good morning" to them and they say, "good morning" back, like "you guys have a good day, you know?" Um, but sometimes, like I said, they'll be like interactions where I say, "how how's the day going?" You know, "anything new?"

Casey's approach was like Peter's in that they let the resident navigate the interactions. Casey indicated, "I kind of let them kind of take it to where they want to. They want to talk and be friendly, I will." During the interview, Casey reflected upon student interactions, indicating "[I] think back and think, that person was really nice, or that was one of my favorite students, or I'll talk to them throughout the year multiple times. I just kind of wish them good luck." Participants noted most of the conversations they had with residents were surface level but were held in positive regard. For Oliver, everyday conversations encouraged positive interactions. Oliver described this interaction,:

If I go into a kitchen and somebody is cooking "mmm, that smells good. What are you (cooking)?" You know, just basic everyday conversations, right? I think that in itself helps them and helps me, because otherwise it's you're the cleaner they're the residents and it draws that line . . . it gives you more of a personal feeling throughout.

Positive interactions with residents persistently emerged within the data. Identifying and knowing these interactions exist between custodians and residents could aid in deepening the

understanding of hall life to aid in enhancing training and expectations related to student-custodian interactions.

Negative. Some participants noted negative interactions occurred between themselves and residents. Ava indicated retaliation occurred between students and custodians. Ava shared, “[One custodian] would get pissed, and he’d vocalize. And I’m sure they heard, and they would pee in the mop bucket. They would spit chew in the showers and stuff. You got to be nice, or they retaliate in ways.” This example indicated that being nice to residents was one way to avoid negative interactions. For Sophia, they shared a story where a student “just came in [to the bathroom while they were cleaning]. They didn’t say nothing. They just acted as though [Sophia] was not in there.” Ignoring the custodian and making them feel invisible provided a negative interaction. For Nadia, it was about the lack of interactions and response. Nadia shared, “I say hi. They don’t say (anything). I leave them alone.” Further, Willow described the behavior and some students as “kinda rude.” Willow said, “Like you say good morning and just walk past you without acknowledging you.” The experience of being ignored showed up within the interviews and participants acknowledged it as problematic behavior.

Peter described the impact of work when students did not abide by the cleaning times, sharing:

Some kids, just have a hard time understanding . . . one person could be in the bathroom and is there every single day of the week, when we start and then all you can really do is just keep telling them without getting frustrated at them.

Peter’s restraint in not getting frustrated connected to Ava’s note about not wanting students to retaliate. For Lucy, their frustration arose when students left exceptional messes. In particular, they shared, “And then we have the ones that they’re stinkers. We’ll be walking down the hall in

the morning. And it's like, 'what the heck?'" when referring to large messes left behind. These experiences indicated that negative interactions occurred between residents and the participants; however, these did not dominate the narrative in the interviews. The participants selected into these interviews or were recommended by their supervisors. This could potentially indicate those participating generally had positive interactions with residents because they were willing to participate in interviews related to their work and student interactions.

Views of Students

Throughout the interviews, custodians demonstrated empathy for the experiences of students and how they believe custodians impact the resident experience. Understanding how custodians view students, the positive regard they have for students, and how they describe their impact could add to their motivation to interact with students.

Impact. During the initial interviews, I asked the question, "Can you tell me about a time in which you had an impact on a students' experience where you worked?" However, I soon realized this question did not address what I was actually trying to learn about, which was how custodians described their impact on the student experience. Upon this reflection, I edited the interview protocol to edit the question to asked, "Can you tell me about a time in which you had an impact on a students' experience where you worked OR what do you think the broader impact of a custodian is on the student experience?" This resulted in a better understanding of how custodians viewed their role and the impact.

Although not all participants were given the alternative question, for Everett, the answer was practical because they believed custodians "keep student experiences in the residence hall, um, moving, uh, more smoothly, like taking out trash." Josephine's response linked to practical support for health and wellness, as they said, "I would hope somebody would be concerned

about their health.” For Peter, their response aligned with practicality; Peter said, “If we help the students, you know, the certain things that the student won't be able to clean, we have to do it for them or something . . . because everybody wants a nice clean bathroom and stuff.” One participant, Holly, shared that they did not believe custodians had an impact on the students’ experience. Understanding how participants perceive the impact of their role could be a topic for future studies.

Positive Student Regard. Some participants regarded residents positively when discussing them throughout the interviews. For Taylor, they said, “[I] think the girls here are really nice” and shared how the students had good manners when talking about the community in which they worked. Sophia shared their appreciation with me about residents but also articulated that they shared it with students too. Sophia shared that they told students when they shared their appreciation Sophia’s work, Sophia shared back, saying, “I appreciate you all too for being here. Because without you not being here, I wouldn't be here.” Out of all of the participants, Sophia talked the most positively about residents throughout the study. Sophia shared, “[On the floor] where I’m working at, I want them to feel welcome.” When people remarked to Sophia about the end of the academic year, Sophia said, “The people will be like, ‘Oh, I bet you’re so glad that kids are leaving.’ No, not really. I'm not.” At the end of the interview, Sophia expressed gratitude for sharing their experiences and thanked me for being there. Sophia was clearly a positive influence within their community and those with whom they interacted.

For Iris, the “college kids” were what made them excited about their work, like Willow sharing, in addition to their coworkers they “like the students, too.” Willow added to their response and identified that without the students, “[they] wouldn’t have a job.” This positive

regard for residents could influence their empathy for residents as well as how they approach interacting with students. For Peter, this positive regard connected to their work. Peter shared:

Especially residential area people that I think care about the students and our buildings making buildings clean, clean and stuff because they care. . . . I know there's a lot of people, . . . residential custodians that do a good job because they say that they do it because of this stuff (caring).

Peter then went on to share how their work was meaningful and how the interactions between themselves and their students were regarded positively. Peter shared:

Everything is (in) every dorm building I think is meaningful because . . . you can always interact with different kids, and there's always going to be someone who, you know, in a dorm building who is going to be like “keep up the good work and not stop.”

Limited examples existed within the data of custodians expressing frustration regarding residents or their work.

Summary

Within this study, most of the participants regarded students positively, articulated the student perspective and their purpose for being on campus, and shared the ways in which they communicate and interact with residents. This communication occurred by interacting personally with residents or via signs that were observed during the walk-through portion. Understanding how custodians describe their interactions with residents supports answering the first research question.

Theme 3: Community Contributions while Being Seen and Valued

The theme, Community Contributions While Being Seen and Valued, acknowledges the ways participants talked about their interactions with staff and how they were supported,

acknowledged, and thanked within the communities where they work while demonstrating their contribution to the community environment. The subthemes identified within this theme are (a) staff interactions, (b) acknowledgement, (c) outward expressions of visibility, and (d) stewardship. Figure 3 demonstrates how first cycle coding moved into the patterns which the resulted in the theme, “Community Contributions while Being Seen and Valued” The key within Figure 3 indicates which data source provided the code.

Figure 4.3. Mapping to Theme 3

Themes	Second Cycle: Pattern Coding	First Cycle	Code Frequency
Theme: Community Contributions While Being Seen and Valued in the Community	Pattern: Nonresident interactions	Staff interactions	1
		Hall staff interactions	23
		Coworker interactions	14
		Supervisor interactions	3
	Pattern: Gratitude and Thanks	Collecting thank yous	4
		Gifts received	4
		Thank you	4
		Unexpected and special	1
		Thank you	28
		Appreciation	6
		Naming contributions	3
	Pattern: Community Connection/Involvement	Giving the staff a NAME	9
		Giving staff a NAME	3
		Personalizing a space	2
	Pattern: Custodians as Community Members	Inclusion/community membership	5
		Inclusion	2
		Greater good	3
		Intentionality	3
		Shared environment	3
		Shared responsibility	2
	Pattern: Custodian's Interaction/Views of Hall Community	Encouraging community	9
		Home	5
		Customer service	6
		Lack of personalization	1

Key:

Interviews

Photographic Memos

Documents

Nonresident Interactions

Throughout the interviews, participants shared information related to their interactions with their coworkers and hall staff. Although questions were directed to participants related to interactions with students or regarding supervisor expectations, they were not explicitly asked about these types of interactions; however, they continued to emerge during the data analysis. There were limited references to supervisor interactions within the data; however, they were

limited and either acknowledged high positive regard for their supervisor or disdain for their supervisor and as a result they are excluded.

Coworker Interactions. Coworker interactions were referred to in nine of the interviews and coded 14 times within the data. Participants described both the positive and negative interactions with coworkers and the impact on their work satisfaction. One participant, Ava, described both the positive and the negative. Ava shared about one fellow custodian when she said, “He likes to tell jokes and stand around and stuff. He chit-chats with the front desk and students, which that’s good, but he can’t do that all the time. He doesn’t work.” This quote articulates the positive interaction between staff and students, but the negative outcome of lacking in work productivity. Peter and Oliver shared their frustration when they were moved to a new building where the custodian previously in that space underperformed their duties. They shared frustration with the level of work quality or student conflict when they were moved into a different building and how that had a negative impact on the hall environment and their experiences.

Kindness, being pleasant, and respecting one another were cited by participants as positive coworker relationships. Casey shared that friendships were a positive outcome from their work on campus, stating, “Some of the people that I’ve met here have become my good friends.” Iris articulated this concept as well, stating, “I love everyone here, my coworkers . . . and it’s a great work environment too.” This positive interaction among peers could promote higher work satisfaction and positively impact how the role is perceived. Several participants worked full time prior to working as a residence hall custodian. Holly acknowledged the role that having friends who already worked on campus and how the friends encouraged their application to the position. Although not the primary focus of this study, instances describing coworker

interactions frequently occurred through the data, acknowledging the role that they play in the participants' work experiences is necessary.

Hall Staff Interactions. Hall staff are defined as students or professional staff members who work within the building as noncustodians. In the hall environment, this includes resident assistants (RAs; i.e., paraprofessional staff) and full-time residence life professionals (i.e., residence hall directors). There were 23 references to hall staff interactions across 12 interviews. Participants noted the importance of interacting with hall staff and the role that student staff play in introducing the custodian to residents, such as in Nadia's case, and addressing issues as they occur in the hall. One of the community management pieces involved custodians sharing with hall staff when there were issues. For example, Oliver shared:

I made it a point to talk to the dorm director, and that's one of the reasons that it worked out so that she. I talked to her. I made it a point to talk to the RAs, um showed the students that I'm human. You're human.

This example aligns with Nadia's interactions with hall staff, when they shared, "They come ask you 'if everything is okay?' 'Have we gotten any problems' you know. . . . I think in that type of way we get to know one another being able to talk." Interacting with others who also manage the hall enhances the custodial experience and supports the communal living environment. As Holly noted, "If you get a good relationship with them, I feel like they will try to explain to the students and they'll have your back about if there's any mishaps in the building and everything." This concept of "having your back" during any challenging issues" provided support to Holly and her work. For Peter, the interactions enhanced their confidence. Peter said, "To the RAs . . . to say 'it looks good, keep it up' you know. And that just gives me confidence that okay, I just gotta keep

making the building look nice, make it nice and clean.” Positive hall staff interactions identified how hall staff support custodial staff members.

Acknowledgement

When participants were asked about interacting with students, they often cited being thanked for their work. Within the coding process, the code of “thank you” was used 28 times across 14 interviews and was used 4 times within the photographic evidence. Participants noted being the recipients of gifts from residents, particularly notes, a painting, candy treats, flowers, a cup of coffee, cards, and verbal thank you messages from residents and hall staff.

Lucy described an instance where the institution’s President brought the campus custodians together to thank them personally and provided a fun social break during their work week. Lucy shared the impact of the President’s presence on campus by stating, “Wherever we are, he would stop and thank us.” Josephine described former residents bringing a cup of coffee to thank them for their contributions. Oliver noted, “Even as like I’m sweeping down the steps and students are coming by and it’s like ‘We really appreciate you’. That that whether you’re expecting it... It’s nice to hear.” Students acknowledging the custodian and their contributions came in high regard from participants. As Holly shared, “There’s some of the students that it makes it worth coming to work because they’ll say thank you so much for doing this,” encouraging positive satisfaction and interactions between residents and custodians.

For Sophia, when talking about the situation, they got emotional when discussing the impact of being thanked. Residents wrote personal cards thanking Sophia for their contributions. As Sophia shared:

When the kids they made the cards. I don’t want to get teary-eyed because I would never have thought that they would be thinking of me again like I told you. And they know it

meant a lot to me because I get very teary eyed at words, because I'm like, wow, you guys didn't have to do that. And they know they didn't have to do that, but that meant a lot to me, memories, memories.

Sophia went on to share how the behavior continued despite residents changing from year to year. She said:

Some of them are gone, but still the ones that are new do the same thing. And I don't expect that, because again, you get new people in all the time. I don't know how anybody feels. But I think it means a lot on how I treat that person.

Sophia then went on to connect this to an overarching concern related to customer service and interactions. She said:

I am a definite greeter. I just feel the same. I mean, it's beautiful to do anyway. You hardly have customer service no more, with anybody. Very little you can find to say it's time for people to be nice and really mean it from their heart.

This concept of being thought of and appreciated for the work that was occurring deeply moved Sophia. The thanks given resonated deeply with the participants as an acknowledgement of their work. Nadia found personal satisfaction from the appreciation received from students, as she shared:

Just knowing that the students are satisfied because you have a lot of students come and just saying thank you. How they appreciate, you know, having a clean bathroom you know a clean den. Somewhere, that they are comfortable at. So that that makes me happy.

Peter shared the thanks received at the end of the year, specifically stating, "A big thank you card for everyone that was working. . . . having a whole bunch of RAs maybe hall directors, named signed on. Thank you for doing what you did this year. The buildings wouldn't be clean without

you.” After sharing this example, Peter sat back with a satisfied smile on their face. Peter clearly cared deeply about keeping the building clean and appreciated being noticed for their efforts. For Josephine, student recognizing something person had an impact, they shared, “They wished me a happy happy birthday. I thought that was pretty neat..” The intersection of students and hall staff thanking the custodians brought them into the fabric of the hall community. This aided both in appreciating them for their work and solidifying their status as a community member.

During the walk-through portion of the interviews, several artifacts identified gratitude and community membership within hall life. Taylor showed me two photos located in their break room. The first photo was a picture of the student staff and custodial team from that particular year. The frame had writing on it that read “BUILDING Hall, Year.” The custodian shared that this photo was given to her by the full-time person who oversaw the building. In the photo, everyone was gathered closely together, and no one stood separated from the others. The effort needed to capture that picture with students who had variable schedules would have taken some effort.

The second photo was in a frame with a larger border around it. On the border, there were personal messages to the custodian. Some of the messages read, “Thank you for all you do,” “You guys are so wonderful,” “Thank you SO much,” and “You rock.” This photo was from the student staff in the building where the custodian worked. Showcasing this photo in the breakroom implied that the image held high importance to the custodian. The personal messages around the photo demonstrated intentionality and specificity to the custodian’s work. These photographs displayed the positive relationship between custodians and building staff and an outward sign of appreciation for the custodian. Positive working relationships between hall staff and custodians would likely enhance overall hall management.

Other participants shared notes of gratitude with me during the walk throughs. On the inside of Louisa's custodial closet, they had a die cut sun that said, "You add a ray of sunshine to [hall name]." The die cut had weathered; however, it clearly impacted Louisa as they retained it on the inside of their closet. For Josephine, the exterior of their custodial door had several saved signs including a "Happy Custodian Appreciation Day" sign that included hall staff signatures and messages and a different sign that stated, "Thank you for all you do to keep our buildings and students safe and healthy." The first sign demonstrated appreciation whereas the second sign explicitly names Josephine's contributions that support the hall community. The inside of Josephine's custodial closet door displayed a note from nonstaff residents that stated, "The GOAT! Thank you for your work [Name]." As Josephine pointed this out, they remarked how things like this note were unexpected and special so they "had to hang on those things." Both the verbal and physical thank you messages to custodial staff demonstrated the positive impact of their work while pulling them into and acknowledging their presence within the hall community.

Outward Expressions of Visibility

Custodial staff provide day-to-day cleaning within the residence halls; within the data analysis there existed evidence supporting the ways custodians' contributions were named within the hall environment and the custodian was demonstrated to be a community member of that hall environment. RAs use door decorations to encourage community and to name the individual people within a particular space. Throughout several walk throughs, custodians showed me door decorations they received from hall staff. In responding to the importance of door decorations, Taylor shared, "It lets the students know who those, like my name and the other person's name. And it makes me feel I'm being noticed, I guess and not just someone who cleans. So that's nice." Taylor appreciated the acknowledgement of being someone beyond their role. Josephine's

door included a Happy Birthday sign and an individual poster that allowed them to fill in information about themselves, such as their favorite animal and hometown. This sign matched what the RA created for residents to encourage community. When asked about this sign, Josephine shared, “And it helps because when you get to know your residents, they tend to be better in keeping up their spaces.” Including custodial staff in community membership identifiers like door decorations and get-to-know-you boards enhanced their connection to the hall and served as an encourager for positive behavior from residents.

Custodial staff members sometimes work in out of the way spaces like a basement. In one walk through, I captured an image of a custodial breakroom/office that was located in the basement of a residence hall. On the door, there were several colorful door decorations that had the custodian’s name on them. The student staff in this building made these door decorations. One of the other items on the door was a hand drawn photo that said, “Thank you, [NAME].” This image represented how these particular custodians were included within the building community. This was not an unidentified door tucked away in the basement, and hall staff had to go out of their way to put up their door decorations. The door included a small window in it so the people who worked out of that office were not tucked away in the preverbal dark despite their office being located in the basement. Other examples of this occurred within the data, including a custodial supervisor’s door covered in building door decorations. The inclusion of custodial staff in the buildings operating team both elevated their presence and named them as community members.

Other signage during the walk-throughs amplified the work of the custodians. One sign created by a student staff member located in a common restroom explained the shared nature of the restroom and at the bottom of the sign included a definitive “RESPECT our cleaning staff.”

A departmental branded sign depicted the responsibilities of residents versus the expectations of the custodian and stated, “May We Help You?” All the common restrooms visited included signs with various information including cleaning times; however, on one sign, it was noted that it included the name of the custodian doing the cleaning. A different restroom sign provided residents with directions on what to include or exclude from the restroom trashcan and was signed, “Thank you, Your Floor Custodian.” Although some of the signs were driven by the department, others were driven by individual student staff who worked to support the custodian. These signs both named the custodian as the person accomplishing the work within the building and named their specific contributions to improving the hall community.

Stewardship

Some of the custodians interviewed articulated pride in their work, recognition that students made the halls their home, and the role their presence played within the community. This level of stewardship elevated the sense of ownership the custodian plays within the hall. This is connected to the participant data in that the range for length of work within a residence hall for the participants was from 1 year up to 24 years, with the average years of work as a residence hall custodian being 8.6 years. Given the transitory nature of residence halls, custodial staff generally have a greater length of time within the buildings where they work. Oliver shared this sentiment, stating, “I’m actually kind of a permanent figure in the dorm. You know? Um, and they’re not. They’re coming in just for the year.”

Throughout the interviews, the participants did not minimize the hard work they accomplished. Some participants noted the pride that they felt as a result of their work. Peter felt a great sense of pride about their work related to their position, sharing:

I think just like pride of work. Proud of what I did. . . . it's a lot of work cleaning these buildings. Um, there's a lot to clean, . . . when you see something like that. It's like you see, a thank you card and it's like it makes you feel proud of what you did.

Oliver shared, "To look back and say, this is clean, this looks you see a difference. It's gratifying." Lucy's pride extended to all their work locations, as they said, "[I] take pride in any building I work in" and, like Oliver, noticed a difference at the end of the day. Lucy said, "When you leave you do have you do know you accomplished something. I mean, when you look at what we walk into and what's it like when we leave." Josephine extended their sense of pride to speak generally about custodial work and the difficulty of that work, sharing:

Think it's important just for everybody to know that custodians do work hard. . . . We work hard, and, you know, we have to be pretty dedicated to your job because if you're not here, um and somebody covers for you. . . . Just that we're hard workers.

This pride extended into a sense of ownership for the areas in which they worked. For Josephine, they started their day by, "usually come in, just check [their] floors. See what's going on." Josephine used this metric to get a sense of what occurred the evening prior and to check in on their areas of responsibility. For Holly, they equated the obligation of cleaning their home as equivalent to their cleaning responsibilities at work through sharing, "If it's my house, I got to clean it." This sense of ownership regarding their work and their work environment could impact how custodians view the hall environment.

Two participants explicitly identified that this was the students' home, and custodians took care of that home for them. For Nadia, they saw their work benefiting students by being able to come home, focus, and making students happy. Nadia said:

I think that's something that they probably like coming home and having it clean because this is a second home. So having a clean environment and not having to worry about, you know, doing anything because they know their bathroom clean, the kitchen is clean for them. They got the clean study lounge, you know, got the TV that they could watch and hang out because that's what we're here. To clean every day and make sure they happy.

Nadia's description took the work of the custodian beyond cleaning tasks and related it to students' happiness. For Josephine, they described their role in educating students about their home in particular at the beginning of the school year. During this time, Josephine went out of their way to share with residents how to cool down their rooms with fans and managed student complaints about refrigerators in their rooms. Josephine provided students with knowledge to aid in their adjustment to hall life.

For Iris, they recognized that their consistent presence served as a way for students to know their role. Iris shared, "Each person has their own floor. . . . like the freshmans once they see you, like, almost every day at the same floor. They know that, you know that you're the custodian for that, floor." Oliver noted the focus of their role not on cleaning tasks, stating, "You're working for the students." Sophia saw their caretaking of the building extending to support residents by sharing with residents, "If you need something extra, let me know. I can get it for you if you need it," as opposed to having students take something like toilet paper or cleaning supplies from their closet or out of a communal space. The custodian's consistent presence, pride in their work, and ownership over the space situated the custodian as one of the stewards of their hall community. The sense of ownership was not reflected within the training or documents and focused on the cleaning tasks of a custodian.

Summary

Custodians who participated in these interviews expressed positive regard for acknowledgement of their contributions within a hall community and were identified for their contributions to the community through door decorations and signage specifically naming their work. Recognition and acknowledgement could enhance the ways in which custodians and hall staff interact with one another and strengthen the custodian's commitment to their hall community and their role.

Theme 4: “I Think the Building Would Probably Have Trouble Sticking Together If We Weren’t Here”

Casey's words for Theme 4, “I Think the Building Would Probably Have Trouble Sticking Together If We Weren’t Here,” captured the necessary work of custodians in keeping the building together. This theme summarizes the custodians and how they described the dirty work they do, how they viewed themselves as custodians, and their motivation. The subthemes identified within this theme are (a) dark side of the job, (b) occupational identity, and (c) motivation. Figure 4 demonstrates how first cycle coding moved into the patterns which the resulted in the theme, “I Think the Building Would Probably Have Trouble Sticking Together If We Weren’t Here.” The key within Figure 4 indicates which data source provided the code.

Figure 4.4. Mapping to Theme 4

Themes	Second Cycle: Pattern Coding	First Cycle	Code Frequency
Theme: “I think the building would probably have trouble sticking together if we weren't here”	Pattern: Dark Side of the Job	Dirty work	11
		Source of Pain	10
		Extra Messes	8
		Reframing Work	2
		Demotivator	7
		Dressing up "dirty work"	4
		Dirty work	2
		Reframing work	2
		Clean up after you	1
		Extra messes	1
		Source of pain	1
		Discomfort	1
	Pattern: Occupational Identity	Pride	10
		Self Expectations	12
		Role and Identity	46
		Ownership	2
		Work Experience	2
		Favorite Part of Work Day	14
		Presence	2
	Pattern: Rewarding Work	Motivation	46
		Motivation for the Position	5
		Motivation to Support Students	1
		Motivation	1
		Community looking good	1

Key:

Interviews	Photographic Memos	Documents
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Dark Side of the Job

Dirty work was explored in the literature review; however, this analysis explored how custodians talked through situations that were above and beyond regular cleaning and the pain points within their work. This included exceptional messes that residents made and general building conditions that impacted their work. Peter expressed this sentiment well, as there was “always something to be cleaned.”

Some custodians expressed building conditions impacting their work. Oliver shared, “Things aren’t kept up well here. You know, materialistically, you know, they’re old buildings and those shower rooms can be nasty (laughter). And even the hallways can be nasty. So, it’s not a glamorous job.” Josephine worked in a historic residence hall and, during the walk through, pointed out a window frame filled with cobwebs. Josephine shared that they had to go in there weekly to clean it out as the windows did not seal well. The impact of having maintenance issues impacted the custodians’ work. Working in a historic building like Josephine’s presented challenges during snow removal as it was time consuming for the custodians. Josephine expressed frustration at the amount of sidewalk and steps needing shoveling while then having to attend to cleaning in a building without elevator access. I witnessed this firsthand throughout the walk through, and the volume of snow removal was extensive and detailed. For Louisa, refrigerators were provided to students throughout the academic year and summer; however, upon move-out, they require significant cleaning due to defrosting and mold. During the walk through, Louisa opened a refrigerator to show me the standing water left behind from the defrosting process. Louisa noted the impact of the room size on their working during summer cleaning, sharing that it was “very tight, hard to clean, hard to move” and added a layer of challenge to their work. Residence halls rarely fit a single architectural mold, and the impact of design choices trickle down to custodians’ day to day work.

For some participants, residents presented challenges due to intentional vandalism and damage in addition to regular cleaning responsibilities. Lucy, worked in a nursing home prior and noted with laughter, “I do think the messes are worse here.” Ava shared a story regarding residents damaging ceiling tiles repeatedly, stating, “So the maintenance guy quit replacing them until the end of the school year. It was ridiculous. It was almost the whole hallway of the ceiling

tiles.” When I asked a follow-up question regarding a different negative interaction, Ava shared, “My worst is the ceiling tiles. That’s not bad because you can vacuum it up.” Ava identified the community impact of the damage; however, the clean-up response was less challenging for them.

Willow shared a wide range of damage they have witnessed, stating, “Somebody ripped soap dispensers off the wall, not once, but twice. And then stuffing toilet paper in the toilets and not flushing. And then finding feminine products in the shower. And then feces in the shower.”

Lucy expressed similar experiences:

We’ll be walking down the hall in the morning. And it’s like, ‘what the heck?’ . . . we’ll find used tampons whipped on the floor and the carpet. And then in the restroom like the toilet paper container, they’ll be laying there and not wrapping up. . . . One time we had problems where the toilet plugging and a maintenance man, he had to come in and he could not believe it. He walked in to go unplug the toilet. There’s like a whole bunch of [residents]. Staying on this toilet, peeing, and making it run over.

Both Lucy and Ava shared extreme examples of vandalism and damage, and both expressed their frustration with the situation and not knowing who caused the damage. For Everett, their story involved both relaying the damage and the action that they took to resolve the issue. Everett said, “A few times a student left like a bag of trash in the room in the bathrooms. Um, but they left on the package with their name and room number on it, so I returned them back” outside of the student’s door. When I asked Everett if this resolved the issue, they shared that it did not occur again.

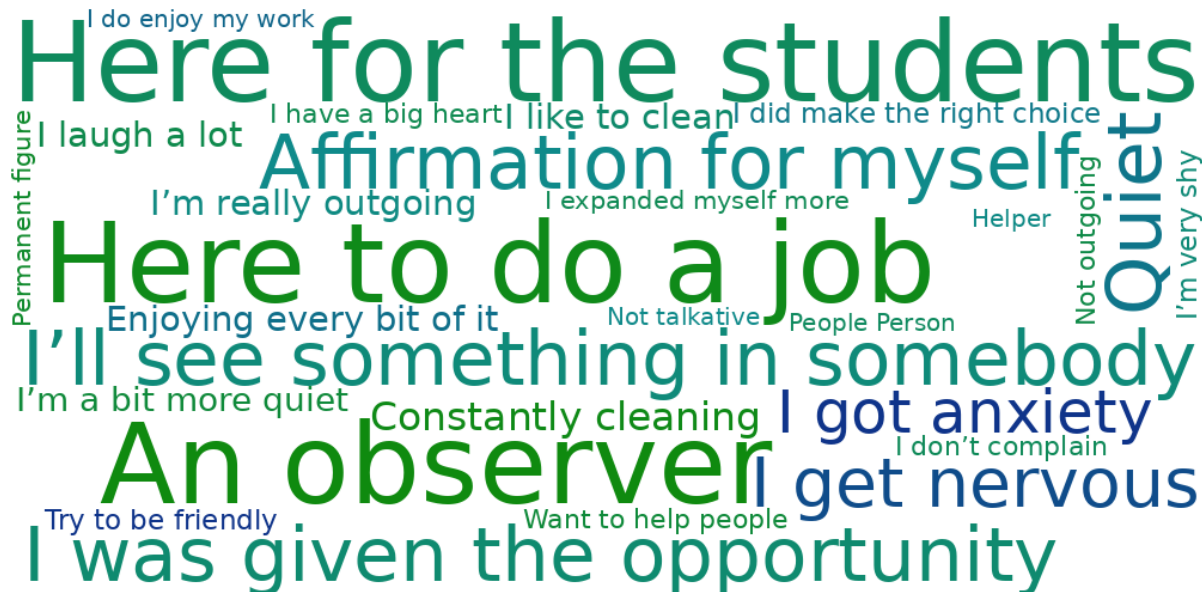
Peter demonstrated a willingness to take on extra messes by sharing, “I’m always the one that’s, . . . I’m usually a good one at this to them. But it’s like uh, ‘we got a mess in the bathroom. Can you go off and do it’ So I’ll say ‘yeah, so we can do that.’” Although not

explicitly expressed beyond Josephine's snow removal example, the extra messes did detract from daily responsibilities and impacted the hall environment. Lucy noted an ethic of continued care despite the messes, stating, "You know, and it's not their fault, you know, we just say 'oh I'm not cleaning that up' because look what they did, because it's not all of them doing it." For Taylor, additional cleaning occurred when things such as blankets and pillows remain in the floor lounges at the end of the year and Taylor would "wash it up" and return it to the floor lounge. Although some custodians expressed frustration with the 'dirty work' aspect of their positions, most remained positive, identified it was not all students causing the issues, and saw it as part of their responsibilities overall.

Occupational Identity

Throughout the interviews, occupational identity arose from the coding process. One of the primary codes that influences this pattern is the role and identity code which was used 46 times across all interviews. This code was used when a custodian described themselves, their role, and how they see themselves. To fully capture how participants saw themselves and represent the information shared, I put the phrases and words into word cloud as demonstrated in Figure 5. Although some of the phrases overlap with Theme 2, "I'm Here for the Students," I made the decision to include these data to ensure all participants were acknowledged and represented when using language that acknowledged their identities and how they see themselves in relationship to their work.

Figure 4.5. Representing Participant's Voice and Identity



Many participants shared their introversion versus extroversion in connection to their work. This response came about naturally during the interview process. Sophia expressed their enthusiasm for the work in that they have “been enjoying every bit of it.” Iris shared they “felt like they . . . made the right choice” in choosing custodial work. Although Holly noted their shyness, they were clear that they “always try to be friendly” and their desire to “want to try to help people” due to their “big heart.” Willow articulated personal growth as an outcome of the role and interacting with residents, stating, “I try to open myself more to talk to them. But before I started, I was really quiet, and I expanded myself more.” Peter equated how people might perceive them based upon their cleaning skills, specifically reflecting that residents might think “How well . . . does this custodian . . . how good does he clean?” Expressing satisfaction within the custodial role occurred as well. Oliver shared, “I do enjoy my work” and found it personally relaxing. Ava and Sophia expressed enjoying cleaning as well. Having participants naturally share their views of work and indirectly see themselves was not the intended purpose of this

study; however, it did add insight into the custodial experiences, specifically areas of satisfaction and personal characteristics of the participants and underscores the participants' self-reflection and awareness.

Within the interviews, participants noted some self-expectations that guided their work and interactions. Iris said, "Make sure everything is up to the cleanest clean, clean for the students." They believed everything was important, but that "the bathrooms are the most important." For Josephine, this meant building a relationship with residents because, as Josephine said, "When you get to know your residents, they tend to be better in keeping up their spaces." Louisa recognized that time was an issue in completing tasks, sharing, "We don't have time to clean all of this properly." Professional behavior guided Lucy's actions, and they believed they must "act professional," sharing, "It's my job to clean, not really hang out with them." Compared to the supervisor's expectations they align slightly but also demonstrate a more personal commitment to specific actions and spaces.

In sharing their favorite part of the workday, participant responses varied. For Ava, Holly, Everett, and Peter, the break periods and end of the day were their favorite time periods. Peter acknowledged that the breaks helped manage their energy as "it's nice to just refuel and get ready to go for the next [building]." Willow and Holly acknowledged that they enjoyed socializing with coworkers as the highlight of their day. The morning, as Sophia noted, is when, "[they]'re getting started really." For Josephine, mornings were their time when interacting with residents and checking on their floor wondering, "Is it all clean? Saying 'good morning' oh 'good morning, hey, good morning.'" Casey appreciated the mornings as the demands of work were greater and then day moved quickly. For Louisa, the reflection back on their day and how their work made sure "everything [is] very nice." Staff brought their whole selves into the work

environment and understanding how they perceive themselves, what expectations they set, and their favorite parts of the day helps set the framework for understanding custodians' motivations.

Motivation

The custodian's motivations provided insight into their work and assisted in enhancing the knowledge around custodial staff. The described motivations varied among participants. For Taylor, they enjoyed the work, but articulated that students provided motivation. Taylor said:

It's the students. I like the work, I don't mind the work, but it's the students that bring me to work every day. So, I mean, it's just always something different and new. My job itself is pretty routine. Yeah, you're going to have a few things here and there that are different from day to day, but for the most part it's routine, but the students that bring me to work every day.

As Taylor described this to me, it was clear that they were genuine in their appreciation and motivation. For Josephine, their motivation connected to people as well, when they shared, "I like to be around people." The interaction with students motivated Josephine as well. During the interview, they described a particular resident who would regularly stop by to visit Josephine, even going out of his way to return to the building as a nonresident to visit. Josephine shared. "When they come to see you and talk to you just . . . makes the job worthwhile." Sophia's reflection acknowledged students as a motivator, in addition to their enjoyment of cleaning. Soph said:

What makes me excited about my work is coming here knowing that I'm gonna see these kids coming in and I say kids, I'm an older person, but seeing their faces come in and speaking with them or when I say speak with them, like "good morning. How you doing?" . . . What motivates me to do this work? I just think it's because that's just in me,

that for a person that likes to clean. I'm really, I like keeping busy. If I can, I want to keep busy. That's just something of a line of work that I really like, things being really clean. I might go a little bit, sometimes maybe, I feel you, I honestly feel you can't go overboard, but I might go a little bit overboard, more than might be expected.

During the interview, Sophia described interacting with residents while never stopping their cleaning. Sophia demonstrated places that they cleaned during the walk through such as the top of the exit sign and the top of a bulletin board in an effort to stay busy during the workday. Sophia's interview and walk through demonstrated how this position fit with their motivation. Iris described their motivation as connected to the job as they had "done custodian like, almost since [they] started working." Iris said, "[I] feel like that's my motivation. Like that's like my passion. I don't know, because that's what I have done in my past years." Several of the participants acknowledged prior experiences as custodial staff members expressed enjoyment of cleaning.

Coworkers provided a sense of motivation for some participants. For Ava, meeting people, residents, and coworkers motivated them. Ava said, "Coming here every day and being greeted and stuff by students and just getting to be around them . . . Feels really good. . . . You get to meet people, and you get to meet coworkers . . . It's not bad." Casey, who recently moved to the town where the university resided, shared enjoyment about the position, the people they got to work with, and the benefits. Casey shared:

I like the job first, but also the people I work with. I enjoy all of them. It's easy to come to work when you have good people, a good supervisor, people that treat you well and respect you. The benefits are really good here, just with like the benefits in general, the vacation, the sick pay, the perks of the holidays you get off throughout the school year

are nice. The pay could be a little better is kind of the only thing, but the perks and the people and obviously I work 7:30 to 4, Monday through Friday, the weekend's off, that's a pretty good deal. So, I'd say those are kind of the motivating things for me, obviously having a job.

As Casey shared, staff motivations did include the financial benefits of employment. Everett cited "money" as a motivator, and Oliver and Lucy stated, "The paycheck." Oliver and Lucy provided additional insight into their responses. Oliver's motivation included personal growth and relaxation, stating, "It's very relaxing. It is. And I just I have my earbud in, and I listen to a lot of positive teaching tapes or, uh, my music and the day flies."

Holly identified the challenges that came with working in housing but was motivated by the newness of each day. Holly shared:

That every day is a new day, regardless of what happened the day before, you go home, you relax, you come back with a new mindset. So, every day has a new challenge, and you don't know what you're gonna get in housing.

Holly articulated the struggle between the position, students and their messes, gratitude, and the drive to continue doing custodial work. Holly said:

Somebody has to do it. It's not my ideal job. I don't want to come every day and clean up after some of the kids because they're so ungrateful. . . . But then there's some of the students that it makes it worth coming to work because they'll say thank you so much for doing this. Or they'll give you little treats in your closet or something. So, I just look at it, someone has to do it, and I'm fine with it. I'm fine with it. I don't get bothered by it. . . . I just look at it like, if it's my house, I got to clean it, so . . . I try to help them.

Holly reframed the work from something that could be perceived as discouraging into something motivating for them. Lucy articulated that being a custodian was “not [their] favorite job,” but further shared, “If I’m in a dorm for a while and things are going real well, that does motivate me.”

Lucy identified students as positive motivator, particularly those who recognized their hard work. Lucy said, “I guess it’s the students, you know, the positive ones, the friendly ones. . . . And, they’ll thank you. There’s some that will thank you for your work. And they understand how hard you work.” This acknowledgement served as motivation for Lucy. Nadia expressed that they always enjoyed cleaning and that served as motivation. As they were expressing this, I noticed that their face lit up with joy when talking about cleaning. I asked them to share a bit more with me and Nadia stated:

This is something that I likes to do. I always like to clean so. And just cleaning for the students just to make sure they got, you know, a good, clean, safe environment to be in.

That’s what I like to do.

Nadia’s demeanor and energy about their work were contagious and brought me joy hearing their motivation. Motivations varied among participants and almost every participant articulated what motivated them.

Summary

Dark side of the job, occupational identity, and motivation join together to demonstrate how participants in this study identified positive motivators for doing this work despite the exceptional dirty work within their roles. Understanding how participants described themselves and their identities enhances this concept as they do not articulate the severity of the dirty work when talking about themselves or their motivations. The articulations of motivation and how

custodians see themselves provide a deeper understanding of why they may persist as a custodian in the residence hall despite the level of dirty work associated with the role. Additionally, identifying personal characteristics and motivations of these custodians humanizes them in a way that makes the messy parts of the job much more challenging.

Chapter Summary

The analysis of the data provided several themes that emerged. The first theme, Adaptive Practices and Unacknowledged Labor, articulated the participants' experiences with the adaptations that they used to support their interactions with residents and work environment. This included learning from peers, work arounds for displeasing things, and learning and sharing "insider information" about student behaviors to support custodians performing tasks outside of their position description. The second theme, "I'm Here for the Students," articulated how the participants talked about resident interactions and the tools through which they communicate. This theme identified empathy and positive student regard as encouraging factors supporting resident and custodian interactions. The third theme, Being Seen and Valued in the Community, articulates how the participants named their contributions to the community while layering in the data observed during the walkthroughs. Together, they point toward the custodian contributing to hall life beyond day-to-day cleaning tasks. The last theme, "I Think the Building Would Probably Have Trouble Sticking Together if We Weren't Here," brought together participants' positive motivators for doing custodial work while acknowledging the very nature of cleaning up after college students. Understanding how participants saw themselves as a custodian added an additional layer to this theme. These themes provided me with the basis from which to evaluate the research questions in the context of literature and theoretical framework while articulating the implications for this study.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

This chapter makes sense of the current study's data, identifies areas of development for next steps, and ultimately answers the question, so what? In addition to answering the research questions, I situate the themes in the context of the literature to help make sense of the data. Using the information I gathered, this chapter addresses implications for theory, policy, practice, and research. Addressing the limitations of the study and future research aids in the evolution of this topic.

Overview of Study

Understanding the experiences of residence hall custodians was a basic interpretive study that sought to explore the interactions, motivations, training, and expectations of residence hall custodians. The purpose of this study was to identify the ways residence hall custodians assist in supporting students within the university environment. The following research questions framed this study:

- 1) How do residence hall custodians describe the ways in which they interact with the students living in the buildings where they work?
- 2) How do residence hall custodians describe their motivation to support students?
- 3) How do residence hall custodians describe the training and/or expectations that are provided by the custodial supervisory staff regarding relationship building with students?

Fourteen custodians participated in semistructured in-person interviews and walkthroughs in their work areas. Photographs were captured during the walkthroughs, and relevant documents aided in strengthening the data set. Analysis of the interviews, photographic memos, and documents allowed four themes to emerge from the data analysis: (a) Adaptive Practices and

Unacknowledged Labor, (b) “I’m Here for the Students,” (c) Community Contributions While Being Seen and Valued, and (d) “I Think the Building Would Probably Have Trouble Sticking Together If We Weren’t Here.” The findings suggest a disconnect between the custodial staff provide beyond cleaning and students’ and supervisors’ expectations. The findings enhance understanding of how custodial staff articulated their interactions with students and their motivations for engaging with residents.

Discussion of Findings

The data participants in this study provided articulated how they interacted with residents, their motivations to support students, and the training and expectations they received from supervisory staff regarding relationship building with students. Putting the outcomes of the study into the context of the Manning’s (2013, 2024) feminist frame aided in understanding the findings.

Connection to Theoretical Frameworks

Manning’s (2013, 2024) feminist frame served as the overarching theoretical framework for this study. Lipman-Blumen’s (1992) connective leadership model and Helgesen’s (1995) web of inclusion served as the basis for Manning’s feminist frame. Manning made sense of these additional models to provide an overarching model under which connective leadership and the web of inclusion rest. This theoretical framework informed the interview protocol for this study, my decision to do residence hall walk-throughs with participants, how I built rapport throughout the interview process, and data analysis. My decision to interview custodians as opposed to residents for this study aligned with Manning’s feminist frame as I sought to elevate the stature of members in an organization whose voice might not be heard.

Helgesen's (1995) web of inclusion flattens organizational structures to elevate individuals to a more equal footing. Although the web identifies a leader, it does not value one member over another. In connecting this framework to the current study's findings, this approach could be perceived in two ways. First, at the macro level, one could acknowledge that the custodians work in nonweb organizations, as participants acknowledged the hierarchy that existed when discussing supervisor expectations and training. Second, in looking at the micro level, or the hall level, the findings clearly indicated, through the interactions between hall staff and the custodian and the ways custodians received and gave gratitude to residents, custodians are a part of a web-like community in which the hall staff and the custodian work together to support those living in the hall community.

Lipman-Blumen's (1992) connective leadership model highlights the importance of interdependence within communities and works to identify the role supporters play with the organization. The findings demonstrated residence hall custodial work goes beyond cleaning. The custodians in this study articulated specific noncleaning tasks that they engaged in to support their hall communities and their students. The data provided evidence of community interdependence when custodians discussed these noncleaning tasks and their motivation and interactions with residents. Connective leadership highlights interconnection and mutuality as two of the leadership characteristics within the model. The findings indicated a degree of connection between residents and custodians when identifying motivation within the data. Mutuality existed in (a) their interactions with residents and staff, (b) communication examples like hall signage specifically naming the custodian or their contributions, and (c) the stewardship custodians felt toward their buildings. Manning's (2013, 2024) feminist frame seeks to elevate

underrepresented voices. Thus, the current study worked to elevate custodial staff member voices through sharing their perspectives, insights, and experiences.

Interactions

Participants described their experiences interacting with residents within the context of their work and responded directly regarding their interactions. I limited my initial lens for viewing interactions, but I quickly learned the data indicated interactions and communication extended to nonverbal interactions and how a custodian interacted within the space. The photographic analysis revealed custodians and noncustodians interacted and communicated a variety of elements, including hall cleanliness expectations with residents through signs. Positive and negative student interactions arose during the analysis; despite some of these negative interactions, the participants still engaged positively with residents. Participants noted some of their peers had challenges with residents and these peers often interacted negatively with residents, thus resulting in retaliatory and negative behavior received from residents.

The findings suggest custodian and resident interactions extended beyond baseline pleasantries into supporting students. Several participants identified noncleaning tasks in which they engaged. Examples included crisis response, supportive coaching, and providing campus knowledge and resources to residents. These types of behavior and deeper interactions added to the residence hall community while also enhancing ownership of that community for the custodian. This finding aligns with Boettcher et al.'s (2019) study that showed custodial staff enhanced the sense of connection for students of color and their campus. The findings of student support are also congruent with Reed's (2015) study. These findings expand knowledge of interactions between nonfaculty and students. Kahu et al.'s (2022) study emphasized familiarity as a precursor to belonging. This finding raises the question of how custodial interactions support

familiarity for students on campus. Several participants in the current study acknowledged welcoming students, looking forward to the first day of school, and having positive regard for residents, thereby supporting Kahu et al.'s (2022) assertion.

When analyzing the custodian and student staff interactions, a surprising finding emerged. Although not the intention of this study, custodians regularly acknowledged a positive relationship with student staff working in the buildings. The analysis indicated these examples were seen as a mutually beneficial relationship, displayed through reciprocity from the student staff through door decorations, gifts, and regular interactions. None of the participants described negative interactions between custodians and hall staff. Manning et al.'s (2014) seamless learning model aligns with this practice in that it describes that learning can come from all student experiences, including those occurring in a residence hall. These positive connections between hall staff and custodians created a pathway to include the custodian in the hall community.

The level of interaction between the participants and the residents varied. Individual personalities and identities appeared to be the main driver in choosing when and how to interact with residents. Most participants were not encouraged to interact with residents, and only a few were discouraged by their supervisor. Scott's (2007) findings indicated the administration in their study drove the custodian's agenda and the findings in the current study demonstrated their agenda was largely individually driven by the custodian. Although some of the literature (Guzmán et al., 2022; Hansman, 2020) I reviewed prior to the study identified the importance of either a formal or informal mentoring relationship, this finding was not articulated in the current study's findings nor was it a primary purpose of the study. Hansman (2020) identified informal mentors as having common interests, causing them to work toward the same goal. One could

argue that communal living does have shared goals; however, the participants did not outwardly articulate these goals.

In identifying the participants' interactions, the findings indicate the relationship between residents and custodians extended beyond in person interactions and included signage and welcoming behaviors. Understanding custodial and resident interactions provides new insights into the residence hall ecosystem. Specifically, this finding brings an often overlooked and unacknowledged contributor of hall life into the forefront and names the ways in which they help the building function. Magolda (2014) recognized that relationships are necessary for knowledge transfer to occur. Guzmán et al. (2022) provided rich detail on individual contributions from campus service workers to support individual students. The current study examined a wider range of questions and experiences; however, it did not elicit personal narratives from those impacted by campus service workers, whereas Guzmán et al.'s (2022) did.

When participants described themselves and their roles, they acknowledged their primary purpose was to clean, but they did hold positive regard and empathy for the students and expressed enjoyment in interacting with them. Blimling (2015) articulated how learning occurs in a residence hall; although focused on interactions, motivation, and training, the current study did not address understanding if learning occurred between residents and custodians; however, as Magolda (2014) articulated, relationships are necessary for knowledge transfer and the current study's findings indicated positive informal relationships occurred between custodians and residents in this study.

Motivations

Understanding why and the custodians' motivations behind student supportive behaviors in this study occurred through data analysis. Although I did not directly ask them, participants

indicated several factors that aided in their motivation. Participants identified residents as their primary reason for being present on campus and indicated they enjoyed interacting with them, viewing them from a positive perspective. Participants benefited and appreciated the ways in which they received thanks for their work through either a verbal “thank you” or other tokens of appreciation. Bringing the custodians into the community through engagement behaviors such as door decorations or relying upon the student staff to assist in addressing behavior pulled the custodian into the residence hall community and entrenched the custodian as a community contributor who supported residents through noncleaning tasks. Custodians expressed pride in their work and ownership.

The findings in this study indicate a high level of satisfaction among participants regarding their interactions with students and staff. Hennequin’s (2007) work identified interpersonal success as a marker of satisfaction among blue-collar workers. The participants’ motivations in the current study were grounded in wanting to help students, enjoying interacting with them, and having a high positive regard for them. The concept of wanting students to feel welcome occurred within this study, thereby affirming Fausto-Vicencio’s (2022) experience as an undergraduate student.

Participants indicated custodial work varies from the day-to-day cleaning to addressing extreme messes. Thus, occupation tasks cannot be divorced from this study. Ashforth and Kreiner’s (1999) study sought to address the question of affirmation for those working in dirty work occupations. Findings from the current study indicated custodians received affirmation as evidenced by thank you cards, door decorations, and positive interactions with staff and residents. This positive affirmation provided balm for dealing with the dirty work and served as a motivation factor to keep going.

Maxwell et al.'s (2009) study of a custodian broadened knowledge on distributed leadership, aligning with the Manning's (2013, 2024) feminist frame that recognizes leadership emanates from a variety of spaces within organizations. Findings from the current study expanded on this concept and articulated the specific student support tasks custodians provide in the residence hall. Conjoining this finding with Maxwell et al.'s (2009) and Mannings's (2013, 2024) findings, the argument could be made that custodial staff do a play a role in advancing student support and their motivation comes from positive interactions with residents.

Training and Expectations

Participants in this study described their training and expectations regarding relationship building as limited or nonexistent. Although some of the position descriptions indicated interacting with the public would occur as a part of the job, these components were unsupported through training and expectations. Participants indicated they interacted with residents and provided student support; however, those skills were learned through peers and job experiences. Lucas and Buzzanell's (2004) study on occupational narratives of blue-collar workers found this sharing of narratives aided workers to better understand the organization. The current study's findings showed participants described coworkers as adding to their knowledge about job tasks and how to interact with residents. This informal institutional knowledge that participants gained enhanced their training and experiences working in the residence halls.

Noe (2013) and Pinney (n.d.) identified that customer service and having a training strategy hold organizational importance. The current study's findings indicated that although training occurred, the participants' experiences varied widely from receiving a piece of paper to engaging in an intentional process over the course of several weeks. The training they received lacked information related to interactions and expectations on relationship building with

students. Some participants reported that their supervisors provided a framework for staff that focused on treating students well and boundary setting. Amah and Escobedo (2022) called for their work to be expanded by encouraging researchers to ask the question, “How else do campus service workers function as institutional agents, mentors, and/or advisors to students, especially during critical times” (p. 122)? In response to this question, the current study identified specific actions custodians could engage in to support students. Although the interviews did not elicit support during critical times, participants shared examples of crisis management responses that aligned with a critical need. Training custodians on crisis management response was lacking within the data and would be an easy first step for enhancing custodial capacity around supporting students.

Montoya (2020) and Ayllon (2016) identified that campus service workers’ roles are limited due to its fixed perception. The lack of training, expectations, and notations about student support and interactions in the documents I examined aligned with this fixed perception. The data showed the importance of enhancing training and expectations for custodial staff. Manning et al. (2014) advocated for enhancing training and expectations for custodial staff. Furthermore, Manning et al. focused on providing relationships for students and increasing the ethic of care for university students from staff. The current study findings demonstrated participants showed a high level of interaction and care for hall community members; however, further evidence was lacking when triangulating the job description and training data.

The findings indicated participants’ training and expectations were lacking information regarding custodial staff and student interactions. Wiggins (2022) identified the stratification that occurs within higher education between the different subgroups of students, faculty, staff, and blue-collar workers. Understanding further if the lack of training and expectations is due to this

stratification would assist leaders in deepening their knowledge within this area. The findings indicated students benefited from noncleaning work, and staff described being motivated by these interactions. Using these motivators to inform custodial staff training and education will enhance the student and staff experience. Having the appropriate training, expectations, and resources to encourage student support will only benefit the communal living environment.

Contributions of the Study

The findings in this study expand knowledge of custodians and their contributions to residence hall life, including the ways in which they support students and contribute to the hall community, and the ways in which they interact with students and staff. This study identifies a gap between the interactions custodians have with residents and the lack of training and expectations received while uncovering the participants' motivating factors.

Implications

The implications for this study vary. From a practical standpoint, one must recognize and reward staff members' noncleaning behaviors during evaluations and merit raises. Campuses should start by identifying if these noncleaning tasks provide value to the campus and then make the necessary administrative adjustments (e.g., rewriting position description, providing training, updating expectations) to align accordingly. The literature of higher education should and could shift to include nondominant narratives within the student support literature. In practice, campuses should provide training opportunities, during nonbusy times, to support and encourage student support behaviors. Campuses should consider leveraging the role of the custodian and consider how their expertise, regular proximity to students, and knowledge of student behaviors could benefit student outcomes.

The research implications for this study could enhance understanding of custodial experiences in the residence halls. Specifically, research should name custodians' noncleaning contributions to hall life, thereby understanding their motivations, and identifying the gap between what is occurring and what they are trained to do. Opportunities exist to continue to explore the impact of campus service workers on the student experience. Taking this study further would include understanding interactions between custodians and hall staff and the impact of custodians on the residence hall ecosystem. A different, but important angle for future research could include understanding supervisors' knowledge of the noncleaning tasks occurring in the hall and the role of those tasks in that environment.

Limitations

Limitations of the current study included my working knowledge of residence hall life and custodians in that environment. Although I had never been a custodian, the people I interacted with and worked with impacted me and my perceptions greatly. To mitigate this issue, I engaged in reflexive activities. Another limitation for the current study was the lack of relevant literature. Although some literature exists regarding residence hall custodians, the depth is lacking. By engaging in this research, my goal was to add to this knowledge to continue to identify the contributions campus service workers make beyond their task-focused roles.

Recruitment occurred to engage individuals who were recommended by their supervisor to participate or self-selected into the study. Based upon some of the knowledge shared regarding participants' coworkers, it is evident that not every residence hall custodian exhibits these behaviors. Therefore, these findings should not be generalized to fit every custodian or every campus because each campus and individual brings forth their own uniqueness. Understanding

these participants, their motivations, and interactions helps provide a glimpse into residence hall life and the noncleaning work that is occurring.

Reflection

In thinking about this study, I have continued to confront the question of what counts as work. For the participants, their interactions, supportive behaviors, and cleaning tasks were seen as work. Participants noted their primary purpose was to clean, but they were motivated to create a welcoming space within the halls. In looking at the documents for this study, nothing indicated that interactions should or could occur at a deeper and more meaningful level, nor did the training these participants receive support for this component. So, the question remains of whether the noncleaning tasks custodians engage in count as work and whether they should be trained on these work tasks or have clearer expectations regarding residents. Furthermore, one may ask about the intersection of recognition, gratitude, or compensation with this work. This study did not address these lingering questions; however, this study made progress toward addressing the nature and benefits of custodians engaging in behaviors beyond cleaning in the residence halls.

Conclusion

In their call to action, Montoya (2020) stated, “Ignoring the efforts of our campus service workers is a function of a failing academic foundation” (p. 29). By understanding the interactions, motivations, and training of residence hall custodians, I sought to address and name the efforts of campus service workers. Although the long road of policy and practice still exists, identifying custodians’ contributions grounds this discussion to make substantive changes to advance student success.

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