

Mutually beneficial interactions: Campus custodian-college student relationships

by Jeremy John Reed

“... a college community dominated by the master narratives of organizational elites is not truly inclusive.”

-- Jeremy John Reed

“.. [come to appreciate] the layers of racism, classism, and sexism [custodians] face on their daily jobs.”

-- Jeremy John Reed

“Despite college and university’s espoused values of inclusion and diversity, university faculty and students frequently ignore blue-collar workers such as custodians as a source of wisdom and insight.”

-- Jeremy John Reed

“I chose a critical philosophical frame for this study because critical theory asserts that socially embedded power relations construct and reproduce social reality. There is a strong tradition of applying critical theory to social class in educational settings [like universities], as scholars frequently investigate the role of education systems in the maintenance and reproduction of social class.”

-- Jeremy John Reed

“...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. [My work] seeks to question, and ultimately dismantle, a privilege of power that is based upon ascribed characteristics such as race, gender, and social class.”

-- Jeremy John Reed

“This study adopted the stance that, despite the important role that informal mentors play in college student success, custodians as blue-collar workers--whose underpaid and unremarked labor is so essential to the smooth running of their campuses--are typically ignored on campuses. “

-- Jeremy John Reed

Statement of the Problem

Custodians and other blue-collar workers:

- are historically under-valued and marginalized and disenfranchised subgroup members of our college communities,
- represent some of the lowest compensated employees on campus and their jobs are often among the first to be outsourced as an attempted cost-saving measure,
- suffer the consequences of low occupational prestige and dirty work stigma at the hands of traditionally-empowered campus stakeholders such as faculty, staff, and students,
- experience blatant micro-aggressions such as being ignored by students and staff in public spaces,
- typically lack the same educational background as faculty and staff, those campus custodians lack the voice to talk about their oppression,
- face unwritten, entrenched norms that teach them not to cross borders to challenge traditionally-empowered faculty and administrators, and
- have perspectives which are devalued or ignored while at the same time legitimize the thinking of students, faculty, and academic administrators.

Based on these findings, this study advises college and university decision-makers to

- examine custodians as formal mentors,
- explore social justice concerns relative to blue-collar campus workers, and
- study the influence of custodian/student interactions on custodial staff job satisfaction and performance.

Suggestions for professional practices include:

- acknowledging and leveraging custodians’ unique assets and contributions as important mentors for, and allies to, college student success,

- fostering relationships between students and custodians,
- increasing custodian's opportunities for professional development,
- considering custodians' potential to support student success in custodian hiring decisions, and
- training custodial staff in Basic Crisis Intervention.

<https://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5788&context=etd>

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