



# The **Custodian's** in **Student**



# Role Success



By Steven D. Gilsdorf, CEFP

I'm going to reveal a secret that many people don't know about. Yet, once some thought is given to that secret, it becomes readily accepted. Ready? Here it is: "Custodians have a key role to play in student success." There it is. That's it. That's the secret.

Cleaning is important to the health and safety of the campus and its occupants. That's no surprise. The real secret, though, is the custodian's interactions with students. Those interactions can truly impact how a student succeeds.

## OVERLOOKED AND UNDERVALUED

I will admit to having some bias toward custodians and custodial work. I've been involved with cleaning for the majority of my 18 years in facilities management. That has allowed me to see the complexities of custodial work. I have come to appreciate many of the varied nuances that not everyone else does. From my personal observation and research, I've concluded that some of the key impacts made by custodians are overlooked and undervalued by the general campus community.

Let's begin with the general responsibilities of the custodian. A commonly accepted definition of a custodian is "one who cleans and maintains a building." The impact of cleaning related to recruitment and retention has been established, especially by Campbell & Bigger's article, "Cleanliness and Learning in Higher Education" (*Facilities Manager*, July/August 2008). There are additional studies that correlate cleaning to attendance, morale, and performance of building occupants (all citations are listed at the end of the article), including "The Smell of Virtue: Clean Scents Promote Reciprocity and Charity" (Liljenquist, Zhong, & Galinsky, 2010) and "Broken Windows: The Police and Neighborhood Safety" (Wilson & Kelling, 1982). Appreciating cleaning's significance within the higher education environment can help cement the recognition of the importance of the custodian's role for the greater university. Cleaning for health and safety are obvious and key parts of the custodial role where it relates to student success.

Custodians have a unique place and position to assist in student success. This is seen in another element of their role, that of "steward" or "caretaker." The custodian works in every place and sees every face on campus, in the classrooms and hallways of academic buildings and in the living and lounging areas of the residence halls. Often, custodians see where students are more vulnerable, open to, and possibly in need of influence. It is the custodian's special role that allows them to be



overlooked—as well as placing them in a unique position to help students in need.

I had an opportunity to complete some research on the role of the custodian. The goal of the research was to identify and highlight those custodian behaviors that positively impact student success. Here is the focus of that research:

#### **Problem**

The role of custodial personnel is often overlooked and undervalued in the equation for student success.

#### **Purpose**

Identify behaviors of custodial personnel that have a potential positive impact on student success. What role behaviors are presented by custodial personnel that impact student success in university settings?

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cleaning tasks that are formally performed and provide more direct support for student success. The research revealed that these duties, while important to the student, can reduce the self-esteem of the cleaner—there is a perceived social stigma from others around campus. Often, cleaning is viewed as beneath the stature of others and can be perceived as menial. This perception is reinforced by the challenging work that custodians perform and by the transient nature of the workers themselves (Ayllon, 2013).

One study of university custodians was able to identify the fear and despair custodians feel while performing their work (Magolda & Delman, 2014). The report shared how institutional policies shape and sometimes force custodians into roles that separate them from the rest

### **CHANGING PERCEPTIONS: CUSTODIANS ARE MUCH MORE THAN CLEANERS**

My study added to the research that broadens the understanding of the custodian role within the higher education setting; it set out to complement the research that identifies nontypical role behaviors (beyond cleaning) performed by custodians that impact student success. By identifying and validating those behaviors, the hope is that the custodian's perceived role can change, and therefore receive heightened recognition by others within the university setting. By identifying those behaviors, appropriate training and professional development can be provided to boost the impact custodians are already having on student success.

The literature turned up in my research revealed few studies that looked specifically at the role of the custodian, with even fewer that looked at the person of the cleaner specifically. A small number of studies did include custodians within the greater blue-collar description.

One qualitative study stood out, which focused on and identified impactful custodial behaviors as it investigated custodian–student interactions within a student housing setting (Reed, 2015). My study expanded on Reed's by taking the research to other areas of campus to determine the results of interactions between university students and custodians; those areas are the classroom buildings and collegiate athletic buildings that custodians maintain.

Reed's study identified two different categories of duties that positively impact students: duties that are institutionally assigned and duties as assumed by the employee.

### **DUTIES ASSIGNED: SOCIAL STIGMA**

The institutionally assigned duties are those normally associated with the custodian role. Those duties include the

of the campus community and also fuel injustice. The study states that the increase of "business" practices in university settings has discouraged custodians' courageous acts, amplified "caste" (class) differences, and made it harder for custodians to cross subculture borders. This focus on business practices negatively impacts university custodians by repeatedly pushing them aside. Often, such efforts to improve efficiency and effectiveness interfere with a university's economic justice and equity goals, particularly toward undervalued, overlooked custodians.

The studies I examined emphasized the custodian's perceived role in the campus community. Those perceived-role traits of a custodian include being ignored, overlooked, and having limited engagement and contact with others unless there is a business need to reach out (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2014). My study validated and confirmed the role of the custodian as perceived by the students, faculty, and staff as being overlooked. Nevertheless, other studies showed that blue-collar work, including custodial, adds to and improves upon the overall performance of an organization (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2014). This study also introduced the concept of *Sisu*.

*Sisu* is a Finnish term defined as stoic and persistent determination, resilience, and the resolve to continue and overcome in the face of adversity. *Sisu* is a combination of "stamina, perseverance, courage, and determination held in reserve for hard times"—in other words, good old-fashioned "grit." Perhaps due to my career in and around custodial and cleaning, I find such this an accurate term for describing a custodian. *Sisu* can be seen as the custodian's "internal guidance system," which motivates them to perform quality work and to persevere through the "purgatorial" monotony of cleaning the same space day after day while remaining upbeat about their service.

## DUTIES ASSUMED: MENTORING AND SUPPORTING

Returning to Reed's study, the second category of duties he identifies—those assumed by employees—are another area where they have an impact on student success. These duties can be broken down further into two types of employee-assumed behavior. The first type is mentoring, and includes role modeling, advising, and contributing. The second type involves supportive interactions, and includes comforting, encouraging, observing, participating, and nurturing.

The mentoring behavior takes place as custodians choose a student to guide. Many of the responses I received show custodians taking a personal interest in helping students and wanting to assist them by being examples to them and sharing their stories with them. Sometimes the custodians were chosen by the students and were sought out for whom they represented. The studies showed that minority students were greatly impacted by minority custodians and would seek them out for life advice. In turn, minority custodians saw themselves as agents of the institution who could speak directly to the trials of the minority student. Often, minority students and custodians come from similar cultural backgrounds and can relate on several levels.

The second type of employee-assumed behavior is more parental, and involves custodians acting as surrogate parents to students who are away from home. Often, it is the custodian's empathy that leads them to students in need, whether that need arises out of stress from exams, project deadlines, or just being away from parents for the first time. Such supporting behaviors can include a custodian showing up at a student's athletic event, fine arts exhibit, or graduation, or talking with a student before, during, or after a big exam or project.

Students may seek such support at times when they could use a more familial support system. For example, they may seek out custodians to introduce parents, partners, and children to other campus faculty or personnel at postgraduation and alumni events. For students who are from out of state, overseas, or are just homesick, custodians

can become surrogate parents providing emotional support, and, when needed, challenging them to do their best and carry on through the tough periods presented by the college experience. It is through behaviors like these that the university can see satisfied the purpose of social justice and life fulfillment for the student; such employee-assumed duties can lead to the humanization of their educational experience. These interactions also impact custodians by providing them occupational esteem and a greater sense of purpose in their work.

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These employee-assumed duties should be considered allies to education and the educator (Reed, 2015). Here, Reed is not asserting that custodians can take the place of a Ph.D.-level professor, but only insisting that each has a needed role in student success.

## TWO ASSETS: APPROACHABILITY AND ACCESS

The role of custodians is unique in a collegiate setting, and includes two factors that can aid them in impacting student success. The first factor deals with their perceived role. Compared to other groups on campus (faculty, staff, and even students), the custodian has little to no perceived authority. This lack of authority can assist the custodian when interacting with students, especially those who are emotionally needy. The “non-authority” of custodians allows students to interact with, share, and receive from them without feeling as if they are threatened or need to put up defensive walls. Additionally, a student’s perspective on custodians is different than what they are typically exposed to. That perspective isn’t of a peer, an educator, or a staff person with authority, but of someone outside their normal circles, and it can provide a fresh approach to an experience that seems overwhelming and a reminder that, though circumstances can appear to be all-consuming, they don’t need to be.

The second factor is custodian access. Custodians are in places that most other staff are not. By being in places that most in authority are not, custodians are granted more personal access to the student. Often this personal access allows them to bear witness to activities that most highlight a student in need, which means they can have a direct impact on student success, beyond that of just cleaning, simply by being present.

It is my personal history that has led me to believe so strongly in the positive impact custodians can have on student success. I have seen custodians intervene effectively with students in many situations and circumstances, including those distressed due to loneliness, homesickness, and stress from exams and research papers.

Custodians have been the first to see those extreme situations, discovering and then helping students recovering from alcohol abuse and suffering through eating disorders, and even dealing with suicide attempts. Custodians are there to see and know the students who are living in the woods or out of a vehicle while going to class. They are the ones who see students losing their hair due to the stress of exams and projects.

With their lack of perceived authority, custodians are able to present themselves as approachable. With genuine concern, they are able to assist students to get the help they need. One notable comment from a custodian summed up how custodians can impact student success: “There are days when a student seems lost and they are nobody; nobody sees them. But I am somebody to them and they can be somebody to me.”

By providing additional awareness training and some basic personal interaction skills, custodians can be better prepared

to engaged a student population that needs mentoring, role modeling, and emotional support. Those custodians can help direct students to the sources capable of providing needed assistance. Not only would this preparedness help students, it could provide a greater sense of purpose and fulfillment for custodians. 📍

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