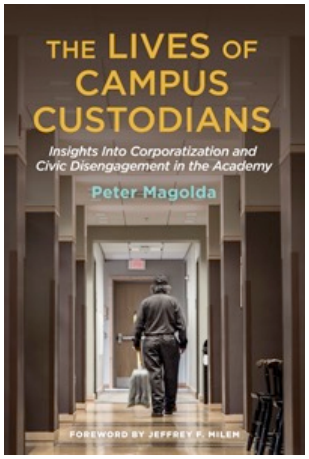


The Lives of Campus Custodians Insights into Corporatization and Civic Disengagement in the Academy

Magolda, Peter M.
Stylus Publishing, Llc., 2016

Book Review

Tags: civic engagement | college and university contexts | community engagement | student learning

Reviewed by: David Aftandilian
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I decided to review this book because of a story one of my professors, Kenneth A.R. Kennedy, told me in college. While he was doing his dissertation research at a university in India, he learned the most not from the esteemed faculty, but from an "untouchable" custodian. Similarly, in the preface to this book, Peter Magolda describes Juanita "Pat" Denton, the head custodian of the residence hall Magolda was directing for his first full-time job, as his mentor: "I learned that custodians knew as much, if not more, about the residents and the condition of the residence hall than I did" (xix). The invaluable lessons he learned from Pat, combined with frustration that higher education scholars have virtually ignored custodians as subjects worthy of study, led Magolda, a professor emeritus of educational leadership at Miami University, to write *The Lives of Campus Custodians*.

Magolda combines more than a year of participant observation, ethnographic interviews, and literature review to give us a valuable glimpse into what daily life is like for custodians on two different college campuses. I especially enjoyed the many tell-it-like-it-is quotes from custodians that Magolda includes, such as this one from George: "In 1974, HU was like a new world for me. . . . [Recently] I heard that the president thought the wages here were comparable with other jobs in the region. Comparable to what? They [new custodians] are still starting off at $9.35 an hour. And health care premiums continue to rise. . . . It's not much higher than minimum wage. The university mismanages its budget, and custodians have to pay the price" (107). Such first-hand observations highlight the usually hidden impacts of cost-cutting measures and other corporate managerial practices on campus custodians, many of whom do not earn a living wage, and who, like Samuel, have to watch their money so carefully

that he will only buy his mother her favorite kind of cake for her birthday if it is on sale (71).

The book is also eye-opening about "community engagement," and offers new ways to think about it. I teach a service-learning class every spring and have helped lead the faculty advisory group for our Office for Community Engagement. Yet until reading *The Lives of Campus Custodians,* I had never thought about having our students engage with an important but largely invisible community: the low-wage staff working at our university. As Magolda thoughtfully puts it: "Typically, higher education civic engagement involves working with communities outside the university, such as service-learning excursions to address societal ills. Yet the findings from this study suggest that subcultures within universities are equally in need of civic revitalization" (173). Moreover, Magolda challenges readers to consider, "Why does civic engagement by those on the margins, such as custodians, seem odd?" (188; Magolda provides several examples of civic engagement by custodians in the book).

Toward the end of the book, Magolda offers a series of concrete suggestions for how to improve matters for both custodians and the university, directed at administrators, supervisors, students, faculty, and custodians themselves. These range from "sponsoring professional development workshops that provide custodians with essential human relations and communication skills to share their wisdom with the larger campus community" (198) to encouraging custodians to unionize (or find other ways to band together and bargain collectively).

Unfortunately, there are also some serious problems with *The Lives of Campus Custodians.* First, the book is often quite repetitive, with the same phrases used almost verbatim in subsequent paragraphs (61, for example), and later chapters repeating previous material, even including the same quotes from custodians. Second, the book too often simply summarizes its findings, rather than analyzing them using relevant theoretical frames. For example, given the topic of this book, it seems very strange that structural and symbolic violence, internalized oppression, positionality, and even labor and immigrant history (many of the custodians Magolda interviewed were refugees from Eastern Europe) are never mentioned. Third, the book often feels heavy-handed in its critique of the growing turn toward "corporate managerialism" in contemporary American universities (a trend which I also find deeply disturbing); at times it seems as if Magolda wrote the book more as an opportunity to critique campus corporatization than to illuminate the lives of campus custodians. And fourth, the vast majority of the custodians Magolda interviewed and worked with were White – 99 percent at one campus, and at least 78 percent at the other (18-26). This means that the book has relatively little to say about racial inequality, which is a serious issue for custodians on many campuses (one welcome exception is a spot-on quote about how racial politics affects

custodians by self-described “huge-ass Black man” Calvin [104]).

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