Family Feud: Campus Custodians and the Corporate University

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Abstract

This manuscript, based on an ethnography about campus custodians, discusses four “family” discourses that reveal ways custodians respond to their university’s adaptation of corporate-like ideals and policies. The discourse analysis focuses on power and shared governance. The paper contains recommendations to offset problems associated with the corporatization of the academy.

Format

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Content

Family Matters

"Back then there was a reason to be dedicated and loyal. They used to preach to us about the Harrison [University] family. They treated people, everyone—custodians, professors, and students—as family. Now we’re suppose to refer to faculty as customers instead of the people you are taking care of. …We were all part of the family and here for the same reasons—to make sure the kids are educated. It was like we were a puzzle and we each were a piece. Now we have been torn apart. Now, they say we are running a business here.” —Harrison University campus custodian

“Family” was the most frequent word uttered by research participants during fieldwork, formal interviews, and casual conversations throughout this yearlong ethnographic study of campus custodians. As this quotation suggests, custodians recognize that universities and housekeeping departments were changing but not for the better. Custodians’ described this shift as moving from a family-like organization that cared for all campus stakeholders to more corporate-like entities, emphasizing the economic “bottom-line.” This corporatization movement—favoring top-down decision-making, downsizing, and outsourcing—negatively influences their job satisfaction and how they interact with the larger campus community.

Custodians’ seemingly near-universal reaction to this shift was fear; their “solution” was for their university to revert back to “the good old days,” and recommit to family-like campus values. As analyses began four different “family discourses” emerged. This manuscript analyzes these four conceptualizations; reveals insights about how institutional values influence custodians’ job satisfaction and interactions with each other and the larger campus community; and illuminates how custodians’ conceptualizations of family allays work fears. This discourse analysis provides insights into the perils of this ideology, how campus custodians and the entire campus community can navigate corporate-like environments to survive and sometimes thrive, and reveals ways for universities to initiate equitable and moral change.

Research Study Overview

This study: collects, analyzes, and disseminates custodians’ life stories; documents custodians’ interactions with and insights about other campus subcultures and vice-versa; reveals how macro-campus policies influence custodians; provides a unique “bottom up” organizational view of the academy; and illuminates how the gravitational pull toward corporatized universities influences organizational structures and administrative procedures.

This study occurred on two midwestern campuses between June 2012 and May 2013. Compton
University (CU) is a private, elite university in a major metropolis. The CU custodial staff included 73 staff members. CU's endowment and hearty revenue streams contribute to an ethos of stability and financial prosperity. Harrison University (HU) is a public, state-funded university, located in a rural college town. The HU custodial staff included approximately 112 members. HU's budget woes (due to reduced support from the State) have resulted in fewer and less predictable revenue streams. Despite its stellar academic reputation, economic and fiscal turbulence remains a norm.

This interpretive/constructivist (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) ethnographic study, with critical theory leanings (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005; Quantz, 1992): solicited and documented the multiple realities of the respondents; valued and attended to local environments and contextual histories; infused the issue of power into interpretations; and celebrated the presence and importance of positionality, politics, and subjectivity. Of particular importance was the “silent workings of structure and power” revealing “how historical conditions and larger social conditions shape current situations” (Charmaz, 2011, p. 362).

Data collection included participant-observations (Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2011) of over 65 events (e.g., attending training sessions), over 100 ethnographic interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2005), focus groups with approximately 70 individuals, and analyses of hundreds of written and audio/visual documents (Hodder, 2000) such as staff manuals.

The Corporate University

"When the economic tsunami washed over them in 2008, almost every institution of higher learning, from the Ivy League to the community colleges, feared that it was in trouble. States cut back their funding, while endowments plummeted. Though each school handled the loss of income in its own way, their early responses indicate that the current crisis will only intensify many of the deleterious trends … Administrations usually acted unilaterally, sometimes by implementing long-sought strategic plans without consulting their faculties. Most strove, it is true, to avoid laying off tenured and tenure-track faculty members and instead resorted to hiring freezes, tuition increases, pay cuts, and reductions in everything from pension contributions to trash collection. (Schrecker, 2010, p. 225)"

Policy changes aimed at responding to the lethargic worldwide economy effected almost every higher education institution. "Behind ivied walls and on leafy quadrangles, administrators and professors acknowledge this new reality. Higher education is changing profoundly, retreating from ideals of liberal arts and the leading edge research it always has cherished. Instead, it is behaving more like the $250-billion business it has become" (Hammonds, Jackson, DeGeorge & Morris, 1997, p. 96). In 2015, entrepreneurialism continues to be tightly woven into the fabric of American higher education.

As American universities grapple with shrinking public support, declining state and federal funding, uncertain federal research grants, and institutional retrenchment (Zusman 1999), a popular "solution" is transforming universities from non-profit corporations guided by scholars and students to corporations tightly managed by a small and elite cadre of administrators whose primary responsibilities are to generate revenues and cut costs. This new kind of university assumes characteristics of profit-making organizations, and is manifested in academic capitalism ideals (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), such as entrepreneurialism.

Both HU and CU enacted business/corporate ideals and practices to respond to these economic realities, which led to downsizing staff, expanding job responsibilities, stagnating salaries, and instituting intrusive accountability systems. These practices intensified custodians’ feelings of fear and fatalism. Specifically they feared their metaphor of “the university as a family,” was nearing obsolesce and they felt powerless—believing their destiny rests on the hands of others. Nelson (1997) talked about the influence of corporatization on powerless campus subcultures:

"As universities struggle with increasingly constrained budgets, the temptation to make ends meet by exploiting more vulnerable employees grows daily. Industry meanwhile provides a handbook of relevant strategies and techniques: make paying workers as little as possible a basic managerial principle and goal; deny employee benefits anytime you can get away with it; describes your responsibility for the most abused workers by subcontracting for their services; during contract negotiations offer nothing until frustration peaks, then make generous salary and job security offers to long-term employees on condition a greater decrease their numbers for attrition….“ (pp. 3-4)

This ideology evoked custodial conversations about how the corporate university changed the nature of their work and decreased their job satisfaction. One custodian noted, “When I started
here, it was definitely a family. We had people who had a house fire. We had furniture in storage and we gave it to them. It was the right thing to do and the university did it. I don't see that happening now." For members of the custodian caste, their collective perception of the shift from family to business resulted in a more legalistic, bureaucratic, risk-adverse, and bottom-line oriented organization. When conflicts arose, the university's interests trumped the interest of employees. While these conversations almost always centered on family, very different ideology was embedded in each family discourse. The majority of the paper focuses on these four discourses and the implications for the entire campus community.

Family Discourses

Custodians’ first discourse about family aligns with contemporary conceptualizations, influenced by increases in the number of divorces, remarriages, adoptions, same-sex marriages, single parents (which is a more inclusive discourse when compared to conventional perspectives based on blood or marriage). Family in this context implies that members live or have lived together; keep each other safe; and offer unconditional love, acceptance, care, and support (i.e., emotionally and financially). In this discourse, family and work domains are separate and unequal. Custodians experience annoyances, injustices, and fears at work, but temper their reactions, because, it is dangerous to bite the hand that feeds you and because energy is better spent on family. In essence, a bad job, that supports one’s family, is better than no job. Family is the epicenter of life and work is the primary means of providing for and supporting family. For these custodians like family is not an important thing—it’s everything.

A second family discourse extends the first discourse to include a “work family.” These unique on-the-job kinships refute the adage that “blood is thicker than water.” Challenging life experiences influence and blur distinctions between home and work as well as family and friends. In this discourse, family and work domains are intertwined and equal. Custodians experience numerous annoyances and fears at work and find support from co-workers on the job and home. Family-like colleagues go a long way make a to tough job and a challenging life a bit easier.

These first two family discourses focused on individual custodians and were prevalent at Compton University. Both discourses accept the status quo and use the strength of family or colleagues to cope with these work realities. The Harrison University discourses center on management systems and the larger university. Harkening for the “good old days” when the university acted more like a family than a business represents this third family discourse. A shared aspiration is for the university to recapture and ultimately sustain these ideals that historically (but no longer) guide it.

Custodians’ stories illuminate the kinds of institutional values of yester year that many custodians believe are vanishing and should be sustained. One custodian retiree, years ago baked cookies for residents and interacted with them afterhours without interference from the university. Now universities prohibit such activity to minimize legal risks (e.g., a student becoming ill from eating cookies). In the past, the housekeeping department sponsored celebratory events to recognize exemplary work of staff. Expensive galas and team building events are rare in these austere times. In the old days, custodians seldom followed a formal chain of command, which now days is a non-negotiable expectation, which lessens opportunities for senior managers to interact with workers. Custodians who embrace this discourse embrace change. They remain sensitive to rising costs and fewer institutional revenue streams, but believe that managing the university like it is a family, is a better option than acting as if it is a for-profit corporation.

The fourth family discourse, like those of the third, opposes university as efforts that attempt to corporatize the university. These individuals support many of the values that characterize the previous discourse, but reject the agenda to return to the past. The metaphor of university as a political organization characterizes this discourse. These custodians publically criticize practices promoted by corporatization advocates. Instead of romanticizing the past, they want to think strategically and politically about the future. “7 Signs Your Workplace is Toxic” (Wilding, 2014) succinctly identifies concerns proponents of this fourth discourse have about the changing nature of higher education.

"How can you identify if you’re trapped in a hostile workplace? Here are seven telling signs you may be working in a toxic office environment: [1] “You’re told to feel “lucky you have a job”…[2] “Poor communication”…[3] “Everyone has a bad attitude”…[4]. “There’s always office drama”…[5] “Dysfunction reigns”…[6] “You have a tyrannical boss.”…[7] “You feel in your gut something is off.” (para 3)"

Custodians bemoan autocratic management practices and their loss of influence in departmental decision-making. Implicit in their critiques are managerial assumptions about custodians. First,
custodians should be happy they are employed, and thus not complain. Second, it is unnecessary for management to communicate rationale for policy changes to custodians; managers make policy and custodians adhere to the policies. Assumptions, such as these contribute to unrest, drama, dysfunction, and workers’ perceptions of tyrannical bosses that Wilding noted. At the heart of these practices are business-influenced ideals such as efficiency, cutting costs, accountability, and minimizing risk.

Custodians, who embrace this discourse, accept the need to change and want to shape the future. They understand that college costs continue to increase, while revenue streams continue to decrease. They believe that it is important to respect and learn from the past, but to return to it would be unwise. They believe that taking risks, acting as critics, demanding input in decision-making, and taking risks—all political acts—benefit the university and all of its stakeholders.

Charles Swindoll wrote, “A family is a place where principles are hammered and honed on the anvil of everyday living.” This insight applies to family and higher education. The HU and CU communities hammer and hone principles on the anvil of everyday living. Disseminating information about the everyday lives of custodians reveals campus-wide struggles associated with negotiating about competing institutional values or principles.

Despite these struggles, rooted in difference, individuals who subscribed to each discourse use the metaphor of family to critique others’ visions of the good (university) life as well as present their own. Some custodians posit that working is simply a means to an end, which is earning a sufficient wage to support family. Some custodians posit that forging family-like relationships with coworkers enhances both their home and work lives. Some custodians posit that a shift from managing the university as if were a family toward managing the university as if it were a corporation is a bad idea; their “solution” is to return to the good old days. Finally, some custodians posit that managing the university as if it were a corporation is ill conceived and so too is the “solution” is to return to the good old days. Instead they favor making explicit the politics of family and seek solutions that focused on shared power and governance.

Each discourse represents a community of interest. These relatively autonomous groups, based on common ideals, give members voice and identity. Communities of interest have merit, yet these autonomous and discrete groupings make it difficult to engage in dialogue about the public interest (Carlson, 1994). Communities of difference and diversity, rooted in democratic multicultural ideals, provides space for communities of interest to form and prosper, while a common, public culture is constantly and consciously being constructed and reconstructed through dialogue across and about difference. An aim of this multicultural democratic community discourse (Carlson, 1994) is to maximize public participation by: providing room for divergent perspectives and be sensitive to the concerns of all; standing for something in the way of moral or ethical vision for the reconstruction of community (e.g., recognizing the important contribution of unsung campus heroes); rupturing the borders that separate individuals into separate camps or neat categories; and building alliances. It aims to invite discrete campus enclaves to cross-pollinate.

The paper provides insights about custodians, an invisible campus subculture and the perils of the corporatization of the university. The discourse analysis reveals ways to think differently about issues that transcend subcultures (e.g., consolidation of power, the demise of shared governance, and the need to forge communities of difference rooted in multi-cultural democratic ideals. The paper concentrates on the fourth discourse—university as a political organization—as a way for campus subcultures to work together (and avoid family feuds) to find political solutions that are equitable and in the best interest of the academy.

**Reference(s)**


