

Dear Students,

As members of our 200-level anthropology class, we have spent the semester examining materiality and inequality in society under Professor Julie Starr and Professor Colin Quinn, culminating in a final project connecting course material to an issue in the Hamilton Community.

Our group has focused on non-academic faculty labor at Hamilton, specifically with regards to Facilities Management employees. We hoped to gain insight into the level of ‘visibility’ of these employees with regards to their personal experiences at Hamilton and interactions with students. We spent several weeks recording personal interviews, meeting with human resources staff, and sent out a schoolwide survey to gain the student perspective.

‘Invisible labor’ refers to the often unobserved and unappreciated work that goes on behind the scenes and at obscure hours. Custodial work is often ‘invisible.’ Miriam Cherry, Merion Crain, and Winifred Poster discuss the topic extensively in their 2016 book *Invisible Labor: Hidden Work in the Contemporary World*. They make the argument that visibility and invisibility are socially constructed through hierarchies, power relations, and social norms. Further, they mention that this work is often ignored by the consumer and the employer.

In his book *Chicken: The Dangerous Transformation of America’s Favorite Food*, Steve Striffler extensively analyzes a poultry plant in Arkansas. He exposes abysmal conditions, demanding work, and severe power dynamics between employees in management and the workers who are paid minimal amounts. One important element of this labor is its invisibility; the workers have little contact with the outside world during their work day and their labor is mechanical and dehumanizing.

At Hamilton, custodial staff and facilities management workers awaken well before students, cleaning bathrooms, vacuuming, emptying trash, repairing appliances, and performing countless other tasks that involve chemicals, painstaking mechanics, and often exhausting labor.

We found that most members of facilities management find student interactions to be one of the highlights of their jobs. While they acknowledged the difficulty of their work and the early hours, they generally had a positive attitude toward working at Hamilton. However, multiple members complained about the way Hamilton is ‘run like a business.’ This left them feeling disregarded and unappreciated by the administration.

Our student survey data exposed an element of invisibility with regard to members of facilities management. Of 154 student responses, 59% did not know or were unsure of the name of the person who cleans their hallway or dorm. 68% of students thought that members of their residence hall appreciate the work of their custodian. While we do not doubt that some students appreciate the work of their custodian, we question the validity of that appreciation given the majority of students don’t know the name of the person doing the cleaning.

As students are attending classes and going through their daily routine, many are unaware of the behind-the-scenes labor taking place to make their lives easier and help the college run smoothly.

While many students commented that they smile or say 'hi' in passing, the majority of students here do not know the name of the person who cleans their housing multiple times a week. Given the strong emphasis on community at Hamilton, this is disappointing. We are proposing that facilities management staff, specifically custodial workers in residence halls, wear name tags. Although this is a relatively small change for a social issue of this magnitude, we believe that name tags will be an important step in facilitating stronger relationships between students and the custodial staff.

Throughout this project, we gained an awareness of the positivity displayed by members of facilities management. While they acknowledge the difficulty of their labor, student interactions are often the highlight of their job.

We urge students to try and learn the name of the person who cleans their dorm, and any academic building they frequent. Further, show this person appreciation for their hard work making your life easier. While it may not mean much to you, these interactions are often a highlight for the custodial staff.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

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