



Fostering Belonging and Inclusion: The Role of Women Custodians in Student Housing

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WOMEN CUSTODIANS PLAY AN ESSENTIAL, YET OFTEN INVISIBLE, ROLE in shaping student belonging in on-campus housing communities. This critical qualitative study explores how women custodians contribute to Latine students' sense of belonging in university residence halls. Using *pláticas*—a culturally grounded conversational methodology—with six first-generation Latine college students, the study centers on student voices to examine how informal, relational interactions with custodial staff offer emotional support, cultural affirmation and a sense of home. Guided by frameworks of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019), and invisible work (Daniels, 1987; Hatton, 2017), the findings reveal that women custodians foster community through everyday acts of care that are often overlooked by institutional structures. These relationships are grounded in shared cultural experiences, language, and values, and are sustained through reciprocal exchanges that reflect mutual respect and community. The study challenges traditional definitions of student support by highlighting the relational labor of women custodians as central, not peripheral, to Latine students' success. It calls for higher education institutions to recognize and honor the often-unacknowledged work that staff perform outside their formal roles, particularly in student housing. In doing so, we affirm the role of women custodians as vital contributors to inclusive, culturally responsive campus environments.

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INTRODUCTION

We don't always notice the people who hold a campus together. They move quietly, before the hallways fill, before lights go on, sweeping, scrubbing, repairing, and resetting. But some do more than clean. They greet us by name, ask how we're doing, and remind us of home when we're far from it. Their presence is steady, predictable. Their labor is often invisible.

Women make up 36 percent of the custodial workforce nationwide (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). On college campuses, especially within student housing, women custodians, many of whom are women of color, form the emotional and cultural aspects of residence life. Yet, their work is rarely acknowledged beyond its physical demands (Magolda, 2014, 2016; Petitt, 2008).

Having spent years working in student housing, I have seen firsthand how often custodians are overlooked, despite the essential roles they play in creating a welcoming and affirming environment for students. Institutions often recognize cleanliness, but their contributions extend beyond cleaning residence halls; they help build community.

This study begins to question what happens when we look beyond the vacuum and listen to the voices of students who have felt seen and supported by the women who clean their halls. Centering the lived experiences of Latine students, this research explores how women custodians foster belonging not through programming or policy, but through presence, language, and everyday acts of care.

Fostering Belonging and Inclusion in Residence Halls

In residence halls, daily interactions with custodians offer students opportunities for connection that are not formally programmed or positioned within student development models. These relationships—built through presence, greetings, small conversations, and moments of care—can hold deep meaning for students who are navigating the complexities of identity, community, and belonging—particularly students of color (Aranda Cervantes & Hernández, 2025; Strayhorn, 2019; Wiggins, 2022). Despite this, women custodians are rarely included in conversations around student support or inclusive campus practices. Custodians, particularly women of color, exist in institutional blind spots: physically present, yet symbolically marginalized (Hatton, 2017). Their invisible work and unseen labor—often emotional, relational, and gendered—underpins institutional life, but rarely receives acknowledgement or credit (Daniels, 1987).

Informal Interactions

This study explores those gaps in visibility and recognition. Grounded in the frameworks of sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019), community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), and invisible work (Daniels, 1987), I examine how the relational labor of women custodians shapes student experiences in on-campus housing environments. Through the use of *pláticas*, I engage Latine students in dialogue about how they experience and interpret these informal interactions.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to critically explore how women custodians in student housing environments contribute to a sense of belonging for Latine students through informal, relational acts that are often unseen, but deeply felt.

The following research questions guide the study:

- *How do Latine students in student housing experience and interpret their interactions with women custodians, and how do these interactions reflect forms of community cultural wealth?*
- *In what ways do these interactions contribute to a sense of belonging and inclusion?*
- *How does the concept of invisible work help us understand the role of relational labor in student development and campus culture?*

By examining these often-overlooked everyday interactions through critical frameworks, this study aims to expand how we understand students' belonging and support in residence halls. The following literature review explores existing scholarship on belonging, community cultural wealth, and invisible work to contextualize relational contributions of women custodians in housing.

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Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model, alongside Strayhorn's (2019) framework for sense of belonging, and Daniels' (1987) and Hatton's (2017) theory of invisible work. Together, these frameworks provide a critical lens to understand the often-overlooked relational labor of women custodians in student housing and their role in fostering inclusive campus environments for Latine students.

Yosso's (2005) model community includes six forms of capital, but for the purpose of this study, the focus is on the following three: aspirational, social, and navigational. Aspirational capital reflects the hopes and the resilience that students carry with them, even in the face of systemic barriers. Social capital captures the networks of people and resources that offer support, while navigational capital speaks to the skills needed to maneuver within dominant institutional structures (Yosso, 2005). These capitals help illuminate the strengths Latine students draw upon in forming relationships with custodians, whose presence can affirm shared cultural values, care, and connection.

Strayhorn's (2019) sense of belonging theory emphasizes the psychological importance of feeling accepted, valued, and supported within campus spaces, particularly for students of color. Interactions with custodial staff, while informal, can be deeply meaningful in reinforcing students' sense of being seen and included in their living and learning environments.

Lastly, Daniels' (1987) concept of invisible work, further expanded by Hatton (2017), describes the unrecognized and undervalued labor that often supports institutions behind the scenes. In higher education, women custodians—many who are women of color—frequently engage in both physical and emotional labor that goes unnoticed within dominant narratives of student support (Hatton, 2017; Pettit, 2008). This invisible labor, while critical to the functioning and culture of residence halls, is rarely named as a contributor to student development and belonging.

Anchored in critical theory, this framework rejects deficit-based narratives and affirms the cultural wealth that Latine students and marginalized staff bring to campus life (Boettcher et al., 2019; Gonzalez, 2019). By bringing together these concepts, the framework offers a lens to examine how everyday relational interactions between students and women custodians may influence students' experiences of belonging in residence halls.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community Cultural Wealth and Latine Student Resilience

Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework challenges deficit views by highlighting the rich cultural resources that Students of Color draw upon in education. This includes six forms of capital: (1) Aspirational – hope, despite barriers,

(2) Linguistic – multilingualism and expression, (3) Familial – deep connections to family and community, (4) Social – networks that offer guidance, (5) Navigational – ability to maneuver through dominant systems, and (6) Resistant – skills to challenge inequity. These forms of wealth acknowledge how students persist and thrive within institutions not designed with their experiences in mind, offering a powerful lens to interpret Latine students' experiences in student housing and beyond. Accordingly, this study focuses on aspirational, social, and navigational capital, as these forms most closely reflect the relational and supportive interactions described by students.

Community Cultural Wealth in Residence Life Contexts

Within residence halls, community cultural wealth is particularly relevant for understanding how Latine students foster community and belonging. Social and familial capital are often used in peer relationships and staff interactions that reflect shared values, language, or cultural norms (Aranda Cervantes & Hernández, 2025; Gonzalez, 2019). Navigational capital also comes into play as students build relationships with staff members, including custodians, who provide informal mentorship or support. These culturally grounded interactions contribute to a sense of safety and connection, reinforcing the idea that students' cultural knowledge is a source of strength, rather than a barrier to success (Aranda Cervantes & Hernández, 2025).

Theoretical Underpinning of Belonging in Higher Education

Belonging—a sense of mattering and acceptance in the campus community—is critical to student success, influencing retention, engagement, and academic performance (Strayhorn, 2019). It is shaped by both cognitive and emotional experiences (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Maslow's (1943) hierarchy positions belonging as foundational for self-actualization. Research highlights the role of peer and faculty relationships, staff representation, and culturally affirming environments in cultivating belonging (Hoffman et al., 2002; Johnson et al., 2007). Traditions, rituals, and shared spaces in residential life deepen this connection (Musoba & Placide, 2013).

Culturally Grounded Belonging Among Latine Students

For Latine students, who represent the largest ethnic minoritized group in U.S. higher education, belonging is shaped not just by institutional offerings, but by cultural and familial expectations (Excelencia in Education, 2023; Nuñez, 2014). Schlossberg's (1989) theory of marginality and mattering offers additional insight into these dynamics: students assess whether they feel included and valued. While marginality reflects alienation, mattering affirms that students are seen, appreciated, and needed through attention, importance, and recognition.

Many Latine students are first-generation and navigate predominantly White institutions where cultural congruence is often missing. Balancing academic demands with strong commitments to family can be challenging (Gonzalez, 2019; Perna & Titus, 2005). Opportunities to speak Spanish, engage in cultural traditions, and see

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themselves reflected in staff affirm their identity and increase feelings of inclusion (Aranda Cervantes & Hernández, 2025). Yet, such nuanced experiences remain underrepresented in mainstream literature.

Understanding Invisible Work in Institutional Settings

Daniels (1987) introduced invisible work to describe labor that sustains communities and systems, but remains largely unrecognized—especially work carried out by women across formal and informal roles. This includes tasks that are physical, emotional, and relational in nature, yet are often left out of dominant institutional narratives.

In the context of higher education, custodial labor exemplifies this invisibility. Custodians contribute to both the function and the climate of a campus, but their efforts are frequently reduced to cleaning tasks, erasing the full scope of their impact (Petitt, 2008). Women's labor has historically been associated with care, relational work, and emotional support—forms of labor that are frequently devalued or rendered invisible within institutional settings (Daniels, 1987; Hatton, 2017). In campus environments, custodial work is often reduced to cleaning tasks, even though it may include relational interactions such as greeting students, checking in, and creating a sense of familiarity (Petitt, 2008). These daily acts of care, while essential, often go unacknowledged in dominant-narrative student support.

Women Custodians and the Quiet Architecture of Belonging

Hatton (2017) extends the notion of invisibility by highlighting how care work is marginalized through cultural undervaluation, legal definitions, and hierarchies. In residence halls, women custodians are often the most visible adults students interact with daily. Their warmth and consistency, especially for students of color, foster trust and belonging. Yet, their contributions—rooted in relational labor—remain institutionally unacknowledged. This study situates their work within frameworks of belonging, cultural wealth, and invisible labor, challenging deficit models and calling for a more relational understanding of student success.

METHODOLOGY

A Culturally Relevant Methodology

To center the lived experiences of Latine students and examine how women custodians foster belonging through relational labor, I used a critical qualitative methodology grounded in community values. Specifically, I used *pláticas*, meaning “informal conversations” in Spanish, a culturally relevant method of informal conversation rooted in the Latine tradition of storytelling and collective knowledge-sharing (Carmona et al., 2021; Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016; Morales et al., 2023).

Unlike traditional research interviews that often reinforce power dynamics, pláticas emphasize relationality, trust, and reciprocity. Participants are not passive subjects, but are active contributors, co-constructing meaning with the researcher. This approach honors the relational fabric of Latine communities, where knowledge is exchanged through dialogue, connection, and care. As a method, pláticas reflect the very cultural and familial values this study seeks to explore, offering a methodology that is not only appropriate, but affirming.

Recruitment and Selection Criteria

Contributors were identified based on specific criteria via purposeful sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The criteria included currently enrolled undergraduate students, at least 18 years of age, who self-identify as Latine and lived in on-campus housing for at least one academic year at the research site. Additionally, contributors had to be able to converse about meaningful interactions they had with custodians of any gender or identity in housing at the research site. Flyers outlining the research criteria were distributed on approved posting areas at the research site and shared with custodians in housing to share with students. A targeted email was sent to students who lived in on-campus housing for the 2022–23 academic year who were still enrolled at the research site. Once a potential contributor reached out, I followed up via email individually to ensure they met the research criteria. Using this sampling method, I was able to identify contributors who could address the research questions.

Research Site

The study was conducted at a large, urban, Hispanic-serving public institution in California. The university’s housing program serves nearly 9,000 students across traditional halls, suites, and apartments. The custodial team reflects the diverse backgrounds contributing to the inclusive fabric of campus life.

Contributors

In keeping with the spirit of pláticas as a culturally grounded, non-hierarchical methodology (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016; Morales et al., 2023), I use the term “contributors” to reflect the active, co-constructive role each student played in this study.

The study included six Latine contributors, all first-generation college students, bilingual in Spanish and English, and living in campus housing for at least one academic year. Each was 18 or older and enrolled at the time of the study. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms are used.

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Table 1 provides demographic context, highlighting the group’s gender balance (three women and three men), ages (19 to 21), and academic diversity. These details offer a glimpse into the wide range of lived experiences shared through pláticas.

TABLE 1

Contributor Identities

Contributor	Gender Identity	Age	Class Standing	Major
Vanessa	Woman	20	Junior	Psychology
Karina	Woman	19	Sophomore	Sociology
Dolores	Woman	20	Junior	Liberal Studies
Guillermo	Man	19	Sophomore	Business
Esteban	Man	21	Senior	Business
Eduardo	Man	20	Sophomore	Mechanical Engineering

Four contributors were employed in campus housing, while Vanessa worked as a tutor and Eduardo was not employed during this study. Three—Karina, Dolores, and Esteban—identified as transborder students from Calexico, CA, and Mexicali, Baja California. Guillermo was raised in California’s Central Valley, and Vanessa and Eduardo were from San Diego County. All came from working-class families, with parents employed in construction, retail, or manual labor.

Data Collection

Guided by a semi-structured protocol, pláticas prompted reflections on moments when custodians made them feel seen, supported, and valued. Probing questions allowed space for elaboration and clarification, following best practices in critical qualitative inquiry (Bhattacharya, 2017). As the study focuses on connections with women custodians, any reference to interactions with male custodians was excluded from analysis, based on the identified gender pronouns used to speak of the custodians they interacted with.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data in alignment with critical qualitative methods, this study draws on coding strategies that center the voices of contributors, remains grounded in cultural context, and supports a critical, asset-based approach to interpretation. In the first cycle

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of coding, in vivo coding was used to highlight the language and make meaning in contributors' own words, which aligns with the relational and culturally rooted nature of pláticas (Saldaña, 2021).

For second-cycle analysis, this study used pattern coding to group codes into broader categories and to identify shared experiences across contributors. Focused coding contributed to the refinement of these categories to highlight themes that resonate with the study's conceptual framework: community cultural wealth, sense of belonging, and invisible labor (Saldaña, 2021). Throughout both coding cycles, analytic memoing was used to document emerging insights and reflexive interpretations, helping to ensure alignment with critical methodology.

Trustworthiness

To honor the integrity of this study and the voices shared, I drew on key criteria for trustworthiness: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019), while applying a critical lens rooted in relational and cultural understanding.

Credibility was supported through sustained engagement in pláticas that fostered trust and authenticity. I engaged in reflective discussions with colleagues not involved in the study, allowing me to acknowledge my positionality and consider multiple truths shared by contributors. Member checks were conducted by returning transcripts to contributors for review and revision. Intentionality shaped each step, from selecting pláticas as a culturally affirming method to recruiting contributors whose lived experiences aligned with the study's purpose. Data were interpreted using the conceptual framework, centering how relational labor and cultural knowledge emerged in students' reflections. Transferability was supported by contextual detail about contributors and the housing setting, offering readers insight into how these findings may apply in similar institutional or cultural contexts.

Research Positionality

As a Latina scholar-practitioner with nearly two decades in student housing, I approach this work through both personal and professional lenses. My experiences as a first-generation college student and daughter of an immigrant parent shape my deep respect for the often-invisible labor that sustains campus communities. I've witnessed how women custodians offer care, familiarity, and cultural affirmation, especially for students navigating unfamiliar systems. Yet, their contributions remain largely unacknowledged. This study is rooted in my commitment to honor those everyday acts of care and to challenge the hierarchies that render them invisible. I view research as a relational process grounded in equity and recognition. By using pláticas, I aim to center voices that are too often overlooked and remain accountable to the communities I serve.

FINDINGS

Through *pláticas*, five overarching constructs emerged that illuminate how women custodians shape Latine students' experiences and sense of belonging in student housing. These five constructs—relational anchoring, cultural affirmation, navigational guidance, emotional labor, and relational reciprocity—capture the subtle yet meaningful way custodians provide support, culturally resonant care, and emotional affirmation. Through themes such as relational consistency, informal mentorship, culturally specific interactions, and mutual care, these findings demonstrate how custodial work reflects forms of community cultural wealth and contributions to students' feelings of inclusion and visibility. They also emphasize how the concept of invisible work through relational labor often goes unrecognized in formal institutional frameworks, supports student well-being and development, and creates more welcoming campus communities.

Connection: Relational Anchors in Unfamiliar Spaces

Contributors shared experiences of orientation, emotional support, and relational consistency, highlighting the subtle and meaningful role women custodians play in helping Latine students adjust to life in student housing and the university. Contributors spoke of custodians as a steady, familiar presence during transitional periods, offering both practical guidance and cultural affirmation that helped students feel less alone.

Guillermo described how the presence of a custodian early in his campus experience became grounding: “Since the get-go, when I got here my first semester, Maritza was always there. She reminded me of my *tias*.” That consistency laid the foundation for a deeper sense of comfort and familiarity in an otherwise new environment, while the custodian reminded them of a family member.

Contributors reflected on how relational labor, or checking on students' well-being, helped affirm their presence and value. Guillermo noted, “They want to know your overall well-being as well. The way they care about, like, whether I've eaten or not, or whether I went to class, or even if I'm down . . . like, if they noticed some shift in my attitude.” These seemingly small moments of care functioned as unspoken affirmations that someone was paying attention, providing a powerful feeling for first-generation Latine students navigating predominantly White spaces.

Laughter and humor also emerged as relational tools that women custodians used to form authentic bonds. Through shared meals, which is a culturally relevant tradition, Esteban reflected, “We laughed, we ate, I would have the time of my life eating my lunch with them.” These interactions demonstrate how joy and cultural nuance become tools of emotional anchoring in new environments and highlight how women custodians provide more than upkeep of spaces; they provide emotional support, cultural connection, and visibility to students whose belonging might otherwise go unacknowledged.

Cultural Affirmation: Honoring Home in Everyday Moments

Themes of cultural recognition, familial warmth, and shared heritage surfaced prominently across the pláticas, revealing how women custodians serve as cultural mirrors for Latine students living away from home. Through informal conversations, small gestures, and shared traditions, custodians created moments of cultural affirmation that made students feel seen and valued.

Guillermo shared how a custodian helped him with homesickness by connecting on shared food traditions, “She would bring me, like, Mexican food. I always tell her, ‘Oh, I missed my mom’s beans.’” These moments transformed ordinary routines into meaningful acts of care that resonated deeply with cultural identity.

Vanessa reflected on how something as simple as a greeting could carry emotional weight. She explained how hearing “*mija*” from a custodian reminded her of home and brought comfort, “Things that like make you feel like, oh yeah.” Signs of affection and cultural meaning helped close the emotional distance between her family and the university setting. The acknowledging “oh yeah” from Vanessa indicates the acknowledgment that someone sees her and understands her familial and home background, as young Latinas are often referred to as *mija* by older family members and familial friends as a term of endearment.

Dolores recalled how a custodian named Margarita, who lives in Tijuana, brought her candies and other items from her hometown, “[She would say] ‘oh, so you won’t miss Mexicali.’” These gifts served as physical and emotional reminders of where she came from and offered a sense of cultural continuity in institutional spaces that lack such acknowledgement. Karina, too, spoke of the importance of finding culturally relevant support in a new environment, “I felt that sense of community . . . someone here that I can at least talk to.” Her words point to how custodians fill a void by reflecting the cultural familiarity that may not otherwise be present in other staff or faculty roles.

Together, these interactions exemplify how women custodians contribute to validating students’ cultural identities in daily, relational ways that foster belonging through shared heritage and connection. These micro-interactions—being called *mija*, offering culturally specific and familiar foods, or simply greeting students in Spanish—become meaningful rituals that reminded students of home. Students experienced moments when their whole selves—including language, traditions, and values—were welcomed and acknowledged. Custodians became a bridge from students’ on-campus lives to their home lives. In doing so, they were redefining what support looks like in higher education.

Navigation: Unofficial Guides of the Institution

Themes of guidance, resource-sharing, and practical support highlight how women custodians contributed to Latine students’ ability to navigate university life, offering navigational insight and direction. These interactions illustrated how custodians often acted as informal mentors and guides, helping students feel less lost—both emotionally and literally—within the complex systems of higher education.

Guillermo reflected on a time when he struggled with roommate conflict and found support from a custodian, “Teresa helped me with that. She asked if I was okay, and I told her what happened. She said, ‘Let me know if you need anything.’” Her response, while simple, offered emotional validation and positioned her as a resource, someone attentive to his well-being in ways that extended beyond her formal job responsibilities. Esteban also spoke to this dynamic, noting how custodians provided navigational reassurance during moments of uncertainty: “They really helped me navigate . . . giving me a sense of community, giving me a sense of, like, ‘you belong here.’” His words touch on both the logistical and emotional forms of navigation that custodians facilitate, grounding students in both place and purpose.

By being present, attentive, and responsive, women custodians became informal institutional anchors that support these contributors’ ability to thrive in spaces not always built with them in mind.

Emotional Labor: Quiet Acts of Care

Throughout the pláticas, contributors highlighted how custodians engaged in what might be called quiet caregiving, noticing moods, offering encouragement, or simply being emotionally available. Often unrecognized in institutional frameworks, this emotional labor is deeply meaningful to students who may otherwise feel invisible or overwhelmed, questioning their ability to persist.

Eduardo described how even brief exchanges helped him feel cared for: “It’s just those little interactions, those small conversations that remind me of being at home.” His reflection illustrates how even casual comments or smiles can carry immense weight for students living away from family and cultural familiarity.

Karina emphasized how seeing a custodian regularly, and being seen in return, created emotional comfort: “She would always say ‘hi’ to me and ask how I’m doing. It made me feel like someone noticed me.” Those daily acknowledgements offered grounding and reassurance, especially in moments when she felt alone. This moment powerfully illustrates cognitive and affective dimensions of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2019). On a cognitive level, Karina evaluated her presence in the residential environment as one that is noticed and acknowledged. On an affective level, the emotional reassurance she received from being greeted daily contributed to a sense of inclusion and mattering, indicating a strong sense of belonging. Additionally, Karina’s reflection that someone noticed her speaks directly to the notion of attention—a critical element of mattering that alleviates feelings of marginality, particularly for students navigating unfamiliar environments (Schlossberg, 1989).

By being present, attentive, and responsive, women custodians became informal institutional anchors that support these contributors’ ability to thrive in spaces not always built with them in mind.

Relational labor, especially performed by women custodians, plays a critical yet undervalued role in shaping students' residential experiences.

Guillermo also shared how custodians often noticed when something was off, even when he didn't say anything: "They'll say, 'You look sad today. You doing okay?'" That attentiveness reflected a kind of emotional intelligence that often goes unacknowledged in formal student support structures. Unlike institutional roles defined by policy and training, custodians' care work arises from relational proximity and cultural intuition, making their contributions both powerful and largely invisible (Daniels, 1987; Hatton, 2017). These accounts emphasize how women custodians engaged in a form of invisible labor. Through culturally connected emotional work, they affirmed students' humanity and served as unspoken pillars of relational community in residence halls.

Reciprocity: Mutual Care in Relational Exchange

While custodians were often described as initiators of care, contributors also emphasized a sense of mutual respect, appreciation, and affection, suggesting that these relationships were not one-sided. These moments revealed how contributors didn't simply receive support, they reciprocated, forming relationships based on shared humanity.

Dolores reflected on how the bond she developed with Margarita evolved into a genuine friendship: "We would always talk . . . we started building a bond. We would talk every day, basically." This daily routine created a space for a relationship marked by continuity and mutual appreciation.

Guillermo shared that the custodians he connected with often inspired him to give back in his own way. He described feeling grateful for how they checked in on him and shared food or stories, and he made a point of showing appreciation: "They're always working so hard, and I tell them, '*Gracias por todo.*'" These exchanges were rooted in cultural values of respect, humility, and care for elders and workers.

Vanessa echoed this sentiment when discussing how she would bring small treats to share: "I brought *pan dulce* once and we had it in the lounge. It just felt like something my mom would do." Her gesture mirrored familial traditions of showing care through food, symbolizing how she internalized and extended the care she received.

These narratives underscore how the relationship between Latine students and women custodians was not defined by service alone, but by relational reciprocity—an ethic of mutual recognition and care. Through this dynamic, custodians and students co-created a sense of belonging that resonated emotionally and culturally with both.

The findings from this study illuminate the powerful, yet often overlooked, ways women custodians shape students' sense of belonging and well-being in residence hall communities through cultural affirmation, emotional support, and relational reciprocity.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the relational contributions of women custodians to Latine students' sense of belonging in campus housing, drawing on three guiding frameworks: community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019), and invisible labor (Daniels, 1987; Hatton, 2017). The findings reveal that custodial interactions serve as a meaningful yet largely unrecognized layer of student support within residential environments. Through consistent presence, culturally grounded exchanges, and everyday acts of care, women custodians contributed to the emotional, cultural, and navigational experiences of Latine students in ways that go beyond traditional understandings of student support.

Relational Labor and the Challenge of Institutional Invisibility

Institutions often position custodial work within a narrow framework of focused operational support of physical spaces (Petitt, 2008). However, the findings of this study suggest that women custodians engage in forms of relational and emotional labor that support students' transition and well-being within residence halls. These interactions reflect what Daniels (1987) conceptualizes as invisible labor or care-based work that often remain undervalued because they occur outside of formal job expectations and institutional recognition.

Within the context of student housing, relational labor appears to function as an informal system of emotional support. Through consistent interactions, attention to students' well-being, and culturally attuned communication, custodians contributed to the conditions that Strayhorn (2019) identifies as foundational to belonging: feeling noticed, valued, and emotionally safe within an environment. While these contributions may occur through small and routine exchanges, their cumulative impact suggests that custodial relationships play an important role in shaping the experiences of Latine students in residence halls.

These findings challenge traditional institutional assumptions about where student support occurs and who provides it. While universities often focus resources on formal student-facing roles, the study highlights how belonging may also be cultivated through informal relationships embedded in everyday rhythms of campus life. Recognizing these dynamics invites institutions to broaden their understanding of the relational networks that sustain student success.

Community Cultural Wealth in Residential Spaces

The findings illuminate how relationships with women custodians intersect with forms of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). In particular, the interactions described by contributors reflect elements of aspirational, social, and navigational capital. Through culturally familiar language, shared traditions, and expressions of encouragement, custodians helped reinforce students' cultural identities while also providing guidance for navigating university life.

These interactions demonstrate how cultural affirmation can emerge in everyday moments within residential spaces. For Latine students whose sense of belonging is deeply connected to cultural and familial relationships (Aranda Cervantes & Hernández, 2025), the presence of culturally resonant interactions helps bridge the emotional distance between home and the university. Within this context, custodians function as cultural connectors who affirmed students' identities while also supporting their persistence within institutional environments.

These contributions expand existing understandings of how community cultural wealth operates within higher education. While much of the literature focuses on peer, family, or formal staff or faculty relationships, this study suggests that campus workers may also play a meaningful role in sustaining students' cultural and emotional resources. In doing so, custodial relationships contribute to the broader cultural ecosystem that supports students' resilience and sense of belonging.

Reciprocity and Relational Community

Another notable insight emerging from the findings is the presence of reciprocity within relationships between students and custodians. While custodians often initiated interactions of care, students also described ways they responded through expressions of appreciation, shared conversations, and gestures of mutual respect. These exchanges suggest the relationships were not solely defined by service roles, but instead reflected a shared ethic of relational care.

This dynamic aligns with culturally rooted values of *respeto* and *comunidad*—respect and community—that emphasize mutual recognition and collective responsibility within relationships. Rather than positioning students as passive recipients of support, these interactions demonstrate how students actively participated in maintaining and nurturing relational connections within their residential environments. In this way, belonging emerged not only through the care provided by custodians, but also through the mutual recognition and relational exchange that developed over time.

Taken together, the findings of this study suggest that women custodians occupy a meaningful yet often overlooked position within the social and cultural fabric of residence halls. Through relational labor, cultural affirmation, and reciprocal care, they contribute to the everyday experiences that shape students' sense of belonging on campus. Recognizing these contributions invites institutions to reconsider how care, connection, and community are cultivated within university spaces and whose labor makes those environments possible.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION AND STUDENT HOUSING

The findings of this study suggest that universities—particularly student housing departments—must expand their understanding of what constitutes student support. Relational labor, especially performed by women custodians, plays a critical yet undervalued role in shaping students' residential experiences. Policies, training, and recognition practices should reflect the emotional and cultural work that custodians

do; work that contributes significantly to student belonging, retention, and success (Hoffman et al., 2002; Strayhorn, 2019). Beyond recognition, institutions could better equip custodians with knowledge of campus resources, culturally responsive practices, and strategies for informal mentorship, enabling them to intentionally support students while maintaining their relational support. Providing ongoing professional development, resource guides, and structured opportunities for custodians to share their insights with residential life staff would amplify their impact and integrate their invisible labor more fully into student support systems.

In addition, these findings call for a broader institutional conversation around whose labor is deemed worthy of acknowledgement. As Hatton (2017) notes, women of color in custodial roles are often physically embedded in campus life, yet symbolically overlooked. They are a central presence for students, but often left in the periphery, in contrast to designated student-support roles. By incorporating their contributions into the discourse of student success and belonging, universities can begin to close that gap and build more inclusive and relationship-rich residential environments.

FUTURE RESEARCH AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study affirms that women custodians are not peripheral in students' residential lives, they are central to how belonging is built, sustained, and experienced. Their work sits at the intersection of invisible labor, cultural affirmation, and relational care. As higher education continues to understand how to create more inclusive and equity-centered environments, it is imperative to recognize the informal networks and cultural relationships that enable students—especially those from historically marginalized communities—to thrive.

Future research should document and elevate the voices of workers whose labor is relational and undervalued. Expanding studies to include the perspective of custodians themselves would provide a fuller picture of these relationships and a deeper understanding of how belonging is co-created in everyday, unscripted moments.

CONCLUSION

The relationship explored in this study revealed that belonging is not only built through institutional programs or formal mentorship, but is also often sustained through quiet, consistent, and culturally grounded interactions with women custodians. Their relational labor—though invisible to many—becomes a vital source of affirmation, familiarity, and emotional safety for Latine students navigating university life. By recognizing these contributions as integral, not peripheral to the student experience, this study challenges institutions to reconsider how they provide care, community, and support. Centering the everyday labor of women custodians allows us to reimagine residence halls not only as living spaces, but as a space of cultural connection and relational belonging. In honoring this work, we affirm the value of the people who help make our campuses feel like home. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What other roles within higher education challenge the traditional institutional assumptions of where student support is occurring? How can we identify these roles?
2. How can we create boundaries within residence life to take into consideration staff members who are providing student support, but are not formally trained or compensated?
3. Taking into consideration the value historically undervalued roles bring to student support and development, how can we apply this knowledge to RA training and/or developmental opportunities?
4. How might institutions be intentionally or unintentionally relying on the emotional labor of women in service-oriented roles?
5. How does power and class impact employment structures and the forms of work that are valued and rewarded?
6. How can we recognize and support the cultural and relational contributions of custodial staff or other roles without overburdening or tokenizing these staff members?

Discussion questions were developed by Ashe Ballew, Clemson University.