

Reflection Paper

This interview project has provided me the opportunity to examine the work of those who make the running of the university possible. That being said, I faced certain challenges to the success of my interview that likely impacted my interpretation of the housekeeping profession at Virginia Tech. After the interview I became interested in the impact of education on employment opportunities and financial security. Though this topic does not explicitly relate to public policy, except in the case of governmental loans for the purpose of education, it is an important component of American work and labor. From this interview, and through additional research, I recognize the benefit of government-sponsored education for all those who desire it. In terms of course themes, this project has altered my perception of the composition of the so-called working class. It has influenced my understanding of the process by which social mobility is achieved. Despite moderate difficulties in the interview process, I have learned a great deal from this project.

Thus far, the interview portion of this project has been the most enjoyable for me. The benefit of interviewing an individual with whom I consider myself relatively close personally was that it became much more than an objective analysis of working conditions on the Virginia Tech campus and in the Southwest Virginia region. Instead, I took interest into the history of my interviewee and her personal background, as opposed to general trends in Southwest Virginia. While the overall analysis of the region would have been interesting, I think the personal note of the interview and learning experience had a much greater effect than it might have otherwise.

Since the interview was such a personal experience, I have been given new insight into the simple profession of housekeeping, and many other similar jobs that are often completed without regard or appreciation. It was apparent throughout the interview that the greatest joy of any job is to be recognized for the hard work and effort that goes into every day on the job. While my interviewee has been lucky to have formed relationships with the students in the Hall she takes care of so well, many others have not been so fortunate. The thankless jobs are what keep a university like Virginia Tech, a region like Montgomery County, even a country like the United States, functioning properly. Though I am skeptical that Ms. Lucas (Martha) really enjoys her job as much as she affirms, I relate to the desire to interact with people whenever possible, especially while I am completing another productive task. While I still cannot say that I would like to be a housekeeper at any point in the future, I understand how the career might appeal to someone who likes to be around, and take care of people on a daily basis.

Through the course of the interview, I learned that Martha had previously been employed as a nurse. Despite the education required for this position, Martha now works in an occupation that requires no specific education other than job-related training. This made me wonder what impact education truly has on wages in America. I was curious as to whether those in positions that demand no educational background are ever able to graduate to more skilled professions if they so choose. What I found was that it is quite possible to pursue upward mobility, but only if given the right opportunities. It is my personal opinion that all people should be afforded these opportunities in hopes that they may reach their full potential and benefit society as a whole to the greatest degree possible. Though I am unsure of what specific policy might enact this change, I am sure that it must involve continued education for anyone in the work force who is interested.

Fiscal decisions seem to be the bane of all public policy decisions. If it were financially plausible, I would recommend that any currently employed individual should be given the opportunity to receive government assisted education in whatever field interests them. While free education is nice in theory, it provides no incentive to enter the job market immediately. By providing government subsidized education to those who are employed in the minimum or lower wage brackets, they are provided with a sense of potential for class mobility and personal development. This policy might help not only those seeking to educate or train themselves in a particular field, but it would exist as a supplement to minimum wage and tax break policies that exist to help individuals in lower income brackets. If feasible, it would also be beneficial to the general working public to mandate that all those who work are required to train in their field in at least some manner each year, or at least every five years. The one fact that most studies agree on, is that those who keep educating themselves benefit, and those who do not, lag behind. This is especially true since those in other countries are actively trying to educate themselves in order to be better positioned in the global job market.

While Martha took a pay cut in the switch from nursing to housekeeping, she refused to give up certain benefits. While many employers offer health insurance, those employed by Virginia Tech are offered state-sponsored health insurance. They also receive life insurance. It is essential for many that their personal well-being is taken care of in the realm of health services. The combination of healthcare and comp days provided by university Student Services to the employees provides a much more stable and pleasant working environment than some other locations. I would be interested to see what benefits housekeepers employed outside of the university might receive. Unfortunately, this information was hard to find and would require more investigation for further analysis.

Another direct result of the interview project has been to distort my view of what may be considered the middle class. What is evident is that America is increasingly being divided between an upper and a lower class with a distinctly smaller middle class. There are those who must work tirelessly to make ends meet and to ensure a bright future for their families, and there are those who are able to step back and let others work in the world. I still believe in the opportunity for upward class mobility, I simply feel that it should be easier to move along the social ladder. With the changing class landscape, the idea of the American dream must change also. It is no longer good enough to wish for people to do better and have more than the previous generations. It is instead necessary to recognize that each person must take it upon themselves to ensure that they work and live under conditions that appeal to them, and not to live under the restrictions of others.

The personal nature of my interview with Martha Lucas afforded me the opportunity for independent reflection on the nature of work in America. While I believe that our close relationship prevented Martha from truly opening up about some working conditions, her explanations of training procedures and requirements, as well as her transition from nursing to housekeeping, inspired me to take interest in the impacts of education and training on wage earnings and social mobility. Through investigation of the subject, I have come to the conclusion that all those who desire the opportunity to learn more about a trade or area of employment should be allowed to do so with the help of the government. Doing such will help the individuals, and also develop the American work environment in the world context.