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# Exploring the Academic and Social Experiences of Homeless College Students

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EXPLORING THE ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL EXPERIENCES OF HOMELESS
COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

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This thesis focuses on the experiences of college students who are facing homelessness, specifically from an academic and social lens. A hidden group within institutions of higher education, these students face many challenges that include economic instability, social isolation, or difficulty navigating the collegial environment. These challenges provide the opportunity for resilience but lack of support creates obstacles that may make degree attainment seem impossible.

Using a phenomenological approach, students were asked to participate in two interviews. Data gathered suggests that participants hide their homelessness from others. Lack of social support experiences, diverse living situations, and unique circumstances illuminated the complexity of this topic. The determination that individuals shared showed the impact of education within their lives and the hope it brought them. The results of this research have significant implications for higher education and the existing body of literature.

**Dedication**

*For students who are struggling to have a consistent place to sleep as they pursue their collegiate education:  Your strength and determination carries you through the challenges you face and the resiliency you display is something all need to recognize.  I hope this work shares an undervalued perspective and starts a larger conversation about your presence on campuses across the country.*

To my family, your love has been the constant encouragement needed to complete this research.  To my wife, who has supported me each day and has shown me the importance of love when working with underrepresented populations.  To my brother, thank you for being the role model I needed; your ability to achieve has always empowered me to believe that I can achieve my dreams as well.  To my parents, your desire provide a better living experience for your children has made this opportunity possible and your never-ending love has allowed me to achieve this goal.

Above all, I want to thank God.  His love has made this possible.  In this journey, my achievements would not be possible without His guidance in my life.

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**Chapter 1-Introduction**

Joe worries as he hands in this final paper for the semester. It is not his grade that worries him, but where he will go for winter break. Joe's roommate lives across the country and will be flying home and his residence hall will be closed. Despite just completing what he hopes is an academically good semester, Joe is homeless. Sadly, he is not alone. There are between 1.5 and 3.0 million homeless youth in this country (National Runaway Switchboard, 2010). It is hard to accurately estimate the number of homeless students, because there is no required tracking. However based on FAFSA data, the federal government estimated that, in 2012, there were approximately 58,000 homeless students on college campuses in the United States (Gross, 2013).

Homelessness is manifested in many ways on a college campus: some students are living on the street, while others may have a car that they use as a home. Homeless students may be "couch surfing," spending a short amount of time at various living spaces and then moving to different locations, with friends or family. Some homeless students may have temporary shelter as they stay in the residence halls for the school year, but struggle to find housing over school breaks. There are innumerable more degrees of homelessness present on college campuses while students attempt to complete their degrees.

Shelter is not the only challenge for students experiencing homelessness. These students may also be unable to get adequate sleep. As students struggle to find consistent shelter, they may choose to sleep in a location unfit for habitation. Lack of sleep can bring on other challenges including mental and physical exhaustion, weakness, and illness. Some students may struggle to have enough food. Seeking out assistance from local resources can help but having a place to store food can also be difficult, all but eliminating the possibility of including fresh foods in their diet. The challenges of homelessness go far beyond shelter from the elements and

can quickly compound each other creating new and unforeseen problems for the student. Furthermore, none of these issues address whether or not the student is experiencing homelessness on their own or with others, who are often family.

There is very limited literature specifically centered on this population, however what does exist already revelas that students may face difficult circumstances. Homeless students suffer from depression and anxiety at a higher rate than their peers (Bader, 2004). Also, homeless students have worse health and nutritional problems than their peers (Robertson, 1989). In addition to their daily struggle to meet their basic needs (e.g., food and shelter), college students who are homeless may face a variety of academic barriers. Some students in this population may resist seeking assistance for their needs and thus make their experience even more difficult (Robertson, 1989). Despite the struggles college students who experience homelessness face, many are hesitant to accept help. Pride may be why some students do not accept help, as they do not want to be seen as weak for accepting assistance (Bader, 2004).

Conversely, homeless students also bring a number of strengths to campus – those who have made it to college have already overcome great obstacles to do so. If these students were homeless in high school, they have already achieved a great deal by graduating from high school or earning their GED. The value that these students place on their education is worthy of researchers' attention. In supporting students in this population, the field of student affairs will be assisting some of the most motivated students within higher education.

Unfortunately, not only is there a lack of awareness that these students even exist, but there is also a lack of understanding about their experiences on campus. The ongoing work by organizations like National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY) is providing resources for those who work with this population in many ways. One

of the most notable is NAEHCY's toolkit for homeless students transitioning to college (Dukes, 2013). In addition, specific college campuses have started to form committees for those facing economic crisis (Gross, 2013). However, the literature is limited in that it does not address college homelessness specifically, or consider the multiple variations of homelessness, and provides little insight into the lived experiences of students facing homelessness. This limits the ability of student affairs practitioners to meet the specific needs of these students.

Conducting research on homeless college students is highly important because it provides a platform for these student voices and challenges the field to better meet the needs of these students. In hearing specifically from college students experiencing homelessness, we can start to gain an understanding of their perspective and what challenges these specific students face as they work to earn their degrees.

## Purpose Statement

The purpose of the study was to better understand the experiences and needs of college students experiencing homelessness. Two sub-questions also guided my research. These sub-questions asked about the academic and social experiences of students experiencing homelessness. This thesis will ask students to reflect on their support systems and what obstacles challenged their success in college. Through this information, we can be more informed as a field to better meet the students' needs. This research goes beyond higher education to affect the communities in which students experiencing homelessness exist.

## Definitions

**Homeless.** For the purposes of this study the participants self-identified as homeless and thus the exact definition was difficult to obtain. More generally the term homeless is defined as "an individual who lacks housing including an individual whose primary residence during the

night is a supervised public or private facility (e.g., shelters) that provides temporary living accommodations, and an individual who is a resident in transitional housing" (Henry, Cortes & Morris 2013, p. 2). For the purposes of this study, a homeless person is defined as an individual without permanent housing who may live on the streets; stay in a shelter, mission, single room occupancy facilities, abandoned building or vehicle; or in any other unstable or non-permanent situation (Henry, Cortes & Morris 2013, p. 2).

**Homeless Coalition**. Organizations within the local community who seek to serve individuals and families who are experiencing homelessness. Their mission is to raise awareness and develop a community commitment to assisting individuals and families who are near or experiencing homelessness.

**Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).** FAFSA is the application used by most colleges and universities to determine eligibility for federal, state, and college-sponsored financial aid, including grants, educational loans, and work-study programs (Henry, Cortes & Morris, 2013).

## Delimitations

As a qualitative research study there are delimitations in the research. The participants were required to self-identity for the research by contacting me directly. I also chose to work through existing agencies rather than seek out participants individually. All interviews were conducted during the day and only in public places. Participants were asked to be at least 19 years of age so that parental permission was not needed.

## Limitations

As with any research, methodological decisions were made that led to limitations within the study. The results of this study are not necessarily generalizable to a larger audience due to the phenomenological nature. The hidden nature of the homeless identity did make finding students a difficult procedure. I believe that a much larger number of students who are experiencing homelessness exist on the campus beyond the number who volunteered for this study. In addition, there is no clear way for institutions to track students who experience homelessness outside of the FAFSA, so identifying a population was difficult. Another limitation is that I did not conduct observations of the participants in their daily lives. This was not done as a way to protect the identity of the participants. The timeline of the master's thesis and graduation was an additional limitation of the study.

**Summary**

Due to the invisible nature of homelessness, the numbers of college students who experience it could be much larger than many widely accepted estimations. Currently, there is minimal research addressing the experiences of homeless college students and that lack of focus does not speak well to inclusivity in higher education. The field of student affairs strives for each student to be successful; hence, professionals in the field must create a space where all students feel supported. This study sought to speak with college students who are were experiencing homelessness and gain understanding of their academic and social experiences.

In the second chapter, relevant literature on poverty within the United States and homelessness, will specifically address the experiences of individuals who face these difficult circumstances. In addition, the literature attempts to focus on the experiences of college students. The literature found is very limited. Chapter Three will examine the methodology used in this study including the phenomenological foundation, the interview protocols and the

data analysis.  The fourth chapter will discuss the themes, outcomes, and reactions of the

participants from their interviews.  Finally, chapter five will state the findings of the study and

the implications from the research for the field of student affairs.

## Chapter 2

## Literature Review

The literature informing this study has four main focus areas: homelessness, social support systems in college, hidden identities, and resilience theory. These focus areas inform the research questions and help frame the interview protocol, the data analysis and discussion, and the study as a whole. As this study hopes to build upon existing literature it is important to have an understanding of what already exists.

The first section of this literature review will focus on the larger concept of homelessness and will has subsections focused on youth homelessness and collegiate homelessness. Though some of this research is not directly correlated to the experiences of a college student experiencing homelessness, it informs this research and thus it helps us to gain the perspective of individuals experiencing homelessness.

The second section focuses on the existing research on social support and has subsections focused on social supports for individuals facing homelessness, social supports in a larger context, and buffering theory. The research on social support systems informed my understanding of the social experiences of homeless student populations and provided a framework for discussing research findings.

The third section focuses on the nature of hidden identities or how individuals hide aspects of themselves. The literature in this section focuses on the perceived negative nature of hidden identities and the larger understanding that hidden identities do not exist just on college campuses.

The final section of the literature review examines resilience theory. This concept originated in a study of individuals in poverty and from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. The

theory provides a framework for understanding the reactions of individuals who face difficult experiences.

**Homelessness**

Homelessness is a growing topic within higher education but currently there is little focus on addressing the needs of students in this population. To gain a larger understanding of homelessness, we must look outside higher education to additional fields. In 2012, an annual assessment found, there were 610,000 homeless individuals within the United States (Henry, Cortes & Morris, 2013). This staggering number allows us to see that at least some individuals' needs are not being met. Of those 610,000 individuals, 10% were between the ages of 18-24 (Henry, Cortes, & Morris, 2013). Though a very small percentage of this amount was attending college, it is important to understand that serving the needs of these individuals goes beyond institutions of higher education.

Another important element to consider when looking at homelessness is the fluidity of the experience. Some individuals experience homelessness for the entirety of their lives, for others maybe a week. According to Ringwalt, Green, Robertson & McPheeters (1998) nearly 8% of youth, ages 12-17, experienced, at least, one night of homelessness in one year. These numbers start to show us the fluidity of homelessness and begin to give us a sense of the problem. Homelessness is present everywhere, including communities of higher education (Duke, 2013). Thus, the cooperation between higher education and the larger communities in which they exist plays a role in the experiences of students who are homeless.

Understanding the definition of homelessness is very important in gaining insight on the student experience. One major piece of legislation controls the definition of homelessness, in the United States, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987. Knowing how this

legislation specifically works with each individual student is complicated and has to be taken on a case-by-case basis. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act defines "homeless children and youths" as "individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence" (National Center for Homeless Education, 2012, p. 6). Though this definition is law, it is a difficult process for school administrators to understand how the rights of this act specifically work with each individual student. During the process of navigating the law, one of the most important concepts is respecting the student and their family's privacy.

   Homelessness can have a dramatic effect when coupled with other conditions. The homeless impact model, points to the impact of homelessness when brought together with other conditions (Murphy & Tobin, 2011).
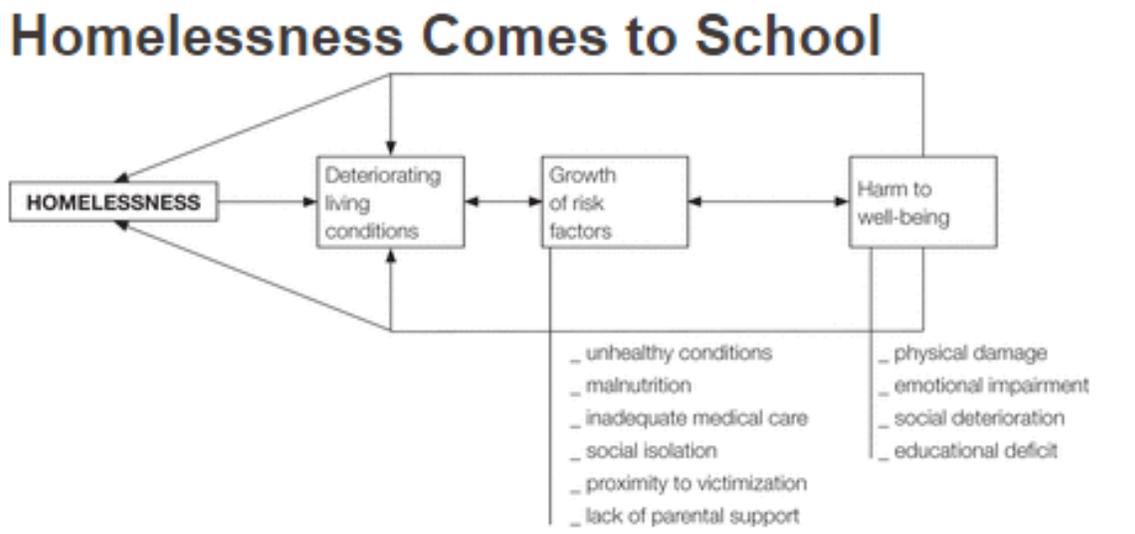


Figure 1. The homeless impact model. This model illustrates how numerous conditions brought together can lead to homelessness.

According to the model, homelessness amplifies other issues that are already present in individuals' lives. The figure shows how homelessness can often fuel other issues and bring about new problems for individuals to face. Those who experience homelessness may be in

environments marked by violence, abuse, and malnutrition, which can lead to more social dysfunction in the future (Murphy & Tobin, 2011).

Much of the research on homelessness is outside the realm of higher education and little effort has been made to make connections between homelessness and college. Most work on homelessness within college has been addressed through theses and doctoral work but the field of research is starting to become more common. Due to the lack of literature, the current study will make the connection between outside fields and higher education, and use existing literature to argue for a more connected model. This research will directly record the voices of these students and thus fill a gap in the literature.

**Youth Homelessness**

To begin, I will consider the literature on youth homelessness. This literature sheds light on the issue of collegiate homelessness, the topic of this thesis, because some students may have experienced youth homelessness and it is a more researched area of literature. In service of this, I will briefly review the literature on youth homelessness with respect to the issues of data on the population, social support, academic support, and transitions that occur.

Within this section, the literature will focus on data for this current population. According to Miller (2012), children and youth make up about one quarter of the total homeless population. Being homeless in childhood affects the potential for further education. Specifically, 75% of high school students who are experiencing homelessness will not complete high school (Miller, 2012). Though this fact makes the population of college students who experience homelessness smaller, it does not make them ignorable. As the number of homeless continue to rise within the U.S., it is important to understand homelessness's impact on students and what institutions can do to serve this population of students.

The literature on the social support that homeless youth face will be highlighted in this section. Within the homeless youth population, individuals have varying experiences and thus experience homelessness in different ways. Toro, Lesperance, and Braciszewski (2011) found three subpopulations within this community. The first of these is "low-risk" (Toro, Lesperance, & Braciszewski, 2011, pg. 5) youth who tend to be younger, maintain more stable relationships with their families and school, and experience the least amount of homelessness over time. "Transient" (Toro, Lesperance, & Braciszewski, 2011, p. 5) youth experience less stable connections with school and housing as they repeatedly move in and out of homelessness, but still did not have prominent mental health or substance abuse problems and retained relationships with their families. Finally Toro, Lesperance, and Braciszewski (2011) labeled "high-risk" (p. 6) youth as those who are more likely to have dropped out of school, have unstable relationships with their families, struggle with mental health and substance abuse issues, and experience long stretches of homelessness.

Lack of social support is a major issue that students who are experiencing homelessness face. For some, the social network around them, such as shelter staff, school staff, family, and friends have both a positive and negative impact on their emotional stability. The composition of the family can be widely varied with some living with their biological parents and others living with non-immediate family (Tierney, Gupton and Hallett, 2008). Murphy and Tobin (2011) suggest that creating a caring environment within the school setting is the first step to helping a student feel supported. Professionals at schools can do this by creating a warm and welcoming environment, while striving for stability. To achieve this, professionals can focus on acceptance, belonging, and hope. Helping students connect to their classmates can create a positive social support on the peer level (Murphy and Tobin, 2011). Due to the overall stress in the family,

homeless youth may experience parental maltreatment, which can have lasting effects on their overall health (Wolfe, Toro, & McCaskill, 1999).  Raleigh-DuRoff (2004) suggests that helpful individuals within the child's environment are one of the greatest factors in assisting a student through their experiences with homelessness.

Students who are using community services often find the staff within those systems are a significant source of support.  However, according to Tierney et al. (2012), students may feel hesitant to develop trust with these individuals because they do not know how long they will be using the services.  In addition, each shelter or service interacts with the students differently, leading to inconsistent relationship experiences.  Researchers note that collaboration between services can only create positive results (Murphy & Tobin, 2011).

Individual strength and resiliency is an important part of student success while they experience homelessness.  Research shows that individuals use hope or self-efficacy to persist in their education.  This is particularly true when there are not others around to provide support (Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004).  This individual support may arise due to the lack of additional external support forcing individuals to find belief in themselves to achieve their goals.  For some, changing their environment into a secure and stable home is a stepping stone to a brighter future and is often one of the things students hope for most (Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004).  Though this hope may manifest through different avenues, it is an important concept in understanding the population.

Transportation to and from school can also be difficult for students who are experiencing homelessness.  If students are using services within the community to have shelter, it may be that the school bus system does not connect to that location and the student must find other ways to get to school.  If a city bus system exists, it may be too expensive for the student to use and thus

not a viable option (Hall, 2007). For some schools, creating a voucher system to help students transport themselves to school and back has become an important step in increasing attendance (Vissing, Schroepfer & Bloise, 1994).

Literature on youth homelessness clearly shows that often experiencing homelessness at a young age can create academic hardships. Rouse and Fantuzzo (2009) argue that homelessness can create a lesser opportunity to learn due to residency transitions and difficulty adapting to ever-changing education environments. Cutuli et al. (2013) found there were achievement gaps between students experiencing homelessness and low risk students, but that students who were experiencing homelessness did have academic resilience. Not all students who are experiencing homelessness display resilience because of their experience. The simple fact that these students are away from school more often hurts their ability for success. In addition, students experiencing homelessness, in K-12 education, are held back at a higher rate than those students who are housed (Duffield and Lovell, 2008). As students continue to be held back they lose self-confidence further hindering their ability to be successful. Creating a stable and welcoming environment for these students can lead to a positive outlook and school may be the only place this happens (Rouse & Fantuzzo, 2009).

Murphy and Tobin (2011) found that individualized instruction and cooperative learning platforms made it more possible for students to learn at a positive rate. They found that these two concepts used together helped students learn material quicker and also develop social and peer skills (Murphy & Tobin, 2011). Giving these students course alternatives is a good way to allow them to be successful while addressing the issues that they are facing outside the classroom (Sanacor, 1995). Developing mini-courses, which allow students to catch up on work, can be a simple but valuable tool to work with students who are frequently transitioning between

schools. Within these mini-courses, creating assignments that can be done with resources from class can ensure that the student has the needed pieces to complete the assignment (Sanacor, 1995).

Transitions between schools can be a complicated experience for students and often lead to more time out of the classroom and falling further behind. Transitions can be more complex for students who are experiencing frequent homelessness. On average, a student misses five days of school when they transition to a new school (Rafferty & Rollins, 1989). For some students who are transitioning often it is difficult to find a place to sleep or rest, thus they become tired in school. This makes staying engaged in schoolwork even more difficult and can lead to even lower rates of success (Clemmitt, 2013).

The transition from high school to college can be a significant barrier for students who are experiencing homelessness and one of the largest obstacles facing homeless students can be earning a high school diploma (Clemmitt, 2013). As seen with youth homelessness, many barriers stand in the way for these students, and just completing primary school can be a great achievement. Though the rates of high school completion vary widely based on geography, nearly 75% of students who experience homelessness may drop out before they finish their high school degree (Dukes, 2013). This may be due to the stress and demands that comes with not having one of their basic needs met (Ferrier, 2012).

In considering youth homelessness, the research starts to provide a picture for the ways in which students handle the difficulties of homelessness. The literature highlighted the data, the social & academic experiences, and the transitions homeless youth face. In understanding more about these experiences, we can start to see what college students who have faced chronic

homeless might have endured to be attain their high school education.  Though students faced these hardships in their youth, they still pursue their college education and value its potential.

**Collegiate homelessness**

Considering the literature that currently exists on this student population is valuable as this research looks to build upon it, though there is limited research, the work that has been done encourages and guides my research.  I will review the literature concerning students who are experiencing homelessness and their living situations, educational experiences, and tracking challenges.  Understanding these barriers that students who experience homelessness face is important in order to find solutions.

A pressing challenge is that these students do not have a safe and secure place to rest and live.  As Maslow (1943) noted, without having our most basic needs met we cannot achieve a higher level of thinking.  However, even if a student is able to find and secure a stable, safe place to live, pulling together the financial means required to maintain that residence adds another level of challenge.  Some individuals may also struggle to have the financial stability for transportation and, even if they do own a vehicle, the price of fuel may be too expensive (National Center for Homeless Education, 2012).  Even if individuals have a vehicle, they might have to pay for campus parking or metered parking and this creates an additional burden.  Public transportation could be available within the community but bus passes could be a barrier if there is a monetary cost associated.

The way in which college students became homeless is another important concept to consider in regards to their living situation.  Students may have experienced chronic homelessness.  Yet, for others, college may be the first time they have faced these challenges.

As tuition increases, students struggle to keep up and often find themselves with a new challenge to face (Paden, 2012).

For students who are able to make temporary arrangements, a lack of housing options beyond their current residence could present a significant challenge and cause a student to experience homelessness. According to Bozick (2007), living arrangements play a strong role in the transition to college. Some students may rely on other people's hospitality and spend a large amount of time living with friends and relatives (Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004). This may be at each location for a short amount of time, but working to make multiple housing options work in succession can be difficult.

Additionally, a residence with multiple transient members can add another layer of danger (Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004). Feeling unsafe may cause some individuals to find additional places to stay (National Center for Homeless Education, 2012). This challenge becomes difficult for institutions to address but as off-campus living becomes more popular, institutions will need to find ways to work with the larger communities to find affordable housing for students. If students do have housing, they may struggle to travel from that housing to another location. Students may have to wake up very early and take multiple modes of transportation to arrive on campus for class (Amber, 2010). Another benefit individuals can use comes from the "Housing Choice Voucher program, commonly referred to as *Section 8*, a well-known federal program that provides vouchers to subsidize rent in private apartments (Turner & Kingsley, 2008). Unfortunately, for this study, the Section 8 program does not track the number of college students who use their services. Student breaks can be a complex time for students to find housing as well, as campuses shut down residential buildings, students are forced to find a place

to stay.  For some students these closedowns require they seek out a local shelter for a short period of time (Hallet, 2010).

Students experiencing homelessness often have difficulty finding services to meet their needs.  This difficulty is not caused by services not being able to provide helpful experiences. Rather, it is more common that students do not know how to connect to the services or where they can go to receive help (National Center for Homeless Education, 2012).  Often, others who are experiencing homelessness are the best resource for connection to services but due to possible isolation on a college campus, it makes connecting to that network difficult.  If student can find shelter, they may avoid it until needed because of the multiple stressors that could exist (Gupton, 2009).  More specifically, there are barriers that can impede continuing their education. Students may struggle to keep a balanced life and have enough time to complete coursework due to the large amount of time that is required to manage the difficult schedules they face.  Often, students who experience homelessness will also work to earn money and this can make balancing work and schoolwork difficult.  Due to the high demand for income, students may be forced to work large amounts of hours and thus miss class more often; this leads to negative results within the classroom (National Center for Homeless Education, 2012).  Other students may face challenges of survival, hunger, and safety.  Staying clean and feeling comfortable with personal hygiene can be an obstacle that makes education more difficult (Ammerman et al., 2004).  Students may be constantly worried or targeted for their personal hygiene and this may make focusing on their work challenging (Ammerman et al., 2004).  This barrier is something that not only homeless student's experience; it is something that those from low socio-economic backgrounds may face.  Solutions to help these students will need to be multi-faceted and must consider the background experience of each individual.

Assistance with financial aid documents for college is another service that students may use to assist them. Students who experience homelessness may have difficulty filling out the FAFSA report making it hard to receive the financial assistance they need. The form itself may be a barrier for students, as it can ask about certain information that may be difficult to locate. In addition, the form asks for information about the student's parents, and their financial situation. This may be difficult information for the students to gather due to the complicated situation with their parents. The document does provide an option for a student to become labeled as independent and not need their parent's information (National Center for Homeless Education, 2012). Students must consider that if they reveal their hidden identity, as a college student experiencing homelessness on the FAFSA report, they will able to receive a waiver for independent status (Hallet, 2010).

For some students there may be a sense of shame that comes with revealing that they are experiencing homelessness and this may affect their education experience. This shame can come from the idea that they should be able to afford housing and be successful on a college campus. This can be difficult for students as they see others around them being successful and want to mask their challenges as they attempt to fit into the norm (Bader, 2004). The rising cost of housing can make finding housing even more difficult for students and thus *doubling up* can become more of a reality. *Doubling up* occurs when more than one individual lives in a space that was designed for only one inhabitant. This phenomenon can also occur on a larger scale when a family of six lives in a space that is only designed for three inhabitants. When placing individuals in such tight quarters they may struggle to survive and new challenges can arise (Bader, 2004).

The shame that students face in revealing this identity can also make tracking the total number of these students difficult.  Challenges can occur within higher education when institutions attempt to gain an understanding of the number of homeless college students.  Some institutions have taken the initiative to discover the number of homeless students who are currently enrolled.  According to Tsui et al. (2011) the City University of New York (CUNY), found that 1% of the total student population lived in a shelter while 42% of students shared that they had been housing insecure in the last year.  This alarming fact points to the fact that students can experience homelessness in many different ways and often at many different times.  Bader (2004) suggests,

> Advocates for the homeless report countless examples of students sleeping in their cars and sneaking into a school gym to shower and change clothes. They speak of students who couch surf or camp in the woods-bicycling or walking to classes-during temperate weather.  Yet, for all the anecdotes, details about homeless college students are hazy. (30)

These quotes point to the evidence of collegiate homelessness but the lack of reporting. "Once state and federal responsibility to homeless kids stops at the end of high school-it's as if they cease to exist. They fall off the map" (Bader, 2004, p. 30).  This struggle to identify the number of students experiencing homelessness on campus also makes finding solutions difficult. If we cannot quantify our populations, then the questions of "is it worth it?" start to arise further slowing the creation of support networks.  Too often the "hard work" mentally is what is prescribed as a bandage to the issues these students are experiencing; that if these students just work a little harder then the troubles in front of them would be manageable and they could continue on pursuing their degree.  These attitudes become institutional barriers (Bader, 2004).

The barriers these students face are numerous and often the education challenges may be too great to overcome. Students who experience homelessness may choose to pursue their education to better their living situation and create stability (Gupton, 2009). However, as they pursue that degree those difficulties continue to persist.

**Social support**

Social support is important for all college students, but for homeless students the need may be greater. The ability to interact positively and process experiences with another individual could provide value for a college student. Not having support from others can make overcoming challenges difficult. Because other forms of support may be lacking, social support may play a larger role. This section will consider social support for homeless students, the benefits of social support in a larger context and buffering theory.

**Social support for homeless students.** As discussed above in the section covering literature on homelessness, homeless students face many difficulties in attending college, but having social support can significantly affect their success or failure. A study found "homeless families generally lack both social supports and social capital (social relationships or networks that allow individuals to gain access to material resources) to assist them in achieving stability" (National Center on Family Homelessness Clinicians' Network, 2003). These findings suggest that social support may be an issue for college students whose families have experienced homelessness. Chronic instability may have been present throughout their lives, making it difficult to understand or acquire social support or capital. When family conflict does occur, some students may be in a "role reversal" in which, they take a parental role with family members (Gupton, 2009, p.154). Ammerman et al. (2004) suggested young adults who are homeless frequently come from families who themselves are living in crisis. It is important to

note that not all college students who experience homelessness have experienced it for the entirety of their life and may have just faced it as they attended college.

Knowing that these students may lack social support explains the lack of awareness of the safety nets that are in place. Due to a lack of support "many homeless individuals and families move in with a series of relatives and friends before finally resorting to the homeless service system; a move into shelter often represents the end of the availability of family support" (Culhane et al. 1996, p. 2). Understanding the process in which the social support system has been used and exhausted is important when considering how families and individuals end up at a shelter. The weight of requesting housing and over-staying their welcome could place a strain on the social support system already in place, and challenge the commitment of those relationships. A social system for students experiencing homelessness may not be able to provide assistance because those support individuals themselves are facing homelessness (Culhane et al. 1996). This makes it continually difficult to have any protection against street homelessness.

**Benefits of social support.** The broader body of research regarding social support and its role in the success of college students clearly shows the benefit while pursuing a degree. The basic concept of having a person to confide in allows students to have fewer negative emotions and develop a positive sense of one's self (Burleson, 2009). This positive process fosters growth on the individual level and as a member of a community. Social support has many protective factors for individuals as it helps fight against depressive symptoms, during the transition to college (Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, & Cribbie, 2007). Additional research has suggested "insufficient received support (less support received than requested) was associated with depression, anxiety, somatic complaints, and health-risking behavior in a sample of college students" (Brown, Brady, Lent, Wolfert & Hall, 1987, p. 342).

For some individuals social support has been linked to academic achievement (de la Iglesia, Freiberg Hoffmann, & Liporace 2014). Social support allows students to focus on their academic journey as they face the common challenges that college presents. It is important to note that research has shown that social support seems to play this buffering role since it improves achievement at all educational levels (de la Iglesia, Freiberg Hoffmann, & Liporace 2014). In gaining a greater understanding of the effect of social support on college students it is important to understand why social support is so valuable. Thus, Buffering Theory aids us in learning more about benefits of social support. Buffering theory suggests that social support acts as a buffer against stress by reducing the impact of stressful events (Cobb, 1976). This definition allows us to understand the importance of social support as students face stress and anxiety in large amounts. Cobb (1976) suggested, "When a negative event occurs and an individual selects social support as a coping strategy, this can diffuse negative emotions" (p. 305).

Knowing the impact over time that social support can have it is important to look to previous research to gain an understanding of student's experiences. According to Eckenrode and Wethington (1990), "social support has been viewed as protective among the youth, it mediates stress and anger among adolescents and young people, affects the person's perception of self-esteem, and reinforces intimacy and dependability" (p. 87). Knowing the positive impact of social support in forming coping mechanisms for young students allows us to gain a deeper understanding of its impact over time and point to difficulties individuals may face without support while in college.

For some, just the perception of social support can have a large impact on their ability to handle stress in a positive way (de la Iglesia, Freiberg Hoffmann, & Liporace 2014). This is important when understanding the influence of social support. The impact of social support

reinforces the idea that having a place on campus for students experiencing homelessness to find support, even if a student does not access that resource, can be very important in a student feeling supported so they can meet the challenges they face at their institution.

**Hidden identities**

When considering the experiences of homeless college students it is important to look into literature and find connections to hidden identities because revealing this identity can be very difficult. This section considers the nature of hidden identities and related research in the LGBTQA field.

Understanding why the literature suggests an individual would hide an identity can be useful when viewing their experiences. Often it might make sense that individuals hide their identity as homeless because they view it as negative and they are ashamed. However, hidden identities are not negative and they do not mark a person as inferior (Vandrick, 1997). Though their identities are not negative in nature, individuals perceive that they will struggle with being accepted by their peers when they reveal a hidden identity and thus they will work to keep these identities secret (Vandrick, 1997). A great deal of time and energy goes into effectively hiding an identity (Trauntner & Collett, 2010). In addition, hidden identities do not only exist on university campuses but all over the world, thus individuals struggle with these identities before, during, and after they attend an institution (Vandrick, 1997).

Student populations facing other hidden identities can be a good resource to look for additional literature. The LGBTQA community is an area that often focuses on and studies hidden identities. Though the hidden identity experienced by students in the LGBTQA community experience is a choice, it may not always feel that way, as individuals sometimes are compelled by communities they are a part of to suppress their identity (Nelson, 1993). Even if

there is a choice, individuals may feel that they must reveal their identity or they are being untrue to themselves; however, there are consequences for revealing an identity. To share their struggles may be looked upon as shameful (Vandrick, 1997). All hidden identities have consequences as they "form an iceberg below the surface in the classroom" (Vandrick, 1997, p. 154) and carry great weight as they are seldom acknowledged.

Hidden identities are an important element of the homeless experience. Students may face this each day they attend their institutions and knowing more about why they would hide their identity creates awareness about the students at a deeper level. The LGBTQA research suggests ideas that may translate to students experiencing homelessness and thus have value for this study.

**Resilience theory**

When looking into the literature framing this study it was important to consider the determination and resilience of students who are experiencing homelessness. This has value because in facing difficult situations, students may overcome those experiences and develop a resiliency. For this, most research revolved around resilience theory and the literature showed the importance of resilience for individuals experiencing poverty or low socio-economic status.

Understanding why exposure to adversity does not result in negative experiences for young people is an important aspect of resiliency theory (Resnick, 2000). Resiliency in itself refers to a "class of phenomena characterized by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development" (Masten, 2001, p. 232).

College students who are experiencing homelessness may have faced these negative experiences before they entered college and may continue to face them as they pursue their degree. Resilience theory offers one means of explaining why some individuals persist and

prevail through the adversity of homelessness and others do not. The theory states that personal factors, certain traits, and dispositions might assist individuals in enduring the experiences they face (Luthar, 1999). However, the presence of one or more protective factors, social networks or caring adults, can minimize the effects of exposure to adversity (Resnick, 2000). For some students, those protective factors may be social support. For students who experience homelessness, the need for protective factors may be increased. Research has found that the more protective factors that are available, the more resilient an individual will be (Toomey, Brennan, & Friesen, 2008).

It is worth noting that there are some critics of this theory. Some theorists contend that resilience theory is deterministic and results in prescribing individuals who have experienced risk factors to a life of inability and thus they cannot become valuable members of society (Yaqub, 2002). Some argue that individuals who have experienced hardships cannot minimize their experience or create space for themselves to feel and understand the impact of those experiences in their life (Yaqub, 2002).

Considering both perspectives, it is important to understand as Rutter stated,

> …resilience is not a stable construct. Levels of resilience may vary with context or situation, while assets may remain the same. There is general agreement that excessive and prolonged exposure to negative life events, dangerous settings and inadequate schooling are likely to undermine young people's life chances despite their assets. (1985, p. 605)

When understanding the experiences of college students facing homelessness this perspective shows how the levels of negative experiences can have a stifling effect on students, and can prevent them from developing a positive resiliency trait.

**Conclusion**

Though the literature discussed in this chapter shows some of the challenges that college students who are experiencing homelessness face, a large gap is present. Specific research that records their experiences is rare and none of that research considers both the academic and social experiences of these students. This gap in research has many causes including the hidden nature of the homeless identity, the varied number of college students experiencing homelessness, and the lack of awareness to the poverty that college students face. This study is important because it delves directly into the experiences of students who identify as homeless. This study begins to address the large gap that exists within the literature and considers what a small group of students in this population experienced.

**Chapter 3**

**Methodology**

As a qualitative, phenomenological study, this project used a dual-interview approach. The interviews with each student were broken into two sessions that lasted on average forty-five minutes each. This two-interview strategy was embedded in the research as a way to build a relationship with participants and gain their trust. Not all participants completed both interviews, which was their right as a participant in this study.

**Qualitative research**

The qualitative approach for this research came from the concept of capturing the voices of students experiencing this phenomenon. Qualitative research is designed to gather in-depth understanding of individual behavior or experience (Creswell, 2007). It investigates the why and how of decision-making, with a focus on a smaller more detailed sample (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenological research, a type of qualitative research, aims to provide insight into how an individual makes sense of a phenomenon they are experiencing. Usually these phenomena carry some personal significance (Creswell, 2007).

Limited data exists on the number of students experiencing homelessness but for this research, the focus was on their individual experiences. Within the body of research, there is a very limited understanding of what students are experiencing. In turn, the qualitative approach was chosen. This was due to its nature to not be limited by numbers but the researcher, from the meaning that the participant creates, imparts meaning. To gain a better understanding of the participant's perspective of the situation, I reflected in a journal.

Understanding my own identities, as the researcher involved in the process can have an impact on the research. Creswell (2007) points to the fact that researchers conducting phenomenological study should reflect on their own experiences and the context within those experiences to gain a better understanding of data. This is discussed more near the end of the chapter.

Qualitative research is the best method to meet the goals of this research. There are merits to more quantitative data being collected on this student population but a balance of data will provide the best overall picture of the experiences these students are facing. Qualitative research allows the experiences of these students, and how they make meaning of those experiences, to exist in a space that is their own.

For these reasons, I used phenomenological approach for this thesis. The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of students who are experiencing homelessness. Using Creswell's (2007) perspective of phenomenological research, I was able to represent the experiences of the participants and the research focused on discovering the phenomenon that they shared.

**Interviewing**

Using a qualitative lens provided an avenue to conduct this research. The task of how best to conduct interviews is the researcher's responsibility (Creswell, 2007). Creswell (2007) points to the idea that phenomenological research focuses on "describing what all participants have in common as they experience the phenomenon" (p.58). In addition Moustakas (1994) stated,

The inquirer then collects data from persons who have experienced the phenomenon, and develops a composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the

individuals.  This description consists of what they experienced and how they

experienced it.  (p.22)

**Interview protocol**

The first semi-structured interview focused on gaining an understanding of the

participant's living situation, their social support, and their academic experiences.  Those

questions are located in Appendix A.  The first interview lasted an average of 45 minutes,

ranging anywhere from an hour and half to twenty-five minutes.  At the beginning of the

interview, the questions were more focused on gaining an understanding of the student's living

situation and the services they were currently using.  This allowed the individual to explain their

version of homelessness and break down any fear of judgment from the beginning.  As the

interview progressed, the interview focused more on the challenges that participants faced.  The

interview questions then shifted toward their academic experiences and finally on social

experiences.

The second interview was semi-structured as it continued to explore ideas presented in

the first interview.  The participants were asked to address specific social experiences with

individuals at the institution they attended.  These questions were followed by academic

experiences in and out of the classroom.  This interview focused on specific social and academic

experiences of the participants rather than on their homeless identity.

The participants were compensated for their time.  After completing the number of

interviews they were willing to undergo, they were given a $25 Visa gift card.  Funding for this

compensation was provided by a small grant from the American College Personnel Association

(ACPA).

**Participants**

The participants in this study were all college students who were experiencing homelessness in some way. Some of the recruitment of participants occurred through a university financial aid office and targeted students who marked "homeless" on the FAFSA. For this process, a recruitment flyer and email were sent to the finical aid office and then the office sent individuals who fit the parameters an email about the study. After receiving the email from the financial aid office, individuals contacted me if they were interested in participating in the research. Additionally, recruitment was done through the community homeless coalition. Members of the coalition placed recruitment flyers at organizations working with individuals who were experiencing homelessness.

Allowing participants to self-select as a participant was an important part of the research. This process allowed participants to protect their identity and only interview if they wanted to, making the data richer. In addition, pseudonyms were provided for participants to protect their identity. Finding students who are experiencing homelessness can be difficult as institutions do not always track this identity and changes in living situation, that may cause temporary homelessness, happen at any time and are less likely to be tracked.

To better understand the participants, I have chosen to give a brief profile of each. These profiles allow me to introduce each participant as an individual with their own background, experiences, and goals. Furthermore, the use of these profiles helps ensure that I re-present, accurately represent, their experiences in Chapter 4 using their own voices (Creswell, 2007).

**Tommy.** Currently staying at the local homeless shelter Tommy is in temporary housing. He can stay there for thirty days but must find another option at that point. At this time, he is studying motorcycle mechanics and is hoping that his degree will help him pursue job

opportunities. He has attended other institutions but struggled to be successful. Many of those past struggles were the result of surrounding himself with the wrong people and getting in trouble. Tommy is currently in drug court for a previous felony offense. While he is attending college, he is also working at a local restaurant to have money to support himself.

**Susanne.** Susanne was staying in a residential housing unit on campus. She plans to live on campus, until she can make enough money from her part-time jobs to afford an apartment. Outside of the residence halls on campus, Susanne does not call any place home. Her older sister has provided her with a temporary place to stay but Susanne feels as if she is intruding upon her family. She is currently studying to become a doctor so that she can help others and hopes to join a non-profit after she completes her degree. Creating a balance between work and school has been important to her success but family is more important than both. Susanne works only on the weekends but tries to commit to nearly ten-hour shifts.

**Karen.** Karen currently lives with her mother, which is a struggle as Karen and her husband work to grow their marriage. Conflicts over lifestyle choices occur between her husband and mother. At her current institution, Karen is working on her general studies, with hopes of pursing the culinary arts. When she attended previous institutions, she struggled to connect with those around her, but has hope for her current institution. Her faith has been an important foundational aspect of her desire to attain better things for her life.

**Betsy.** Currently Betsy is living in an apartment with the help of a local placement service. Without this service, she would have no way to find a living situation. Betsy is considering attending a cosmetic school in the near future and has previously attended a local community college. Her desire to move out of her current situation is strong and Betsey believes

that she has been given an opportunity to better herself.  Overcoming previous academic challenges has instilled confidence in Betsy as she looks to pursue a career that inspires her.

      **Alex.**  A specific section of the local shelter was providing housing support for Alex.  In this situation, he is able to live for two years, as long as he commits to monthly rent.  Alex is pursuing his degree in social work and wants to help those around him in the community.  Currently, he volunteers with a local non-profit organization but wants to accept a paid position with that organization.  To attain that position he must first gain his Bachelor's degree.  Alex is well-connected to the homeless community and his willingness to help others around him never stops, no matter his situation.

      **Clint.**  A two-year federal program currently provides housing for Clint at the local mission.  During these two years, Clint lives rent or payment free.  After that two-year period, however, Clint will have to find other housing.  He is currently studying the physical sciences and is interesting in joining a specific research-focused program at his institution.  Clint has had numerous part-time positions while he has been in school, but is currently unemployed.  He has previously attended an institution back in his hometown, but after a break, he decided to enroll at his current institution.  An independent and fearless person, Clint believes that he must look after himself because others will not.

      **Derek.** Currently, Derek does not have a location that he can call home, so he gets sleep where he can.  On weekends, a friend allows him to stay on his couch.  However, during the week, Derek shifts from the college, to gas stations, to park benches to sleep and do his work.  He would stay at the local shelter but had negative previous experiences that encouraged him to give in to his alcohol addiction.  Derek is pursuing a career as a mechanic and enjoys working with automotive technology.  As a formerly incarcerated individual, Derek has struggled to find

work and believes that his education will help him achieve his professional aspirations. Derek works where he can, when he can, but focuses much of his energy on schoolwork. A large amount of personal growth has occurred for Derek as he has pushed himself to achieve academically.

**Research Site**

The research site was focused on one individual city and institutions within that city. Participants were all located in the Midwest. Individuals interviewed attended two different institutions within the city. Most individuals interviewed on the campus of City University. One individual interviewed at the local shelter, while another interviewed at a library on another campus. However, City University will serve as the research site.

City University is a large, public, land-grant university in the central Plains region. Although more than 25,000 students attend City University and residential housing is available, issues of housing instability are present. The city where City University was established is home to more than 250,000 people and is considered an urban campus, as the city center is less than one block from the edge of campus. City University has no current office that specifically addresses the needs of homeless students but TRiO programs and other resources exist for students from a low socio-economical background.

Participants were encouraged to meet me on the City University campus for the interview but interviews took place where the participants felt most comfortable. In addition, I paid particular attention to creating a private space for interviews, to help participants to feel comfortable as they shared personal experiences. Nearly all the interviews took place in a private room in a library on City University Campus.

**Data**

Data was gathered through qualitative interviews. Interviews lasted from thirty minutes to an hour and half. The first interview relied loosely on the interview protocol but provided space for deeper levels of questioning when necessary. This interview focused on their current living situation, challenges they faced, their education, and social support. The second interview was unstructured and guided more by the answers from the first interview. The main focus was on the academic experience and the social supports student possessed. The interviews were recorded on an audio recorder and transcribed by a local transcriptionist.

The use of a semi-structured format allowed the interviews to have a more natural flow and allowed the participants to have more control. This built more trust between myself and the participants and allowed for richer data. Although the project began in the early fall of 2014, the interviews did not take place until October of 2014. Four of the seven participants completed both interviews. Various challenges impeded the other interviews. One participant, became incarcerated before we could interview again. Another chose not to interview again because they would not receive an additional gift card. For the other participants who did not complete both interviews I was unable to schedule another interview due to difficulties contacting the participant.

**Data Analysis**

During and after the interviews, a local transcriptionist transcribed the data. Interviews were then analyzed and coded. First, I highlighted "significant statements" (Moustakas, 1994, p.132) that provide understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon. Next, I gathered these significant statements in themes (Creswell, 2004). Finally, these significant statements and themes were used to create a textual description of what the participants

experienced (Creswell, 2004). These coding structures allowed me to see and understand the data in context while honoring the individual experiences of the participants.

In addition to coding, I also personally reflected through journaling. After interviewing, I would reflect on the experience and the particular emotions that I left with after meeting a participant. This along with conversations with my advisor assisted me as I attempted to triangulate my findings and find cross-validation.

**Verification**

In the verification process, a form of data verification was a member check, which consisted of sending an abstract to the participants to verify the main themes of the research. Additionally, two peer reviewers were utilized to provide feedback on my work. Personal journaling done after the interviews with each individual participant allowed me to reflect on the feelings and emotions that were present after the interview. Journals focused on the emotional tone of the interview, the physical characteristics of the interview and my personal feelings after the interview. These journals were useful for data verification because they allowed me to look back and remember the emotions and feelings that were occurring during interviews.

**Limitations**

There are inherent limitations that come with conducting qualitative research, the first being that the research is not generalizable to a larger population. The experiences that will be shared in the interviews are from individuals and thus represent their individual experience. The sum of their experiences has created a truth for each participant that may not be true of the larger population. At the same time, college students who are experiencing homelessness may experience similar phenomena thus professionals in higher education must consider each individual's experience.

Due to the phenomenological nature of the study, only a small number of participants were necessary to conduct the research, which may be seen as a limitation of the research. However, the goal of this research was not to create a generalizable understanding of college students who are experiencing homelessness; rather, the goal was start to understand the experiences of these students in a way current literature has not yet captured.

**Role of Researcher**

An important step in the phenomenological research process is to share the researcher's role within the research. In this step, the researcher explores his or her own experiences, contexts, and situations that may have affected their experiences within the research (Moustakas, 1994). This is important because, as a qualitative researcher my own values and experiences will be inherently infused into this research.

The inspiration for this research came from an article about a student who was experiencing homelessness at a small college in Michigan (Ellis, 2013). This student struggled to find a place to stay over student breaks and was looking for a way to improve her living situation. This research sparked my interest in the topic of collegiate homelessness and encouraged me look into the field of literature. While researching the topic I found that little to no research had been done on the topic and that youth homelessness was the only topic that offered any relation to the idea of collegiate homelessness. This discovery only furthered my interest in the topic and led me to reach out to my colleagues for their guidance on pursuing this research. From my interaction with my colleagues, I inferred a sense of hesitancy related to finding students to interview. They raised concern that students who identified in this way, might not exist on this campus and, if they did, it would be too difficult to find them. These

comments further fueled my desire to pursue this research and create a platform for students who are experiencing homelessness.

In conducting this research, it was important for me to understand the perspective that I brought when interviewing and analyzing the data. My roots are in a small town in rural Nebraska, where my family lived in the country. Hard work and joy was a staple of my youth, as my family had enough to get by. In my rural community, poverty was difficult to find as the expansion of farming could be seen in the homes of many. In attending college, it was important that I attend an institution that I felt called to, but tuition and income was an important piece of the conversation. My interest in college students who are experiencing homelessness stems from my previous experiences and connection to a passion for attaining something better. Being a first-generation student, I know that the sacrifices my family made have created a foundation that allowed me to attend college and pursue my passion. In interactions with the participants of this study, I found myself drawn into the conversation. At times in higher education we feel the need to discuss the important issues of the day; when communicating with the participants, I found myself reminded of the common conversations I would have in my small hometown. I became drawn to the familiarity of the open, kind, and understanding way they interacted with me. My perspective has informed my conversations with the participants of this study and in many ways reminded me that these students and I share similar goals.

**Conclusion**

This chapter explained the methodological choices made in this research. These choices contain limitations that have been discussed. In Chapter 4, the findings of this research will be discussed using the coding methods presented in this chapter. In the final chapter, the meaning of these findings and their importance will be discussed and implications for the field presented.

**Chapter 4**

**Findings**

This chapter will focus on the findings of this research. The purpose of this thesis was to understand the experiences of college students who are experiencing homelessness, specifically considering the academic and social experiences of these students. Through semi-structured interviews, I was able collect data from seven students with varied living situations and backgrounds. This chapter will explore the themes of their experiences.

Two main research questions guided this project from inception through building the methodology, interview protocol, and analyzing the data. The first question, which asks about the academic experiences of students who are experiencing homelessness, is answered by each of the themes gleaned from the data. However, the fourth theme most completely answers the first question through gaining an understanding of the student's determination to achieve educationally and thus gaining hope that education will be a conduit for positive change in their life.

The second research question that guided this asked, what are the social experiences of students who are experiencing homelessness. The second question is answered through all the themes in at least some ways. In particular, the second theme, about the social support systems, answers this research question most thoroughly. The theme's focus on social support systems gives insight into the structure that is in place to provide guidance or encouragement to the students.

**Overview of Themes**

Four main themes emerged from the data. The first theme, that students hid their identity from the institution and from many on campus, is drawn from the participants' experiences. This

closed approach to their on-campus life impacted the way they interacted with all members of the campus. The first theme is supported by two sub-themes. First, when participants revealed their homeless identity, people treated them differently. Second, participants indicated a lack of connection to their institution, which led them to continue to hide their homelessness identity.

The second theme explores the small amount of support the participants reported receiving and how their support group was, at most, a handful of people rarely consisting of any members of their higher education institution. While support systems varied slightly between participants, nearly all discussed having small support groups based mostly outside of their college or university. This theme was also supported by two sub-themes: having family support and simultaneously having no one for social support.

A third theme that emerged from the data was how the living situations of the participants varied dramatically. How the homeless identity manifested itself was very different for each participant and had a major effect on how they experienced homelessness. Very few participants had similar living situations and thus this suggests the varied array of backgrounds that students can experience while homeless.

The final theme states that students had the determination to continue their education, and their education gave them hope for a more positive life. This hope manifested itself in different ways and elicited different emotional reactions from the participants. This fourth theme was supported by three sub-themes: a desire to get out of their current situation, a growing value in education and the promise that it brings, and hope for the future was the third.

The next section addresses each theme, utilizes direct quotations from participants to show how the experiences of these students came together to form the theme. In relying on the student's experiences, I am placing their perspectives at the forefront of the work.

**Theme #1- Hidden Identity**

During the interviews, participants spoke about how their homeless identity was kept

hidden from the institution and from many other individuals on campus.  Participants shared

their experience being homeless was something that they did want not others to know and they

did not feel encouraged to speak about it.  If they did share their experience, it was at the very

most with a few people.  The institutions' lack of knowledge about the homeless student

experience was a concept that led them to hide their identity.  Tommy shared:

> "They don't even know I'm at the Mission, I don't think.  I don't really want it to be
>
> known to the world."

For Tommy, it was important to hide how he was experiencing homelessness from peers at his

institution and where he worked.  In sharing these hidden details during the interview, he

expressed the value in being able to conceal this information but often felt that hiding this

identity lead him to distance himself from others.

Tommy was not alone in keeping his identity secret, hidden identities were a part of

many of the interviews.  The reasons why the participants kept their identity secret differed.

**Differential Treatment**

Moving forward, the first sub theme was that when participants revealed their identity,

they were then treated differently because of it.  Participants had different reactions, Alex shared:

> "Most people don't know my living situation just because . . . not that I'm embarrassed,
> but it's not . . . people look down at you because of it and they may not want to be your
> friend or they may not want to be known as the person that knows a homeless guy."

The worry about being criticized or being shown pity pressured Alex to hide his identity.  The

fear of being "that homeless guy" was something that was present in the interview with Alex as

he shared his interactions at this institution.  To distance himself from that fear, Alex created an

alternative character that he would speak about with his peers, an individual, who was not Alex

himself that was experiencing homelessness.  Alex would share that he had a friend who was

homeless and use this character to buffer himself from the exposure,

> "Because it's a thing where people sort of back away, the guys homeless.  Don't want to associate with that guy, you might be homeless.  Like it's a disease or something.  What it is, is a social disease.  The social disease that ruins you."

Both the social disease and created character are buffers that Alex had created to speak about his

experiences.  Both ideas offer insight into how Alex was hiding his homeless identity.

For Clint, the experiences he faced when he revealed his living situation often led others

to believe he would be a danger to them, saying:

> "Something's going cool or something and then to find out that I'm homeless.  Well this guy's probably going to rob me at some point.  Or they just have that look on their face like I should not be interacting with this person."

In the negative interactions that Clint experienced, he shared that people would react differently.

Generally, these reactions were negative and would lead him to continue to hide his identity from

his peers.  The negative interactions that Clint had with his peers only further isolated him and

his living situation.

Susanne shared that people would often act strange and not know what to do when they

interacted with individuals who were experiencing homelessness.  In her own words,

> "My roommate, I had actually told her I was coming to do this.  She goes, "What?" I go, "Yeah, its fine."  She goes, Seriously?"  And she got really weirded out.  People just don't know what to say."

This negative interaction led Susanne to believe that her own roommate did not understand

Susanne's living situation and no longer knew how to interact with her.  When the experience of

homelessness is salient for an individual, it becomes even more difficult when other people do

not understand or agree with the living situation.

**Negative Institutional Interactions**

These bad interactions with individuals at their home institutions and in other

environments, had encouraged these four participants to stop sharing their experience, and thus

created a negative impact for them at the institution.  This concept was the second sub-theme.

The negative impact influenced the entirety of their experience and led them to close themselves

off from others.

For some participants it became difficult to believe that anyone at the institution wanted

to assist them.  They believed it would be important that someone at the institution be working to

help students experiencing homelessness and encourage their progress.  Susanne shared:

> "Now that I think about it, it is kind of funny that I put homeless on my transcript – my
> FAFSA and they haven't really said or done anything.  I think that's odd now that I think
> about it.  That's kind of rude."

This negative experience with revealing their identity only reinforced that sharing the identity

does not lead to positive experiences.  This experience also helped hone the lens through which

Susanne perceived the rest of her experience at that institution.

Feeling disconnected from their institution and lacking support, these students found it

difficult to feel there was a place to connect and share their experiences.  Most students just

wanted to find that connection on campus.  Karen shared:

> I don't like it when people give me pity looks.  You can tell when they're pity looks.  It's
> okay.  I appreciate it, but it just almost makes it worse because I don't want pity.  I just
> want people to think that I'm a normal person and I'm okay."

Connecting to others at the institution and feeling like a normal student was important for Karen.

She felt that being homeless changed how others perceived her, and she wanted to be viewed as

simply another student.

Striving for connection to their institution, students sought to be treated as a member of the campus community. Participants wanted a common connection and respect, and thus felt disregarded because they experienced homelessness. These interactions only further encouraged individuals to hide who they were from the institution for fear of being treated differently.

These are just a few of the reasons why students who are experiencing homelessness do not share their identity. These social pressures encourage them to conceal their identity and to hide that they are experiencing difficulties. This theme speaks to the social experiences for students who are experiencing homelessness, which helps inform for the second research question.

**Theme #2- Students had few to zero support systems that offered positive encouragement**

Participants shared that if present at all, their support system was small, and that this affected their experiences in college. Often the participant's support system consisted of family members and rarely consisted of any individuals from the institution they attended. During the interviews, rarely did a participant mention the support of the institution or an agent of the institution. In the absence of support participants felt isolated.

**Family Support**

For many participants, family was the only support they had, which is the first sub-theme. Susanne shared:

> "I don't feel the need to get super close to anybody here. I suppose it's from growing up, family is always gonna be there. Or most the time. I always know my sisters and my grandma's gonna be there so that's who I usually trust the most."

For Susanne, family was her only connection and she viewed that, as enough. Though not all of Susanne's family was a positive support system, a few members, her sisters and grandma, were present. Susanne resisted the idea that she would need anyone else for support, and believed that

because that small support group had always been present, they would not be going anywhere.

Also having shared in difficulties with those individuals already, she felt that they already knew

her and did not have to overcome her interpersonal barriers.  She struggled to make connections

with others on campus because of her experience with people coming in and out of her life

unlike her family who provided invaluable constant support, however small.

Any support that family did show toward the participant's education had a dramatic

effect on their experience.  Betsy shared:

> "She's like – they're all partying and they're like, "That's my spot."  She's like, "That's
> my sister's spot."  I got my books spread out all over the table.  She's like, "Nobody can
> go in there.  That's my sister's spot."  So, when I come over, they're like, "I'm at home, I
> don't leave home because I'm studying and stuff."  They're like, "Come over, come
> over." Because they want me to be a part of the family.  I'm like, "I'll come over but I
> have to study." So, that's my spot, nobody can come in there unless they help me with
> my homework."

This small gesture had a large impact on Betsy and made her feel supported in her pursuit of

education.  This gesture reinforced for Betsy that she was supported and that her family wanted

to make her education important.  For Betsy, this was a memory that brought joy and happiness.

This was a true statement for her that her family supported her education and wanted to find

ways to improve her situation.  Sadly, for many of the students in this study this level of support

was not present.

**No Support**

Without the support of their family or from their institutions, participants shared that,

they alone care for themselves.  This was the second sub-theme.  Often, interaction with peers

was difficult and thus being independent of others was the easiest option to maintain. As Tommy

shared:

> "No, I don't interact with any of them, so I don't know anything about them."

Tommy shared that he was alone in his actions and rarely had positive interactions with others within his institution, so he never sought out acceptance from others. This concept was repeated in numerous experiences as students struggled to connect. In Derek's words,

> "No one really. Just myself. I'm always trying to keep myself not to fall completely off the ladder."

For Derek, feeling isolated was a way in which he could protect himself from others at the institution. Previous experiences had affected Derek in a negative way and pushed him to build barriers between himself and others. Derek shared that he had challenging experiences with both his peers and professionals. These events usually occurred within the classroom and seldom were resolved positively.

For some, the need to protect themselves from others led them to believe that they did not need support. Clint shared,

> "I came here by myself, I'll leave by myself, I don't need them they don't need me."

The emotions that came from the isolation only further encouraged Clint to seek isolation and, in some ways, become hostile toward others. Clint drew upon his own strength as a support system when others were not present to support him. He believed that no one else was there to support him and that he must be independent if he wanted to achieve his goals for his future.

This theme and two sub-themes showed that participants in this research struggled to have a social support system in place that could positively influence their experiences. Though family was important for some participants, most shared that they were alone. The reasons why participants struggled to have support varied but the isolation they faced was common and an important facet of their experience.

**Theme #3- The varying living situations of each individual participant**

For each participant, the experience of homelessness manifested itself in different ways. Each understood their collegiate experience through their own homeless experience but the way they lived changed, and thus brought different perspectives. For some, the local shelter was a place they could seek housing assistance. Tommy shared:

"Yeah. I use it (local shelter) to shower, to eat, to sleep, to change clothes. I am in temporary housing, it's like 30 days."

Tommy's experience was a temporary stay and the local shelter has rotations for those who stay for shorter amounts of time. Providing housing for a longer period requires certain commitments from residents as they work to improve their living situation. Tommy knew that 30 days would not require a longer commitment but that also meant he would be required to move again. Currently working, Tommy is looking for ways to save money and look to have his own place.

Not all students who stayed at the shelter shared a similar experience with Tommy. Each person's living situation had different commitments but also offered different benefits. In Alex's words,

I live at the Mission. One of the services I use at the (Shelter) is the Long Side (Specific part of the shelter). It's a step up from being totally homeless to getting a good recommendation for an apartment that you're renting from them, you're renting a dorm room sized apartment from them. That gets you a good recommendation on the next apartment when you go out to get one.

Clint's experience was very different even though he was using the same program, saying,

I'm staying here on the Long side (Specific part of the shelter), it's a two year program under the federal government where I live rent free. Services I've got include free meals, restrooms, showers, laundry room, and my own sleeping quarters.

Gaining access to residence on that side was more difficult than short-term housing but it depended on the individual's needs. For Alex, that specific part of the shelter became an option based on his pursuit of an education and his commitment to the living standards that were associated with that area of the shelter's housing. For Clint, that housing became available because of his previous military service. For these individuals the support the housing offered assisted them as they worked to achieve their education. Both individuals knew that, although the housing options were more long-term, they would still be just a step in the correct direction and they would have to find housing after their time expired.

Shelters were not the best option for every participant. Betsy shared that pursuing her education and experiencing homelessness often were in conflict when it came to receiving assistance. However, some services recognized the need. Betsy shared:

> "While I completed that program I was able to get a voucher called Regional Five Voucher. That is, they pay your rent for two years. They pay my lights and gas for two years so I'm able to now relax a little bit, think about what I want to do with my future. That was a blessing. I think I heard about that program and I just shot for it."

For Betsy, this was an important step in gaining independence. Previous living situations had been difficult and she often faced eviction and pest problems. Having a stable living situation promoted a healthy environment for educational success. Though this program was an important support, it still had a limit and Betsy shared that she would have to seek out an apartment after the funding expired. However, this temporary funding did allow Betsy to save money for future housing opportunities.

Another source of housing support was the institutions' ability to house students. Susanne shared how the institution had helped provide housing:

> "I live on campus right now, in one of the dorms. I'm studying pre-med and art. During fall break and all of our breaks and probably summer I'm just going to go back and live with my sister. I don't know what I'm going to do for next year. I'm definitely hoping

not to have to live with her just because I want to give her a break. She's a newlywed so I want to give her and her husband time to be together. So, I'm figuring it out. I live on campus and I like it."

Choosing to live on campus was a significant choice for Susanne. She found support on campus because her other housing option affected her family in ways she did not like. Luckily, she had a place to go for student breaks and did not have to find somewhere to live on campus. Her campus was one that completely shut down over the breaks and all residence halls would be closed. While Susanne had housing during the academic year, she still self-identified for this research as experiencing homelessness. The identification was due to not having stable housing when the residence hall closed.

Even though Susanne had shelter at the institution, she struggled to feel that her living space within the residence hall was her home, saying:

"I don't really call a place my home. My sister would like me to call that place my home, but it's hard to say a certain place is your home. I don't know. I wouldn't necessarily say my home was with my mother."

For Susanne, finding a home was much more difficult than finding a place to have shelter. Claiming a space as your home is a significant choice and something that she did not take lightly. Susanne faced difficulty when trying to connect to the institution and that had an effect on the way she saw her living situation. Susanne's focus on independence was a factor in these feelings and feeling like a burden to her family support group was something she wanted to avoid.

For others, the available support only allowed them to have a place to stay for parts of the week and this led them to seek shelter in additional ways. Derek shared:

"I've got a friend who will let me sleep on their couch on the weekends. He doesn't care because he's not really home. So, he'll let me stay over and that way I get rest and I can power through my notes and get ready for the week. Then, like I said for the week I'm just kind of wandering about and when school opens up, I usually go in early and I'll sleep in the student center for a few hours before class. That's where I get to catch up. My sleep is really erratic. I kind of bounced around doing the same thing I'm doing now,

just going early to school and stay late. Get sleep when I can and usually just find a place where I can stay all night. Sometimes there's a gas station. If I don't have the energy to walk that far then I'll usually find a bench somewhere and I'll just sit. I've got a rechargeable flashlight that I use to read or go through notes at night."

Derek knew that finding a living situation was important but pursuing his education was a higher priority. Though he only had shelter for parts of the week this situation did not put a damper on his excitement about his education or his spirit for growth. Having enough support to find housing for parts of the week encouraged Derek to find other ways of seeking shelter. Derek's experience in forcing himself to stay awake on a park bench came from fear of being arrested if he was caught sleeping. Seeking rest in a nearby gas station offered a place for Derek to relax. Despite the resources around Derek, he struggled to find a common routine that would allow him to be successful. Derek had to make choices when it came to the services available because of his struggles with addiction. He shared that it was too easy to fall back into his addiction when he put himself in certain environments. This was due to the ability of other individuals who used those same resources and the pressure they would place on Derek to give into his addiction.

This theme shows the varying ways in which participants experienced homelessness and how it impacted their educational experience. Their current living situation was often fluid and during the time spent pursuing education they would experience multiple environments. The transient nature of these students' living situations shows that their experience changes often and they may face different forms of homelessness within a given month. This theme speaks to the social experiences for students who are experiencing homelessness, which provides support for the second research question.

**Theme #4- Students were determined to continue their education which gave them hope**

Participants in this research had strong determination to continue their education. In addition, their pursuit of education gave them hope. The first sub-theme focused on why it was

important for participants to work to find ways to get out of their current situation and move

toward something better.  Tommy shared:

> "Just the fact that I know I'm going to go somewhere with it if I keep to it.  Since I'm in
> the place that I'm in, it's just more motivation when I know I got to do this for this
> reason.  'Cause I'm tired of being stuck in this place.  It might not be in the direction I
> want but beggars can't be choosers I guess. I'm just tired of the spot I'm in."

For Tommy, it was important to recognize that he was unhappy in his current situation and he

needed to work for something better.  Gaining understanding about his current situation was

important and knowing that there are current limitations helped Tommy gain perspective.

Tommy saw his personal growth as he pursued his education, but it took time and effort.

Realizing that he was unhappy with his current situation was a motivator to attain the things

necessary to move forward.

**Determination**

Showing determination in working to find change was important for the participants of

this research.  Though their determination took different forms, they shared a drive to attain an

education.  Derek said:

> "I guess . . . I have a whole slew of problems but then it always comes back to . . . there's
> always going to be bumps in the road so I have to push through it.  I'm not ecstatic about
> the way things are right now, but I'm not depressed by it either.  Just the way it has to
> be."

His present issues helped Derek as he worked to see change in his life.  Derek knew that the

situation was not completely in his control and this was important in feeling positive about his

education.  Having resiliency to continue through difficult situations was important for him.  In

addition, knowing that being happy is not a part of every situation showed that Derek was taking

his current situation seriously and looking to find more opportunities to grow and develop.

The determination to change their situation often led to a drive to pursue education and thus, change.  For some of the participants, it was important to know that no matter their living situation, they must be determined to pursue their education.  For Clint, the fluidity of his situation was a challenge:

> "One minute you're straight, the next minute you don't know where your next meal's gonna come from but you know what?  You still gotta make it to school, even if you're sleeping on somebody's couch."

The determination to continue to attend class and pursue their education is something that was apparent in many of these students' experiences.  Finding the energy and focus to meet the demands of college courses while facing the challenges that come with experiencing homelessness shows these students' grit.  Clint knew that the challenges he would face would be varied and he had to be ready to take each one as it came.

**Value of Education**

Valuing education also allowed participants to become better connected with the educational environment and find excitement in where they were.  Their growth led them to see the greater value in education and find encouragement in learning.  Betsy shared:

> What the hell are we doing?  Oh, but it's like this, when I walk onto campus I can't believe that I'm actually there.  It's like every day is a gift.  It's amazing.  Its like, "Whoa.  We're really here?"  It's like, "Oh my God."

The excitement about her experience and shock that she could attain this level of education and what it has to offer interested Betsy.  New areas of learning had been opened.  The shock of knowing that she was pursuing her education felt dramatic and it started to change her perspective regarding what she could attain.  This experience helped her seek an academic environment and the rewards it offered.  Additionally Betsy offered:

> "Basically you have all of these faithful people . . . faith thinking people where they believe that one day they're gonna have this life and everybody's thinking about this

stuff. They're not thinking about the misery, the pain that they're in today. They're thinking about their future."

This pursuit was new for Betsy and her ability to think toward the future helped her discover new perspectives. The misery and pain that she had experienced previously was such an important part of her psyche that she used that experience to gauge this one. Exposure to the environment allowed this student to glimpse into the lens through which people on campus see the world. She could see that individuals at their institution were focusing on the change they can make in the world. For some participants, like Alex, they were able to see how this environment changed them, saying,

"But, in college you're actually learning something that will better your life and I can help other people with what I learned."

Helping others with what he had learned was why Alex was pursing his education. Alex had pride in his ability to give back to others, even when he struggled. The practical knowledge he was learning motivated him to continue. In pursuing in his education, there was a sense that led him to believe learning would continue after college. His degree would be a step in the correct direction, but over time, he would learn from those around him and be able to share that with others.

**Hope**

In seeing the value of education, participants still believed that in many ways their degree was about personal growth and determination. This was the third sub-theme, a hope for the future that could be seen through education. Derek shared:

"I think with this whole 19 months of – I call it my training period. It's really paid off because I've been able to push myself to do it instead of just giving up. The determination is there."

During those 19 months, he had experienced extreme homelessness that often led to sleeping on the street. However, Derek's determination had allowed him to see the large improvement in his life. He saw the value in his work. In the past, when difficult situations arose, Derek found himself stuck without direction. However, with this most recent challenge, he had motivated himself to find a new level of determination.

Participants also shared how their personal growth was important and gave them confidence to overcome their living situation. Derek also shared:

> "If I start giving too much energy into that. It's like, "Oh my God why are people thinking this about me?" That's just . . . I had to accept it. That's just how it is. I have to go about my day. I guess it really wouldn't make a difference if everybody in school knew I was homeless, I would still show up because I'm not doing it for them. That's how I see it."

Derek knew that others would always have their own opinions about his choices, but his recent determination to pursue his degree gave him reassurance that he was making a positive change. Though he was not openly sharing that he was facing homelessness, he was not afraid if that conversation would take place; he had confidence in his growth. The determination to pursue their education gave many students hope the future would be more positive than the present. Experiencing difficulties now would only pay off if they followed through on their education.

Through all these experiences, participants shared their determination to continue school and the hope that their education brought them. Knowing that they had to work to change their current situation and seeing the influence of education led them to believe that education was the key they needed in order to be where they wanted to be. This theme speaks to the academic experiences of students who are experiencing homelessness, which provides support for the first research question.

**Conclusion**

This research is one of very few works focused on the experiences of college students who are experiencing homelessness. These findings are in no way complete or generalizable and thus provide areas to continue research. However, these four themes do provide context and understanding for the experiences of students who experiencing homelessness.

The data in this work suggests that students may be keeping their homeless identity hidden from their peers and staff at the institution they attend. Reasons for this may stem from their previous interactions with others when they revealed their identity. Negative reactions may only continue the cycle of hiding their identities on campus. The limited social support that students in this research have may point to the fact that little to no support is offered on campus and thus family may be the only support present. For many in this study, a strong sense of loneliness guided their actions. This loneliness was seen in nearly all of the living situations that students experienced.

The living situations of the participants varied and this encourages solutions to be flexible and intentional. However difficult their current situations, participants shared they wanted to better themselves and they saw education as a way to achieve those results. Feeling encouraged by the educational environment, and finding hope in the promise of education, individuals looked to attain new more positive situations for themselves.

In the final chapter the implications of these findings and discussion about what recommendations come from this work will occur.

**Chapter 5**

**Implications and Discussion**

The previous chapter detailed the findings of the study through the themes and sub-themes discussed. The data came from the eleven interviews conducted with seven participants. The seven participants represent a diverse array of the college students who attended different institutions and pursued different goals. These participants provided a broad picture of what this student population may experience.

This chapter builds on the findings from Chapter 4 and discusses the implications of this research for college students who are experiencing homelessness. I will begin by summarizing the findings through the perspective of the research questions that guided my work. The literature that is relevant to this research will also be referenced to show the connections between the study and previous work. I will then provide recommendations for practice and consider areas for future research.

**Summarization of Findings**

Two research questions guided this study. These questions were developed from the small amount of literature that exists on the population of college students experiencing homelessness. Due to this lack of literature, I also reached into additional areas for supportive literature. Resilience theory, the social support of college students and hidden identity research were some areas within literature that I explored to better understand the experiences of students who are facing homelessness.

Both research questions were addressed by the data collected. However, themes more strongly provided evidence of the research question focused on social support. Though the participants were asked about their academic experiences, themes based on their experiences

were difficult to conclude. This topic will be discussed more in the section focused on future research.

**Connection to Literature**

**What are the social experiences for college students who are facing homelessness?**
Individuals in this study struggled to feel socially supported. The isolation that Clint experienced has created an ability to distance himself from others. It has also created a barrier that goes up when interacting with him. This barrier can be overcome but it can quickly return if difficulties arise.

From friends and family to the institution itself, participants felt disconnected from those around them. Alex shared that he had not connected with any of this classmates because they did not seemed interested in understanding his living situation. The ways he did connect with his classmates were based on a character he had created that was experiencing homelessness. This character allowed him to create a barrier, thus making it more comfortable to connect.

For those individuals who did receive support it was often from a very small group of individuals. For Susanne, it was difficult to connect with others but having her small support group of family members was good enough. She had a strong feeling that her family was all the support she needed and in many ways, this hindered her desire to connect with her peers. Having little support influenced the social experiences of these students and made them feel more isolated.

Previous literature suggested that young adults who are homeless frequently come from families who themselves are living in crisis (Ammerman et al., 2004). Karen and Susanne faced this hardship as their previous living experiences before college reflected these findings. Although they experienced negative situations with their families, both were still closely aligned

with them and relied on them for support. However, while some family members were

supportive and close to the participants, others did not encourage education and thus were on the

outer circle. During a time of minimal support, many individuals who are homeless may choose

to connect with family due to the limited access to other support groups (Culhane et al. 1996). In

this study, this was seen as individuals described that they did not have connected support groups

at their institution. Participants lacked support for many different reasons, but they all struggled

to understand why support was difficult to gain at their institution.

In relation to the isolation or lack of social support, the literature suggested insufficient

support can be associated with isolation for college students (Brown, Brady, Lent, Wolfert and

Hall, 1987). For Tommy, Alex, and Clint, isolation in their social environments often led to

them having no social support. This isolation came from individual choices, fears and other

circumstances. Tommy shared that he had no support system in this current living situation or at

the institution he attended. He blamed his lack of social support on his living situation and

believed if he had a more stable or comfortable living situation, he would be able to invite others

over and thus, develop a support system. His transient living situation also made it difficult to

stay in one location for any period of time, so attending school was also effected. For Clint,

isolation became the norm after he had difficulties at his institution with his classmates and

professionals. Clint shared that they often did not approach him and would avoid working with

him on class projects. As for professionals, Clint felt that certain professors were not invested in

his education and at times worked against the progress he was making. Alex shared that

interactions within the classroom were difficult because he did not feel comfortable interacting

with others. He stated that he often did not know about the topics his classmates would be

discussing and by the time he understood what they were speaking about, they had stopped the

conversation. The interactions that participants had with individuals at their institutions were often controlled by their hidden identity as a college student experiencing homelessness.

Hidden identities were a core component of the social support experience that participants shared. Literature shows that hidden identities are not negative and do not mark a person as inferior (Vandrick, 2007), although that may be a perception. However, for many of the participants, the fear of being treated differently was a large factor in not revealing their identity. Susanne did not share with her roommate that she was experiencing homelessness and noticed on move-in day that revealing any experience that related to poverty led to different reactions from those around her. On that day, she had no help to move into the residence hall, which elicited a reaction from other parents, and made Susanne feel different. This feeling enforced in Susanne a reason to hide her identity.

Alex created a fictional character that he spoke about in class who was experiencing homelessness. Having a character allowed Alex to have a barrier between him and his classmates and protected his hidden identity. Alex did not have concerns about this character he created and felt that it was a way to approach conversations about homelessness without revealing himself.

Betsy shared that she would not share her identity with others in class and that keeping up appearances was important to feel that she belonged at her institution. She did look to assist others at the institution who were experiencing homelessness. To do this, she left clothes, makeup and cleaning products for another classmate who shared her struggles with Betsy. When this peer revealed her identity to Betsy, she worked to help the individual develop a more well-kept look. This points to Betsy's concern with appearances, which suggests a connection to hiding a homeless identity. These experiences align with research that suggests that though their

identities are not negative in nature, individuals perceive that they will struggle with being accepted by their peers when they reveal a hidden identity and thus will work to keep these identities secret (Vandrick, 2007).

For some participants, their lack of connection to their institution led them to further conceal their identity. Tommy shared that he believed no one at the institution knew he was experiencing homelessness. He had not been asked much about his living experience since starting at the institution and believed that others only cared about themselves. His lack of connection to his institution never challenged his idea that no one knew about his living situation. The literature suggested that a great deal of time and energy goes into effectively hiding an identity (Trauntner & Collett, 2010). Susanne was bothered when she revealed her identity, on the FAFSA report, and no one from the institution followed up with her. That experience furthered her investment in hiding her identity and discouraged her from connecting with peers about her living situation. Derek never spent more than limited time with the same group of individuals and thus made it difficult to connect and reveal his identity. The short-term nature of his interactions made Derek feel that it was logical to keep his identity hidden instead of having to explain it repeatedly. Not only did the participants experience this hidden identity on campus but it was also often involved in other areas where they existed. This aligns with literature in suggesting that hidden identities transition with individuals as they move (Vandrick, 2007).

**What are the academic experiences of college students who are facing homelessness?**
Individuals in this study were attending college while facing a major difficulty in their lives. Satisfying one of their most basic needs, housing, was an area of major struggle for these individuals, yet their determination to achieve academically was their focus. For Tommy,

attaining a degree was a way to move forward and, past previous negative experiences. Though

getting his degree was just the first step, Tommy knew it was important in the bigger picture. He

had dreams to work as a mechanic and then someday pursue a music career. Tommy viewed this

process as a trial to see if he was invested and able to attain goals he set for himself.

Betsy shared that being able to attend a place of higher learning, revealed to her the

possibilities of what people can attain. Through learning more about people's passions, Betsy

was able to understand her own passion. This growth encouraged Betsy to value education,

which allowed her to see how pursing a career as a stylist was important for her to attain her

dream. Susanne believed in her education and wanted more than anything to give back to others.

Her desire to attain her degree motivated her to be more independent and take each challenge as

it came to her.

Many of these experiences relate closely to what the literature conveys about resilience

theory (Resnick, 2000). A hope for a better future was seen in the experiences of many

participants, but Alex also spoke specifically about how his degree would allow him to assist

others. He spoke about his desire to give and how this impacted him. He knew that with this

education he would be able to pursue a career in social work and be paid to work for a local non-

profit that helped youth in the community. Derek saw hope in this education because it would

allow employers to see how he has changed and provide him with an opportunity to find a

position as an auto mechanic. Many participants felt that hope could be gained through

education, which impacted their academic experience and motivated them to earn their degree.

**Recommendations for Student Affairs Practice**

There is no simple way to remove all the difficulties facing college students who are

experiencing homelessness; however, I believe there are many things that can be done to make

the experiences of these students better.  First, student affairs professionals should consider the barriers that are in place within their office that could hinder students.  Second, professionals should be aware of the resources within the larger community that could be beneficial to this student population.  In addition, listening and acknowledging the experiences of these students can be powerful.  Finally, professionals can think about simple ways to bring awareness of these students' experiences to the entire campus.

No matter the office, there are barriers that are currently in place that make access to available resources more difficult for students experiencing homelessness.  A straightforward approach is to consider how all resources can be accessed for no cost.  Often, students who are experiencing homelessness do not have additional financial resources to pay for events or activities.  Additionally, it is important to consider how adjusting office hours can be a beneficial way to open doors for these students.  Being open earlier in the morning or later in the day could provide additional time for the students to visit.

Transportation can be a difficulty for these students and student affairs offices must consider how that is an element of each event.  Because each office is specific, the most important element of this recommendation is to consider what barriers might be in place for your individual office.  In addition, offices must consider that these individuals will most likely not share with you that they are experiencing homelessness, but we must work to make our space more inclusive.

The research also suggests that student affairs practitioners should become more aware of resources for students experiencing homelessness outside their institution, in the larger community.  In many ways, student affairs practitioners are limited in the assistance they can provide, but knowing more about the outside resources allows referring beyond the institution.

For some institutions, these services are already in place on campus, for others reaching outside the immediate community into county or state resources is necessary. A list of resources can easily be found for counties or cities. These assistance programs would divide resources into needs-based areas and would allow practitioners to easily assist individuals who reveal their identity and are seeking assistance. Even though students may not often reveal that they are experiencing homelessness, student affairs practitioners need to be equipped with resources that can assist them when they do.

In one-on-one interactions with these students, it is valuable to know when a student is asking for assistance and when a student is sharing an experience. For this population in particular listening is an invaluable skill for professionals. Students may share their experiences but that does not mean they are seeking assistance. A positive way to approach a student who reveals his or her identity is to ask the student if he or she wants assistance or just someone to listen. Though this may go against the natural call of student affairs professionals to help and assist, it is important because individuals may face shame in revealing more about themselves. Listening to students will show simultaneously care for them and build trust.

Raising awareness to the larger institutional community is a positive move for professionals. This can be done through presentations, workshops, and general awareness activities. Potential exists in creating signage that shows an open and safe space for students who are experiencing homelessness. These could be placed on individual office doors and bring awareness to the larger community while also directly speaking to students experiencing homelessness. The phrasing for such signs could be "safe zone for those experiencing homelessness or housing instability."

**Areas for Future Research**

This study shines light on a major gap within the literature and reveals that we must look to explore more about college students experiencing homelessness. As the demographics of college students continue to change, and as tuition continues rising, we must consider how students' financial situations are important in their collegiate experience. Among the topics that could be considered, three areas of research stood out. The ability of students to hide their identity while pursuing their education was a concept that little literature explores. Knowing more about the hidden identity of this student population would aid us as we find the best way to assist these students. Secondly, future research should consider the academic experiences of students facing homelessness. Though this was a goal of this research, little evidence was found to be present to glean meaningful conclusions. Finally, additional research is needed as we try to understand the reasons why this student population pursues their collegiate education even as they face daily challenges with their most basic need not being met.

The concept of hidden identities was a major theme that was uncovered. Participants would often not share their identities with anyone on campus for fear that the identity would change the way individuals interact with them. Future research should consider the work that has been done with other student populations in higher education, such as LGBTQA or undocumented students. From these student populations, researchers can look for areas to expand and create a better understanding of the experiences of college students facing homelessness.

The academic experiences that college students who are homeless face is a broad area of research, but current research is very limited, making it a good starting point. One focus could be on peer interactions or on the connections with faculty. Individuals in this study faced

difficulty interacting with their peers in and out of the classroom.  In addition, participants' interactions with faculty were, at times, a difficult experience.  These interactions only further led students to feel disconnected from their institution and future research should consider the dynamic between peer-to-peer interaction and a homeless students' connection to their institution.

Finally, future research considering why individuals experiencing homelessness pursue a collegiate degree would allow us to understand the motives behind attending.  The motives for why individuals in this study attended their institutions varied greatly, but their high level of determination did not.  For many of the students in this population, attending college would not be possible if not for their individual determination to achieve.  Future research should consider the concept of self-efficacy as a reason why many homeless individuals pursue college.

**Conclusion**

Experiencing homelessness while attending an institution is not an easy situation to be in. The challenges faced by students are numerous and without simple solution.  The effort it takes to keep an identity hidden while receiving little to no social support challenges one's connection to the institution.  However, determination to pursue an education for the betterment of self provides hope while the living situation varies dramatically based on the type of homelessness faced.  While there is limited research on college students experiencing homelessness, this study brings awareness to seven individuals who are facing the challenges of pursuing an education without a stable home.

The data collected from the interviews in this study start to form a picture of the experiences of students in this population.  As a professional field, we must consider what things are occurring within our space that exclude these students and what we can do to help students

feel more connected to the communities in which they reside. This study also challenges student affairs professionals to find ways they can reach out and seek support, guidance, and assistance, in providing what is necessary for these students to achieve. Though the picture has started to form, there are many gaps in the literature that need more research so we can better understand the experiences of these students.

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## Appendix A

**Interview Protocol**

Interview #1

1. What services do you currently use?  Are they on campus or off campus?
2. What services would be most useful to you?
3. What is your current living situation?
4. What are your current challenges with your living situation?
5. Has there been times where you have struggled to have your needs met? If so then could you expand upon that?
6. In what ways have your needs been met?
7. What is the most challenging part of college or the education you have received thus far?
8. What do you enjoy most about college or the education you have received thus far?
9. Who has been a support system to you?
10. What are your future goals?


Interview #2

Follow up questions based on their initial answers.  These questions will be focused on their academic and social experiences as a homeless college student.

# Appendix B

Dear potential participant,

I am currently recruiting participants to take part in a research project that would be focused on college homelessness. The target group is individuals who are in college and who experience difficulty in their living situation. This focus is on gaining a better understanding of the student population and their experiences. From this research, a great benefit would be shown in being able to help provide better services for those experiencing homelessness.

For the research a semi-structured interview would occur, with the possibility of follow up interviews. The focus of the interview would be on the experiences of the individual and what services they use or need. For participation in the interview participants would be given a 25$ incentive.

Through this research, the investigator would provide the experiences as evidence to what changes need to occur on a college campus and in the community. The focus of the research would be on the participant's experiences, making the interview less taxing.

To contact the investigator call (402)-710-0325 or email at quinton.geis@huskers.unl.edu

Sincerely,

Quinton Geis

**Appendix C**

# Being a college student is tough.

# Being homeless is hard.

# Being a homeless college student is…..you to tell me!

Seeking research participants who self-identify as homeless college students and are 19 years old or older.  Interviews will be conducted with participants about their experiences as a homeless college student.  Participants will receive an incentive for their time and effort.  Please contact if interested in participating.

Quinton Geis

402-710-0325

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**Appendix D**

UNIVERSITY OF
**Nebraska**
Lincoln

**Participant Informed Consent Form**

**Title:** Exploring the Academic and Social Experiences of Homeless College Students

**Purpose:** The purpose of the study is better understand the experiences and needs of this student population. This research is significant because it gives a voice to college students who are experiencing or have experienced homelessness. Through this information, we can be more informed as a field to better meet the student's needs. The definition of homeless is not widely agreed upon so for the purpose of this study the researcher will allow you to self-identify.

**Procedures:** You will engage in a semi-structured interview and you will discuss your experiences as a member of the homeless community. Academic and social experiences will be the focus of the interview questions. The interview will last anywhere from 45 minutes to an hour and will be audio recorded. A second interview could be possible with your approval. You will be asked questions during the interview, and you have the ability to answer or not answer the questions.

**Benefits:**
There are no direct benefits to you as a research participant. There will be benefits in regards to the field of student affairs and other fields that work with college students. This research will shed light on the experiences of homeless college students. This research will also assist the communities in which homeless student reside.

**Risks and/or Discomforts:**
The risk of your breaking confidentiality is something the research is aware and steps are in place to protect you in all situations. Your name will not be used in the study or recorded.

**Confidentiality:**
Any information obtained during this study which could identify you will be kept strictly confidential. The data will be stored in a locked cabinet in the investigator's office and will only be seen by the investigator during the study and for 2 years after the study is complete. The information obtained in this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings but the data will be reported as aggregated data. Your name will not be associated with any of the interview answers.

**Compensation:**
You will be given 25$.

**Opportunity to Ask Questions:**
You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. Or you may contact the investigator(s) at the phone numbers below. Please contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board at (402) 472-6965 to voice concerns about the research or if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant.

**Freedom to Withdraw:**
Participation in this study is voluntary. Your refusal to participate will have no effect on their financial standing with the University or any benefits or resources that you are currently accessing with the University, shelter, or any organization.

**Counseling Services:**

As a UNL student, there are counseling services located on campus.  If you would want to speak to someone further you can contact Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS).  Their contact information is (402) 472-7450.

**Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:**
You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you are at least 19 years of age or older and have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.
Signature of Participant:

_____ _____
Signature of Research Participant               Date
☐ I agree to be audio recorded.
Name and Phone number of investigator(s)
Quinton Geis, Principal Investigator Phone: (402) 710-0325
Debra Mullen, Ph.D., Secondary Investigator Phone: (402) 472-2913