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Resilience and Thriving in Homeless College Students

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in Homeless College Students

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Cayla C. Maurer

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ABSTRACT

Homeless college students face many obstacles in higher education. These students are the invisible population on campuses that are sometimes forgotten. Despite facing many challenges and barriers, these students continue to pursue a degree of higher education. The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences and obstacles homeless college students face while they word toward a degree. Understanding how successful homeless college students overcome barriers and utilize resources will provide information that may change the fate of future homeless college students. A phenomenological approach was utilized to explore the qualities and characterizes that allow homeless college students to build resilience and thrive. Research revealed that students use many different personal and community resources that enable resilience and thriving. Participants discussed the positive experience they had at the university despite being homeless.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to every homeless college student who has been at their lowest, yet managed to face every challenge set before them with a determination and a belief that life will get better. You are important and your story deserves to be told. Never doubt that you deserve happiness Never doubt that you deserve a good life. Never doubt that things will get better.

You matter.

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To my beloved cohort, thank you for giving me a place to be vulnerable. Your love and support over the past two years has been everything I needed.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Throughout history there has always been a part of society that are homeless. Most people do not realize that there are still people who are homeless and attend an institution of higher learning (Wisehart et. al., 2013). A growing number of homeless students are making their way into colleges and universities across the nation and around the world (Field, 2015a). There are between 1 and 1.7 million homeless youth in the United States on any given night (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2013). It is hard to get an accurate number of homeless youth because a standardized way of tracking this college population does not exist. Since colleges and universities are not required to keep records of how many homeless students there are on campus, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form is the only way to track homeless college students. Based on the FAFSA data from 2012, the federal government estimates that there were 58,000 homeless students on college and university campuses across the United States (Gross, 2013).

Homelessness can be seen as "couch surfing," living on the street, sleeping in their car, living in a homeless shelter, moving from location to location without a set living space, or staying with different friends and family members (Hallett, 2010). Some homeless students find temporary shelter in residence halls or apartment complexes during the school year, but struggle to find housing during school breaks such as summer break, fall break, winter break, and spring break (Hallett, 2012). An adequate place to sleep is not the only factor homeless students face. These students who struggle to find a place to rest their head at night also face the problem of finding food, medicine,

appropriate health services, academic services to succeed, and specific programs to help them navigate the college experience.

Access to a stable job, a stable place to live, financial aid, and access to resources to get out of the position of being homeless are the four biggest areas that homeless students look at when coming to colleges and universities (Somerville, 2013). Homelessness can lead to other issues that sometimes cannot be seen such as depression, exhaustion, weakness, or physical or mental illness because of lack of sleep, stress, or abuse (Dang, 2014).

Most colleges and universities are not prepared to deal with homeless students (Clemmitt, 2013). The higher education system is tailored to accommodate traditional students and are sometimes not all that aware of homeless students on their campus. Although some institutions are trying to create programs and initiatives to reduce dropouts and challenges they may face during their time on campus, there is still work that needs to be done (Field, 2015b).

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences and obstacles homeless college face while working toward their degree. This thesis focused on how homeless students show resiliency and thriving at a Midwestern university. Understanding how successful homeless students overcome barriers and utilize personal, social, or community resources can help institutions provide the necessary services and tools to homeless students. This research has the potential to affect institutions of higher education across the nation and around the world. This research highlights different resources homeless college students utilize throughout their campus and community. This

research could help the communities' homeless students come from by showing middle schools and high schools how to care and support homeless students before they get to college.

Research Questions

1. How do homeless college students describe their experience at a midsized, regional university in the rural Midwest?

2. What difficulties/barriers/challenges to academic achievement confront homeless college students?

3. What factors most influence their ability to complete their program?

4. What personal, social, or community resources facilitates or enable resilience and thriving in homeless college students?

Significance of the Study

This study could help colleges and universities enact new policies, procedures, and programs that would help with recruiting and retaining a larger portion of homeless students. Through understanding the needs of homeless students, the college and universities will be better able to serve the needs of this group of students. Lastly, this study adds to recent research on homeless college students.

Limitations of the Study

There is no clear way for colleges and universities to track students who are experiencing homelessness outside of the FAFSA, so identifying homeless students will be difficult. It will also be difficult to get students experiencing homelessness to feel comfortable enough to talk about their situation and beliefs formed from that in such a

limited amount of time. Another difficulty will be the inability to observe individuals on a day-to-day basis. The timeline of the project is an additional limitation of the study.

Definition of Terms

  Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) – An application that every family seeking financial aid must complete (Lange & Stone, 2001).

  Homeless – For the purpose of this study, a homeless person is defined as a) "an child of youth who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, such those who are: sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship or a similar reason; in shelters and transitional housing programs; staying in cars, parks, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, campgrounds and public spaces or living in motels" (Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, 1987) or b) a student who identifies as a homeless student based on their current living situation.

  Resilience – A positive, adaptive response to adversity (Masten, Best, and Garmezy, 1990). Resilient individuals are able to utilize personal, social, or community resources to avoid or reduce the negative effects that threats have on less resilient individuals (Chaskin, 2008).

  Traditional-aged student – A student who has matriculated to college directly from high school with little or no break in their education (Pryor, Hurtado, Sharkness, and Korn, 2007). For the purpose of this study, this term will be used interchangeably with "traditional student."

  Thriving – Thriving has a similar concept of flourishing (Keyes, 2002, 2007) which is operationalized in the mental health field as mental well-being. Thriving refers to the acquisition of new coping strategies, of new confidence, and enhance relationships.

Thus, thriving is a transformation: "involving a fundamental cognitive shift in response to a challenge" (O' Leary, 1998).

Summary

Due to the lack of awareness of the homeless, the number of college students experiencing homelessness could be much larger than the assumed estimations. Currently, there is little research addressing the experiences of homeless college students and their needs while in college. This lack of research does not speak well for the intended inclusivity in the higher education world. Student affairs professionals strive to support every student, but this topic is one that lacks insight and understanding. This study will highlight the needs of homeless students to provide student affairs professionals with a way to interact and understand the plights and realities they face.

CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

The purpose of this study was to better understand the experiences of homeless

college students. This chapter begins with a review of the literature relating to

homelessness among college students and the risks and barriers that they face on college

campuses. Research in the area of resilience provides the primary theoretical lens for this

study, including a review of the initial resiliency research as well as the shifting

perspective of recent resilience research. This chapter also reviews the research on the

topic of thriving.

Homelessness

Homelessness is a topic that is a big concern within higher education, but

presently there is little to no focus or literature addressing the needs of these homeless

college students. Homelessness can be experienced by anyone for many different reasons

that include unemployment, decreased income, decreased availability of affordable and

stable housing, physical, mental, or emotional incapacities, and violence (Nord, Luloff, &

Jensen, 1995).

Homelessness is not only a lack of residence, but a societal issue that has plagued

our country and the world for decades (Belcher & DeForge, 2012). Because there is no

consensus on a clear definition of homelessness, the information collected can be vague

or boarder than expected (Burt, 1996). Hopper and Bauhohl (1996) wrote, "it seems that

homelessness is at best an odd job word, pressed into service to impose order on a

hodgepodge of social dislocation, extreme poverty, seasonal or itinerant work, and

unconventional ways of life" (p. 3).

There are many different definitions of homelessness that have been used in research over the past 40 years, but one piece of federal legislation controls the most popular definition of homelessness, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987. While this act has set the standard for homeless cases in its 30 years of existence, this act has been looked at on a case-by-case basis because situations vary. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act defines "homeless children and youth" by "individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence" (National Center for Homeless Education, 2012, p. 6). Although the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness is law, many school administrators, faculty, and staff struggle to understand how the rules and regulations work specifically in a case with an individual student. It is not easy for school administrators, faculty, and staff to align laws, procedures, and policies into practice because no two homeless situations are the same. In the early 1980s when public schools were adjusting to the introduction of the McKinney Act, many public schools in Chicago received backlash for non-compliance to Homeless Education Program (Nix-Hodes & Heybach, 2010). While the support for homeless youth in K-12 has gradually gained national attention, McKinney-Vento liaisons are tasked with supporting more students as the rate of homelessness grow. Many schools lack the appropriate number of staff members to meet the needs of the homeless students in their school districts (Ingram, Bridgeland, Reed, & Atwell, 2016). As the topic of homelessness becomes more relevant and discussed in society, the McKinney-Vento Act is and will be updated to better serve the students stuck in these dire circumstances. On May 31, 2016, the United States Department of Education proposed new amendments to the McKinney-Vento Act in accordance with the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015

that would further help homeless students and students in foster care (Miller, 2016). Some amendments include requiring McKinney-Vento liaisons to discuss the possibility of college with homeless youth as well as telling students about their status as an independent student when it comes to federal financial aid for college. High schools will also have to track the progress of this subgroup as they move toward graduation and beyond.

To better understand the gravity of the situation, we must look outside higher education to the total homeless population. In 2010, an annual assessment that found that there were 649,917 homeless individuals in the United States on any given night in January 2010 (Cortes, Leopold, Rothschild, Khadduri & Culhane, 2011, p. i). Again in 2015, the same annual assessment found that about 564,708 were homeless on any given night (Henry, Shivji, de Sousa, Khadduri, & Cohen, 2016). These numbers are still startlingly high indicating that the needs of this population are not being met. There is not an exact number of homeless students enrolled at a college or university, however, it is imperative to understand the needs of this student population. Homeless students seek a degree in higher education for multiple reasons. Some students have dreams and goals that need a degree of some sort. Some students just want to create a better life for themselves to end the cycle of poverty and homelessness (Tundel, 2008; Ashtari, 2014; Frick, 2015).

Another important factor to consider when looking at the topic of homelessness is the individual's experience. Some people might face homelessness for a week or a few months while others will experience homelessness for their entire lives. One any given night in January 2015, approximately 564,708 people were homeless. Most individuals

(69 percent) were staying in a residential program like a shelter for homeless people. The other 31 percent were staying in an unprotected location such as an abandoned building or on the street. Of the 564,708 people that were homeless in January 2015, 36,907 were unaccompanied youth between the ages of 18 and 24 (Henry et al., 2015).

Most of the research on homelessness is not focused toward the realm of higher education and little has been done to link the college experience and homelessness. Master's and doctoral students have started to address homelessness on a college/university campus, but research is still limited (Ambrose, 2016; Geis, 2015; Peterson, 2016). Geis (2015) found that many students hide the fact that they are homeless to avoid being treated differently, which can explain why research on this population is limited.

Youth Homelessness

The literature focused on youth homelessness is one of the most researched subgroups of the overall homeless population because this group has more factors decreasing their chances of surviving on their own. For example, unaccompanied youth and children are still developing mentally, emotionally, psychologically, and physically that could be negatively impacted due to the stress and adversity they are facing. Also, these individuals do not have work experience, have not finished high school, and lack the skills "such as cooking, money management, housekeeping, and job searching necessary to live independently" (Ramos, 2016, p. 1). Per Henry et al. (2016), approximately 36,907 unaccompanied youth and children were experiencing homelessness on any given night in January 2015.

Homelessness during childhood decreases the likeliness of individuals furthering their education. Rouse and Fantuzzo (2009) argued that being homeless can create a smaller opportunity to learn because of not having a stable place to live and continuously changing educational environments. Research shows that there are achievement gaps between homeless and low risk students and those students who do have a stable living environment (Cutuli et al, 2013). Duffield and Lovell (2008) found that students who experience homelessness in K-12 education are held back at a higher rate than those students who do have a stable living condition. When students are held back in middle school their self-confidence to succeed waivers. Rouse and Fantuzzo (2009) found that by creating a stable and welcoming environment for homeless students, schools can create a positive outlook for these students which might be the only environment that this happens.

Over the past 30 years, schools across the nation have seen more and more students experiencing homelessness especially in urban areas of the United States as well as mid-sized to rural communities (Miller, 2009). Many families with children experiencing homelessness increased dramatically in the 1980s and 1990s and then spiked again during the Great Recession during the first 10 years of the 21st century (Masten, Fiat, Labella, & Strack, 2015). After seeing the rising numbers of homeless youth, the federal government responded with the McKinney-Vento Homeless Act, originally passed in 1987, which stated that homeless students were entitled to free education. This Act removed any residency requirement asked of homeless students. It also created a position in each state for a fulltime employee to allocate money and services for homeless students (Markward & Biros, 2001). The Act was created to

address the academic challenges of homeless students, guaranteed homeless students the right to enroll in school immediately regardless of their situation, attend the school of their choice if it is feasible, and receive transportation to and from school and educational events (Masten et al., 2015). Additionally, the law required state and local agencies to college the number of homeless children and youth enrolled in school. The numbers were analyzed by the National Center for Homeless Education, which runs the United States Department of Education's assistance and information center for its Education of Homeless Children and Youth Program. The Act was first amended in 1990 to add that no barriers could be added to prevent a homeless child from enrolling in school. Also, state educational departments were allowed to start awarding grants to start after school programs, tutoring, and both mental and physical health programs to better serve the students (Markward & Biros, 2001). The Act was amended again in 1994 to extend services to homeless students who attended faith-affiliated schools (Markward & Biros, 2001). The Act was once again restructured and reauthorized under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (Samuels, Shinn, & Buckner, 2010).

Collegiate Homelessness

The magnitude of collegiate homelessness tends to be subdued because homeless youth and families tend to have the main focus in the media (Roman, 2016; Stewart, 2016). The literature available on the topic of collegiate homelessness is limited. Some research has been focused on ethnically diverse first generation college students and low income students (Kezar, Walpole, & Perna, 2014). Specific research that focuses on homeless student's experiences during their college years is starting to become researched more (Ambrose, 2016; Betters, 2012; Geis, 2015; Goldrick-Rab, Broton, &

Eisenberg, 2015). Ambrose (2016) found that all her participants viewed college as an immediate escape along with providing long-term solutions in terms of a job, a stable place to stay, and income. Geis (2015) found homeless college students were determinated to continue their college education hoping to one day having a better life. Betters (2012) found that stress played a huge role in the hindrance of continuing in college for a homeless college student. Betters participant worried about when they would eat their next meal, where they family would stay, and if the cycle of homelessness would ever end. The Wisconsin HOPE Lab found that students who experienced homelessness tended to also experience food insecurity meaning that their eating patterns were disrupted and their food intake was reduced (Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Eisenberg, 2015). According to the Wisconsin HOPE Lab survey of 4,312 community college students across the nation, 13 percent of the students indicated they dealt with homelessness in one form of another (Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Eisenberg, 2015).

One main reason colleges have been slow to help the homeless population on their campuses is the lack of data available identifying homeless college students. Students may self-disclose and classify themselves as an independent on the FAFSA, but there are still some students that do not disclose that information for reasons such as shame, guilt, or embarrassment (Summer, 2003; National Center for Homeless Education, 2015). For example, Jenn Hecker, the organizing director of the National Student Campaign Against Hunger and Homelessness, said "each year at our national conference, homeless students come forward to share their stories" and "what often comes through is shame. Most feel as though they should be able to cover their costs"

(Bader, 2004, p. 1). There is no way to track the students as they make their way through college or if they make it to graduation. Specific research into this population is limited.

The main challenge that homeless college students face is that they lack a safe, secure, and stable place to live (National Center for Homeless Education, 2012). For more than 50 years, Abraham Maslow's Theory of Human Motivation (1943) has been used as a theoretical lens to study human behavior. Maslow's hierarchy of needs has a foundation of the most basic human needs such as air, water, and food followed by safety, belonging, and self-esteem. Without getting our most basic needs met, we cannot achieve a higher level of thinking or learning. Maslow stated that "if all the needs are unsatisfied, and the organism is then dominated by the physiological needs, all other needs may become simply non-existent or be pushed into the background," (Maslow, 1943, p. 3) which proves that if we do not have stability, we cannot move forward. For example, if homeless college students cannot find a stable place to sleep at night or figure out where they are going to get their next meal from, they will not be able to focus in class or on course work which is the purpose of higher education. Also, if a homeless student is working to pay for food, bills, or rent, they might be more focused on work as opposed to their course work.

Resilience Theory

When looking at the topic of collegiate homelessness, it is important to acknowledge the determination and resilience these students display. Resilience is considered a strength or asset, a highly desirable quality, and a process that is likely to have a positive impact on an individual's life (Bartley, Schoon, & Blane, 2010). While

resilience is considered to be a positive asset, few studies have been done on the resilience of homeless students (Masten et al., 1997).

In the past 50 years, the concept of resilience has gathered attention and become well-known in the fields of psychiatry and psychology (Rutter, 1987). Resilience has been studied in many different situations including wartime, family violence, poverty, natural disasters, and other situations with high stressors and risk factors (Garmezy, 1985; Luthar & Zigler, 1991; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Wright & Masten, 1997). The results from these studies conclude that show that children display competence or better psychosocial functioning during/following these adverse experiences (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). The two most common predictors of resilience in children and adolescents seem to be bonds with adults outside the family and good intellectual functioning.

There have been many different definitions of resilience throughout the years that look at numerous different factors and aspects of an individual such as an individual's unique strengths, capacities, vulnerabilities, and goodness of fit with the demand and opportunities of the environment (Felsman, 1989). Deardon views resilient individuals as those who show a "positive adaptation to significant risk," (Dearden, 2004, p. 187). Gilligan (2001) stated that a resilient child is one who does better than they should, keeping in mind what has happened to them. For example, Khadijah Williams was homeless for most of her life, but despite the obstacles she has faced, she attended Harvard University (Amber, 2010). Friedland (2005) sees resilience as a hardness or toughness along with flexibility and elasticity. Friedland's suggestion that resilience is a multi-dimensional term with characteristics at the opposite ends of the spectrum shows us

that there can be many different definitions of the term resilient that feature adaptive and innovative responses to a threat, challenge, or type of adversity (Cassidy, 2015). According to Masten and Coatsworth (1998), we must see that "there has been a significant threat to the individual" or have had "exposure to severe adversity or trauma," (p. 205).

While many researchers would agree that the "meaning" of resilience is appreciated, there is currently not a consensus on the conceptual or operational definition of resilience. Resilience researchers strive to stress that the term resilient does not refer to a personality or characteristic trait or an attribute of that individual, instead it is a two-dimensional developmental construct that "implies exposure to adversity and the manifestation of positive adjustment outcomes" (Pianta & Walsh, 1998, p. 857). Resilience is a process of positive adaptation despite being faced with barriers of adversity (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). Resilient individuals utilize personal, social, or community resources to lessen the negative effects that threaten less-adaptive individuals (Chaskin, 2008).

Understanding why contact to adversity does not result in such negative experiences for individuals is a major piece of the resiliency theory (Resnick, 2000). Homeless college students may be facing these negative experiences while obtaining their degree or may have faced negative experiences before they entered college. For example, Bader (2004) spoke with Aesha, a 20-year-old homeless college student, who became homeless after her child's father became physically abusive. After leaving home, Aesha was forced to sleep at an emergency assistance unit before she was sent to a hotel before she was ultimately moved to a family shelter.

The literature on resiliency also looks at the history of how schools all across the nation have attempted to identify and support "at-risk" individuals in our schools. The term "at-risk" carries a negative connotation as schools were focused on identifying students as problems that needed to be fixed which meant that the students themselves were the problems rather than the deficit itself (Bernard, 1991). This procedure of identifying individuals as "at-risk" focuses on the potential of failure even though these individuals have not demonstrated any failures (Brown, D-Emidio-Caston, & Bernard, 2001). It is important to identify the risks and understand the risks that the individuals face in order to know how to respond because the overarching theme of resiliency is how people can adapt and overcome the risks to achieve success academically, emotionally, and physically (Rutter, 1987).

Wang et al. (1994) conclude that academic resilience as an increased likeliness of academic success despite adversities. Alva (1991) described resilient students as individuals who stay motivated even when faced with stressful events and in situations that place them at risk of poor performance. This study focuses on resilience in terms of achieving success in an educational setting despite facing the challenges of being a homeless college student.

Thriving

After we look at the resilience that homeless students come away with after facing adversities, we can also see another process that is an unlikely outcome for homeless students: thriving. Like resilience, researches have not reached a consensus on the conceptual or operational definition of thriving.

The concept of thriving came out of research conducted by Corey Keyes (2002) that focused on the functioning and feelings of mental health in a positive light that changed the way psychologists and researchers looked at adaptive functioning and mental wellness as a whole. Keyes (2007) found that languishing was on the negative end of the spectrum, resilience fell in the middle, and thriving could be viewed at the positive end. Individuals who experienced languishing viewed themselves and their lives as "hollow," "a shell," and "a void" (O' Leary, 1998, p. 210). Resilient individuals were those that had a positive and adaptive response to adversity (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). Individuals who thrived after being in a harsh situation would "go beyond the original level of psychosocial functioning" (O'Leary, 1998, p. 429).

Laurie Schreiner developed the Thriving Construct (2010) after three years of research on a national scale to better understand the concept of thriving in college students based on Keyes' earlier research. Prior to Schreiner's research, most research was focused primarily on smaller children or older adults. Schreiner developed the Thriving Quotient to measure the "changeable psychological qualities in students that affect their ability to optimize their college experience" (Schreiner, 2010, p. 2). By studying students from a wide variety of backgrounds for such a long period of time, Schreiner and her team were able to study the experience of thriving as students that have "have an enthusiasm for life, are productively engaged with others and society, and are resilient in the face of personal challenges" (Schreiner, 2010, p. 4). Thriving requires individuals to harness new coping skills, find self-confidence, and build a higher level of interpersonal relationships. Because of this, thriving is viewed as a transformation process from a large stressor (O'Leary, 1998).

Conclusion

Though the literature discussed in this chapter is limited and sometimes disagreed upon, the research shows that even though homeless students do face additional obstacles like finding a place to sleep at night, these students can rise above the adversity and succeed academically. This study is important because it can identify the characteristics of resilience and thriving in homeless college students' and how we can foster these characteristics in a collegiate environment. Chapter 3 will focus on the methods to conduct this study.

CHAPTER 3

Methods

As a qualitative, phenomenological study, the goal was to conduct the study and obtain the data needed to begin gathering the insight into the experiences and obstacles of homeless college students and how they show resilience and thrive in a college setting.

Design of Study, Data Collection, and Analysis

A qualitative approach to this study allowed each participant to share their stories and detail the successes and challenges they have faced. The researcher conducted interviews with each participant to gain sociological information as well as gain insight in how they cope with adversity and overcome obstacles to stay in college. Qualitative research allows researchers to gather an in-depth of an individual's experiences and behaviors associated with them (Creswell, 2007). Limited data exists on the exact number of students experiencing homelessness in college, but the focus of this study will be on the individual experiences at a public, mid-sized, comprehensive university in the Midwest. By using Creswell's (2007) definition of phenomenological research, the researched focused on the individual's experiences in order to connect them. According to Creswell (2007), a phenomenological study "describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (p. 57). By studying students experiencing collegiate homelessness, the findings will explain the qualities and characteristics that make this population have positive outcomes in the face of adversity. The phenomenon of homelessness is not a new topic in United States history, but the subpopulation of colligate homeless is one that is gaining attention.

Each participant met with the researcher for a 45-minute interview pertaining to their experiences as a homeless college student and how they built resilience in the face of adversity and thrived in a collegiate environment. In preparation for the interview, guiding questions surrounding the topic was created, but participants had freedom to elaborate on any topic they saw as important. The established research questions can be found in Appendix A.

Before starting the interview, the researcher had the participants sign the consent form and return it. When we met for the interview, the researcher explained the purpose of the study again and told the participants why this topic was important to me as a former homeless college student. The researcher reminded the participants about the measures taken both to preserve confidentiality and analyze the data. Participants were also reminded that interviews would be audio recorded, transcribed, and then sent to them to check the accuracy. Participants were asked to select a pseudonym for the study which were utilized within the transcription and final published study. Participants were also informed that they could skip questions or halt participation in the study at any time.

During the interviews, the researcher took field notes in a journal to refer to during the coding process. By using a journal, the researcher wrote small details and noted specific times during the interviews where participants said statements or words that were important to the research. This also allowed the researched to take notes about each participant such as emotions, body language, and demeanor. The researcher was also to able to write down any ideas for future research or recommendations for faculty and student affairs professionals as well as homeless college students. After asking all the questions, the researcher asked each participant if they needed to add any information to

any question asked. The researcher listened to the interview all the way through one time and then transcribed the interviews through a process of close listening and typing. The researched read through the interviews multiple times to be analyzed and coded (Saldaña, 2009). Coding is just one way to analyze qualitative data, however, this will be the most effective way to find the most meaningful information and themes throughout each interview. Coding in a qualitative study is looking at "most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 3). During the First Cycle coding process, the portions that will be examined can range from one word to a full paragraph of the interview transcripts. After identifying all clusters of words or statements, these clusters were put into themes. Following the First Cycle coding process, the same portions of the transcripts were looked at again as well as longer passages of texts and entire pages of text. Identifying meaningful and in-depth quotes from the interviews was crucial to support the four research questions. The researcher selected quotes for Chapter Four with the least number of identifiers as possible, but when there was a quote with specific people or places, they were put in brackets and given simple names.

Once all coding was completed, the thesis advisor and myself triangulated the findings which referred to the use of numerous methods to develop a better understanding of the phenomena in a qualitative study (Patton, 1999). Method triangulation allowed us to use interviews, observation, and field notes to explore the topic of homeless college students on a deeper level. In addition to coding, the researcher kept a journal on the experience and the emotions they left with after interviewing each participant. The

researcher used a process called bracketing which "allows one to self-consciously and regularly check to see where one is imposing meanings on the data and re-look to see what other meanings might appear" (Fischer, 2009, p. 584). This process gave her the opportunity to own her own experience without putting her bias and experiences into my study. The researcher worked with her thesis advisor as well as her counselor to reflect on her personal experience and the emotions she left with after interviewing a participant.

Following the transcription of the data, interview files were set to be preserved for six months in accordance with the institution's IRB policy. Once this point is reached, interviews will be deleted by the researcher. At no point in-between will the audio recordings be listened to by anyone.

Participants

For the present study, a sample contained of four undergraduate homeless college students selected from a public, mid-sized, comprehensive university in the Midwest. There were originally five participants, but one participant dropped out of the study because she was not ready to talk about her experiences. In an effort to reach as many students as possible snowball or chain referral sampling was used. Snowball sampling gains participants "through referrals made among people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest" (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 141). Once students were contacted and agreed to participate in the study, the participants printed off the consent form (Appendix B), signed it, and returned it to the researcher prior to the interview. The participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire (Appendix A) before the interview started.

April. A 21-year-old white female majoring in Recreation Administration. She is a senior originally from Illinois. She became homeless at 15 while in high school when her mother kicked her out of the house while high on drugs and alcohol. April lived with friends for a while, but ultimately stayed with her grandma and still relies on her for help.

Charles. A 22-year-old white male majoring in Sociology. He is a senior originally from Indiana. He became homeless at 16 while in high school when his mother kicked him out of the house after he tried to break up a domestic dispute between his mother and her boyfriend. Charles lived in his car for the remainder of high school.

Georgia. A 21-year-old white female majoring in Business Management. She is a senior originally from Indiana. She became homeless at 15 when her mom and dad kicked her out of the house after a disagreement. Georgia stayed with different friends and her grandparents throughout high school.

Journey. A 21-year-old African American female majoring in Mathematics. She is a junior originally from Illinois. She became homeless at 17 when she left the house because she did not follow the Islam religion like her mom and dad. She lived on her own before going to Prairie State College after high school.

Research Site

The research study will be conducted at a public, mid-sized, comprehensive university in the Midwest. At the time of the study, the institution reported a student body of 7,415 students. The university has a 1:14 faculty-student ratio, with a graduation rate of 57 percent. Of the 7,415 students during the fall 2016 semester, 49 students identified as homeless according to the information reported by the FAFSA at the mid-sized institution. Of those 49 students, 33 identify as Black or African American, nine identify

as White, three identify as Hispanic, three identify as having multiple ethnicities, and one identifies as American Indian or Alaskan Native. Of the 49 students who identified as homeless, 55 percent are female and 45 percent are male (M. Starwalt, personal communication, March 22, 2017).

Of the 7,415 students, 2,701 were considered first-generation students. First-generation students are students whose parents did not go to college. During the 2014-2015 academic year, 3,202 students received a Pell Grant which is a federally funded grant based on need that is awarded by the U.S. Department of Education.

The interviews took place in a meeting room in the public community library. Each interview was voice recorded.

Role of the Researcher

A critical piece of the phenomenological research process is to share the researcher's role in the research. According to Moustakas (1994), the researcher explores his or her own experiences, contexts, and situations that could have affected their experiences in the research. This is important as a qualitative researcher that has had firsthand experience because my values and experiences will highly ingrained in the research.

The inspiration for this research came after years of being a homeless student in high school and well into my junior year of college. After dealing with family issues and one final blow up with my father, I left my home as a sophomore in high school. At first I stayed on the couches of friends and ultimately ended up spinning out of control before going to live with my grandparents and then my aunt. I had no contact with my father for three years. We rekindled our relationship during my freshman year of college, but there

was never any talk of me moving back home on breaks from school. I knew moving back in with family members was not an option so I moved in with my boyfriend at the time. Every summer after that I applied for on-campus jobs including being an orientation leader one summer and a conference assistant the next. Throughout my journey as a homeless college student, I realized that I wanted to help any other homeless students I could even if that meant just lending a helping hand or getting them in touch with the correct resources. When I entered the College Student Affairs master's program, I knew I wanted to focus on homeless college students, but as I researched the topic I realized that there is limited research on the topic. Youth homelessness was the closes related topic that had extensive research done. After having many conversations with different students, faculty, and staff members I realized that my story of homelessness was one of the first that they had heard. By sharing my story, I was able to spread awareness for and knowledge about this voiceless group on college campus all across the country. In an effort to acknowledge my values, assumptions, and biases, I will disclose my role as a former homeless college student to participants. As I collect my data and interpret the data, I will be sure to not make assumptions or illicit any of my experiences or feelings onto these participants. I will ask participants to elaborate or explain a situation further when a topic of meaning is unclear.

Summary

This chapter explains the methodological choices for this research. While these choices may contain limitations, I will reduce as many biases and barriers as possible to obtain with accurate and trustworthy data. In Chapter 4, the findings from my research will be discussed using the coding methods presented in this chapter.

CHAPTER IV

Results

This purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the experiences and obstacles homeless college students face while they are in college working toward their degree. Data was obtained through gathering participant narratives in face-to-face interviews that lasted anywhere between 60 to 90 minutes. Although each participant had a different story to tell about their experience and struggles they have faced, there were similarities allowing for several themes to the answer the questions that guided my study.

Following the transcription and analysis of these narratives, the researcher was able to identify many themes, which are organized by research question. While multiple themes occurred throughout the research questions, friendship was a reoccurring theme throughout.

Research Question 1: How do homeless college students describe their experience at a mid-sized, regional university in the rural Midwest?

Participants were asked a series of questions to discuss their experiences as a homeless college student. Specifically, participants were encouraged to explore and share their decision to go to their institution, what their experiences have been like this far, and how that compared to what they thought their experience would be like. Throughout their discussion, all four participants stated that they had a positive experience at this mid-sized, regional university in the Midwest despite facing challenges throughout their college career.

There were three themes that emerged from those questions: caring people at the university, challenging academic programs, and strong friendships.

Caring people at the university. Participants discussed the reasons why they decided to enroll in this institution over other institutions. Charles visited the campus multiple times and met people that left "long lasting impressions" on him. He mentioned that he met a Sociology professor on his first visit to campus that would later become one of his mentors. He also mentioned meeting different faculty and a staff member that made him feel at home. He shared:

> It's actually been awesome. I don't know if I'm just looking at things positively or what, but the good always outweighs the bad especially at [the university.] I liked it because it was small and has a tight knit community. Everybody I talked to was like super nice. They're all so genuine. Just everybody. Faculty, students, BSW's.

And Georgia shared:

> The people. Hands down. There are some great people on this campus. Students, professors, BSW's. I don't think I would've made it through these four years without [the university.] The people here are real.

Georgia also shared how the university and the town it is located in had a small-town feel that she liked. The university also had clubs she liked and the campus had a vibe that she liked. Georgia specifically mentions that she liked that nobody knew her on campus and that this was her fresh start. She said:

> [The university] is heaven to me. I came here and I had a fresh start and it felt like home. I am home. I can breathe here. I can thrive here. No one holds me back or

tells me I can't do something. People say "the world is your oyster." Well, [the university] is my oyster.

Challenging academic programs. Prompted to describe their experiences at the university so far, all the participants stated that their academic program was a successful part of their college experience because it brought them happiness. Participants were asked about their successes academically and what were their proudest accomplishments so far that were academic related. When participants were asked about academics, three of the participants indicated that they had changed their major and were happy they did. April stated:

> I went into education and I was almost done and I decided I don't want to do this and I don't want to be a teacher. I finally changed to recreation administration and I've just been so happy ever since. It adds a year on to my schooling, but I don't care. I've been so happy and I think that's a big accomplishment. There were so many problems and I was just so upset that I didn't know what I was doing and my grades were so bad. Now I've found something that I love and I know that I want to do.

Journey shared that she came to the university as a Biology major with a mathematics minor, but soon found her passion was for mathematics when she became a math tutor through the mathematics department. She was taking only required to take Calculus I as a Biology major, but she was in a Calculus III course and a Linear Algebra course. She said:

So, I was like, you know what? You need to be a math major. So, that's what I

did. I changed my major to math. I still really like biology so I thought just flip

flop them and do a math major with a bio minor.

Georgia came to the university as a business major and struggled in the introductory

courses. She met with her advisor and they decided that business was too broad for her.

She changed her major to focus on business management. She ended up becoming a tutor

for the department.

Strong friendships. All the participants discussed how friendships played a large

role in their experience. Three of the participants met their best friends while at the

university while Journey came to the institution because her best friend was already here.

April described meeting her best friend as her "best moment" at the university. They

became friends while April was still an Education major when they were in a dance class

together. April shared that they ended up becoming roommates and her and her family

were understanding of her homelessness.

Georgia also said that one of her best experiences was finding great friends that

she could confide in and lean on when times were tough. She mentioned that she became

roommates with three women that lived in her residence hall for the remaining three

years at the university.

Charles, who stated that he was bullied during high school, shared that he met his best

friend through the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) program. He stated:

I found a lifelong friend. It was actually through ROTC which is kind of like a

fraternity I guess in terms of community. Everybody cares for each other. I met

this guy and he's actually my roommate now. His name is [ROTC friend] and we

just hit it off in the beginning. Similar likes and all that. He helped me through a bunch of stuff and I helped him. We made future plans and all that fun stuff. He's helped me through college quite a bit.

Research Question 2: What difficulties/barriers/challenges to academic achievement confront homeless college students?

The participants in this study were asked to share not only the successes of their college experience, but the challenges as well. In discussing their experiences, some commonalities in their responses occurred. These themes were: university break housing, significant life events, and working multiple jobs.

University break housing. Charles, who came into the university as a traditional-age student, stayed in one of the residence halls on campus during his freshman and sophomore years. He shared that he never told anyone he was homeless because he did not want to put his problems on other people. He stated:

Over breaks I would live in my car. Nobody knew which was awesome. I went to truck stops for showers. I still went out and did things. I would eat fast food all the time which was very financially burdensome. I got through it and I didn't feel like somebody's extra baggage. I didn't feel like a burden to anyone.

Georgia also shared that she struggled to find somewhere to stay during breaks. She did not disclose that she was homeless to anyone until the second semester of her freshman year which meant she was on her own for fall and winter break. She said:

I ended up staying at [local homeless shelter] for fall break and the beginning of Christmas break. I told papa I was working until he came and got me. I slept on the bench outside of [residence hall] the night before he came to get me. It was so

f------ cold. He picked me up and asked why I was so cold. I had to pretend like I

wasn't, but deep down I thought I was cry and throw up because my feet were so

cold.

Georgia went on an alternative Spring Break trip with the local church to have

somewhere to stay during Spring semester of her freshman year and she got a job on-

campus that provided housing during the summer before her sophomore year.

     Significant life events. On top of being homeless, all four participants dealt with

a major event that set them back personally and academically. Journey was a sophomore

when she found our she was pregnant by her ex-boyfriend. She was "tore up" because she

was starting to make amends with her parents. Journey's family did not accept that she

was pregnant out of wedlock and refused to speak to her. She was also suffering from

depression and was taking medication for the depression. She stated:

> That really took a drain on me because I had just got back into my home life and I
>
> didn't do it [get pregnant] on purpose. Obviously, I wanted to have kids
>
> eventually, but not right now. I didn't want to do adoption because I'm too selfish
>
> for that. I can't hold my child and then give him away. And I couldn't do abortion
>
> because I feel like that's killing a life and that's not fair. He didn't ask to be here
>
> so why is he going to suffer because of my decisions.

Ultimately, Journey decided to keep the baby boy and stay in school. Her mother and

siblings spoke to her after months of silence while Journey and her father are still not

speaking.

     Charles was driving to a hospital 45-minutes away to visit his grandmother who

was having heart problems. He would often miss class so that we could stay in the

hospital with his grandmother or he would fall asleep during class. Charles would apologize to the professors, but never self-disclosed.

April had just transitioned into the Recreation Administration program and was getting acclimated to the new major during her junior year when her brother died. She said she was in "a bad spot emotionally" and thought about dropping out of school to cope. Ultimately, she confided in a professor in the department and was able to take time away and complete the homework later on.

Georgia was dealing with food insecurity for a year and a half during her sophomore and junior years. She relied heavily on food pantries at local churches, but more often than not, struggled to find food for her next meal. She shared:

> I went [to a food pantry] every single month for a year and a half. Probably more than that. I didn't have food sometimes. More often than not. Those packets of tuna and crackers were meals. Not an "Oh, I'm kind of hungry so I'm going to have a snack" kind of thing. An actual "I'm so hungry I have a headache and I might pass out" kind of meal.

Georgia had trouble focusing during her classes and during her tutoring sessions. She finally got roommates to come with her to get food from the pantries. She also got more jobs so that she could afford food.

Working multiple jobs. Each participant shared that they had two jobs to help pay for food, rent, bills, and other living expenses. Two participants had up to four jobs at some point in their college career. Each participant shared that financial aid helped pay for school and sometimes they would get a refund check, but it was never enough to live off.

Charles struggled with the shame and guilt of being homeless so much so that he refused to go to local food pantries for food. Instead, Charles worked multiple jobs including construction jobs to earn money. He kept tools in his trunk and built sheds or remodeled houses. He shared that sleep was tough to come by, but he saw "how homelessness is labeled and stigmatized and didn't want all that" so he never told his professors.

Georgia felt a need "to blend in with the girls on my floor who still got allowances from their parents" so she worked four part-time jobs starting her freshman year. She did not tell anyone she had so many jobs because she was ashamed. She said she "had to act like I had money and since money doesn't grow on trees, I had to work my ass off."

April also shared her need to blend in, but that slowly wore off and just worried about paying for the essentials. She focused on working out and staying away from the party scene. She stated:

> It's hard to go to work and go to school. Right now, I'm a bartender and its late hours and then waking up early to go to school, but I've finally gotten used to it now. It's a nice feeling to know that I can work that hard and go to school and to be able to manage everything. Like, it was hard at first, but I found a way to manage it.

Research Question #3: What factors influence their ability to complete their program most?

Participants were asked to share what or who has influenced their ability to complete their academic program the most. All participants were in different

undergraduate programs, meaning they came from different perspectives. Although they come from different viewpoints, there were commonalities in their responses regarding the factors that influenced them to complete their academic program. These themes include: professors, friends, and organizations/work.

Professors. Participants discussed how professors pushed them to complete their coursework and ultimately pushed them to complete their academic programs. Charles mentioned that two of his professors in the Sociology department helped him through different challenges in his life that were having a negative effect on his academics. The professors were there to help with homework assignments, but were also were available as a support system to talk about personal matters. He stated:

Everybody genuinely cares. Specifically [Sociology professor] and [another Sociology professor]. She's great. They both helped me personally, professionally, and academically. If I needed help on an assignment, boom. They were there. If I just needed to talk to somebody… It didn't matter if it was four in the morning. If I was having a breakdown or lose it, [Sociology professor] was there.

April, who became close with one of her Education professors after her brother died, talked about her professor taking the time to ask how she was going and making sure she was doing okay. He was understanding of the situation and gave her an extension on her assignments. He also excused her from class to grieve and attend the funeral. Georgia, who was on track to be in the top five percent of her graduating class, had three professors in the Business Management department that knew she was homeless and made sure she was doing well in her courses throughout her four years. They also asked

her if she needed anything such as course materials, personal belongings, or resources to help her stay in their classes and the department.

Friends. Journey shared that her best friend was one of the main reasons for coming to school at this mid-sized Midwestern institution. She mentioned that is was hard for her to get involved with different organizations because she did not know other students besides her best friend and was nervous to go places without her. Journey also mentioned that members of her sorority, Sigma Gamma Rho, encouraged her to work toward her dream of becoming a mathematics professor. Georgia shared how she struggled to make friends during her freshman year in college because most of the women in her residence hall were drinking and going to parties which she did not do. She ended up sharing her homeless story with her roommate and two women on their floor. All three women were accepting and kept her secret. She stated:

> I have awesome friends who push me every single day. They are badasses in their own way, like, in their program and at work. They don't let me slack off or give up. They have had and do have my back on a daily basis. I seriously don't know what I would do without them.

April shared that she lost friends after she removed alcohol and going to parties from her life. She spends most of her time with her boyfriend that she has dated for two years. She shared that he recognized her for her dedication and hard work academically which she appreciated because "sometimes that's just nice to hear because obviously, people don't know that I'm homeless." April was also influenced to succeed academically by her grandmother who said that she was proud of April for going to college.

Organizations/work. Charles, who was a member of the ROTC program all four years of his undergraduate career, stated that this program put extra responsibilities and expectations on him to prepare him for a successful military career. The ROTC commanders emphasized that they were students first and encouraged them to complete all their course requirements before the organization or outside work.

Georgia shared that she had two part-time jobs as a student work in one of the dining halls on campus and as a bartender at a local bar and grill. She stated that she worked to stay busy and make money to pay for school and living expenses. She said she used both of these part-time jobs to "motivate me to get my degree in the way that I don't want to be making minimum wage forever."

Research Question #4: What personal, social, or community resources facilitates or enable resilience and thriving in homeless college students?

Participants were asked multiple questions to discover what personal, social, and community resources they used to help them while they were homeless. The participants only mentioned personal and community resources in their responses to the interview questions.

Personal. Each participant discussed the importance of having close friends to share their struggles and story of homelessness with. Journey had her best friend here already and met more friends through her sorority. Journey also credits her mom as a personal resource. She states:

Also, my mom because our relationship has not been the best. There have been times where we argue and we won't talk for a couple months. We'll go back and

forth. Even still she would make sure I was continuing my education. No matter

what. I had to get my education.

Georgia met three of her best friends while at the university. She also shared that they

would help her buy groceries, take her to the local food bank, and help her pay for bills

when she did not have enough money. April mentions the important of her "best friend

because she's been there with me through everything and she's definitely motivated me

to keep going." Charles met his best friend and roommate at the university and has gained

many friends through his time in the ROTC program.

The participants were asked to describe themselves in three words. Although not

all responses were the same, two words were mentioned by different participants. The

words hardworking and determined were used by April, Georgia, and Journey. Georgia

described herself as determined and hardworking while April used the word hardworking

and Journey said she was determined.

Community. Participants discussed multiple types of resources from the

community, both from the university and in the city where the university is located. April

talked about her positive experience with not only the Financial Aid office at the

university, but one employee who went above and beyond to make sure she had enough

money to not only get through the day, but also get through the entire year. She stated:

She was phenomenal. There was a time when I didn't have a job and I didn't have

food and I didn't know what to do because I had no idea. She was like there is this

assistance program or she somehow got me money and I just broke down. I was

like thank you so much because I did not know what to do. I was living by myself

at the time and I didn't have a roommate. She definitely helped me a ton by

getting as much financial aid as possible. My refund check helps me so much with

bills and getting food.

Charles also mentioned how helpful the Financial Aid office was when he needed help

filling out the FAFSA. He mentioned that it was nice to have someone explain the

paperwork, definitions, and the different types of aid available to him. He shared:

That (the FAFSA) has helped tremendously. I couldn't make it on my own. I'm

an independent student, but gosh that's a lot of fees to pay. A lot of stuff to pay on

your own.

Charles and Georgia both mentioned using second-hand stores or churches to get clothing

for every day wear and for interviews or presentations. Georgia went to a local church

rather than a second-hand store because she could not afford to spend money on clothes.

Charles stated:

I would like to give a shout out to Goodwill because they help. A lot! Especially

if you have a job interview and you don't have slacks. Oh goodness! They helped

me not look like an idiot. There are just some really good people there.

Georgia and Journey both mentioned using some form of assistance to get food. Georgia

went to on-campus and community food banks to get food over a two-year span. She

stated that on several occasions she asked her roommate to come with her to get food so

that she would have enough to make it through the month. Journey applied for an Illinois

Link Card, a card that can be used for food and cash assistance, when she came to the

university and has used it for groceries ever since then.

Georgia was the only participant that mentioned going to the counseling center at the

university. She said she had a counselor who helped her by providing her with grounding

techniques, tips on how to combat irrational thoughts, and who allowed her to show her emotions in counseling appointments.

Journey talked about how her on-campus apartment was beneficial because it allowed her to stay over university breaks whereas the on-campus residence hall closed down for university breaks. She said:

> It (on-campus apartments) saved me because I was literally bouncing from house to house to house because I didn't have a home and I hated that. I was embarrassed, but I had to do what I needed to do.

Summary

This chapter discussed the results of in-depth interviews with four participants about their experiences as a homeless college student. Each participant had different experiences, but there were common themes throughout their journeys. The results found in this chapter will be discussed further in the discussion section in Chapter V.

Chapter V

Discussion

This study was designed to discover the experiences and obstacles homeless college students face while working toward their degree. The researcher examined how homeless college students describes their experience, how they overcome challenges in the way of their academic achievement, and how they were able to build resilience and thrive.

Four research questions guided this study: how do homeless college students describe their experience at a midsized, regional university in the rural Midwest; what difficulties/barriers/challenges to academic achievement confront homeless college students; what factors most influence their ability to complete their program; and what personal, social, or community resources facilitates or enable resilience and thriving in homeless college students? This chapter also provides recommendations for homeless college students and student affairs professionals working with this population of students. This chapter will also provide suggestions for future research.

Due to a lack of literature, there was limited research to make connections to the overarching theme of the challenges facing homeless college student. There is a lack of homeless college student tracking (Berg-Cross & Green, 2009) and a reluctance among homeless students to self-disclose that leaves a gap in the research (Paden, 2012). More and more homeless college students are showing up at colleges and universities across America (Field, 2015a), yet there is perception that these students are "the invisible problem" (Dillon, 2009, p. 16) or that they are "hidden in plain sight (Ingram et al., 2016, p. 1). The research that has been discovered shows that homeless students face many

challenges in higher education including lower retention and graduation rates (Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Eisenberg, 2015; Crutchfield, 2012).

While the research is limited around the topic of homeless college students, it is important to shed light on the research that has been conducted around the theoretical frameworks that are resilience and thriving. Studies and articles about resiliency in homeless students are on the rise (Gupton, 2015; Kidd and Davidson, 2007; Masten et al., 2015). New studies show that despite being at-risk academically, students are finding ways to adapt and persist in higher education. Lauralee Summer's autobiography *Learning Joy from Dogs without Collars* (2003) highlighted her experience as the "homeless to Harvard" success story that shed light on her resilience when she was turned away by 40 professors in various departments for wanting to create her own course of study. Her perseverance and passion eventually got her an advisor in the Literature Department.

Laurie Schreiner's creation of the Thriving Quotient (2010) shed light on a student's "ability to optimize their college experience" despite challenges they face (pg. 2). Schreiner studied successful students and their ability to thrive as opposed to surviving or just getting through a situation. Homeless students have the drive to do well at an institution of higher education because they have the four aspects of academic determination: 1) investment of effort, 2) self-regulation, 3) environmental mastery, and 4) goal-directed thinking (Schreiner, 2010). All of participants in this study showed spoke of academic determination in their interview.

The experiences of homeless college students at a midsized, regional university. The results of this study revealed three themes: caring people at the

university, challenging academic programs, and strong friendships. All of the participants in this research reported coming to the university because of someone they met before or while they were on the campus visiting whether that be an admissions counselor, professor, or building service worker who said hello to them. The participants spoke about simple conversations that made them feel welcomed and special. One participant remembered talking with a professor during his first campus visit and now considers this professor a mentor. Georgia remembered meeting two high school teachers who were alum of the university and went on an on-campus visit because the teachers spoke so highly of the school. She credits part of the reason of choosing the university to those two teachers.

All the participants of this study shared stories of how challenging their academic programs were. Although three of the participants changed their majors at least once, they all found contentment once they found the right major for them. These three participants said that they were happier despite the fact that by changing their majors, they would spend an extra year or two at the university. The participants each found mentors within their respective programs that allowed them to self-disclose their homeless identity which led to closer relationships and stronger bonds. Two of the participants give acknowledgement to their mentors for leading them to master's programs that will help them continue their education. In a prior study, Laurie Schreiner (2010) found that students grow intellectually, interpersonally, and emotionally when professors work closely with students both inside and outside the classroom. Charles and Georgia both mention becoming more involved in class discussions when they became closer with their professors.

The theme of friendship was sewn throughout the interviews as one of the most helpful and necessary resources to make it through their college experience. Strong friendships were important to the participants because it gave them one or more specific people to share their homeless story with as well as help them find resources, share good and bad times with, and allow them to be honest about how they were honestly feeling when times were tough. Three participants found their best friends during their experience and April said her "best moment" of college was finding her best friend.

Difficulties/challenges/barriers to academic achievement. Participants were asked to share some of the difficulties they have faced during their pursuit of a degree in their respective majors. The three common themes that many of the participants talked about were university break housing, significant life events, and working multiple jobs. The university in this study has a one year live on rule that states that incoming freshman and transfer students with less than 30 credit hours must live on-campus in university-operated residence halls for one year. The university did not offer seasonal break housing or an option to stay in their residence hall rooms so they had to find places to stay during the summer, fall, winter, and spring breaks. Charles and Georgia shared their experiences of having no where to stay during seasonal breaks at the university which lead them to stay in their cars, at local homeless shelters, or sleeping outside.

All four of the participants faced significant life events that made them question their future at the university. Life events included death of a family member, hospitalization of a family member, food insecurity for two years, and the birth of a child. These life events had long-lasting impressions on the participants that still have effects on them to this day. April struggled with the death of her brother, but had professors and

friends to help her cope. Charles drove back and forth to see his grandmother in the hospital which left him sleep deprived, but he pushed through. Georgia was food insecure for two years and utilized multiple food pantries both on- and off-campus survive. Journey gave birth to her child during her sophomore year and struggled with the decision on what to do with the child. Ultimately, she ended up keeping the baby and continued in her path to obtain a mathematics degree. Although these events made them question their future, all the participants chose to stay at the university to continue their pursuit of a degree.

All four participants worked two jobs for various reasons, but the most common reason was to pay for rent, bills, tuition, and food. Two participants shared that at one point, they had four part-time jobs to make money. Georgia said she struggled with keeping up with perceptions that she was a "normal" student who got an allowance like the other girls on her floor in the residence hall she lived in freshman year. Although she eventually shared her homeless story with three girls on her floor and gave up two of the part-time jobs, she shared that she missed the security of having money to spend. Charles talked about doing odd jobs such as construction to make money because he would not go to food pantries to receive free food. He talked about the stigma still associated with homelessness and did not want to be labeled by others. April worked two jobs at the time of the interview to pay rent and bills. She used the part-time jobs as a motivation to finish school and get a higher paying job. Journey worked as a tutor, but ended up quitting her job when she got pregnant.

Factors influencing completion of program. Participants were asked what influenced them to complete their programs. The themes that emerged include:

professors, friends, and organizations/work. To say that there were motivated to complete their degree was an understatement. All participants felt supported and encouraged to graduate. They all shared multiple stories about professors being there for them. Charles spoke highly of two professors in the sociology department that became mentors to him on a professional and personal scale. He said that they were two of his biggest supporters. April and Georgia both had professors that took the time to ask how they were doing and if they needed help. Both said that this made them feel comfortable. Again, all participants credited friends with being huge factors that pushed them to continue in their academic programs. Participants found these friends in their academic majors, organizations, or had them before they enrolled in the university. Participants talked about the encouragement and support they received every day. Along with people as influences, two participants said that organizations and work pushed them to succeed. Charles shared that the ROTC program made sure that he was a student first and a student leader second. They encouraged him to take responsibility in the program to work toward a future career in the military. Georgia used her two jobs as motivation. She receives minimum wage at both jobs as a student worker in the dining center on campus and as a bartender at a local bar. She wants a higher paying job after she graduates.

Personal/social/community resources that enable resilience and thriving. Participants were asked multiple questions to explore who or what resources they used to build resiliency and thrive in a college setting. The interviews discovered that participants utilized personal and community resources while social resources were not mentioned. Personal resources included friends, family, and personal characteristics that were important to them. Journey had her best friend at the university which was also her

roommate. She also credits her mother for continuing to push her to finish her homework and classes. Even though they might not talk for months at a time, she would still check in to see how she was doing. Charles acknowledges his best friend and roommate for supporting him in the ROTC program and during his studies. It is also important to note that participants were asked to describe themselves in three words. These words were positive and made each student pause for a moment of reflection. This is important because each participant talked negative about themselves, but when it came down to three positive words, they chose words. Two words that were mentioned by three of the participants were hardworking and determined. These are words that they used to describe themselves, not other people. Many students felt hope as they looked to the future which also motivated them to keep going. Rick Snyder (2005) says hope is the final aspect of academic determination. Snyder states that people with a higher hope approach situations and obstacles in a positive state and look for success. Charles mentioned that he used hope as a strategy to get through his four years as an undergraduate student. Some community resources include second-hand stores such as Goodwill and local churches were mentioned as well. Participants used these resources for clothes and personal affects. Students also mentioned university resources such as the counseling center and the financial aid office. Both office offer free help to students. Only one participant mentioned going to the counseling center to talk with a counselor while two of the participants mentioned going to the financial aid office for help with the FAFSA and financial counseling purposes.

Implications from this study

Understanding the experiences of homeless college students and the challenges they face as they work toward a degree is the first part of many to help them. By understand the challenges and barriers, colleges and universities can create policies and procedures to combat the harsh realities that they face in their daily lives. After reflecting on the findings of the current study, the following are implications to improve the experiences of homeless college students. The findings can help both faculty members and student affairs professionals understand the importance of supporting these students in and outside the classroom. This information can also help homeless college students know how to ask for help.

Faculty members

- Faculty members must seek to actively engage with homeless college students to build a relationship with the students. These relationships can help establish trust which can allow the student to self-disclose their homeless identity. It is important to note when a student is asking for assistance or just needing someone to listen. It is important because students may feel shame, guilt, or fear in revealing more about themselves.

- Faculty members must be willing to work with homeless college students if they are behind in course work, late to class, or are falling asleep. Faculty members need to have an honest conversation with the student without making them feel like they have done something wrong or deserve to be punished. Taking time to listen can make all the difference to a homeless student.

- Faculty members must advocate for and with these students to create institutional and social change that could be beneficial to them. By advocating for homeless students, faculty members can help identify services that need to be in place to help this population of students perform better academically.

Student Affairs Professionals

- Student affairs professionals need to listen to and support homeless college students that disclose their situation to them. Actively listening to and acknowledging these student's stories can be power. Validate their feelings and ask to assist in any way possible. If a student is not ready to receive help, do not push.

- Student affairs professionals need to be aware of barriers in place that make access to resources more difficult for homeless students. Lower or eliminate the costs of resources such as transportation, food, and shelter. Additionally, consider adjusting office hours to open earlier or stay open later to accommodate working homeless students.

- Student affairs professional need to be aware of university and community resources to assist homeless students. Gather a list of on-campus offices, resources, and professionals that can help a student in need. Food pantries, clothing banks, counseling services, career services, academic services, financial aid, and student accounts should all be on a list or handout for students. Community resources such as food and clothing banks, state and federal agencies, homeless shelters, and any additional resources should be on

the list as well. All university personnel should have access to this information.

- Student affairs professional need to develop and support institutional and community programs surrounding homeless students and food insecurity. This can be done through workshops, drive-in conferences, presentations, and professional development. Creating signage that promotes a safe space for students who are experiencing homelessness could be affective as well. Having food and drinks in your office will give students resources and build trust.

- Student affairs professionals need to encourage homeless students to get involved with an organization or group of people to develop relationships. By getting these students involved with other peers, faculty, and staff, they will feel a sense of belonging.

- Student affairs professionals need to develop a safe space for homeless students to meet and support each other. A counseling support group will acknowledge that there are homeless college students on campus. This will give students who feel isolated and alone a space to decompress and build relationships.

Homeless College Students

- Students should try to locate a list of resources or search the surrounding areas for resources available to them whether that be community or university resources. This could include food pantries/banks, transportation options, housing options, federal and state resources, academic resources, and others.

- Utilize free or low cost counseling services at the university or in the community. A trained counselor can be a sounding board or a voice of reason during personal low points. Telling your story to someone who is not close to you can be therapeutic.

- Confide in one or two people that you trust. Tell them your homeless story or at least that you are struggling with homelessness. This can be a counselor, best friend, professor, advisor, friend, or family member. Tell someone so that you have someone you can go to no matter what.

- Trust people who tell you they want to help whether that be academically, financially, personally or professionally. When you disclose your story, it might be a shock to people. Try to realize that they are processing the information as much as you are.

Recommendations for Future Research

Since there is so little research done on or surrounding homeless college students, any type of research is welcome. Using this study as a foundation, there are several directions that would help to deepen our understanding of this population. First, replicating this study at institutions across the nation with different populations such as women's colleges, military colleges, large public, small private, religious colleges, and other would deepen our understanding of homeless college students' experiences. Second, future research should study why students who do not have one of their most basic needs met continue to pursue a college education. Third, future research should consider the personal characteristics of homeless students and how their personal thoughts can affect their ability to succeed. Lastly, future research would look at the

correlation between homeless college students and the need to help others while still needing help themselves.

Hiding the fact that they were homeless was a common theme that was uncovered during the interview process. Participants chose not to self-disclose to peers, faculty members, or staff because of the perceived guilt, shame, and fear associated along with the label of homeless. The stigmatization of homeless people as a whole has made students weary of sharing a big piece of their lives with others. Research that has be conducted on member of the LGBTQA community as well as undocumented students would be a good springboard. Researchers can look for ways to expand and create a deeper understanding of homeless college students.

Conclusion

Students experiencing homelessness while attending college face situations that can discourage and dishearten them on the way to pursuing their degree. There are no simple solutions or quick fixes to the challenges they face. The cause of homelessness looks different for each of the people experiencing it. However, students who have a goal or dream in mind will stop at nothing to achieve it. Determination coupled with a strong resiliency and the ability to thrive in a negative situation can do the impossible. This study demonstrates that with a strong support system, access to resources, and a will to overcome, students can pursue and attain a degree without a home. Therefore, more research needs to be conducted to better understand homeless college students. We need to make our current resources easier to locate and work on providing more resources as the number of homeless college students increase. We need to support the students who want a better life, get a better life.

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APPENDIX A

Participant Sheet & Interview Protocol

Participant Profile Sheet

Name: _____

Email Address: _____

Gender: _____

Race/Ethnicity: _____

Major: _____

Age: _____

How many credit hours have you completed at this time?

Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about yourself.

   a. Growing up?

   b. High school?

   c. College?

2. What made you decide to go to college?

3. Why did you pick Eastern Illinois University?

4. How would you describe your experiences at EIU so far?

   a. Successes?

   b. Challenges?

5. What strategies have you used to navigate your college experience as a homeless college student?

6. How does this experience compare to what you thought it would be?

7. What has influenced your ability to progress in your academic program?

   a. Succeed in organizations? Work?

8. What are your proudest accomplishments so far?

   a. Academically? Personally? Professionally?

9. What resources have helped you?

   a. Who/what has helped you?

   b. Specific activities/organizations?

10. How would you describe yourself to others?

11. What makes you want to continue on in college?

12. What are your dreams/goals?

APPENDIX B

Consent to Participants in Research

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Resilience and Thriving in Homeless College Students

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Cayla Maurer (advised by D. Dena Kniess), from the College Student Affairs graduate program at Eastern Illinois University.
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate.

You have been asked to participate in this study because you have been identified as a homeless college student who would be willing to share their collegiate experiences.

- **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences and obstacles homeless college students face while working toward their degree at a Midwestern institution.

- **PROCEDURES**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

Participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher that will last approximately one hour. During the interview, you will be asked questions about your experiences a homeless college student. Your interview will be audio recorded, which will then be transcribed. Audio will be stored on the researcher's computer. Following transcription, you, as a participant, will have the opportunity to review the transcription for accuracy. A pseudonym will be assigned to you, and you will have the opportunity to verify is has satisfactorily met confidentiality.

- **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

There is not more than a minimal risk expected from participation in this study. Participants may feel uncomfortable sharing their experience as a homeless student.

- **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

By sharing your experiences, we can better gauge the needs of homeless college students at institutions across the nation and abroad.

- **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of pseudonym assignment within all resulting data and published materials. Only the researcher and faculty advisor

will have access to transcripts and audio recorded interviews. The audio recorded files of the interviews will be kept for 3 years and then destroyed, as required by the IRB.

- **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Participation in this research study is voluntary and not a requirement or a condition for being the recipient of benefits or services from Eastern Illinois University or any other organization sponsoring the research project. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits or services to which you are otherwise entitled.
There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

- **IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact:

Cayla Maurer, Principal Investigator
217-581-6405
ccmaurer@eiu.edu

Dr. Dena Kniess, Faculty Advisor
217-581-7240
drkniess@eiu.edu

- **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS**

If you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study, you may call or write:

Institutional Review Board
Eastern Illinois University
600 Lincoln Ave.
Charleston, IL 61920
Telephone: (217) 581-8576
E-mail: eiuirb@www.eiu.edu

You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with EIU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time. I have been given a copy of this form.

_____
Printed Name of Participant

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date