Homeless: How residential instability complicates students’ lives.

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As winter break nears, student conversations shift from campus life to beloved family traditions and anticipated gifts. Tenisha, a sophomore with a boisterous personality, cunningly deflects questions about going home for the holidays. In truth, her family has not had a “home” for nearly a decade. She moved into the first homeless shelter in middle school with her mother after a domestic violence dispute disrupted their residential stability. Her mother emphasized graduating from high school and attending college. With the help of mentors and her mother, Tenisha graduated near the top of her class and was accepted to a private four-year university. Academic demands are manageable; social expectations create high levels of stress. Each time the residence halls close, she must strategically arrange housing accommodations. Unless other arrangements can be made, Tenisha will leave the plush, safe environment of campus life to spend three weeks in a family shelter in Skid Row.

The findings and recommendations presented in this article are based on two complementary research projects conducted with homeless students transitioning from high school to college. I focus here on the residential instability that defines the lives of these students and other highly mobile student groups (e.g., children of migrant farm workers, undocumented youth, and those in foster care). Together, these projects contribute to a growing understanding of how to support and retain students through degree completion. Admissions staff, academic advisors, faculty, community organizations, and peers each play an integral role in supporting these students. Safe spaces are needed where students can openly discuss their experiences and receive guidance navigating the barriers that inhibit their ability to fully engage in the educational process.

In the sections that follow, I provide further information about students from highly mobile backgrounds. I begin with a discussion of how mobility influences educational participation before discussing...
the barriers these students face while pursuing post-secondary degrees. Since individual experiences differ, the recommendations presented may be considered a place to start conversations geared toward supporting students without residential stability.

**Educating Mobile Students**

**Student advocates** have worked for decades to increase access for underrepresented student populations. Continued efforts are needed to remove barriers; however, modest successes have resulted in a more diverse student body with diverse needs. Here I focus on the impact residential uncertainty and mobility have on students’ participation in higher education. Lacking stable housing shapes access to college as well as how students participate in the educational process once they are admitted.

In 2006, the National Alliance to End Homelessness estimated that nearly 3.5 million people experience homelessness each year. Approximately half of these individuals are families in need of shelter. The students in these families face many barriers that impede their educational success, including exposure to violence, illegal substances, and residential mobility. Lance Freeman and Derrick Hamilton found that less than half of homeless youth earn a diploma or GED. Graduation from high school remains the most significant barrier to postsecondary education. In 2007, William Tierney, Jarrett Gupton, and I designed a study to understand how homelessness influenced educational participation for adolescents. We found that although all participants had college aspirations, few were able to navigate obstacles during the application process. In a follow-up study, I found that homeless youth transitioning to postsecondary environments often struggle to meet basic needs, including securing stable housing. Students like Tenisha divert attention away from educational and social development to ensure they have food and shelter. Persisting through high school graduation becomes a major challenge to students who lack a consistent, safe space to focus on their academic goals.

**Federal Law.** Tierney, Gupton and I explain how the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act shapes how educational institutions define homelessness. A homeless person, according to McKinney-Vento, lacks an adequate, fixed, regular place to stay. The inclusiveness of the federal definition provides protection for street youth, people in shelters, families in hotels, couch surfers, and families doubled up. The two most obvious categories are youth who live on the street and in shelters. Street youth generally live in a car, abandoned building, or campsite. Shelter youth may or may not be with a family member. Emergency shelters allow individuals to stay for a night, but the space is not secure from day to day. Transitional shelters, which require enrollment in school or a job training program, provide shelter until permanent housing can be arranged. Individuals living in a hotel generally have a space approximately 12 by 15 feet with one bunk bed and share a public bathroom with 20 or 30 other rooms. Couch surfers sleep on a different friend’s or extended family member’s couch or floor from night to night. The most controversial inclusion of the federal definition is families living doubled up—two or more families in a dwelling designed for one family unit. In many cases, each family unit, consisting of three or more individuals, uses one room in an apartment while sharing the kitchen and bathroom spaces.

Currently, federal legislation focuses on supporting students from kindergarten through high school graduation. Few protections are offered to students attending postsecondary institutions. Homeless students attending a public high school may contact the school district’s

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homeless liaison during the college application process. After verifying the residential situation, the liaison may provide the student with a waiver to use when filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. Students are then allowed to file for financial aid as an independent. Few protections beyond waiving the family financial contribution—which typically would be zero—exist at the postsecondary level. The lack of support discourages homeless students from attending college.

**Moving Beyond Legal Requirements.** My research has found that residential environments shape the needs of students pursuing higher education. In addition, the postsecondary institution influences the residential environments of students. Although law lags behind the needs of the students, institutions can voluntarily take steps to increase educational access for homeless and other highly mobile students. One of the most pressing concerns of these students is securing stable housing.

Housing options vary from campus to campus. A community college may not offer student housing; therefore, the student may continue to experience residential instability in the aforementioned ways. Four-year institutions frequently provide students the opportunity to live in residential halls on campus. A gray area emerges. Does living in a residence hall preclude a student from the definition of homelessness? What happens when the residence hall closes for breaks or the student takes a semester off as a result of economic necessity? Is the postsecondary institution obligated to consider these questions when guiding students through the educational process? Given the limited number of homeless students entering postsecondary institutions, how these questions are answered influences the likelihood that these students will persist through to degree completion. The following section provides some guidance in thinking through how to support homeless students attending postsecondary institutions.

**Guiding Students Through the Process**

A**ttending a Postsecondary Institution** may not seem realistic if students do not believe their basic needs will be met while pursuing a degree. Residential stability shapes the educational experiences of homeless students at each stage of the educational process, from determining if higher education is a realistic possibility through the transition to life after degree completion. The discussion that follows is not intended to be inclusive of all the possible obstacles students face or the resources necessary to support their educational ambitions. Each educational context may have unique characteristics that either support or inhibit the success of homeless students. Policies and procedures at each institution should be reviewed to critically analyze how students without residential stability experience the educational process.

**Locating Financial Resources.** Homeless students typically come from families that are unable to financially support their children’s higher education pursuits. These students often receive federal, state, and institutional aid to offset the minimal family contributions. Federal financial aid generally addresses tuition, housing, and books; however, the financial package does not always cover all personal and educational expenses. Beyond the needs of low-income students in general, homeless students face additional expenses that warrant consideration.

Students may also feel an obligation to provide support to their families. Sending money to assist parents and siblings with basic needs may be an expectation. If family members face financial crises, including loss of housing, students may consider using a portion of their income or financial aid to help. Students in these situations need guidance concerning how and when to use finite resources without jeopardizing their educational participation.

Students often underestimate the costs of higher education and living independent during their first year of college. The financial aid package is likely more money than the student has had access to before. In some cases, it may be more money than the entire family survives on each year. Students may be unrealistic in their assessment of the financial costs of life as a college student and expect money to be left over at the end of each year. In particular, they misjudge how much money they will spend on entertainment, social engagement, travel, clothes, and other “nonacademic” expenses. The nonacademic expenses are particularly

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relevant at schools where the general student body comes from middle- to upper-class backgrounds. Students may experience difficulties trying to survive the social expectations of participating in campus life.

Parents may not understand the process of attending school. A few community organizations have sought to fill the gaps this can cause. For example, one organization sends care packages during finals week to students. They also provide guidance to the students through the process of attending school, focusing on critical moments when the students may feel overwhelmed (finals week) or need to make choices that will impact their futures (internships over the summer). For students without connection to family or friends who have navigated postsecondary education, these services are essential to their persistence through degree completion.

Financial support in a lump sum meets one need; however, these students may need more than simply a check. Developing programs that teach students how to budget as well as access additional funds is necessary. Postsecondary institutions should open avenues for students to seek support throughout the school year to deal with crises as they emerge.

Securing Stable Housing. Campus housing is more than a practical consideration. For students from mobile backgrounds, securing stable housing becomes imperative and determines if attending school is realistic. Unlike their peers from families who reside in a stable residence, highly mobile students make educational and social decisions based upon housing. Attending a school without on-campus housing becomes a challenge. First, these students may be unable to secure the necessary resources to pay rent, utility bills, and other household expenses. Even when the monthly bills are taken care of, students must locate furniture and other supplies. Second, these students may not have lived in a private residence during their adolescence. Household tasks and responsibilities that may seem intuitive (e.g., cleaning a room or cooking food) or that students typically receive guidance from parents to accomplish (e.g., how to pay bills or sign a rental contract) become a challenge for those with a history of residential instability. Therefore, ensuring students from highly mobile backgrounds have on-campus housing becomes important to their educational success. Residence halls, in particular, provide a stable space for students to focus on their education.

The issue of housing becomes even more relevant during breaks. Many residence halls close during breaks. Even a four-day closure during Thanksgiving vacation creates stress. Without a stable family residence to visit, students may need to plan weeks or months in advance to ensure they have a place to reside for the holiday. If the student has chosen a university far from his or her family, or parents have moved far from the campus as a result of economic necessity, traveling to visit parents during breaks may not be financially viable or practical. For example, families living in shelters may not be permitted to host overnight guests. Although students may have on-campus housing during the semester, the issue of homelessness continues to shape their educational decisions and identity as a student.

Two housing options are worth consideration. Postsecondary institutions may permit homeless students to stay in residence halls year round—similar to considerations made for international students. This option needs careful consideration; students will likely be unable to pay additional costs for the extended residential stay. A second option is to provide holistic academic advising that includes helping students create a plan for breaks to limit stress. Resource centers on campus could partner with organizations that serve mobile populations. Many homeless students have relationships with groups that supported their educational ambitions during high school. Colleges and universities could benefit from the expertise of these programs. In addition, some organizations have access to short-term housing options, including hotel vouchers, transitional housing, and other choices.

Establishing a Safe Space. Depending upon the educational context, identifying students in need of support may be challenging. Services may be available to assist students with financial aid applications, registering for classes, and becoming involved on campus; however, these programs are frequently voluntary. Students distracted by meeting basic needs may not feel they have time to participate in these programs. Information about resources on campus and in the community should be distributed widely across...
Information about resources on campus and in the community should be distributed widely across campus to individuals that work directly with students, including faculty, residence hall staff, academic advisors, counseling programs, and educational resource centers.
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Words matter. The problem with this language is that youth rarely identify with the term *homeless*. Shame permeates the life of individuals without residential stability. In addition, many individuals are unaware of the inclusive nature of the term. As such, many students reject the term to avoid the social stigma attached. The unintended consequence is that these students do not receive the support necessary to navigate the educational process.

Putting theoretical considerations aside, using the term *homeless* to describe programs and services discourages students and their guardians from seeking support. The aforementioned recommendations will have limited impact if students reject programs and services because they do not identify with the terminology used. *Highly mobile* is one possibility; however, actual physical mobility may not occur. Youth may live in the same doubled-up residence, shelter, or hotel for years at a time. Although these environments could be semi-stable and warrant additional support, youth and families may not self-identify as being highly mobile. Another possibility is to avoid the word *homeless* and use subcategories (e.g., youth living in a shelter and doubled-up families) for promotional purposes. This approach would enable states and districts to distinguish how aspects of the federal law may be used to support each subpopulation differently. In addition, youth and families may be more likely to self-identify as belonging to one of these subcategories.

**Conclusion**

Currently, few homeless students successfully complete high school and transition to colleges and universities. Assisting these students and guiding them through the process of earning a postsecondary degree is important for at least two reasons. First, supporting students with diverse backgrounds and experience provides an academically stimulating environment for all students. Second, many homeless students do not pursue postsecondary education because they do not believe that earning a degree is a realistic possibility. Additional students will be encouraged to apply as programs are developed and students graduate from colleges and universities.

**Notes**


