From Homeless to Student Housing: School Counselor Roles and Experiences in Preparing Students Experiencing Homelessness for College

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Abstract

This qualitative study focused on examining the roles and experiences of high school counselors supporting students experiencing homelessness in their college preparation. To be included in the study, participants needed to have experience working with high school students experiencing homelessness. Findings indicated that the participants supported students experiencing homelessness by (a) enhancing access and exposure to college, (b) providing hands-on and individualized college-going support, and (c) building partnerships with universities to support college going.

School counselors help students develop the mindset that completing a postsecondary education leads to long-term success in their future careers (American School Counselor Association, 2019). Looking toward the future can be hard for students experiencing homelessness because they often have to focus on meeting their present-day survival needs (e.g., food, clothing, and shelter; Maslow, 1954). Thus, they may not prioritize longer term planning for college (Havlik et al., 2017). Individuals working with high school youth experiencing homelessness must consider how to support their immediate basic needs while concurrently preparing them for life after high school. Within high schools, school counselors are stakeholders who are well positioned and uniquely trained to build supportive systems to meet the needs of students experiencing homelessness (American School Counselor Association, 2018; Havlik & Brown, 2016). They provide direct and indirect services that encourage students' development of mindsets and behaviors that will enhance their preparation for college (American School Counselor Association, 2014, 2019).

A growing body of literature sheds light on the high number of students experiencing homelessness in college, the challenges they face, and the ways in which they can be supported (Adame-Smith, 2016; Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Bowers & O'Neill, 2019; Hallett & Freas, 2017; Ringer, 2015). However, there remains a dearth of research on how students experiencing homelessness are being prepared to transition to postsecondary institutions. Now that school counselors are explicitly mentioned in Title VII-B of the McKinney-Vento

Homeless Assistance Act (Title IX, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act; United States Department of Education, 2016), one critical need is greater insight into school counselors' experiences and roles with college preparation for students experiencing homelessness.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is federal legislation that focuses on removing barriers in education for children and youth experiencing homelessness (United States Department of Education, 2016). McKinney-Vento defines "homeless children and youth" as individuals who lack a "fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence" (United States Department of Education, 2016, p. 5). This includes children and youth who are "sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason," and children and youth who are "living in motels, hotels, trailer

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parks, or camping grounds due to lack of alternative adequate accommodations, living in emergency or transitional shelters, or abandoned in hospitals" (United States Department of Education, 2016, p. 5). The definition of homeless children and youth also includes those who "have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings"; "children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings"; or "migratory children who qualify as homeless because they are living in circumstances described above" (United States Department of Education, 2016, p. 5).

McKinney-Vento was reauthorized under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and states that school counselors and local liaisons who are "tasked with college preparation, should ensure that all homeless high school students receive information and individualized counseling regarding college readiness, college selection, the application process, financial aid, and the availability of on-campus supports" (United States Department of Education, 2016, p. 48). School counselors' inclusion in this federal legislation indicates their important role in supporting the college aspirations of students experiencing homelessness.

College-Going Barriers for Students Experiencing Homelessness

Students experiencing homelessness face unique issues in preparing for college. They may experience chronic absenteeism (National Center for Homeless Education, 2017), higher rates of emotional and behavioral difficulties, lower academic performance (Ramakrishnan & Masten, 2020), and a lack of social/emotional supports in school (Sulkowski, 2016). Nationally, graduation rates for students experiencing homelessness are an estimated 20% lower than their peers with consistent housing (Education Leads Home, 2019). Moreover, students experiencing homelessness are 87% more likely to drop out of school (Education Leads Home, 2019). The disparity in graduation rates is magnified in some cases at the state level. In Michigan, for example, 55% of high school students experiencing homelessness graduate in 4 years, compared to the average 4-year graduation rate of 80% for all students in the state (Erb-Downward, 2018).

Identifying (or designating) students as homeless can pose a further challenge, which limits the support they receive under McKinney-Vento. Students may not know they qualify as homeless under the various definitions of homelessness and/or may feel embarrassed or hesitant about sharing their housing status. Although high schools make concerted efforts to document student homelessness, one study from a Colorado school district determined that students experiencing homelessness were underreporting their lack of housing (Cumming & Gloeckner, 2012). Cases of underreporting create greater obstacles to ensure students experiencing homelessness can access and apply for financial aid (e.g., loans, scholarships, and fee

waivers; School House Connection, 2018), making the transition to college more difficult.

Students experiencing homelessness who enter college may continue to face barriers. For example, those without family support when they transition to college may struggle to navigate the college system (Quarles, 2020). Quarles (2020) also found that college students who have on-campus housing may continue to face homelessness. This finding is supported by a survey conducted by Goldrick-Rab et al. (2019) that found high numbers of students experiencing homelessness existing on college campuses (i.e., 14% of the student body at 4-year institutions and 18% at community colleges). Thus, homelessness may not end once a student graduates from high school. In fact, identifying and tracking students as homeless may become even more challenging after they graduate high school (School House Connection, 2017). Despite the challenges, research suggests that students experiencing homelessness want to enhance their academic experience and attend college (Bowen et al., 2020). School counselors play a critical role in supporting these students, who face uniquely challenging circumstances, in transitioning to college.

Role of School Counselors in College Preparation

The American School Counselor Association (2019) states that school counselors help students to "(1) understand the connection between school and the world of work and (2) plan for and make a successful transition from school to postsecondary education and/or the world of work from job to job across the lifespan" (p. 4). School counselors accomplish this by providing career and college counseling through short-term individual and small-group counseling, and by facilitating curriculum-based lessons (American School Counselor Association, 2019). Meeting with school counselors is an important way for students to advance their college trajectory. In fact, Belasco (2013) found that students from low-income backgrounds who had multiple contacts with school counselors increased their likelihood of going to 4-year institutions. Research also suggests that students who explore postsecondary options with a school counselor are more likely to plan a college visit and express intentions to enroll in a bachelor's degree program after high school (Radford et al., 2016). Castleman and Goodman (2018) found that college counseling helps low-income high school students make better informed decisions regarding the cost of college attendance. Thus, school counselors are essential in supporting college preparation for all students but seem particularly crucial for students from low-income backgrounds.

School Counselors' Roles in College Preparation for Students Experiencing Homelessness

The limited research available on homelessness and school counseling suggests that school counselors tend to spend more

of their time addressing the basic and academic needs of students experiencing homelessness, and less time supporting their college readiness (Gaenzle, 2012; Havlik & Bryan, 2015; Havlik et al., 2017). Research has also found that school counselors often focus on providing basic college information such as the costs of local institutions, rather than actually assisting students in completing forms (McDonough & Calderone, 2006). School counselors do, however, recognize the importance of engaging in college preparation counseling and advisement for students experiencing homelessness (Havlik et al., 2014). Further, they are critical partners for local homeless liaisons (i.e., individuals who are designated in most public schools to help identify students as homeless and ensure that requirements of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act are met) in providing college and career support (Havlik & Duckhorn, 2020).

School counselors' roles in providing college preparation for students experiencing homelessness include ensuring that students are completing credit requirements for graduation and, when necessary, supporting them in credit recovery (Hurt, 2018). Roles and responsibilities also include regularly meeting with students for academic planning and college counseling. This involves helping students to obtain fee waivers, assisting them with completing financial aid applications, and helping students access necessary technological tools (e.g., laptop, iPad, and Wi-Fi; Hurt, 2018). Across these roles, school counselors are also expected to coordinate a system of support that includes other stakeholders (e.g., teacher, principals, parents, and community resources) to help students transition to college (American School Counselor Association, 2018).

To ensure their success, students experiencing homelessness may need additional support from school counselors to help them remove barriers and become college ready. This may include exposing students to a variety of careers, enhancing opportunities for exposure to college environments, and encouraging students early on to establish goals toward college attendance (Pérusse et al., 2017). College selection is particularly important for students experiencing homelessness. For instance, if a student anticipates not having access to consistent housing when they enter college, school counselors must help them to identify universities with summer and break housing and/or similar supports (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Bauer-Wolf, 2019). Thus, enhanced college counseling from school counselors can set up students experiencing homelessness for success.

Purpose of the Study

With scant research available on homelessness that includes the voices of high school counselors, the current study addresses a gap in the literature related to school counseling, college preparation, and students experiencing homelessness. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to investigate the roles and experiences of high school counselors supporting youth experiencing homelessness in their efforts to prepare for and attend college. The following research question guided this study:

What are high school counselors' roles and experiences supporting students experiencing homelessness in their transition to college? We used qualitative research methods to answer this question through interviews with high school counselors.

Method

Studies using qualitative methods tend to focus on exploring relationships between individuals' experiences and seek to gain deeper insight into their experiences, attitudes, and behaviors (Keegan, 2009). Further, qualitative approaches allow for flexibility in the design and for the researcher(s) to have a major role in the research process with the participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Accordingly, our research team chose thematic analysis (TA) as a qualitative approach to categorize the data set and make meaning in patterns identified across the participants (Clarke & Braun, 2017). This particular approach is well suited for studies that investigate experiences of participants (Clarke & Braun, 2017). In this case, we explored school counselors' experiences and roles supporting students experiencing homelessness going to college.

Participants

Thirteen public high school counselors participated in this study, of whom nine identified as female and four as male. Participants' years of experience ranged from 1.5 to 29 years ($M = 14.7$ years) and student caseloads ranged from 125 to 600 per year ($M = 320.8$; two respondents did not provide a number). The number of students experiencing homelessness at participants' schools ranged from 2 to 300 students ($M = 47.16$). Specific to each participant's individual caseload: five participants had between 1 and 5 students experiencing homelessness on their caseload; six had 10–20; and one had 100. One did not report their caseload. The school counselor participants practiced in settings that included urban ($n = 6$), suburban ($n = 4$), and rural ($n = 3$) in seven states, representing all four regions of the United States (i.e., Northeast = 3 states; Midwest = 2 states; South = 1 state; West = 1 state). Participant ages ranged from 26 to 55 years ($M = 44.5$), with three participants not reporting their age. The majority of the participants were White ($n = 9$, 69%). Other represented races/ethnicities included Black ($n = 1$), African American ($n = 2$), Caribbean ($n = 1$), and Latina ($n = 1$). Four of the participants reported having no prior training to work with students experiencing homelessness. Eight participants reported having some form of required professional development or training on working with students experiencing homelessness, and two participants reported receiving training in graduate school.

Research Team

The research team comprised three White, non-Hispanic females from a graduate counseling program and one White male researcher. The first author is a full-time associate professor and

former school counselor who previously worked with students experiencing homelessness and has conducted extensive research on the topic. The second and third researchers were both graduate-level school counseling interns at the time of the study. One had prior work experience in providing college preparation support to first-generation college students and the other had experience with qualitative methods and homelessness research, and prior work experience in college admissions.

With the three primary authors' backgrounds being closely related to the topic at hand, the research team acknowledged how our prior experiences, assumptions, and beliefs influenced the research process. We recognized that our prior training and work experience led us to have assumptions about the roles of high school counselors working with students experiencing homelessness. To mitigate the influence of our backgrounds on the data analysis, we bracketed our experiences by holding group discussions and writing reflexive journals in an attempt to set aside our assumptions about the data set (Fischer, 2009). The fourth author was invited to join the research team as a peer auditor after the initial data analysis was completed. He was a professor of counseling at the time of the study, has qualitative research experience including in studies on homelessness, and is a former high school counselor with experience working with students experiencing homelessness.

Data Collection

The primary data set included transcripts from interviews with high school counselors. The interviews lasted on average 36 min and ranged from 27 to 55 min. The interview protocol was designed to collect a rich data set examining participants' perceptions and experiences, including questions that created opportunities to probe deeper into responses (Charmaz, 2006). The questions were open-ended in nature to allow an inductive approach to data analysis. Through thematic analysis, we used the interview responses to make meaning of and explore patterns in the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). The first set of questions focused on demographics of the school and general roles of the participants. We then solicited information from participants across three domains. These included schools counselors' perceptions of students' experiences of homelessness, school counselor participants' experiences in counseling youth experiencing homelessness, and participants' knowledge of the McKinney-Vento Act. Sample questions included: "What do you see as the general experience of high school students experiencing homelessness?", "What is the experience of homeless students related to their college and career preparation?", "What types of career and college readiness support do you provide for all students?", and "What challenges have you experienced supporting the college readiness of students experiencing homelessness?" Where appropriate, we integrated general follow-up questions into the interview, such as "What has this experience been like for you?"

Interviews were conducted over the phone, recorded, and later transcribed. Transcripts were uploaded into ATLAS.ti for analysis. We recruited participants using multiple methods, including: (a) emailing known contacts, (b) posting on the ASCA Scene online community of school counselors, and (c) emailing ASCA members who were high school counselors. Purposeful sampling was used to solicit participants (Patton, 2002). To be included in the study, participants had to meet the following criteria: (a) have at least 1 year of school counseling experience at the high school level, (b) be presently working at the high school level, and (c) have provided counseling or advisement to at least one student experiencing homelessness over the past year.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis as a systematic process and inductive approach for conceptualizing codes and themes across participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017). We selected thematic analysis because it can be used to examine participants' experiences related to phenomena across an array of fields and is a flexible approach that can be applied to answer a variety of research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Through reflexive thematic analysis, we identified patterns across the participants related to their perspectives and practices with supporting students experiencing homelessness going to college (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Coding was a collaborative process, where the themes were conceptualized from the data to tell a story about the participants' roles and experiences within their work (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Our research team followed Clarke and Braun (2017) six steps for thematic analysis. First (Step 1), we familiarized ourselves with the data by reviewing the transcribed interviews and taking notes on our general impressions and highlights of each one. For Step 2, we generated initial codes by identifying interesting data features in each interview. During Steps 1 and 2, the three researchers worked independently to conceptualize codes. Then, we collaboratively created a comprehensive list of codes to map the development of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) by working together to combine all of the codes we had identified independently. The group noted that, in general, we similarly identified codes and shared similar insights into the patterns we were noticing within the data set. We talked through differences by going back to the transcripts, and comparing and contrasting perceptions of participant statements. Based on these discussions, we came to consensus and made adjustments accordingly.

In Step 3, the team used our list of codes as a guide to collaboratively identify themes. We each examined the codes independently and grouped the codes into potential themes, then discussed our findings with each other. For Step 4, we met as a team to organize the themes. We generated a written map of the themes and went back to the transcripts to confirm instances of the identified themes across participants. Afterward, in Step 5, we defined and named each theme. During this step, we further refined the themes, combined repetitive themes, and organized

the themes identified. This was done through an inductive approach as we noted themes that were revealed across the codes. Last, we produced a report (Step 6), in which we collaborated to identify the most compelling quotes for each of the themes across participants and further solidified the identified themes related to the research questions (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

Trustworthiness

To establish trustworthiness, our research team engaged in several different strategies, including member checking, data triangulation, peer debriefing, and the incorporation of a peer auditor (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, we engaged in member checking by sending the participants their transcripts to allow them to make any corrections. We conducted follow-up interviews with select participants to clarify statements made during the initial interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). We used triangulation by comparing multiple data sources (i.e., separate interviews with homeless liaisons; results reported in Havlik and Duckhorn [2020]; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). We engaged in peer debriefing by holding regular meetings to discuss and ask questions about the research and coding process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The primary investigator recorded the process through a written audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, the peer auditor was invited to audit the findings by reviewing the transcripts. He provided feedback on the findings.

Findings

This study addressed the research question: What are high school counselors' roles and experiences supporting students experiencing homelessness in their transition to college? Findings suggested meaningful patterns among participants' expressed roles and experiences engaging in college counseling and advising with students experiencing homelessness. This includes three themes: (a) enhancing access and exposure to college, (b) providing hands-on and individualized college-going support, and (c) building partnerships with universities to support college going.

Enhancing Exposure and Access to College

Participants' roles in supporting students experiencing homelessness going to college centered around enhancing students' access and exposure to postsecondary institutions. Several participants observed that students experiencing homelessness often do not see college as an option and/or have not been previously exposed to university settings. Participants emphasized the importance of students seeing that college is within reach and described their efforts to ensure that students had direct and indirect exposure to college. A participant shared their experience:

> We do a lot of college visits. And it's either through, with the freshmen we have, [Name] Community College. So, every single freshman gets to go and just see what it's about and you know, for a start, get them exposed to. . . something.

Several participants reported that college visits were a particularly important way to expose students to university settings. When it was not possible to engage in visits to colleges, the participants said that they brought universities to their schools. For example, one school counselor shared: "We have all the mascots come in. We have door decorating for colleges. And then we also have a day where everyone in the whole district wears their college sweatshirt." Participants in the study shared the experience of helping all students to recognize they could go to college. One described the importance of simply talking about college:

> I just do a lot of talking to kids about what to expect in college, too, like the transition piece about free time. And it's not always free time and then with the schedules. Like how to do the schedule, kind of doing that kind of stuff. College 101. So, I'll just talk about what to expect and just, you know, to be reasonably prepared. You know they know how to talk to professors and all that kind of stuff.

One participant suggested that a critical action for school counselors is to help students experiencing homelessness appreciate the long-term value of college. He stated, "It is almost like the future is too far away to consider" and shared that students might not consider college because of the high cost. In light of this, the participants shared ways they supported students accessing financial aid. For example, one school counselor discussed the importance of identifying students as homeless so that they can access fee waivers (i.e., waivers that cover the costs of applying for college—application and test fees, etc.): "If there's kids that are homeless, they're immediately considered for free lunch, which, then, they immediately qualify for the waivers." Another participant expanded on enhancing exposure and access, sharing their own experience with it: "I generally sense that it [belief about going to college] is just not there. Maybe it is the fact or truth that there is no realistic option for them." Thus, the participants shared experiences indicating that they felt that students experiencing homelessness often do not recognize the value of college. The participants suggested that school counselors' key roles include helping students experiencing homelessness to see college as available to them.

Providing Hands-On and Individualized College-Going Support

All of the participants shared that they provided hands-on and individualized college-going support. They observed that students experiencing homelessness had unique needs; thus, the school counselors designed interventions to support them.

Although several participants specifically stated that they "did not do anything different" for students experiencing homelessness, this seemed to suggest that they tailored their counseling approaches for each student on their caseload. Participants reported their experiences that one-on-one interventions were critical to support students' diverse needs. They felt that one-size-fits-all approaches to college counseling were not effective. One participant described how exploring career interests came first, before college planning: "Career exploration is the first thing. A lot of kids say, 'I don't know what I want to do.' Then we start probing and seeing where some interests [lie]. And trying to find something that can match around the interests."

Another participant highlighted the importance of engaging in individualized approaches to ensure the privacy of students who are homeless. They shared:

> It's hard to ensure that they have the extra support without jeopardizing the confidentiality of their status. I don't want to point out, "Oh, all homeless kids, come to the career center and we're gonna have a little workshop for you guys," and everyone knows who shows up. So, it has, in my experience, been more of a one-on-one approach.

Because family and student finances are necessary but sensitive topics to discuss in college counseling, participants described one-on-one sessions as necessary to uphold confidentiality.

The participants shared that within this individualized approach, the verification process (i.e., identifying students as homeless) for students experiencing homelessness was critical to their roles in supporting students going to college. Many participants shared that they experienced verifying student homeless designations as a complicated process, one that requires school counselors and liaisons to work with each student individually to complete financial aid forms and access documents (e.g., address verification). Several participants said that they feared that the process was a deterrent and posed an additional burden for youth experiencing homelessness going to college. A participant provided more details about the process:

> Our homeless students are selected for verification 100 percent of the time. That means on top of doing the initial financial aid forms, there are additional forms they have to fill out to verify their homeless status. Questions about income, different things like that. I've been helping a number of students with that part of the process, that not all students have to participate in.

Thus, participants suggested that knowing each students' circumstances and having a trusting relationship were critical to provide individual and hands-on college support for students experiencing homelessness.

Many of the participants recognized that, although college is important, viable alternative options did exist to be explored on a case-by-case basis. For example, one participant described:

> A lot of them [students experiencing homelessness] have had academic issues because [of] their active instability at home. And they really can't go to a four-year school because of their academics, but we can encourage them to go to a two-year school [instead].

Another school counselor shared that their roles included engaging in career counseling with students for whom college may not be a fit. They described exploring other options:

> What are some strong professions you can do where you just need a high school diploma and the long-term growth is still there as far as you being able to move up and eventually get to a point where you have a family, you can survive?

The hands-on and individualized approach described by the school counselors seemed to take all aspects of students' circumstances into consideration. One participant explained how he pulls aside students identified as homeless, telling the student, "When you look into this [college], let's look into some student support systems that are also offered at this school." He personalized his approach to help students identify universities to meet their unique needs (e.g., childcare and year-round housing):

> "I know you are concerned about your siblings and that kind of stuff. . . . Let's see what the distance is. How long it is going to take you to go to and from if you want to visit your family?" You know, again, if a student is homeless, deceased parents, then we can also look at the dollars and cents of it as well.

Overall, across the participants' experiences, they highlighted the need to engage in tailored approaches when providing college support for students experiencing homelessness. Their roles included providing individual college and career counseling that takes into account each students' unique circumstances.

Building Partnerships With Universities to Support College Going

The participants emphasized the importance of school counselors engaging in partnerships with universities to build a system to support students experiencing homelessness. Bridging the gap between high schools and colleges was cited as a particularly important partnership to ensure a smooth transition for students. For example, one participant shared their experience with the verification process: "We work that [verification process] out with, you know, the financial aid officer [at the university], the school, through FAFSA. All of that. If we have deemed them homeless, then that they are secure within their financial aid." To support the verification process, several participants described their role as connecting directly with universities by sending letters, based on the McKinney-Vento requirements. The purpose of these letters was to confirm that the student was homeless and request that the university, as one participant said, "please consider that as you process it [financial

aid].” Participants also worked directly with local liaisons to collaborate on supporting students through this process.

Participants' experiences led them to recognize the need to build relationships with financial aid offices and admissions counselors. One participant shared:

> We're on a first-name basis with the admissions officers from all of our local colleges. We can call them up [and say], "I have a kid, who wants to go up to [name of school] but her grades aren't good enough."

Participants shared that connecting with universities helped the institutions to understand extenuating circumstances behind lower grade point averages and/or test scores. Further, these connections encouraged institutions to consider students they may have otherwise disregarded. One participant described how they called universities directly to request help removing barriers to enrollment, such as lack of transportation to the university for placement tests. Another participant highlighted their success in partnering with universities:

> I am working closely with [an] admissions rep and he claims that certain students do not come to [name of college], and there is money that is still available. He will try to move some of that money and give her additional aid.

Connecting with universities seemed particularly important to aid in the college counseling process and enhance access for youth experiencing homelessness. One school counselor described their experience with the complicated nature of college enrollment for youth experiencing homelessness:

> Some of it has to do with the FAFSA because, well now, they're homeless, they're living with grandma. Parents aren't around [but they are the identified] parent or guardian. Grandma has no say in the matter. So, now you kind of have to start dealing with that situation. We have to be on the phone with FAFSA trying to figure out what to do.

Participants suggested their roles required them to take some of the burden off the students experiencing homelessness by helping them with the admissions and enrollment process through university partnerships. Local community colleges were highlighted as helpful partners to work through issues, such as guardianship and financial aid. Participants described experiencing many complex situations that made applying to college, getting accepted, and receiving funding challenging for students experiencing homelessness. Thus, the participants felt that they had a critical role in building partnerships to ease complications.

Discussion and Implications

For this qualitative study, we interviewed high school counselors to explore their roles and experiences supporting college going for youth experiencing homelessness. Three themes were shared across participants. They included: (a) enhancing access and exposure to college, (b) providing hands-on and individualized college-going support, and (c) building partnerships with universities to support college going. Participants noted that students experiencing homelessness have unique needs that require focused support and collaboration to ensure that they are ready to successfully transition to college. They also shared their experiences supporting students experiencing homelessness and described their roles in supporting students' success after high school.

Participants' roles and experiences enhancing access and exposure to college settings for youth experiencing homelessness echoed prior research on best practices supporting all students in their college going. For instance, exposing students to university settings is described as a critical way to help normalize the college experience (Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Swanson et al., 2019). Participants in the current study suggested that much of the work to enhance exposure is done in the school by inviting universities to the high school and/or engaging in other college awareness activities (e.g., university sweatshirt day for teachers, and college and career days; Yavuz et al., 2019). These activities encourage college and career exploration, thus enabling students to connect college planning with future goals. This research also highlighted the importance of taking students to university settings. Through exposure to the physical college settings, students may start to identify with similar-aged peers while touring the campus environment, thereby increasing their interest in pursuing a college education (Swanson et al., 2019).

Beyond enhancing access and exposure, the findings also highlight the importance of school counselors' roles in engaging in hands-on and individualized approaches to support students experiencing homelessness. In this regard, the participants seemed to be meeting the McKinney-Vento recommendations of providing individualized college counseling related to "college readiness, college selection, the application process, financial aid, and the availability of on-campus supports" (United States Department of Education, 2016, p. 48). Further, by highlighting student strengths and interests during individualized postsecondary planning, school counselors encourage the development of specific students' mindsets related to college (American School Counselor Association, 2014). Such experiences encourage excitement related to college going and help students to connect how going to college will lead to a successful career (American School Counselor Association, 2014).

Our study findings also support recommendations from Hurt (2018) regarding school counselor roles in preparing students experiencing homelessness for going to college. Hurt (2018) highlighted the importance of one-on-one work and suggested that counselors ensure that students have enough credits to graduate (i.e., credit recovery options), engage in quarterly meetings to check on progress, assist with the financial aid process (e.g., scholarships, fee waivers, and FAFSA), and write letters of recommendation. Providing individualized attention

for students experiencing homelessness sets them up for success in transitioning to universities. Because meeting with school counselors to discuss college seems to be effective in getting students to pursue college, this work is particularly crucial for students facing barriers such as homelessness (Belasco, 2013; Castleman & Goodman, 2018; Radford et al., 2016). The present study suggests that school counselors must help students identify schools that meet not just their financial needs but also their basic needs, such as food and year-round housing.

School counselors are responsible for making sure that students have postsecondary plans that fit their unique needs and interests and that will set them up for long-term success. For example, students who will not have consistent housing in college should be connected to universities that have year-round housing (Silva et al., 2017). For students who must provide income for their families after they graduate, school counselors can provide individual counseling to explore options that would allow them to work and study or enroll in training programs to support their long-term career goals while providing financially for their family. Although this study focuses specifically on the transition to college, participants also highlighted the importance of discussing an array of postsecondary options when advising students experiencing homelessness. When school counselors tailor their college counseling and advisement, it must be inclusive of all opportunities, such as the military, community colleges, technical schools, and job training programs (Edwin & Dooley Hussman, 2019).

Another important finding in this study is the recognition that, in order to fulfill their roles in supporting the transition to college for students experiencing homelessness, school counselors need partners at the university level. Because school counselors are accustomed to partnering with local liaisons to support students experiencing homelessness in high school (Havlik et al., 2017), their perception of value in similar partners at the university level is not surprising. Although the McKinney-Vento requirements have specific guidance in place to support high school students experiencing homelessness, federal guidance is limited when they get to college (Klitzman, 2018; United States Department of Education, 2016). Having a partner in place at all higher education settings would help school counselors to assist students in being identified, getting financial aid, discovering housing, and gaining access to services and supports in a university setting (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2018).

One study found that early engagement in college support programs has potential for enhancing success for students experiencing homelessness at the university level (Huang et al., 2019). Thus, school counselors can identify universities with strong programs and partner with them to get students enrolled immediately upon their entrance to college. Moreover, Klitzman (2018) suggested that it is critical not only to prepare students for college but to ensure that colleges are prepared for them. Movement has occurred in recent years toward having more point-of-contact programs at universities. For example, several states have introduced legislation to support students who are homeless and in foster care in college, such as Washington, California, Nevada, and Massachusetts (Scherer & Kennedy, 2019). Further, School House Connection (2018) recently found a 28% increase in financial aid officers identifying students experiencing homelessness, thus suggesting that universities are starting to recognize their role in supporting students who are homeless. If passed, the Higher Education Access and Success for Homeless and Foster Youth Act of 2019 (pending federal legislation), would designate universities as homeless and foster youth "friendly." This legislation would help school counselors in advising students experiencing homelessness to select universities that are prepared to support them. It would ensure that the support afforded by McKinney-Vento to students experiencing homelessness would similarly continue as support for students pursuing higher education. We encourage school counselors who are anxiously awaiting partnerships with universities to engage in professional advocacy to support such laws (Havlik et al., 2018).

Limitations and Future Research

This study had a few limitations. First, the participants' years of experience varied widely (i.e., 1.5–29 years). School counselors with more years in the field had more experiences to share, and thus, clearer perspectives and examples when describing their work with youth experiencing homelessness. Although all regions of the United States were represented, participants came from only seven states. Some states have more advanced legislation than others related to supporting students experiencing homelessness in higher education; therefore, participant location may have influenced the findings of the study. Last, caseloads ranged widely from 2 to 300 students, which may have further affected the length of interviews and findings. Relatedly, participants' interviews were relatively short, lasting an average of 36 min. This was partly related to the reasons stated above (i.e., participants with fewer students experiencing homelessness or less experience did not have as much to share). Despite these limitations, this study offers critical insight into an area that is relatively unexplored and the findings have important implications for future research.

With the findings suggesting that individualized approaches to college counseling are beneficial when working with students experiencing homelessness, future research should examine the efficacy of tailored college counseling interventions and different types of models for one-on-one approaches. Moreover, future research should include the perspectives of high school students experiencing homelessness to examine their experience working with school counselors to prepare to go to college. More research also is needed to investigate the effectiveness of partnerships between school counselors and universities. Last, a larger-scale study with a broader sample across the country would provide more diverse perspectives and experiences.

Conclusion

This study is the first of its kind to highlight the central roles and experiences of high school counselors supporting students

experiencing homelessness going to college. Overall, findings emphasize the necessity of individualized and collaborative approaches to assist in the transition to college for students experiencing homelessness. The findings communicate how school counselors are critical stakeholders in supporting youth by establishing connections and engaging in meaningful conversations with fellow partners to facilitate an effective post-secondary transition process for students experiencing homelessness. From a systemic perspective, students experiencing homelessness would benefit from having points of contact at the university level and federal legislation that aligns university processes and protocols with McKinney-Vento. Overall, this study indicated that school counselors are important stakeholders in ensuring that students experiencing homelessness are prepared to transition to college.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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