EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF HOMELESS COLLEGE STUDENTS:
ALUMNI REFLECTIONS ABOUT PERSISTENCE

by
INDIA LUCRETIA BLACKBURN
(Under the Direction of Diane L. Cooper)

ABSTRACT

Homeless students who attend college often find it difficult to persist to graduation. The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to explore the phenomenon of college students who experienced homelessness and illustrate the essence of homeless college students’ experiences by eliciting and examining the factors that contribute to homeless college students’ persistence to graduation. Seven formerly homeless college student alumni participated by providing their description of the factors that supported their persistence to graduation. This study found five themes related to how the participants experienced homelessness while pursuing an education, and how the institutional environment contributed to their ability to persist in college. The themes included: the institutional obligation to homeless college students; the campus environment; emotional support; the strengths of homeless college students; and the needs of homeless college students. Using these themes as a guide, the study identified recommendations to support homeless college students’ persistence and academic success. The recommendations included providing greater institutional support, the importance of identifying an institutional agent, making financial resources available, and
extending the hours for campus offices and services. It was recommended that future studies explore identified barriers to persistence for homeless college students, along with their tenacity, financial literacy, fear of disclosure, use of first person language to describe this population and graduation rates. This study contributes to much needed literature on the homeless college student.

INDEX WORDS:  Homeless college student; persistence; post-secondary institution; completion; institutional obligation; campus environment; emotional support; institutional agent; financial resources; extended student services
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by

INDIA LUCRETIA BLACKBURN

B.S., University of Alabama at Birmingham, 2004
MA.E., University of Alabama at Birmingham, 2008

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by

INDIA LUCRETIA BLACKBURN

Major Professor: Diane L. Cooper
Committee: Darris Means
           Chris Linder
           Candace Maddox

Electronic Version Approved:

Suzanne Barbour
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to my late father, Melvin Ross. So many told me that I should pursue a doctorate. In his last days, my father shared that he believed in me and he knew that I could do it. It was my father’s passing that prompted me to apply for the Student Affairs Leadership program. Dad, I did it and I know you are so proud. Thank you for believing in me. ...And knowing you, you’re in heaven, bragging right now.
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CHAPTER 1

I slowly entered the classroom looking downward toward my feet. It was a struggle to control my breathing. In and out, I could do this. I could walk into this room unnoticed. A quick scan of my surroundings revealed that the only desk available was in the center of the room toward the front. Arrggg! Ok, I can do this. I was almost in tears before I took my seat. I crossed the room as quickly and quietly as I could, sank into my chair, trying to disappear into it as I round my shoulders up toward my head to block the stares that might be coming my way. I wonder do they know? Can they tell that I’m homeless and live in a shelter? I washed my clothes last night, hung them to dry and freshly ironed my jeans and t-shirt this morning. I know they can’t smell the lingering moldy unique scent of the shelter on me or can they? The bar of Ivory soap the staff provided served as a cleansing balm as I locked myself in the bathroom at a time that no one would disturb me, taking my time to soak in the tub and gather my courage to face my first college class.

That first day came and went, then another, and another. I willed myself to relax and focus on the professor each day. I committed myself to see it through. Everyday I returned to that classroom and each day I thawed a little more. Slowly, little by little it happened. I was able to rejoin society and participate in the process of learning...being. Day by day I lost my fear of being judged and built friendships. Soon I realized that I was laughing again and finding joy in life. I became a part of this world, a participant, no longer a spectator. And I felt something besides the dreamlike detachment that had
settled into my soul. It was a marvelous thing to feel contentment again with something as simple as the warmth of the sun caressing my face. Gradually, I let down my defenses and allowed myself to feel more than the numbness that helplessness wrought. I was no longer floating through life, but instead felt my feet touching the ground. Little did I know that this university summer seminar course would lead me to find my own personal path to safety and security. I learned that education could open doors for me. That summer, I found hope.

INTRODUCTION

Homeless students who attend college often find it difficult to persist to graduation (Gupton, 2015). Persistence, which the U.S. Department of Education & National Center for Education Statistics defines as “the act of continuing toward an educational goal,” (n.d., p. 1) is described by Reason (2009) as “an individual phenomenon--students persist to a goal” (p. 660). Postsecondary institutions define persistence in differing, yet similar, ways. The focus of this study is the phenomenon of persistence, understood to refer to “the behavior of continuing action despite the presence of obstacles” (Rovai, 2003, p.1).

The majority of students who matriculate in college have the goal and intention of attaining a degree, yet many fail to persist to graduation. The exact number of homeless college students who leave college without completing a degree cannot be accurately conveyed, as “national-level data sets on college entry and/or completion for homeless students” do not exist (National Center for Homeless Education [NCHE], 2015, p. 1). Data are not yet collected from post-secondary institutions, with the exception of the Free Application Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).
Nevertheless, persistence to degree attainment is unquestionably difficult for homeless college students, who, in addition to facing the academic challenges that confront every college student, frequently lack the financial resources, academic readiness, and family support many of their peers have at their disposal (NCHE, 2015; Tinto & Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, 2004). While some of the factors that lead to homeless college students dropping out or stopping out are readily identifiable, additional research in this area would be highly beneficial to post-secondary institutions. Benefits to having this knowledge include the acquisition of needed resources necessary to support this population which will foster retention (Woosley, Slabaugh, Sadler, & Mason, 2005).

The terms “retention” and “persistence” are frequently used interchangeably. For the purpose of this study, I will use the following definitions. Retention has been expressed, as an institutional measure of responsibility, defined as academic and social integration on campus (Tinto, 2007) and a student meeting their educational goal (Tinto, 1993). Persistence is communicated as a student measure of responsibility, defined as, “the behavior of continuing action despite the presence of obstacles,” (Rovai, 2003, p. 1) while persisting toward a goal (Reason, 2009). Examples of obstacles for homeless college students can include housing instability, food insecurity, insufficient healthcare, financial, achievement gaps, and social stigma (Masten, 2014).

There are challenges to homeless college students persisting to graduation; however, student affairs practitioners can assist in the success of this population. Programs that foster campus involvement and academic support services are key to retaining the homeless student population, as are initiatives that acclimate low-income or
first-generation students to college life and provide them with financial assistance (Baum et al., 2013). In addition, Field (2015b) found that the majority of homeless college students are unwavering in their determination to succeed and these students want to have the ability to be self-sufficient. They do not want to rely on support from others. There is an awareness that completing a college degree can drastically change the lives of homeless students, disrupting the cycle of poverty by providing a means to earn a living wage and to take care of themselves and often their families as well.

Students who “stop out” of college have been a subject of interest since 1980 (Enrollment Projections, 1982). A student who has stopped out is one who interrupts their enrollment for a minimum of one term, then returns to college and persists to graduation (Hoyt & Winn, 2004; Renn & Reason, 2013). Ross et al. (2012) found that with each instance of stopping out, the probability of completing a college degree decreases by 60%. College students who stop out are more than twice as likely to never return to college to complete their bachelor degree as students who remain continuously enrolled (Renn & Reason, 2013). These numbers emphasize the importance of developing processes to retain students at the greatest risk of stopping out, including homeless students. This study examines the experiences of homeless college students who persisted to graduation, exploring the influence of the campus environment on the retention of these students and investigating how students identified and utilized available resources to overcome the odds and complete their college degrees.

**Problem Statement**

Housing instability and homelessness are prevalent problems in the United States (Robertson & Toro, 1999). Economic insecurity of all kinds threatens the future of young
people, as family structure impacts young people’s ability to feel and be secure. The turmoil of being in a perpetual state of homelessness, moving from place to place with family members or living in foster care placement, greatly influences the educational aspirations of a secondary school-aged student.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act of 2001 is a federal regulation that mandates equal access to public education for homeless children and youth of elementary and secondary school ages (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Guidance for the education of these homeless children and youth was issued by the U.S. Department of Education using the McKinney-Vento Act to provide studies, support, and reports on homeless students as they move through primary and secondary school. However, these homeless students are no longer tracked once they leave the system or turn 18 years old. Homeless students who find their way to college must self-report their previous year’s living conditions on the FAFSA in order to be identified as homeless (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Many applicants make the decision not to disclose their homelessness, which may result in insufficient financial aid and a resulting continued unstable housing situation. The lack of access to, or uncertainty of, adequate housing is unquestionably detrimental to academic achievement. Postsecondary educators and administrators need to understand the influence of housing instability on a homeless student’s ability to persist to graduation if we are to remove one of the major barriers to student persistence and success (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2015).
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to explore the phenomenon of college students who are experiencing homelessness and illustrate the essence of homeless college student experiences (Van Manen, 1990) by eliciting and examining the participants’ stories (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007) to explore the factors that contribute to homeless college students’ persistence to graduation. The campus environment of a post-secondary institution is an important factor on the impact of academic integration, social integration, student resiliency, and interventions, such as, support services, programs and systems on homeless student success (Bensimon, 2007; Flemings, et al., 2005). I interviewed alumni from various public institutions who have graduated between 2008 and 2017 who were homeless for periods of time while they were college students, eliciting their experiences. The interview questions focused on obtaining information on how the campus environment, their academic integration, their social integration, and resiliency influenced their persistence.

This study sought to provide insight into how some homeless college students persist despite the obstacles they face, and to identify the types of resources institutions can provide that will improve these students’ chances of success. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do homeless college students describe their campus experience?
2. What influences homeless college students’ ability to persist?
3. What factors are needed to aid homeless college student success?
Research Paradigm

This study utilized a constructivist paradigm that allowed me to seek to understand the participants’ experiences and analyze their collective voices, with a goal of making “sense” of and deriving “meaning” from these experiences (Guido, Chávez, & Lincoln, 2010, p. 15). In seeking to understand individuals’ experience, multiple findings or truth are revealed. The participatory nature of this paradigm actively engaged the contributors, enabling a richer and deeper understanding of their experiences.

This approach allowed me to seek answers to my research question by collecting data from participants. Analyzing the themes that emerge allowed meaning making to occur. It also allowed me to identify the common themes in the participants’ individual stories (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007).

Theoretical Framework

Tinto’s Retention Theory is the theoretical base that informed this study and provided its framework. Tinto’s theory emphasizes the need for social and academic interaction at postsecondary institutions to support student success (Tinto, 1975, 2007; Tinto & Pell Institute, 2004). Tinto’s Theory of Retention argues that college students’ ability to integrate socially and academically is central to their ability to persist (Tinto, 1975, 1993). The research states that the institution has a responsibility to commit to its students (Tinto, 1993). Commitment will be proven by providing substantive retention programs (Tinto, 1993, 2007; Tinto & Pell Institute, 2004). Homeless students’ integration into college and engagement with the college community, particularly during their first year, is thus a key to student success (Tinto, 2007). A mutual influence and interconnectedness exists between the campus environment itself, the students who shape
that environment, and the retention of those students (Tinto, 1975, 2007). Tinto’s Theory of Retention was used to examine how the campus environment influences retention.

Tinto (1999) identified several factors that create a sense of belonging for college students. These include a knowledge of exactly what is required of them; support from faculty, socially and personally; a sense that they are valued members of the community; and active engagement and participation in the learning process. These elements are especially important for homeless college students who may feel dissociated from the campus environment and need to feel that they are a part of the campus community.

**Operational Definitions**

Homeless College Student: The McKinney-Vento Act defines homeless children or youth as those who “lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence” (NCHE, 2008, p. 1). In this study, the term *homeless college student* refers to a college student who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence for at least one academic year. Similar to the definition put forth by NCHE (2008, Sec. 725), for the purpose of this study the phrase will also include college students who have lost housing and are living in alternative spaces such as campsites, shelters, cars, abandoned buildings, or any other place not designed to serve as sleeping accommodations.

Homeless Youth and Homeless Students: Much of the literature that is available about homeless youth focuses on those who have aged out of the foster care system. In this study the terms, homeless youth and homeless students, were used interchangeably to refer to adults over the age of 18 years old who are former foster care youth.

Persistence: Persistence refers to “the behavior of continuing action despite the presence of obstacles” (Rovai, 2003) while persisting toward a goal (Reason, 2009).
Retention: Retention is defined as academic and social integration on campus (Tinto, 2007) and a student meeting their educational goal. (Tinto, 1993).

Campus environment: The campus environment encompasses “the human-built, organizational, and natural elements that make up the milieu in which student learning and development occur” (Renn & Reason, 2013, p. 83). The campus environment is significant to the studies analysis of the influence of academic integration, social integration and interventions, such as, support services, programs and systems on homeless student success.

Academic integration: Academic integration is attained when individuals are able to understand their role as a student, identify academic norms and values, and achieve academic success (Tinto, 1975).

Social integration: Social integration is achieved when individuals have a sense of belonging and the ability to interact positively and effectively with various campus constituencies (Tinto, 1975).

Resiliency: Resiliency is defined as “the many instances in which an individual is able to adapt to and thrive despite adverse conditions” (Gupton, 2016, p. 228).

Intervention: Intervention refers to the act or process of intervening to improve a situation.

**Significance of the Study**

The exploration of how campus environments influence homeless college students’ persistence has potential benefits for students and practitioners alike. Support of homeless college students has become an important issue for post-secondary institutions (NCHE, 2012). As awareness homeless college students increased, the creation of
outreach and support efforts for this population has amplified with the hope that homeless college students will self-identify (NCHE, 2012) through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or person-to-person. Increased visibility of this population will provide the data needed to support a call for greater resources for homeless college students as well as the establishment of policies and procedures for institutions to respond to their needs.

Higher education practitioners who are educated on issues of homelessness and the challenges homeless college students face are more likely to make decisions that address the needs of these students in a manner that fosters their academic persistence and success. Homeless college students who have successfully completed their degrees are a valuable source of information for these practitioners, as well as for other students who may be motivated by hearing their personal experiences. Practitioners can use this information to argue for resources and support to provide the tools homeless college students need to enable them to persist to graduation.

**Summary**

This study has significant potential to bolster retention efforts for homeless college students and perhaps for other underrepresented student populations (Woosley, Slabaugh, Sadler, & Mason, 2005). Scholars have argued for both the importance and the viability of managing the many obstacles to persistence faced by homeless college students in institutions of higher education (Baum et al., 2013; Engle et al., 2006; Evans et al., 2010; Goodman et al., 2006; Hoyt & Winn, 2014; Tinto, 1999; Tinto & Pell Institute, 2004). By eliciting the experiences of alumni who were homeless college students themselves, this study aims to provide insight to practitioners into how to most
effectively serve this population and provide the support needed for persistence to graduation.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

To understand the phenomenon of homeless college students and identify their needs, it is important to assess what is known about this population. Unfortunately, scant research exists that addresses the homeless college student’s experiences. In this chapter, I reviewed the knowledge compiled to date about this population based on the available research. I also reviewed research related to other underrepresented and/or low socioeconomic college student populations such as foster care youth and first generation college students. The literature on the aforementioned populations often does not refer specifically to students who have experienced homelessness while in college, but instead serves to provide additional insight into the issues homeless college students might face.

The chapter will begin by reviewing the history of the homeless college student population. It will continue by defining who comprises today’s homeless college student population and how to identify those students. Next, it will illustrate the barriers to access and opportunities confronting this population and factors of persistence that can help to combat these obstacles. Lastly, the chapter will explore interventions that provide necessary support to help homeless college students improve their chances of successfully completing college.

History of the Homeless College Student Population

The environment in which a student dwells is important to the success of their academic journey. The college environments’ abilities to influence rather students thrive
or fail has been a concern of post-secondary institutions for quite some time. In the 1930s the University of Wisconsin, with funding from the federal government, conducted a foundational study on residential student housing to explore the social aspects or social integration of students’ lives and their environment away from home (Butts, 1937). These early findings reflected many of the same concerns of today’s college students, with the location of student housing (on or off campus), family support, financial resources, social opportunities, and cultural needs influencing students’ ability to learn and therefore remain in college (Butts, 1937).

Today, there is little data available about homeless college students. To begin to address this lack of information, I explored the origins of this student population by reviewing data about homeless youths’ transition to college. Doing so will provide information about how homeless college students accomplish the shift from high school to the post-secondary environment.

**Homeless College Students of Today**

The National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients (NSHAPC) found in 1996 that between 204,600 and 406,000 Americans ages 18 to 24—approximately one in 194 individuals in this age group—experience homelessness each year (NCHE, 2012). However, among the same age group, those with incomes below the federal poverty line are at significantly greater risk, with one in 29 experiencing homelessness (NCHE, 2012). The study found that military veterans face the highest risk, with one in 10 veterans experiencing homelessness in their lifetime (NCHE, 2012).

In 2015, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) released their Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress. The report
indicated that on any single night in January 2015, 564,708 people were homeless in the U.S. (HUD, 2015). Nine percent of these homeless individuals were between the ages of 18 and 24, while 68 percent were over the age of 24 (HUD, 2015).

HUD also released of a new definition in 2015 for the population designated “unaccompanied youth” in 2015. It defined unaccompanied youth as “persons under the age 25 who are not accompanied by a parent or guardian and are not a parent presenting with or sleeping in the same place as his/her child(ren)” (HUD, 2015, p. 40). It defined a “parenting youth” as “someone who is under 25 who identifies as the parent or legal guardian of one or more children present with or sleeping in the same place as that youth parent, and who is not in the company of someone over 24” (p. 40). The report found that 87% or 32,240 unaccompanied youth are 18 to 24 years of age, and that each night in January 2015, 6,907 unaccompanied youth and 9,901 parenting youth were homeless.

These statistics provide post-secondary institutions with a sense of the number of potential homeless student applicants. Although one cannot predict the number of applicants from this population, it can be assumed that homeless youth may want to improve their financial outlook by seeking a degree (Field, 2015b). Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, and Wyatt (2005) found that the majority of their former foster youth college students believed they must obtain a college degree to have a better life.

To effectively assist homeless college students, post-secondary institutions must first be able to identify these individuals. Such identification has proven to be difficult (NCHE, 2012). There are a few mechanisms in place to assist with identification of homeless college student (Berg-Cross & Green, 2009; Field, 2015b), and students are most likely to self-disclose through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid.
(FAFSA) or to gatekeepers. In 2009, FAFSA added an option for applicants to indicate that they were homeless, in danger of being homeless, or independent (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). This qualifies homeless college students for a federal status of special circumstance (Berg-Cross & Green, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2015) under the “unaccompanied student” status (Field, 2015b), and in doing so identify themselves as such to the institution. Post-secondary institutions should be prepared to receive these students and provide the assistance necessary for enrollment and retention. This status allows students to submit an FAFSA without providing parental information, something a homeless student may not be able to provide.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act (reauthorized in 2002 by Title X, Part C) is a “federal law that provides additional support for this vulnerable population during their elementary, secondary and college education” (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth [NAEHCY], n.d.). The McKinney-Vento Act allows homeless students to enroll in college without the proper documentation, such as parental and financial information, also providing a liaison to assist student in navigating the enrollment process (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth [NAEHCY], n.d.).

NAEHCY (n.d.) advocates identifying a “Single Point of Contact (SPOC),” or gatekeeper, on college and university campuses who can assist homeless college students in navigating their educational journey to completion. This person can assist students in working with a myriad of units on campus, including admissions, financial aid, veterans’ affairs, academic advising, housing, counseling and health centers, TRIO, disability
services, and student activities (NAEHCY, n.d.). The SPOC can also provide staff and faculty role models and mentors (Merdinger et al., 2005).

How many homeless college students graduate, achieving the goal of receiving a postsecondary degree? To date, there is no available national data on graduation rates for homeless college students (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2016). Broton and Sara Goldrick-Rab (2018) mention in their article on food and housing insecurity that “there is very little attention to these concerns in higher education” (p. 122). However, some data is available on former foster youth and their college completion rates. Merdinger et al. (2005) noted that of seven studies on the college attendance of former foster youth, only two reported on college graduation rates. These studies found extremely low rates of five percent and two percent of this population completing college degrees (Merdinger et al., 2005).

**Homeless Youth and the Transition to College**

Coley, Leventhal, Lynch, and Kull (2013) have noted that “Housing is a primary proximal context in which children’s development unfolds” (p. 1). Housing and well-being are unquestionably interconnected. Unstable housing has been found to produce emotional and behavioral instability in children (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Coley et al., 2013; Toro, Dworsky, & Fowler, 2007), which has a negative influence on adolescents transitioning to college. Examples of behavioral instability are the mental health issues, conduct issues (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Toro et al., 2007), substance abuse related to stress (Toro et al., 2007) and a lack of consistent emotional support from an adult (Coley et al., 2013; Dworsky & Perez, 2010).
Youth in various states of homelessness need additional support as they transition into young adults. Much of the literature that is available about homeless youth focuses on those who have aged out of the foster care system. This research emphasizes the importance of providing extended federal assistance for this population and calls for extensions of state policies and an increase support from colleges (Okpych, 2012).

It is important to understand the influence on students who are put out of a system they previously depended on, and which served as a primary if not sole source of support. They then must transition into a world in which neither parental support nor government subsidies are available (Aviles de Bradley, 2011; Okpych, 2012; Stott, 2013). Most homeless students lack access to information and are unaware of the rights and resources available to them (Aviles de Bradley, 2011; Wynne et al., 2014). If they become homeless college students, they must find new ways to provide for their basic needs while navigating the academic world. There is thus a vital and urgent need for higher education to provide transitional services to provide the necessary support for this vulnerable student population (Aviles de Bradley, 2011; Field, 2015a).

**Removing the Stigma**

Homeless college students want to be treated like everyone else, but face an undeniable stigma (Aberson & McVean, 2008; Fields, 2015b; Phillips, 2015; Wynne et al., 2014). It was found that two-year college students are more likely to disclose housing insecurity then four-year college students (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018). Students are often hesitant to report their homeless status to institutional personnel, as there is a lack of trust that personnel will keep their housing status confidential (Wynne et al., 2014). Students may also fear being unfairly judged and viewed negatively by their peers and
others in the campus community if their status is disclosed (Aberson & McVean, 2008; Berg-Cross & Green, 2009; Field, 2015b; Summer, 2003; Wynne et al., 2014). For example, in Fields (2015b), a current homeless student at Norfolk State University, stated that she, “has lots of friends but says she doesn’t feel she can share her struggles with them because they wouldn’t get it, and it would make me mad. I miss that – having someone to talk to” (p.3). Society tends to view homelessness as a condition one can control, often attributing homelessness to laziness, substance abuse, or mental illness (Aberson & McVean, 2008; Phillips, 2015), or assuming homelessness individuals must be criminals (Aberson & McVean, 2008). Despite the stigma associated with homeless persons, however, providing support for these individuals is widely accepted as it is acceptable to be charitable to those deemed less fortunate (Aberson & McVean, 2008; Phillips, 2008). For example, Phillips (2015) studied the qualitative responses of postsecondary students view and willingness to keep a social distance from homeless people. The majority of those participating in the study not only reported that they were willing to volunteer, but that they would donate financially to provide assistance to homeless individuals (Phillips, 2015).

**Barriers to Completion**

For students entering college, homelessness presents a variety of challenges. The issues and obstacles that homeless college students face, however, can be ameliorated by postsecondary institutions. Homeless students are often poorly prepared academically, which presents a significant barrier to their success (Butts, 1937; Coley et al., 2013 Hernandez & Naccarato; 2010; Tinto & Pell Institute, 2004; Toro et al., 2007). Homeless college students also face social and cultural barriers as they navigate an environment in
which they perceive others are not facing the same issues. They may feel socially isolated because they do not have the same financial resources as their peers (Field, 2015b; Summer, 2003).

Financial

A significant earnings gap exists between individuals with a high school diploma and those with a college degree (Baum, Kurose, & McPherson, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2014; Ross et al., 2012). In 1975, renowned political economist Lester Thurow predicted that for many individuals a college education would become a “defensive necessity” (p. 96) versus a way to financial health. Thurow’s words proved prophetic, as today the median weekly earnings of a college graduate with a bachelor degree are 83% higher than those of a high school graduate (Baum, Kurose, & McPherson, 2013). In 2010, the median annual earnings for young adults ages 25 to 34 with a bachelor’s degree or higher working full-time were $50,300, while those with a high school diploma only earned $29,200 (Ross et al., 2012).

Moreover, the value of a high school diploma or GED has decreased as indicated by the decrease in average yearly earnings in 1965 of $31,384 to $28,000 in 2013 (Pew Research Center, 2014). A 2014 report by the Pew Research Center found that the earnings gap by graduates with a bachelor’s degree stands at a significant $17,500. Clearly a high school diploma or its equivalent is no longer enough to ensure not only financial security, but also even financial stability.

Financial issues are a primary concern for homeless college students. The literature consistently identifies financial issues (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018) and barriers to academic and social integration as key reasons that college students
discontinue their education (Baum et al., 2013; Engle, Bermeo, & O’Brien, 2006; Hoyt & Winn, 2004).

Engle et al. (2006) stated that, “college students are often first-generation students who face “lower levels of academic preparation, lower educational aspirations, less encouragement and support to attend college particularly from parents, less knowledge of the college application process and fewer resources to pay for college”(pp. 14-15). First-generation students are less likely to attend college and less likely to persist to a degree (Engle et al., 2006). In addition, these students are typically older women, minorities, and have low income. They often have dependent children, delay entry, begin at two-year institutions, commute, work full time, attend college part-time, need remedial coursework, and stop in and out (Engle et al., 2006; Feldman, 1993; Hoyt & Winn, 2004).

Over 50% of students who stop-out name financial concerns as their reason for not returning to college (Ross et al., 2012). Such students may have a pressing need to work in order to pay the bills and fulfill family obligations (Hoyt & Winn, 2004). Students’ family background, as well as the current state of their family, are both influential factors in their success in higher education (Baum et al., 2013; Reason, 2009). One way to ease the financial concerns of these students is to provide alternate ways to fund their education.

Access to education increased for low-economic status U.S. citizens when the federal government implemented the Higher Education Act of 1965 and the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant program (known as Pell Grants) of 1972. The cost of tuition today is rising steadily across the United States. With few options for obtaining
the money required to cover their basic needs, some homeless college students may choose to break the law to provide for those needs (Merdinger et al., 2005). Merdinger et al. (2005) found that 27 percent of their sample of college students formerly in foster care admitted to committing a crime for monetary gain. The lack of adequate finances can sometimes cause problems in securing stable housing, transportation, clothing, and food (Berg-Cross & Green, 2009; NCHE, 2012). Homeless college students often manage to creatively overcome these obstacles by using facilities in campus locker rooms, sleeping in residence hall common areas, and utilizing local food pantries (Berg-Cross & Green, 2009).

**Behavioral and Physical Health**

Researchers have found that homelessness may lead to emotional and behavioral instability in children (Coley et al., 2013; Toro et al., 2007), outcomes that often continue once the child reaches college age. Marijuana, crack cocaine, inhalants, hallucinogens, heroin, methamphetamines, stimulants, sedatives, and tranquilizers, as well as tobacco, alcohol, and intravenous drug use (Greene, Ennett, & Ringwalt, 1997; Toro et al., 2007), are prevalent among homeless populations. Homelessness may also lead to physical and mental health issues such as depression (Greene et al. 1997; Robertson, 1989; Toro et al., 2007), physical victimization, illegal activities (Greene et al. 1997; Toro et al., 2007), reduced self-esteem (Robertson, 1989), deficient personal health (Robertson, 1989) and suicide (Green et al., 1997; Kidd & Carroll, 2007; Toro et al., 2007). These are therefore problems that institutions of higher education must be prepared to address.
Factors Leading to Persistence

Several factors influence persistence among homeless college students. These include the campus environment, academic integration, social integration and resiliency. Because each of these factors helps establish the suitability of the campus for a given student, these factors influence the retention and persistence rates of the homeless student population (Tinto, 1975, 1993).

Campus Environment

Institutions must take responsibility for the achievement of student success. The campus environment of a post-secondary institution is an important factor on the influence of academic integration, social integration, student resiliency, and interventions, such as, support services, programs and systems on homeless student success. Students who transition and feel secure increase their chances of persisting (Flemings, et al., 2005). It is important that practitioners reach out to homeless college students as these students are likely not to reach out to others due to fear and rejection (Bensimon, 2007). There are many ways that post-secondary institutions can influence the persistence of homeless college students.

The use of “institutional agents” (Bensimon, 2007, p. 443) are paramount to providing the tools to guide students in need of additional support to the correct resources and affirm their ability to believe in themselves (Bensimon, 2007; Flemings, et al., 2005). Advocacy tends to be second nature to these individuals. Bensimon (2007) describes institutional agents as practitioners who feel morally obligated to assist marginalized, capable students by providing knowledge and increasing the network of those who otherwise would be unable to attend college. These practitioners provide this support
despite their official role at the institution and they also have the same expectation of their peers. Institutional agents have the ability to make homeless college students “feel valued, worthy, and respected.” (Bensimon, 2007, p.463). Their work, belief and interactions with homeless college students can be an invaluable tool in the persistence of this population.

The institutional agent can be any number of people associated with the institution whom the student trusts. This relationship can begin with the first interaction the student has with an advisor (Flemings, et al., 2005). This advisor could be a recruiter, enrollment staff, an academic advisor, financial services advisor, or other practitioner.

**Academic Integration**

Academic integration is attained when individuals are able to understand their role as a student, identify academic norms and values, and achieve academic success (Tinto, 1975). A lack of academic integration hinders success when the student is not prepared for the rigor of college coursework. Researchers have identified a number of strategies colleges and universities can employ to ease students’ transition from high school to college and thereby increase retention. Hoyt and Winn (2004) recommended such academic interventions as early alert systems, mentor programs, tutoring services, supplemental instruction, cohort study and support groups, accessible faculty contact hours, and freshmen seminars to support student success. Consistent, structured interaction with faculty by “emphasizing the student-faculty classroom experience, faculty advisors, quality teaching, faculty sponsorship/participation with student organization[s], and faculty scholarly participation” (p. 15) may also promote academic integration (Arnold, 1999).
Social Integration

Social integration into an academic setting is another important factor that influences retention and persistence for all students, including those who are homeless. Social integration is achieved when individuals have a sense of belonging and the ability to interact positively and effectively with various campus constituencies (Tinto, 1975). A sense of belonging can increase students’ networks on campus which can increase retention (Arnold, 1999; Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 1975). Students often depend on student affairs practitioners and others on campus to assist them in navigating the higher education experience. Assimilation of the homeless student with the campus environment can be facilitated with a robust orientation program (Arnold, 1999) that offers students the chance to develop a sense of belonging and build community (Arnold, 1999). Providing opportunities for homeless students to engage with peers, faculty, and staff will also strengthen social integration (Rovai, 2003). Mentorship and advocacy are required to support this demographic group in reaching the goal of degree completion.

Resiliency

It could be argued that persistence at a post-secondary institution may not be possible for homeless college students without resiliency. Masten (2001) refers to resiliency as “a class of phenomena characterized by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development” (p.228). For the purpose of this study, resiliency is defined as, “the many instances in which an individual is able to adapt to and thrive despite adverse conditions” (Gupton, 2016, p. 228). Many homeless college students have faced the stress of rootlessness prior to entering post-secondary institutions. The difficulties they may have faced increased their ability to adapt to stressors (Garmezy,
Resiliency is a strength that can be used as a coping mechanism against the obstacles faced by this population (Gupton, 2016). My participants showed intelligence in their decisions and responses to adverse conditions and by virtue of college attendance and completion, they showed resilience and success. It was specified by Garmezy (1991) and reiterated by Gupton (2016) that, “the person’s intelligence and disposition” (p. 229), “family support and external support from institutions and individuals outside the family” (p. 230) are influences in increasing resiliency. The use of resiliency and resiliency theory will be further discussed in chapter 5.

**Interventions**

Postsecondary institutions can take a variety of actions to support homeless college students in their academic journey and thereby increase retention and persistence (Tinto, 1993; Tinto & Pell Institute, 2004). The institution must first acknowledge that there is a homeless college student presence on campus and then seek to meet the distinctive needs of those students (Gupton, 2015). Such support may include providing academic advising, tutoring services, developmental courses, academic support services, faculty involvement both in and outside the classroom (Tinto, 2001, 2007; Tinto & Pell Institute, 2004), a financial aid checklist (Gupton, 2015), financial support (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010; Tinto & Pell Institute, 2004), and opportunities for student engagement (Tinto, 2001, 2007). Personal counseling, peer counseling, and mentoring services (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010; Mares & Jordan, 2012; Tinto & Pell Institute, 2004) may provide additional sources of support.
There are other actions that could help meet the needs of the homeless college student. Gupton (2015) suggests that a system could serve as an “economic distress student support network” (p. 232) to operate as a one-stop shop for financial concerns. An “access and community outreach advisory committee” (p. 232) can be formed to address and monitor the needs of this population (Gupton, 2015). Providing a priority status for on-campus housing is another way that institutions can support homeless college students (Gupton, 2015). This would remove a primary barrier in the lives of these students.

Federal support programs such as the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, TRIO Student Support Services (TRIO SSS), the Second Chance Act (SCA), Education and Training Vouchers (ETV), and the Transitional Living Program for Homeless Youth (TLP) can be expanded to provide the additional funding necessary to address the needs of this population (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010; Mares & Jordan, 2012). Employment programs through the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) would also be of benefit to homeless students (Toro et al., 2007). Lastly, it would be helpful for postsecondary institutions to maintain a dedicated staff member to serve as a “higher education homeless liaison” (Gupton, 2015, p. 233) to homeless college students, similar to the homeless education liaison position the McKinney Vento Act requires all K-12 school districts maintain (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth [NAEHCY], n.d.).

**Summary**

Given the lack of research on homeless college students, as well as the absence of data on graduation rates for this at-risk population, it is difficult to conclude what
strategies colleges and universities can employ to support homeless college students in completing their college degrees. Nevertheless, data from other underrepresented groups suggests that there is much we can do to improve the prospect of success for these students. Nearly 80 years ago, Butts (1937) emphasized the importance of the college environment in influencing student success. Today we remain interested in and aware of the myriad ways in which the campus climate and context influence all students, and may disproportionately influence homeless college students.

Students who lack permanent housing, which include those who are former foster youth, have a significant and ongoing need for services and resources in order to persist to degree completion. Post-secondary institutions can provide these services and resources, and in doing so remove significant barriers for these students. Making such a commitment to homeless college students will assist in increasing their rate of persistence and support them in their educational endeavors.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to explore the phenomenon of college students who are experiencing homelessness and illustrate the essence of homeless college student experiences by eliciting and examining the participants’ stories to explore the factors that contribute to homeless college students’ persistence to graduation (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; Van Manen, 1990). The methodology or frame used for this study is a phenomenological approach, which allowed me to reflect on the lived experiences shared by the participants (Creswell 2014; Van Manen, 1990). Phenomenological research is “the study of lived experience, the attentive practice of thoughtfulness” to reveal the “essence” or “description of a phenomenon” (Van Manen, 1984, p. 6). The goal was to gain profound understanding (Merriam, 2009; Van Manen, 2017). The purpose of this research study was to explore the phenomenon of homeless college student persistence and to illuminate the essence of these students’ experience (Van Manen, 1990).

The constructivist paradigm allowed me to seek to understand the participants’ experiences and analyze their collective voices, with a goal of making “sense” of and deriving “meaning” from these experiences (Guido, Chávez, & Lincoln, 2010, p. 15). Constructivism allowed me and the participant to co-construct the narrative (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007) using, in this study, the techniques of artifact sharing and semi-structured interviews. The goal was to interpret the meaning from the
experiences of the participants, as they conveyed the meaning they constructed from their experiences and relationships (Creswell, 2014) at a postsecondary institution while homeless.

To conclude which factors influence homeless college students and their persistence, researchers must acquire firsthand knowledge of their experiences through their stories or narratives. Qualitative research thus served in this study as “an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribed to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). The participants’ narratives or “storied lives” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.2) provided texts that became the data sets used for analysis (Merriam, 2009). This allowed the researcher to obtain fresh insight and understanding about the participants and their experiences (Pellico & Chinn, 2007) offering findings that provide valuable information to assist in improving the practice of those who educate our students (Yettick, 2009).

Sites

To ensure engagement of the needed number of participants, I identified a program, an institution, and a project as three primary sites for participant recruitment. At each site a gatekeeper, in this case an individual, who works with homeless college students, was identified. I had no prior relationship with any of the gatekeepers. However, involving gatekeepers in participant recruitment efforts was intended to help establish my credibility with potential participants (Jones et al., 2014).

The gatekeepers selected for this study serve as liaisons to homeless college students with the ability to provide needed support services. These gatekeepers were selected because of the likelihood that they would know of the potential participants’
homelessness through close interaction and a relationship built on trust. This was especially important in this study, as it is not common for homeless college students to disclose this status to others in the campus community (Miller, Pavlakis, Samartino, & Bourgeois, 2015). I hoped that the gatekeepers had access to the contact information of former homeless student graduates at their site enabling them to identify potential participants for the study. I sent an email to the gatekeepers at each of the three sites, asking them to forward it to graduates of four-year institutions whom they knew were homeless and met the eligibility criteria.

Although the gatekeepers selected for this study serve as liaisons to homeless college students, it was discovered that these gatekeepers did not have extensive databases containing the contact information of former homeless student graduates. The contact information that they stored was largely inaccurate as it was information obtained from homeless college students prior to graduation and leaving their respective institutions. Therefore, although attempts to contact possible participants were made, those results were dismal. I received zero participation from the sites. This confirmed the difficulty in identifying and locating homeless college student graduates. Contact information for homeless college student alumni was not readily available.

**Alternate Methods of Recruitment**

After an extensive search for participants, a number of interested individuals were located. Word-of-mouth, social media posts, and email accomplished this. I informed family, friends, and colleagues of my search for participants. I emailed the recruitment email to all of my personal contacts, work contacts, community organizations, including homeless shelters, and my states’ homeless student liaison listservs for high school and
post-secondary institutions and asked them to distribute them. Further, I posted a call for participants on numerous Facebook professional organization pages, post-secondary student organization and graduate program pages. Lastly, I conducted Google searches to locate news stories of homeless college student graduates. I recruited these individuals on email and various social media accounts to inform them of my study and attached the recruitment flyer with my contact information, should they or someone they know be interested in participating. These methods provided the recruited participants for this study.

**Participants**

Purposeful sampling was used to gather “information-rich” cases from which to answer the research question (Patton, 2002). Participants consisted of seven alumni who graduated between 2010 and 2017 from a post-secondary institution. Potential participants met specific criteria to qualify for participation in the study; qualified individuals must have: (a) graduated from a post-secondary institution between 2008 and 2017, and (b) been homeless for a minimum of one academic year during college. The participant must have experienced a period of homelessness for one academic year to ensure that the student did indeed experience homelessness and all of the factors associated with being in this situation versus temporary displacement.

The research process was conducted in a manner that conveyed respect and appreciation for the participants’ contributions. As rapport was established between the participants and me, the participants’ trust in me grew (Patton, 2002) for they stated that they felt comfortable sharing their experiences with me because they knew that I
experienced homelessness as a student. The establishment of rapport began with the interaction that took place during the initial meeting (O’Brien, 2013).

A recruitment email (Appendix A) was forwarded to each gatekeeper for distribution to known homeless student graduates of their site. The three gatekeepers distributed the email to potential participants, informing them of the study and providing my campus email address so they can contact me if they were interested in participating. This method of recruitment did not yield any participants. An extensive search for participants continued using word-of-mouth, social media posts, and email. This method resulted in the recruitment of potential study participants. I then distributed the email to the potential participants I solicited. The recruitment email contained information about the study and instructions on how the potential participant could contact me if they had any questions or were interested in participating in the study.

Once I received contact from the potential participant, I called them to establish eligibility to participate in the study. This was done by use of the Criteria Screening Questionnaire (Appendix B) which insured that no time would be wasted interviewing respondents who do not meet the study’s criteria. It also reinforced the purpose of the study by asking questions that alert participants to the type of participants sought by me. The questions were created by determining the scope of data needed to study homeless college students. For example, it is important that potential participants experienced homelessness as a college student for a minimum of one academic year to ensure that they truly experienced the phenomenon.

Once the qualified participant was identified, I explained the purpose of the study and the participant’s role in it which was to explore how homeless college students who
were successful in completing a college degree perceive the influence of the campus environment on their persistence by eliciting their individual experiences on how the campus environment, their academic integration, their social integration, and resiliency influenced their persistence. This was to provide insight into how some homeless college students persist despite the obstacles they face, and to identify the types of resources institutions can provide that will improve these students’ chances of success.

An “Instructions to Participants” form (Appendix C) was emailed to individuals who indicated an interest in participating in the study. The Instructions to Participants form provided the agreed upon date, time and location of the interview and instruction to bring their artifact(s) with them. The form also included details of what would occur during the meeting such as reviewing the interview protocol, completing a consent form, completion of a demographic survey and conducting a multi-phase interview.

At the prescheduled interview time, date, and location the interview commenced with a review of the research process and interview protocol (Appendix E). Once understanding was established the informed consent form (Appendix D) was provided to the participants prior to data collection. We read over it together to insure comprehension and the participant signed the form. The participant was then asked to complete a Personal Data Sheet (Appendix F), which elicited demographic information such as age, gender, ethnicity, level of education, and current housing situation.

**Data Collection Methods**

Data collection tools should be tested or piloted prior to use in studies to allow for correction and intentionality (Jones et al., 2014; Merriam, 2009). The interview questions were piloted prior to using them, and edits were made allowing for correction and
intentionality (Jones et al., 2014; Merriam, 2009). The purpose of doing so was to assist in producing a strong study (Merriam, 2009). Data were collected from multiple participants for this study using a multi-phase artifact sharing and semi-structured interview. The goal of the interview was to understand the phenomenon from the participants’ viewpoint and to see the experience as they did (King, 1994; Knox & Burkard, 2009). A semi-structured interview was conducted, allowing for flexibility and giving me the ability to clarify answers with follow-up questions (Jones et al., 2014). Background, experience, knowledge, feeling, and probing questions (Patton, 2002) were asked in both the artifact sharing and semi-structured interview portions. It was necessary to build rapport and create a trusting environment to encourage participants to disclose a greater depth and breadth of information, enabling me to better understand the participants’ backgrounds and experiences (Jones et al., 2014).

The interview locations varied dependent upon the needs of the participant. Although in person, face-to-face interviewing is the preferred method of data collection as it provides the opportunity to identify “social cues” (Knox & Burkard, 2009; Opdenakker, 2006), alternative interview methods such as videoconferencing was permitted. This allowed for flexibility in the data collection process to accommodate the varied schedules and locations of the participants.

Each participant had the option of meeting in a quiet public space in a quiet, reserved space or meeting by videoconference. Participants interviewed by videoconference were asked to submit photographs of their artifact(s) prior to the interview. This ensured that I could clearly see the photos of the artifact(s) being described. All interviews were recorded with the participants’ permission.
Instruments

The data sources used for this study are personal data sheets, artifact sharing, and semi-structured interviews. The participants provided this data. Profiles of the participants were developed using information from the three data sources.

Personal Data Sheet

I developed personal data sheets for the participants to complete. The instrument asked for the participant’s age, gender, ethnicity, number of years and months as a homeless college student, if they are a first-generation student, what year were they awarded their bachelor degree, highest level of education, and current housing status. Table 1 illustrates this information in Chapter 4.

Artifact Sharing

Collecting and analyzing visual data is an effective way to complement the traditional verbal method of interviewing in qualitative research (Padgett, Smith, Derejko, Henwood, & Tiderington, 2013). Artifact sharing is a form of collecting visual data. Bach (2007) described visual narrative inquiry as “an intentional, reflective, active human process in which researchers and participants explore and make meaning of experience both visually and narratively” (p. 281). Its benefits derive from the prompting of memories elicited by visual items, such as, photographs, memories that were often forgotten until the image was viewed (Padgett et al., 2013). In this way images may cause better recall of memories from an individual’s consciousness than does language, producing increased information (Harper, 2002; O’Brien, 2013; Padgett et al., 2013). Similar to photo elicitation, inviting participants to take an active role in the artifact sharing by providing their own artifacts empowered the participant and built rapport with
me (O’Brien, 2013; Padgett et al., 2013), helping to generate rich description (Rose, 2016).

Each participant supplied one or more artifacts for this phase of the interview that depicted their story and narrated their experience as a homeless college student, expressing their personal experiences. Each participant was asked to provide three words to describe what each artifact represents or means to them. Rose (2016) stated that this technique would empower the research participant to serve as an “expert” (p. 314). This phase of the interview, driven by the participant, resulted in a joint understanding of the experience by both the participant and the interviewer (Clandinin, 2013; Gubrium & Harper, 2013; Padgett et al., 2013). Increased understanding of the described experience was an indication that the interview was a success (Gubrium & Harper, 2013).

**Semi-structured Interview**

The second phase of the interview conducted was a semi-structured interview. The use of a semi-structured interview approach allowed for the creation of a standard set of open-ended interview questions, in no set order, and permitted participants to clarify their answers (Jones et al., 2014). This interview protocol also provided me with the ability to compare data sets (Knox & Burkard, 2009).

This approach was selected to enable me to establish some structure for the interview without a sense of rigidness (Knox & Burkard, 2009; O’Brien, 2013). I wanted the participants to feel that there is a natural flow or freedom to expressing themselves and sharing their experience. The rapport I built with the participants influenced this flow (King, 1994). This second phase of the interview continued to build upon the rapport
established in the first portion, fortified trust and encouraged continued rich conversation (Knox & Burkard, 2009).

**Interview Protocol**

Each participant was asked to bring one or more artifacts with them to our meeting for the artifact-sharing portion of the interview. The participant used the artifact(s) to depict their story and narrate their experience as a homeless college student, expressing their personal experiences, connected to the research question. In introducing the interview process itself, I utilized strategies to share my passion for the subject matter, set clear expectations for both parties, and explained how participation can help others by contributing to this field of scholarship.

Following the introductory information, the artifact-sharing phase of the interview began. At its conclusion, the semi-structured interview question phase immediately followed. Throughout these interactions I strived to be cognizant of cultural norms and thoughtful about my environment and remain attentive to and observe body language (Jones et al., 2014). In addition, I sought to provide encouragement (Josselson, 2007) by sharing some details of my own educational journey while experiencing homelessness.

I acknowledged that revisiting these memories may cause an uprising of emotions for the participants (King, 1994; Knox & Burkard, 2009). A list of counseling resources were provided to each participant at the conclusion of the interviews. Lastly, I attempted to utilize snowball sampling by asking participants to identify other college graduates they knew who experienced homelessness or housing instability during their postsecondary education. The participants were asked to send the identified potential participants the recruitment email (Appendix A).
In order to increase trustworthiness, participants received an email containing a typed transcript of their interview for their review to establish accuracy. Any edits were incorporated into an updated transcript. The transcripts were housed on a secure server and a flash drive was kept in a locked file cabinet at my home for the duration of the study. These transcripts will be destroyed when mandated by IRB protocol. Lastly, participants received a thank you email for their contributions to the study.

**Data Analysis**

I used a thematic analysis for this study. Thematic analysis is defined as, “the process of recovering structures of meanings that are embodied and dramatized in human experience represented in a text” (van Manen, 2014, p. 319). I analyzed the interviews to make sense of the data (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011). The recordings of both the artifact-sharing phase of the interview and the semi-structured phase of the interview were transcribed, then analyzed together. A professional transcriptionist completed the transcription. I cross-referenced or checked the transcription against the recordings for accuracy. Afterward, the participant was sent the transcript to review for accuracy. I then listened to the recordings and read the transcriptions again to become acquainted with their contents (King, 1994). Once I became familiar with the transcripts given experiences, and the phenomenon, I began the process of identifying codes, categories and themes.

The transcribed interviews were uploaded into Dedoose (http://www.dedoose.com), a secure Web application that stores and organizes both qualitative and quantitative data. A journal of memos kept on each participant interaction to record my thoughts throughout the process, were used as an instrument of analysis for
this study (Jones et al., 2014). Codes were then developed from the raw data and used to analyze meaningful statements in the transcripts. I created a provisional list of codes. I utilized an open coding process to delineate themes from the raw data (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011). This lead to initial coding. Attribute coding was utilized to capture the demographic information.

After the list of codes were developed and categorized, subcategories were identified and the transcriptions were recoded, as needed. These data-driven codes were utilized in the development of a codebook. DeCuir-Gunby et al. (2011) outlined five steps to creating data-driven codes for a codebook: 1) reduce raw information; 2) identify subsample themes; 3) compare themes across subsamples; 4) create codes; and 5) establish reliability of codes (p. 141). For the purposes of this study the codebook consisted of code name, full definition, and example.

I then utilized pattern coding to pull the data together and develop categories. I cross-referenced codes in Dedoose to reparent codes, make new code roots, merge, clarify titles and definitions, as needed. At this point, it was important for me to visually see the codes all at once. I used horizontalization, processing all the data with equal importance. I needed the ability to rearrange the codes by hand and see them laid out to get a better visual on the patterns. I imported the codes to a spreadsheet and printed them. I cut them up for easy management and arranged the codes into categories, eliminating duplications and consolidating, as needed. These were then arranged into themes. The themes changed several times during the writing process. The final list of themes accurately represent the experiences of the participants.
Trustworthiness

Qualitative measures of credibility look different from quantitative measures (Merriam, 2002). Merriam (2002) speaks to how trustworthiness can be increased through the use of strategies that strengthen our interpretation of the findings. Several strategies can be used to strengthen a study. Possible approaches include triangulation, member checks, peer review, reflexivity, and saturation (Merriam, 2002). For the purposes of this study, I used the following three strategies to increase trustworthiness: triangulation, member checking, and peer review.

To address reliability, I used triangulation, or multiple sources of data (King, 1994; Merriam, 2002). Triangulation occurred, demonstrating validity, as two types of raw data sets were analyzed: data from the artifact sharing interview phase and data from the semi-structured interview phase (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011; King, 1994). The use of thick, rich description also improved reliability and external validity. A researcher’s log or journal was keep to provide an audit trail to increase reliability. The use of member checking improved trustworthiness, as participants received a copy of their transcribed interviews for review (King, 1994).

The researcher is the primary research instrument within a qualitative study (Merriam, 2002). My interpretation of the data therefore provides the reality through which the study is written (Merriam, 2002). I tested the reliability of the interpretation or findings using peer review. I gave two transcripts and my findings to a peer for review. I asked the peer to provide me with feedback on the credibility of my findings (Merriam, 2002).
Confidentiality

I upheld confidentiality throughout the research process. Once an individual was identified as a participant, the procedures of anonymity were explained. Confidentiality was maintained by issuing each participant a pseudonym. The data collected from each participant was labeled with the pseudonym only. Pseudonyms were also used in the transcription of the interviews and prompts. After the transcription was completed, the recordings of the participants were destroyed. The transcripts were de-identified using the pseudonyms and housed on a secure server and a flash drive are kept in a locked file cabinet at the home of the researcher.

Positionality

As a researcher, I have a personal interest in understanding the factors that cause homeless college students to persist to graduation despite the hardships of their circumstances. My lens involves my experience with homelessness as a youth. My family went from living in an affluent neighborhood to living in other families’ spare rooms, to a decrepit downtown hotel, and finally to a charity-run shelter.

Having spent two-and-a-half years in a state of homelessness with my family, I empathize with the journey of these particular students. There were times when living in a vehicle would have been preferable to sleeping in some of the structures we inhabited. I was a high school student for half the time I was homeless and a college student at the latter end of this time period. I had become fairly despondent by the time a former high school teacher spotted me job searching and offered me an opportunity to attend a summer program at a local postsecondary institution. I accepted that offer and began to come out of the fog of despair and rejoin society. Enrolling in college was my way back
to the present and my way out of the despair and helplessness I faced. College and the resulting degrees became a way to secure an escape from homelessness.

My interest in conducting this study also involves a desire to understand the overwhelming sense of isolation, helplessness, and shame I felt during the time I was homeless and to explore whether others experience the same phenomenon. During this time, I did not know any other homeless college students. As a student affairs professional I now understand that there are a number of homeless college students at any given time on our college campuses.

Working in student affairs has increased my awareness of the plight of homeless students. During my tenure at my current institution I have encountered many homeless college students. There is an increase in the number of these students identified every year, yet colleges are not equipped to provide the resources that these students need. In my current position, my office provides homeless student liaison information to those in need of support. I was very interested in learning which services and programs caused homeless college student graduates to persist despite the hardships they faced.

Watching some students excel in spite of their privations is inspiring. Identifying and providing resources that can help students succeed might encourage students to disclose their homelessness and seek the assistance they need. Robert Coles (1989) reflected that the study of identity could be considered an investigation into the stories of one’s life. I have certainly learned “to respect” my “stories and learn from them” (p. 30). I hoped to do the same during my research as I listened respectfully to the experiences and journeys of my participants while bracketing any of my assumption.
**Delimitations**

The delimitations of this study are: 1) limited existing research on homeless college student persistence, 2) the difficulty in identifying homeless college student graduates, 2) access to homeless student graduates contact information is severely limited, 3) confidentiality held by the personnel that work with this population, 4) the amount of time between graduation and participation in the study, 5) the use of a newly created instrument, 6) reliance on study participants to self report accurately, and lastly, as the researcher, 7) I acknowledged my bias as a former homeless college student. I was aware that I must take care not to assume that my experiences are the same as the participants.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

My mother always—she told me this, she was like, God doesn’t put anything on you that you cannot handle and which is—I feel like she figured I could handle what I was going through which is why she didn’t—she did not like the situation I was in and she felt like I was choosing it and partially I was because I knew—the reason I was choosing it was because of education, that’s why I was choosing it. But she also knew, at the same time, I didn’t have a choice because if I wanted a future for myself, I need to get my education. If I want to do the things I want to do, I have to have an education to do those things. ~David, 2017

The purpose of this research study was to explore the phenomenon of college students who experience homelessness and to illuminate the essence of these students’ experience (Van Manen, 1990). By eliciting and examining the stories of the research participants (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007) with a goal of discovering and understanding the significance (Merriam, 2009), the study sought to identify factors that contribute to homeless college students’ persistence to graduation. Tinto’s retention theory (Tinto, 1975, 1993) provided the theoretical foundation for this exploration, and phenomenology provided the methodological framework. Approaching the study through a constructivist lens allowed me to co-construct the narrative with the participants, using the techniques of artifact sharing and semi-structured interviews. I interpreted the meaning that
participants constructed and conveyed based on their experiences and relationships (Creswell, 2014) as homeless students attending a postsecondary institution.

The participatory nature of the constructivist paradigm actively engaged the contributors, enabling a richer and deeper understanding of their experiences. Analyzing the themes that emerged from the participants’ interview data helped illuminate the essence of their experiences. Discussion of the study’s findings will include a summary of the participants’ demographic characteristics, a profile of each participant, and an analysis of the themes that emerged from data collection, using semi-structured interviews and artifact sharing.

**Participants**

It is difficult to identify and locate homeless college student graduates because contact information for homeless college student alumni is not readily available. After an extensive search, a number of interested individuals were located. Only seven of these potential participants met the two specific criteria to qualify for participation in the study: (a) they graduated from a post-secondary institution between 2008 and 2017, and (b) were homeless for a minimum of one academic year during college. The criteria insured that the student did experience homelessness and all the factors associated with it, as opposed to experiencing temporary displacement.

Anonymity was safeguarded in the study by using a self-selected pseudonym for each participant. The following section provides an introduction to each participant. Each profile contains the participant’s pseudonym, demographic information, the significance of the artifacts the participant presented, and a metaphor the participant believed would
best illustrate the experience of homelessness as a college student. A summary of the demographic information is located in Table 1.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years Homeless</th>
<th>Degree Type</th>
<th>Year Degree Awarded</th>
<th>Highest Degree Earned</th>
<th>1st Gen. College Student</th>
<th>Veteran</th>
<th>Disability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Precious</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anodda</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>Associate’s</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Associate’s</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jodi</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Associate’s</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>Associate’s</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Precious**

Precious self-identified as a 36-year-old African American female, and was a homeless college student for a total of two years while pursuing her bachelor’s degree. She received her bachelor’s degree in 2012. Since then Precious has earned a Master’s degree and is currently a doctoral student. At the time of the interview, she had stable housing. The artifacts Precious presented are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

*Precious: Artifacts and Meaning*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Altoids</th>
<th>Kotex Panty Liners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Refreshing</td>
<td>Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Embarrassment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpful</td>
<td>Needful</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked to provide a metaphor that describes her experience as homeless college student, Precious stated:
You know how Snoopy, I guess, in the Peanuts, went up to his dog house and that’s where he dreamed? I remember, as a child, I had—when I was coming up, my mother went to the thrift store and found a bedspread and curtains that were Snoopy. . . . I adored that. She washed it and put it in my room. And that’s how . . . for whatever reason, I felt connected at some point because he would dream . . . it seemed like none of the children knew anything as much as he knew, he was like the smart one, but he never said anything . . . it’s like he always knew something that they didn’t know. So that’s how I kind of felt I was that person, there was something going on in me that nobody knew but I knew it was there.

**Anodda**

Anodda self-identified as a 30-year-old White female veteran with disabilities. Anodda stated that she had been a homeless college student for a total of two years and seven months while pursuing her associate’s degree, which she completed in 2016. Anodda is currently interested in continuing her education and has applied to a specialized bachelor’s degree program. At the time of the interview, she had stable housing. The artifacts Anodda presented are listed in Table 3:

**Table 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anodda: Artifacts and Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Car</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked to provide a metaphor that describes her experience as homeless college student, Anodda sang a song:
You know it goes, “Like a small boat on the ocean sending big waves like a single word can make a heart open. I might only have one match, I might only have one goddamn match, one, but I’m a fucking explosion and all those things I didn’t say, wrecking balls inside my brain, I could scream them loud tonight, can you hear my voice this time, this is my fight song, take back my life song, prove them all right song.”

That song served as a prayer for Anodda. She stated that she didn’t know how she would be successful without having the energy or fuel to succeed. However, Anodda vowed to not give up on herself. She said that she would close her eyes and sing that song because she knew that despite her obstacles, she would continue to reach her educational goals, somehow. That spark or fight in her would not be denied.

In addition, Anodda shared:

You’re just like, I have this goal, I have this goal, I have this goal, and it’s a big goal I have no fucking idea how I’m going to—like when people who come from families that are proper and have it all together, they have a plan, they have a step plan. I’m going to do this, this, and this, and no one is going to tell me no and I’m going to reach my goal and I’m just going to get it, I’m just going to shoot for it and I’m going to aim. Those are the people who are seen. They don’t need little engine that could, they’re fucking Katniss Everdeen and they’ve got the arrow.

Anodda continued by sharing that as a college student experiencing homelessness, she went through hardship to reach her academic goals. She remained focused despite her hunger stating, “So, it’s like the little engine that could but the little engine that could
doesn’t have train tracks, doesn’t have coal in the back firing that flame, you don’t know how that flame is up and running”.

**Jodi**

Jodi self-identified as a 61-year-old African-American female with a disability. Jodi stated that she was a homeless college student for a total of three years while pursuing her bachelor’s degree, which she completed in 2017. Jodi is now interested in helping those who are newly homeless to prevent chronic homelessness in their lives. At the time of the interview, although she was temporarily staying with her son, she was actively looking for other housing and categorized herself as homeless. The artifact Jodi presented is listed in Table 4:

Table 4

**Jodi: Artifact and Meaning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cell phone</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sight</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked to provide a metaphor that captured her experience as homeless college student, Jodi stated:

The only thing I can think of right now as a metaphor would be a scripture. It says the race is not given to the swift . . . but to those who endure to the end. And then that tortoise and the hare story came to mind as well, with the hare racing on and deciding he going to take him a nap because the tortoise is not going to win. And the tortoise won because he took his time and he was persistent and he finished strong.
David

David self-identified as a 32-year-old Black male. David was a homeless for a total of one year and three months while pursuing his associate’s degree. He received his associate’s degree in 2012, followed by a bachelor’s degree in 2016. David has recently been accepted into a master’s degree program. At the time of the interview, he had stable housing. The artifacts David presented are listed in Table 5:

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>David: Artifacts and Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Blanket</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warmth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked to provide a metaphor that describes his experience as homeless college student, David stated, “Floating in the wind, because I felt like I was at the mercy of the weather outside. Like a plastic bag floating in the wind is how I felt.”

Eric

Eric self-identified as a 51-year-old African American male veteran. He also identified as a first-generation college student with a disability. Eric stated that he was a homeless college student for a total of two years and six months while pursuing his bachelor’s degree. He received his bachelor’s degree in 2014 and is currently enrolled in a master’s degree program. At the time of the interview, he was homeless. The artifacts Eric presented are listed in Table 6:
Table 6

_Eric: Artifacts and Meaning_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emblem of Organization</th>
<th>T-Shirt with photo of birthplace</th>
<th>Collection of Books</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Historical</td>
<td>Remembrance</td>
<td>Heritage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sankofa</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>Foundation</td>
<td>Evolution</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked to provide a metaphor that describes his experience as homeless college student, Eric asked if we could talk about a phoenix. He continued:

I guess, as we talk about a phoenix, and they say phoenix, you know, they’re born and then they grow and then they burn and die and then they come back alive out of the ashes, and that’s just rising, you know. I’m not a Falcons fan, but you know, they rise up out of these ashes. Or Maya Angelou, still, I rise, you can use that one. But, I love the fact that I just won’t let it beat me. So, I would take a poem like Maya Angelou, I Rise, or like I said, the phoenix, and I rise . . . You know, rise up, and continue to use either that slogan or statement to motivate you to not stop.

_Karen_

Karen self-identified as a 30-year-old African American female. Karen stated that she was homeless for a total of one year while pursuing her associate’s degree, which she completed in 2010. Karen continued her education and completed a bachelor’s degree as well. She currently works on a college campus. At the time of the interview, she had stable housing. The artifacts Karen presented are listed in Table 7:
Table 7

Karen: Artifacts and Meaning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Night Cream</th>
<th>Toothbrush</th>
<th>Deodorant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secure</td>
<td>Clean</td>
<td>Dirty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable</td>
<td>Car</td>
<td>Creative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sight</td>
<td>Healthy</td>
<td>Worried</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked to provide a metaphor that describes her experience as homeless college student, Karen stated:

You know, actually, I would say it’s like a fish, right? You’re in an ocean or in a pond or whatever and you’re just swimming around and there’s really no way out because there’s so much room to just go. That’s how I felt at times, just like a fish, like I was just swimming and never had to come up for a lot of air, but I had to come up just for a little bit, but there was still—I had to go back under the water and keep going. Just going and going and going. Just swimming around.

Alice

Alice self-identified as a 25-year-old White female. She also identified as a first-generation college student with a disability. Alice stated that she was homeless for a total of six years while pursuing her bachelor’s degree, which she completed in 2017. At the time of the interview, Alice was living with a brother who had an unstable housing situation, and she was therefore at risk of losing her housing. The artifacts Alice presented are listed in Table 8.
When asked to provide a metaphor that describes her experience as homeless college student, Alice declined to provide one, wanting to “think on that” and email the metaphor at a later date. An email reminder was sent to Alice and although she replied, she has not provided a metaphor to date.

**Themes**

I explored how these students experienced homelessness while pursuing an education, and how the institutional environment influenced their ability to persist in college. Based on a systematic analysis of the data, I assigned codes, and a review of these codes enabled well-defined categories to emerge. Further review of these categories resulted in the identification of common themes among the participants’ individual stories (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007).

Five themes were identified through this process. Analyzing the distinct themes that emerged allowed meaning making to occur. The themes include: the institutional obligation to homeless college students; the campus environment; emotional support; strengths of homeless college students; and the needs of homeless college students.
Institutional Obligations to Homeless College Students

Institutions of higher education typically acknowledge that they have a primary responsibility to support student success. There is less agreement, however, regarding to what degree (if any) post-secondary institutions are obligated to assist homeless college students in successfully completing their degrees. Nevertheless there are many ways that post-secondary institutions can influence the persistence of homeless college students.

Acknowledgement

To assist the homeless student population, post-secondary institutions must acknowledge that such a population exists on its campuses. The simple willingness to recognize the existence of its homeless student population can have a large influence on the ability of these students to succeed. Acknowledging the existence of enrolled homeless college students is an essential first step in addressing this issue. As Alice asks:

How many students have to have this problem? So, what will move the needle? Tell me. How big does it have to be? How bad does it have to be? How much do you have to know? Because one of the answers that I got a lot whenever I told people was, well, not enough people have your problem. And I was like, well, what’s enough then, honey? Define it for me, because if there’s no definition then we’re not talking about this anyway. So, no matter how much I did or how often I was around these people, they still held some belief to a degree or other that I was not me and it wasn’t real and it didn’t exist and it wasn’t really that bad, it couldn’t really be that bad, etc.

The participants were not asked any questions directly related to their alma mater’s acknowledgement of their existence on campus; however, all of the participants
mentioned this acknowledgement and believed it was important. In fact, it meant a great deal to each of them. The final interview question asked participants if they wanted to add anything else pertaining to homeless college students that had not already been discussed in the interview. Eric responded:

That they are on the campus. Number one: That they are on the campus. Because if I’m homeless and I’m just one student that they don’t know about, I’m sure that there’s many others that are on the campus that they don’t know about.

Similarly, David said:

That if not—it could be Debbie who is right next to you or it could be Bobby who sits back there all by himself or it could—and it can easily happen to anyone. Just—it just really—as we know, people today live paycheck to paycheck. You miss one paycheck, you are behind and you can—one paycheck, maybe two weeks, but that can put you behind a month or two months and if you don’t pay your rent for two months, you’re kicked out. And it can happen—and I feel like—a lot of people feel like, Oh, it can’t happen to me, can’t happen to me—a lot of people feel exempt from certain things—from things happening.

Precious stated:

One of the things I would like the population to know about homeless college students is that there are more than you think is there. A lot of them will not say anything because of embarrassment. Also, being young and in college is hard and not having a place to stay is an extra added stress on that student to achieve their goals.
It is important for the institutional administration to recognize the existence of homeless college students on campus. The administration can guide the campus community regarding how they should accommodate homeless college students, as well as setting the tone for policy discussions and decisions. Some participants who became advocates at their respective institutions understood the need for acknowledgement from institutional leadership. Alice stated:

One hindrance that bugged the shit out of me was I had asked our chancellor for four years straight, in meetings and otherwise, please publish even a fucking tweet, I don’t care, something that just says, We acknowledge that students are experiencing housing and food insecurity at the [University]. First and foremost, we support these students, like we recognize their struggle or their—I hate to use the word struggle, that’s misappropriated a lot—their journey or their challenges—the challenges they’re experiencing at our campus, and we are committed to researching this issue further and making recommendations and improving [the] campus community for all. They’ve never said that and it’s such a wuss thing, I mean, that’s not—can you just say—it sounds performative, like a performative allyship, but low key, that would have been meaningful to me. I would have cared.

Ignoring this population can give homeless college students the message that they are not accepted members of the campus community. Alice shared how she felt on her campus:
You know, they actually used to insist in articles when I started speaking out that I did not exist as a student, they wanted to claim that I did not exist as an actual student and all of these other things.

Alice continued, “But yeah, I’m sure you know, university administrators told me to leave, you need to go to a community college, you’ll find more people like you there.”

Similar experiences told by other participants painted a vivid picture of the lack of awareness of homeless students’ existence by the campus community. But why does this matter? Why is acknowledgement important to homeless college students? Anodda explained:

Because people need to know. Because we are not something that should be swept under the rug, because we are bigger than our fucking circumstances. Because they want to—because we’re not Hitlers, this should not be a Hitler society, only the best of the best deserve to fucking succeed.

In other words, Anodda and other participants suggest, knowing that others acknowledge your existence in the world, matters and has an impact. To be seen is to be visible, real, and a part or member of something.

**Ability to Identify Signs of Homelessness**

To acknowledge that homeless college students exist on campus, post-secondary institutions must have the ability to identify this population. Practitioners cannot help those they cannot see or identify. Currently, homeless college students self-identify (NCHE, 2012) through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or person-to-person. However, it is important to identify or look for signs that something may be
deficient in a student’s life, because they are unlikely to volunteer the information. David explained:

It’s not the person who you expect it to be. Because I think looking at me, people didn’t—like if you looked at me, I am an SGA senator, I’m a leader on campus, I do all of these things here, and I play tennis here, and I do all of these things. I don’t—and I think people looking at me would not have thought—my clothes were never dirty, I never smelled—after tennis I did but like I never smelled like I never take a shower. I never—my clothes were not like super ripped, I never wore the same thing every day in a row, I never did that. It’s not the person—it might be the person who gives you all those signs, but it might be somebody who doesn’t give you those signs.

Despite David’s ability to mask his true housing circumstance, he knew that if someone looked hard enough, they would see that something was not quite right. David explained, “And so, for people—and like I feel like I didn’t give out those signs, the only way I gave out those signs was like, I was here early in the morning and—I was first here and last to leave.”

If homeless college students cannot be identified they cannot be helped. Therefore, it is important that staff and faculty on campus receive training to help them recognize the signs of homelessness. Anodda shared an example of an attentive professor:

If you see a student and they’re not eating and they show signs of hunger, because confusion is a sign of hunger, someone needs to ask them, someone needs to say something; it’s not okay to come to school hungry. I mean, [a professor], every
time she sees me, she wants to give me food. Let me tell you about Faith Powell, she is the most compassionate, most—there’s not words to describe her. She was eating a blueberry muffin one morning before class and she could see it. I don’t fucking know how she knew, but I was looking at her, I was staring at her, I didn’t fucking even know I was staring at her, but I was staring at her like it was a crime to eat in front of me, like no joke, like it was fucking creepy as fuck. There was a break and I pretended like I could afford shit like I always did, like I could afford food, and I came back and on my desk, was an apple, a bag of chips, and a protein bar, and a soda. Oh my God, I’m ashamed of how quickly I ate that.

While Anodda’s professor was able to correctly determine what Anodda was experiencing, Alice described an instance in which another sign of homelessness, sleepiness, was misinterpreted by her professors:

And so, it’s just constantly having to be afraid and so it was like, this was a span of time where I just wasn’t sleeping, I wasn’t sleeping, the only time I fell asleep was in the middle of class because that was the only time I felt safe and my teachers didn’t understand that. It was actually a compliment to them, it was not an insult. They didn’t get it.

Anodda reported encountering the same issue:

That came to me because when [my professor] was always looking down on me, because that’s how I feel, she looks down on me, because she was always nitpicking at my behavior, because sometimes—because I was always tired because of having to travel so much between the homeless shelter and school. I fell asleep in her class one time which was bad. I am so sorry, [professor], that I
fell asleep in your class and I’ll never stop being sorry for that. I am guilty for that
and I’ll never be sorry enough for that. Right? And I would apologize to her over
and over and over again for that. But, that single instance was very bad for our
relationship and I can’t take that back and I can’t stop feeling guilty for that. And
ever since that time, I always wanted to find ways to blend in so that she wouldn’t
notice me so much.

Anodda showed obvious signs of hunger, while both Anodda and Alice displayed
signs of sleep deprivation. However, often the signs are not as easy to see. They can also
be misinterpreted. Homeless college students frequently attempt to hide signs of
homelessness so they don’t stand out among the student body. Some participants
suggested that they appeared to thrive, in the eyes of those on campus, due to their ability
to be whatever others wanted to them to be. They learned to blend in or, more accurately,
not to stand out as different.

The participants who accomplished this worked methodically to insure they
presented themselves this way as often as possible. According to Eric:

I didn’t think that they would believe that I was homeless because I had to come
stinking, raggedy, you know, hair messed up, you know, unkempt. And I couldn’t
do that because in my mind I was always thinking, these books where I came
from, all of these artifacts that I brought you contributed to, no, I’m not going to
be that person, I’m not going to be stinking, I’m not going to be ran down.

While Eric hid his homeless status in plain sight, Alice attempted to deprive
herself of a personality in order to remain unseen:
That was one of the things that I knew really early on, is like, in terms of my housing situation in isolation of itself, I had to be so many different people all the time. And oftentimes it meant generally that I had to be the blandest version of myself possible because I needed to not offend anyone, I needed to not offend anyone, not spark aggression or anger. I just needed to almost not even exist, I just needed to be meek.

And so that was really hard for me. I lived with a lot of people who had beliefs and values that I don’t ascribe to, that I think are really generally—just genuinely terrible. So I had to be a version of myself that stayed with people who would be considered Trump supporters, and then another version of myself that stayed with people who were like really rich, like Hillary Clinton elite-type people, and then just all different kinds of folks in different situations.

And it made me—it meant that like when I tried to be in conversations with other people, my initial instinct was, Who do I have to be for that person? It wasn’t just like—I didn’t have an Alice, there wasn’t a self, it didn’t exist. I didn’t know what I liked, didn’t know what I was good at, didn’t know what I was bad at, didn’t know what my talents were, nothing. I knew nothing about myself generally. And all of the things that I thought I knew about myself were luxuries and I needed to get rid of those things because I had to survive somehow. So, yeah, it meant parroting a lot of the things around me.

**Ability to Engage Homeless College Students**

Once a homeless college student is identified, it is very important to speak to him or her in a way that does not belittle them or make assumptions about who they are.
Speech and tone can make all the difference in the world for these students. If not engaged properly, homeless college students can feel slighted, become withdrawn, and be reluctant to ask for assistance.

Alice shared the response she commonly received when she told professors she could not afford to purchase the course textbook. Alice would ask, “Can you please put one on reserve in a library?” The responses Alice received varied, but were often negative:

At first, they were like, Well, what kind of fucking financial decisions are you making? Are you—are you an alcoholic? Do you party too much? Do you socialize too much? Don’t you understand that this is your responsibility as a student? You are supposed to be buying my textbooks.

Training on how to engage homeless college students is vital to their success. Anodda shared how she responded to one particular professor who knew how to engage her:

I don’t know, we just had the same kind of sense of humor and just like she would make me want to try so hard. I got an A in her class or something like that. Even though she didn’t know, the way that teachers talk to you is so dependent on your success and your success is so dependent on your homelessness because you’re always thinking about, How can I change this circumstance?

Alice volunteered a suggestion to assist in effectively engaging homeless students and minimizing harm:

I would like to be honest, it would be cool if, in terms of recommendations for schools and practitioners, that there was some oversight about who is advising
and guiding this otherwise group of students. And I don’t want it to be people who don’t have any idea what they’re doing because, well, intentions are great, but influence is important and they can’t afford to be impacted so negatively. And your—you know, someone saying, Well I didn’t mean to do that is not good enough. We just don’t have the financial or emotional bandwidth to deal with people’s first times around the block here.

**Strategic Plan and Taskforce**

A post-secondary institution announces its principal commitments by creating a strategic plan that conveys its goals, garners participation from its constituents, and guides institutional change. The strategic plan conveys its plan to act. It is a pledge, a promise to follow through for the betterment of the institution and a way to show the entire campus community the importance of this group of students by promoting a vision, mission, objectives, strategies, and action plans for combating homelessness on campus.

Alice believes adding a homelessness initiative to an institution’s strategic plan would demonstrate a commitment to supporting this specialized student population:

You get to the point where a lot of [homeless] students also say things like, “I’m sick of panels, I’m sick of these, we can do better” statements. They want actions, they want results. So, some sort of enforcement measure, I want—yeah, one thing that we didn’t get was commitments. Give me a timeline, give me a date. What’s going to happen if you don’t do it?

Another perceived that a task force would be an acceptable way to carry out such plans:
So we could put a committee—I say “committee,” but a group together to say, We’re going to collect for a food bank, or We’re going to spread the information for food stamps, or We’re going to help veterans and homeless people fill out paperwork to get Section 8. Their time should be compensated, generously.

The Campus Environment

The campus environment of a post-secondary institution is an important factor that influences homeless student success. The participants gave a wealth of information about relational experiences on the campus environment. They all acknowledged that they received something from the campus, though they described the campus environment in various ways.

Karen recalled ways the campus provided her with essential resources such as water and toiletries:

And back then, I just had to learn personal hygiene was even more than what it is now, because you never knew when the next time you would be able to apply those things with water, you know? Not—I didn’t have water accessible to me 24/7 like I do now, and so it just made me not take small things for granted. Because sometimes I was worried that I couldn’t buy a small thing of deodorant or that I couldn’t go into the health clinic and get a care bag that had those things in it.

Some participants described the campus environment as welcoming and characterized the campus as their home, while a few others sensed hostility. Karen expressed:
And so it was really tough on campus, because I thought that would be a safe haven when I first went and that was going to be the place that I helped find myself. And I got done and it wasn’t a place that I thought it was going to be.

**Improve Quality of Life**

Research shows that obtaining a college degree increases individuals’ earning power (Baum et al., 2013; Pew Research Center, 2014; Ross et al., 2012), which can assist in providing the basic needs that can improve one’s life. Increased financial security translates to the ability to fulfill basic needs, such as obtaining secure housing, better healthcare, food security, and clothing. It may even satisfy wants, such as taking a vacation or sending money to family members.

Regardless of how they experience these spaces, homeless college students have an expectation that persisting in the campus environment will have a large impact on their quality of life. Many saw the pursuit of a degree as the opportunity they needed to change their circumstances. Like many homeless college students, Alice viewed earning a college degree as a way to escape the outcomes of those she grew up around:

And so, I guess my college education was maybe, I don’t know, a huge risk, a damn gamble. I took a gamble on myself, I guess, because I knew what my fate was going to be otherwise. So worst case scenario I end up failing like everyone else did. So what’s to lose besides maybe the idea that I end up somewhere else? Anywhere else would have been better than there.

Anodda mirrored these thoughts when she stated:

And I said, God, if you want me to be a sign language interpreter, then I need to pass this math class. And I took ASL I and the math support and a couple of other
classes and English and stuff like that. And lo and behold, I passed that math course.

And it just—the reason why I started going to college was because I just have an innate need to not succumb to my circumstance, to not succumb to the statistic of the veteran not doing anything with her life, to the, Oh, I was homeless so I’m worth nothing. It comes from that innate need.

But then God. I will not give up on the mission and the purpose that God has for me because somebody like [my professor] says it’s not good for me to be an interpreter and good for me to go outside because I’m autistic, and my circumstance of homelessness, and all this kind of other shit. God kept me alive for this purpose, and how dare me or anybody else do anything to not honor it.

Similar to other college students, for homeless students this time in their lives is a time of self-discovery. College inevitably prompts significant self-examination, raising questions about who you are and who you want to become, for yourself and others. The participants were no different. They set goals and were driven. They believed this was their opportunity to improve their lives. Faith or a belief in something greater than themselves fueled participants’ desire to fight for their education. Jodi expressed, “I’m very independent, but I’ve just been through some situations where I have not been able to move forward like I want to. But I thank God for Him seeing me through school in spite of everything.”

The campus environment prompted participants to be introspective about themselves and what they had experienced in their lives up to that point. Precious described her response to being in this new environment:
Freedom. A sense of freedom. And I had not—I didn’t know that I was bound to a certain extent, I didn’t know that I was carrying this load. You know what I’m saying? Because no one had ever encouraged me to tell me how good I was at anything.

Being on campus sometimes prompted daydreams and feelings of escapism. For example, Precious described how the campus environment made her feel:

So I felt like that campus environment kind of nudged an urge to want to be more sociable. I thought about—I would daydream about, if my husband was picking me up some time, I would just psych myself out in the front and say, you know, my family member, somebody is coming to get me, but then you know it would get dark and nobody came. So, those are things that I think it just urged—it ignited a feeling—not urged, but it ignited a feeling in me to want to involve myself.

David shared that he often had the same association while spending time on campus:

I was on the tennis team when I was here and even during that time, I played tennis and it was one of the ways I used to regather my mind, to focus my mind. Because that’s what tennis does for me, it, it’s like a therapy for me when I play tennis. Even now when I play tennis, it’s very important—it helps me focus and it’s a hard thing for me to do is just focus on one thing, but it helps me pull that focus in.

And that’s what really school was for me in general, but especially when I was having and I’m dealing with the pressure that I’m just with this [tennis
racket]. I had friends that are tied to this racket, like they—it was a reminder of time when I was going to have fun, time where I could spend it with my friends, time where I can really just escape a world that I was—to escape.

**Sense of Security**

Some participants described the campus as providing a feeling of safety or protection from harm. This is very important for homeless college students, who need a safe haven from situations of uncertainty and fear of both the known and the unknown. Other students have a designated place called “home” to which they can go for refuge. The campus environment served as such a refuge for some of the participants.

When one has nowhere else to go and spends the majority of their time in a particular space, that space is like home. David stated, “I know when I was here I felt like—I felt safe. I’ve always felt safe here.” David elaborated:

> It was also an escape for me because I was here, my classes were in the morning time, I would do stuff in the afternoon for SGA and I would go play tennis and sometimes we had evening events. So during—from 8:00 in the morning until sometimes 8:00 at night, 10:00 at night, this is where I was, basically this was my home.

> So, you know, I would go to class, I would do what I needed to do, and then do events, and my events—I was doing things to help students out, whether it was just to give them an escape by doing game days or doing a mafia night, or whether it was doing other things, like cultural events and things that we did. So, it was really like—for me, it was like, I’m at home now, and I can do what I need
to do and I was helping other people out; I was also helping myself, too. So it just—I felt safe and I felt at home, and I was good.

**Basic Needs**

It would be impossible to discuss what contributes to this population’s persistence without addressing the fundamental needs of the homeless college student. The average college student may not have concerns about whether they will be able to eat that day or where they will sleep that night. They may not worry about whether or not they will have toiletries and a way to bathe, or even worry about Wi-Fi capability to complete their class assignments. Homeless college students worry about these things, and many others, on a daily basis.

**Shelter.** Practitioners need to understand the types of environments homeless college students may have to sleep in while pursuing their education, as these contexts can influence the students’ behavior and how they present on campus. The stories of the places in which these participants have taken shelter for the night are astonishing. Safety concerns were important, but so was not getting caught by law enforcement. The local weather also paid a big part in how the students managed their sleeping arrangements.

The decision about where to sleep was decided by factors such as privacy and safety. Anodda shared, “I don’t know how to say this, but it’s like there are places where they don’t check. So it’s like, Oh, could I get away with sleeping here tonight.”

When all else failed, some participants slept outside. David brought a blanket to his interview to serve as an artifact:

It is this blanket or a comforter and I still use it today and I don’t think I will ever get rid of it. But I bought it during that time too cause I knew it was going to get
cold—but it was the summer time—and I knew it was going to get cold and I didn’t know if I was going to have a place to stay at that point in time when it did get cold. And so I remember I went to Target, I picked it up, it was on sale, it was like $24.99. I was like, Oh, let’s get it, it’s on sale. Because like a lot—because getting a comforter can be like—can be expensive. And so it was on sale and that’s why I got it. And it did get cold and I was still homeless at that time and it kept me warm.

David used this blanket to keep him warm and shelter him when he had no choice but to sleep outside on campus:

There were a couple of times where I did not have my car [where I had been sleeping], it was getting fixed, and you know my mother, she would help me out with getting my car fixed and things like that and I would have to be outside. And every single time that did happen though it was raining, it was really cold and raining, and like it would get wet but like it would take a while for me to feel the coldness of the wetness. And I remember one time it was just—it wasn’t like a hard rain, it was just like this drizzly rain that we always get here, and it was, you know, and I remember when I did feel the cold, it was like 6:00 in the morning and I was like, okay, well I need to get up anyways.

When David’s vehicle was operational, he used it for shelter. David explained:

I stayed in my car and still, you know, I would turn it on to get some heat and things like that, but you know, when I was low on gas I wouldn’t turn my car on at night. So, it kept me warm.

Precious spoke of the outdoor place she slept for years:
I would go in there and talk to Ms. Margie until she closed and her home was in the back of the storage place. So when she closed up and locked up, I would just sit on the side of the storage place until she opened up again the next morning. Precious continued, stating that at some point she realized she could sleep in unlocked storage units:

And so I used to be like, Oh man, I could climb this gate and I would just walk through to see what storages were open and finally one day, I mean, one day I found a storage space with a mattress in it. And I would sleep there at least twice a week because I didn’t want the people to come and find me. But I was so happy about having a place to stay, staying in a storage space. That’s what I did.

However, due to the security cameras on the property, Precious was eventually caught trespassing:

So, she said, Are you homeless? Do you have a place to stay? And I was like, Ms. Margie, I don’t have a place to stay. So she let me stay in her home for like a month and it was at the storage place, until I could get on my feet. But, I mean, by that time, that had been like two-and-a-half to three years I had been homeless.

Eric also slept outdoors:

I think that maybe if I had alerted them [practitioners], which I did at one time, alerted them of my situation, that they may have sent me to different places. But at that time, you know, I would stay in shelters from time to time, I would stay in different—under different bridges at time to time, I would stay in my car.

Karen described her fear at being identified as homeless:
I was really worried that someone would know that I was sleeping in my car at the time, or that they would know that I had been sleeping on the couch of a friend’s house that didn’t have the basic running water sometimes or lights.

Alice lived out of her car for six years while pursuing her bachelor’s degree. She had a very strong connection to her vehicle, which she named as one of her artifacts:

So, yeah, it was really, really, really hard for me and I loved my car, it was the closest I could feel to my mom and then at the same time also my home. And yeah, I mean, I had to eventually get her scrapped and junked because she was no longer operable and that was an extremely emotional day for me; I have many pictures. But that was absolutely the loss and death of a family member by far. So I was very privileged to have that vehicle to sleep in in Wisconsin winters. And it was like my moving storage unit because you had nowhere to store your shit. So, yeah, I’m forever indebted to my car, I also would not be here without my car. Very grateful for her.

Anodda described in detail how she felt when she stayed in one particular homeless shelter:

It’s like you feel so out of place when you’re homeless, because when you’re homeless the homeless shelter that you’re going to is not yours, it’s not yours, and you’re rooming with people that you don’t want to room with necessarily. Like [homeless shelter] is a very bad place; it’s a stressful place to live. They say, Oh, all these rules will help you grow. No they won’t, not when you fucking come—they come in your room every day to check for cleanliness and make sure that everything is okay. If you have anything on the floor, even if it’s normally
supposed to be on the floor, you get written up. If they don’t like the way your closet looks, you get written up.

Nothing is yours. You feel like a fucking prisoner. You are a prisoner when you’re in these homeless shelters because they write you up, Oh, we don’t like that everything is so cluttered. They treat you like you are an object, like you belong to them. And it’s very hard to be thankful for the place that you have because it’s not yours.

Anodda described how she rationalized sleeping on public transportation and staying in jail as better options than returning to that homeless shelter:

Seeing homeless people who didn’t have options on the train, are they going to stab me? Sleeping on the train because I was afraid to go home [to the homeless shelter] to [an employee of the homeless shelter] because I actually believed her when she said, Oh, you can’t come home tonight. And yes, I slept on the train. Yes, I almost got arrested for sleeping in the fucking train. And yes, I spent 20 days in DeKalb County because my license for my car was suspended and I didn’t have anywhere to go home because I didn’t think that I could go home. That was hell.

Not all the participants stayed in shelters or slept outside. Jodi lived with family members, yet was displaced:

I lived with my son. He took me in after I went blind. So I couldn’t live on campus, so I had to move back in with my son. This was during the transition time when he was moving to another place, my daughter and her family had to live with us and during that particular time, I was more or less confined to a room.
And I know other people experience worse, but I was confined to a room in my son’s house, my daughter and her children lived there, four boys, and sometimes five, and her husband, and then of course my son. And I had no peace.

But that didn’t work out so I wound up having to move in with another son and his two kids and they didn’t really want me there. So then my son that I lived with originally said, Well, come on back here, come where I am now. So I went back over to a new place he was in. I’m still there and he pretty much helped me through it.

Some participants stayed anywhere could find a place to rest. Eric, a non-drug user, described finding shelter in a crack house:

I mean, I wasn’t that guy that didn’t have anything. You know, I have finances coming in, but it wasn’t enough to get a house because everywhere I went it was like they needed the first month’s rent, they needed this down payment, I didn’t have that. I mean, I had a couple of dollars, but it wasn’t enough to give you a down payment anywhere, even when I tried to buy houses.

So I, you know, I was laughing because I was thinking about something about—I was living in this house at one time, not to get off the beaten path, but there was some crack heads, it was like a crack house or whatever. But they were just like, Why you always coming over here reading those damn books? You know, and it was just funny, because yeah, like you need to shut up because I’m really, I’ve really got a test.

Alice described some of the varied places she found shelter:
So, yeah, and it did make the nuances of finding housing incredibly difficult, which just meant I stayed in my libraries a lot, I slept in the bathroom, because the libraries often had really good heating and cooling, you know? So yeah, I don’t know, I squatted in places a lot. In 2014, I was squatting in the basement of a co-op on campus; it’s not owned by the university, it’s a community co-op so anyone can live there and I was living in the basement.

From sleeping outside to living in a car for six years to sleeping in bathrooms, these students did whatever they had to do to continue their education.

**Other needs.** Shelter is not the only need of a homeless college student. There are many other needs that those with stable housing often take for granted, including the ability to maintain personal hygiene, eat, and receive mail, among others. Several participants spoke of the difficulty of finding a way to take care of their hygiene on a daily basis. They may or may not have had access to the necessary toiletries, and a water source was not always available.

Anodda explained how precious a hot shower is to her, even today:

And I’ll never forget it. It was one of the most thankful moments of being homeless. I would thank God every day that I woke up in time to go to school but I was still tired, but I got to school. But it would just suck because I was taking a shower and I was cold and you’re not supposed to be cold when you take a shower, but I was.

And like now that I have stable housing, I have some of the hottest water in Stone Mountain. Like that’s one thing that I prayed for, I said, God, please give me the hottest shower known to man. And I tested it, that shower runs hot for two
hours and it feels like a sauna and it’s fucking wonderful. It’s wonderful. But I will never stop being thankful for a shower even—even now, when things get hard for me, I go straight to the shower because that’s the only thing that will calm me down is a hot shower and that—like that’s the only thing I really wanted was a hot shower.

Other participants shared similar sentiments. Karen recalled:

I would always carry travel-sized deodorant with me so that once I went in the bathroom I could clean under my arm and I wouldn’t smell bad. And I knew that I could—with the shape and it would always be a travel size because I knew that I could always take a dollar here and there and buy a small container versus a big, normal size. So it would mean that, you know, sometimes I would even oftentimes go into the health clinic on campus and just ask them for a bag of goodies, because I knew that it was going to have at least some deodorant in there.

David struggled with a sense of guilt for relying on his campus gym locker room facilities:

But in the summertime, it gets really hot, so I—even at night, so I do remember like it being—waking up at 6:00 in the morning drenched in sweat. I’m like, okay, and I would take a shower here on—down here, I would go to the F building and to justify myself being able to use the facilities in taking a shower, I would go work out. I would run. I’m like, Okay, my car was in the parking lot, I would park it somewhere else safer and I would run around this reservoir and that’s what I did.
And I was even more sweaty and I would be like, Okay, it’s now 7:30, I can go now and take a shower, get this sweat off of me and, you know, all that kind of stuff and do what I need to do. I always felt like I had to—that I didn’t want to take a shower here. I had to justify, like, Why am I going to take a shower? Like I can’t just like go take a shower, you know? Oh, the facility is available to us. I felt like I needed to do something, whether it was work out or whatnot, what I need to be to feel like I can use this without any problem.

One challenge homeless students face that is often overlooked is the need for a mailing address. Precious described this concern:

You know, it was toward the end of me being there and I think when they needed an address or something like that. And I didn’t really—you know, all my mail had come back and something like that had happened and they was trying to find out, Where does she stay? And you know, I didn’t have an address.

And so I remember right next door to Georgia Perimeter was a storage place, and I looked up one day on the sign and saw that they had—you could rent storages for a dollar and you could get storage and a mailbox for a dollar. So I went in and I met this lady, her name was—it’s not Margaret, Margie. Her name was Margie and I got a mailbox for a dollar. So I felt like, Oh my God, I own a mailbox. This is the greatest thing ever, you know?

**Academic Integration**

Vincent Tinto’s (1975, 1993) theory of retention defined *academic integration* as a state in which college students are able to understand their role as a student, identify academic norms and values, and achieve academic success (Tinto, 1975). For the
participants in this study, their degree of academic integration, as measured by their ability to understand their role as students and achieve academic success, supports their ability to persist.

Precious had a professor who encouraged her in class—and in doing so, this single professor changed her life. According to Precious:

I think it was all about being included. Because I had gone to that school and not felt included, and it was because I alienated myself, because I didn’t really know how to be included. And so, it was at that moment that I did that public speech that he included me. And I was like, Oh man, I’m a student. Outside of that, I never really officially thought of myself as a student of that school because I felt like everyone else was getting something that I wasn’t.

In that class Precious made a friend who can recall the change that occurred. Precious revisited a recent conversation with that friend:

Yeah, because otherwise I wouldn’t have done it because I always stayed to myself, I always—I didn’t talk to anybody. And from that class I met a wonderful friend—we’re still friends today years later—Andrea. And she was like, If you remember, you used to be so quiet, but when you did that speech—we just talked about that a few months ago. I was like, You remember that? She’s like, Yeah, girl. She was like, You’ve been talking ever since.

Eric was able cultivate relationships with his African American male professors outside the classroom, gleaning information from them that assisted him in his studies:

But academic integration, I spent time with my professors all the time, in the [faculty] offices of which I connected my book [shared African American
literature] which is how I—What about this? So what do you read? Every office hour, you know, I’m there. Like, Oh yeah, E will be here . . . I’ll be there to talk to them during their office hours when they open to try to—not only just to get necessarily ahead in school, but find out what’s going on with our lesson plan, but how did you do it? To spend time with someone that has or shares a like interest, I guess I could say.

**Social Integration**

Tinto’s (1975, 1993) theory of retention proposed that social integration is achieved when individuals have a sense of belonging and the ability to interact positively and effectively with various campus constituencies (Tinto, 1975). Each participant shared how a sense of belonging assisted them on their journey to completion. For example, Jodi stated, “I felt pretty good. I got along well with everybody and we all—we were family.”

That sense of belonging presented itself in higher numbers with participants who were actively involved on campus. Eric noted that he felt a strong social connection on campus, and spoke fondly of a close group of friends:

Five friends that I will hold true, and that’s all I had was those five friends. Although they were different, they still—they would still give me something. And none of them, only one, two, two knew that I was homeless, and of course they tried to help me in their own way. You could come here and stay, but I knew I could come and stay, but I couldn’t stay but a certain amount of time. So why would I want to put that—I don’t need to put you through that. I can live right here under this bridge. But I would never tell them where I was living, where you at? And sometimes they would contact me and say, Where are you going to be
tonight? or whatever. And I’ll be here, and I wouldn’t tell them. But that friendship, even today, that I can go to them and say, Well hey, what about this, what about that, and we’re still together. So I think that friendship is definitely essential to the soul.

Yet Eric also acknowledged:

I don’t know if I would have accepted, oh, well I know I wouldn’t have been accepted the way I was accepted with my appearance being kept up. I felt very welcomed, very welcome as a member of the campus community. Again, and I think that is because I didn’t come looking as we “view” a homeless person.

**Student involvement.** Participants who were actively involved on campus were able to avoid some of the hindrances to persistence, like isolation and lack of knowledge about resources. Students who are involved in campus life typically know more about what is happening on campus and what resources are available than those with less engagement. Such knowledge may mitigate the degree to which they suffer the consequences of their homeless status.

David explained this best:

I felt like a leader here cause I was on student government. I just know a lot of times, students did come to me, even in SGA, students were like—they would look to me to know how to react to stuff. And there are times like in meetings, and I don’t like long meetings, people asking questions for no reason and they all knew that too. But they also knew like after the meetings they would come ask me, So what do you think about this here? And I would let them know.
And I’m like, this is what I think and this is how I think we should do according to—to do this event or to help this club out. People always—they did come to me and I would—I ran the meeting for the—what is it called? It was the college-wide SAF. I would run that meeting. And . . . there were students who would come and just, Oh yeah, we can all be in it together and all of this sort of stuff and afterwards they would talk to me—from other campuses—they would talk to me and ask me what my opinion was about whatever we were doing. David continued, saying:

People—tons of people knew me, there are people I didn’t even know knew me. And like, I remember even having a conversation with someone and she was like, Oh, how is Ms. Sessions class going? I’m like, I don’t remember talking to you about calculus, but it’s going good. And I felt like a leader on campus and people would come to me.

I felt—I mean, I probably—if I hadn’t done student government, I probably just would just have felt like—I would have been like a student, I would have come here—and I just probably—I would have—I probably would not have felt as safe because I probably would not have as many places to go. I know I probably—I would have spent time in the library until the library closed, doing things like that. That’s what I probably would have done. I probably would not have felt as safe or as connected to the people, I know I would not have felt like a leader.

There were still things I did with tennis and I would do stuff with them a lot, but I would—to get them involved, I would not have known how to get them
involved in school. Cause I got a lot of them involved, I got my friends involved and got them other friends, other people to hang out with too besides just like—\because on the tennis team it’s just you and those 6 or 12 other people and that’s all it is. And I got—I worked to get them more involved in things that were going on on-campus and all that kind of stuff. So I know if I hadn’t been in student government, I would have had a different feeling about being on campus.

**Emotional Support**

Students who transition to college and feel secure on campus increase their chances of persisting (Flemings et al., 2005). Homeless college students need emotional support, yet are unlikely to reach out to others due to fear of rejection (Bensimon, 2007). Thus practitioners must seek opportunities to provide such support.

Such opportunities may include planned gestures, such as the use of “institutional agents” (Bensimon, 2007, p. 443) to support homeless college students and encourage them to believe in themselves (Bensimon, 2007; Flemings et al., 2005). They may also include unplanned gestures, such as showing empathy when approached by a member of this student population. Both forms of emotional support are helpful and needed. Table 9 identifies the emotions felt by the participants while they were a homeless college student.
Table 9

*Emotions Reported by Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotion</th>
<th>Anger</th>
<th>Alienation</th>
<th>Anxiety</th>
<th>Appreciation</th>
<th>Blame</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
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<td>Embarrassment</td>
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<td>Fear</td>
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<tr>
<td>Isolation</td>
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<td>Pride</td>
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<td>Suicidal</td>
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</table>

**Mental State**

The participants identified a broad spectrum of emotions they experienced as a result of pursuing a degree while homeless. These emotions varied widely based on the situations the student encountered at a given time. Practitioners need to understand the struggle and recognize the importance of encouraging the homeless student population and being there for them.

Karen described how the lack of support made her feel, stating, “I felt alone because I felt like I didn’t have anyone or a place to go to.” Jodi simply urged those concerned to, “Help if you can.” She recalled:

There were some ladies I would talk to, just to talk to them, go in their office and just—I don’t even know who these ladies were, but they worked there and the majority of my time was spent talking to these people and just chat and chat. So, you know—and they would just let me do it. I know they knew something was wrong with me, but they figured maybe at some point I would say something, you know what I’m saying? But you know, everybody was extremely kind. So that’s—I think that made a difference, you know, nobody said, Girl, you’ve got to
leave. Every once in a while they’d say, Don’t you have class to go to? You know, I would go to class and come right back and just be hanging out, because I had nowhere to go.

**Strengths of Homeless College Graduates**

How do homeless college students continue to strive toward their goal despite the myriad challenges they face every day? As a group, homeless college student graduates possess outstanding strength and tenacity. The internal strengths the participants conveyed were integral to their successful completion of a degree.

**Resiliency**

Resiliency is defined in this study as “the many instances in which an individual is able to adapt to and thrive despite adverse conditions” (Gupton, 2016, p. 228). It could be argued that without resiliency these participants would not have persisted to graduation. The obstacles were great, yet they persevered, adapting to the stress of their condition.

Anodda exclaimed, “I may be, at my worst, down and out. But it doesn’t fucking matter, because I have a fucking goal and the devil himself can’t take it from me because that’s what keeps me alive.” Resiliency is a strength that provides a coping mechanism when confronting obstacles (Gupton, 2016). The participants’ will to succeed, along with their decision-making ability and the support they received from others on and off campus, propelled them toward their goal.

Achieving success also required the participants to believe in themselves. Precious reflected:
I don’t know, I’ve always felt like there was something going on there that maybe—at some point I would be better or do better, or life would be better. Just maybe other people didn’t know it, but I did.

Anodda experienced many obstacles in pursuing her degree, including imprisonment and the resulting stop out from school, yet continued to strive toward her goal. She recalled:

I spent 20 days in DeKalb County. It was three—after I had got out of jail, you could only sign up for classes for three more days, that’s how close it was to the next semester. All of the ASL classes should have been gone, should have been filled, should have not been available, and I said—and this is another “but then God moment.” I said, God, if you want me to be an interpreter, the classes will be available and the times I need and the teachers who support me will be available.

No fucking joke, I was on my knees crying, no fucking joke. But no fucking joke, the day I got out of jail, I had a decision to make, give up or go back to college. And I said, God, if you want me to go back to college, that shit will be there, no fucking joke. 6:00 at night, Michael Cain, three fucking open spots. Guess who signed up? Guess who is back? Back again.

Today, Anodda continues to press forward. “But let me tell you, there’s more coming. I’m going to get that bachelor’s degree.” She believes that she will meet her goal. Anodda added:

I thought about committing suicide when I was homeless more than one time because of these [homeless shelter] policies, because I would be home and think about, What’s [an employee of the homeless shelter] going to say to me tomorrow
morning? Is my closet going to be good enough for them? I’m just a number to them, why am I here?

And I would have to yell at myself in the mirror, I am here because I am going to be a sign language interpreter. I would have to yell at myself and talk to myself like I’m crazy, I still do that. I still walk around in a circle saying things like, [my professor] has no power over my life, because I’m going to go to such-and-such school and make such-and-such score on my ASLPE [American Sign Language Proficiency Exam] and I’m going to be an interpreter someday. I say that out loud to myself on a daily basis.

Similarly, Jodi also pushed forward, explaining what it meant to reach her goal despite the obstacles:

I’m just grateful that I was able to persevere and get it done. And I had to keep reminding myself, just get it done, just get it done. And I went through a depression, my final semester. And so going through school and not having that peace of mind that I’m in my own place but yet I have to forge—I must finish strong, I must finish school, was driving me and I had to cry to the Lord to help me. And then at my low points, I had people were pushing me.

**Resourcefulness**

Another strength the participants possessed was their resourcefulness. They were able to make a way out of no way. Had it not been for their tireless pursuit of ways to survive while obtaining an education, it is likely that the participants would not have persisted to graduation.

For example, Anodda found a way to obtain Internet service:
Let me tell you, I was in a sociology class and I had no electricity, this is a little bit before I went to [homeless shelter], this is on the road of becoming homeless. I had no electricity, we had no electricity for a month. Our food was bad; we couldn’t eat the food because there was no electricity in the house, and I was in the gym using the gym’s Internet to submit all of my homework. I slept in a gym because they were the only ones who had Internet. Don’t tell me college is a waste of time; there’s always a way.

David shared the following routine:

A lot of times—like what I needed, I need—to use my laptop, I need Wi-Fi, I need power, and I—and those are the main things I would need. And so, places like Starbucks was a safe haven. And then not far from here, there is a—where Target is, and they have—I would park in Target and I would go to this little center pavilion where I was able to get Wi-Fi from Panera and they have like these outlets and I was able to plug in my laptop and so I could do—and that’s how I would do my school work. And so I would sit up there until like 12:00, 1:00 doing my school work.

Jodi needed services that her disability office did not provide, so she found a way to make her accessible resources work for her and her situation:

The cell phone was my main connection to life because during my time in school and part of being homeless was blindness. And the only thing that I could really see, or the only writing or reading I could really see, was on my cell phone. And I’ll explain that to you. I had, I couldn’t see the books. So my phone, because of
the light, was what I could read really. So this was how I was able to see in
school.

Alice made sure she had a choice in her reproductive health by locating free
health care. Alice explained:

I—as soon as I found out I got readmitted back to school on May 14th of 2014,
three days later, on May 17th, I went to Planned Parenthood and got the
NEXPLANON implant in my arm, which is still there. Because my thought was,
if I have to, again, participate in sex work more to be a student, or am sexually
assaulted again, at least I know I would not bring a child into that experience
because I’ve already brought a cat. Yeah, it was a significant moment for me
reinvesting in myself, to say that my education was going to be always infinitely
more important than—and had to come first before making a family.

**Illegal Activity**

As a result of their homelessness, many of the participants resorted to committing
illegal acts to better manage their situation. For the participants, these acts came from a
place of resourcefulness. Without a stable home, many participants resorted to doing
things they would not ordinarily do, such as loitering on campus. Precious explained, “the
majority of my day, all day, was spent at school until everybody left. So I would just stay
and hang around.”

Most of the participants had no place to go and nowhere to sleep for the night, so
they were forced to improvise. David described how he managed the temperature in his
vehicle overnight:
Before then, I had slept in my car before, but it was like—really it was just out of, like, I’m tired and I’m going to pull over and go to sleep. And I could do that, I knew how to maneuver things in my car where it didn’t look like I was in my car. Because typically—Actually, I think it’s illegal to park a car overnight and sleep in it. It’s illegal.

And so I would have to like hide myself in my car using this blanket—I would have to hide myself in case like somebody came snooping by looking in a car. I would—I would, you know, I would crack my windows because if you keep the windows up, the steam—what is it called? Your windows will fog up, eventually. So I would crack a window.

I would notice—like if it was cold outside, even when it was cold out, I would crack a window, because it would still sometimes get warm just cause I was under the blanket and all the steam coming up. So I would have to crack a window until it cleared up. By the time it cleared up it was cold again, it was like freezing cold.

There were also times the participants’ committed unlawful entry to find a place to sleep. Had they not done this, sleeping outside would have been their only option, exposing them to harsh weather and risking possible harm from others. As discussed earlier, Precious took a refuge in a storage facility:

And what I would do, and I know this is how [the owner] caught me, because people would leave their storage things up and they wouldn’t lock them all the way. So I would—when she went to bed at night and closed up, I would climb the
gate and go walk through the storages to see who was open and I would go sleep under the storage so I wouldn’t be outside.

Precious described shoplifting to obtain the basic toiletries that most of us take for granted:

So I would just open up a box at Family Dollar and take a whole bunch. And I didn’t get the regular items or the bigger pads because I felt like it would be too obvious. These I could just stick in my pocket, I could have like 20 and nobody would know. I learned how to appreciate things that—now that I have that I didn’t have then, simple things like panty liners that I used. I mean, you know you don’t use them for that time of the month, but I did because I didn’t have anything else. Precious also shared that she would sometimes take non-essential items from the store:

So, I would see that and see them digging through their pocketbook or taking out lip gloss or taking out, you know, something like this in the bathroom because they had it. And they had a lot of it and a lot of times I wanted to ask for one but was too ashamed to do it. So I would go up the street to the Family Dollar and steal them.

Alice spoke of resorting to performing sex work in exchange for shelter, hoping for, but not always receiving, a safe place to sleep at night. She stated, “I had sex with people for housing and I got assaulted by people in the middle of the night when they were under the influence of things....”. The illegal activities were actions that the participants did not want to take, but felt that they had no choice.
Advocacy

*Advocacy* refers to an activity by an individual or group that aims to influence decisions within political, economic, and social systems and institutions. As a result of their personal experiences, some of the participants took on the role of advocates for homeless college students, reaching out to the school administration to attempt to change policy.

Alice became a powerful force for change at her institution after she stopped out, then returned to campus. Alice described an influential meeting in which she participated:

We went in to meet with the chancellor to talk about that [the reality of homeless college student existence on campus] and I started talking about homeless students on campus. And I said, you know, after they were publishing articles saying I didn’t exist, I finally said, Well, I’m that student that you feel does not exist, my name is Alice. And I said, You know, I find it worrisome and it gives me great pause that a world class Research I institution such as this would make claims about the existence, scope, and impact of an issue to which it intentionally, willfully, and admittedly collects no data. And she didn’t say anything and she started taking notes.

Alice worked tirelessly to bring about policy changes on campus. She recalled:

So, but yeah, my experience was hell, I felt like I didn’t really exist there so I tried really, really hard to make—really hard. I mean, I worked every single day, I had like 40 projects under my belt by the time I graduated. Really hard for the university to acknowledge we fucking exist and that we have a basic right, a basic
claim that everyone else does to a college experience. And right now you’ve given us none of it.

Taking part in a research study that focuses on such a personal matter can be daunting. It was wonderful to know that each participant wanted to be involved in this study for unselfish reasons. They want to prevent other college students who face homelessness from having to experience the things they did on their journeys.

When asked specifically why she was interested in participating in the study, Karen stated:

Because I want students—one, if I can touch one student with my story and help one student by sharing my story, and letting them know that while they may be homeless at this particular time in their life, it does get better. And here are the steps that I took, here are some resources that could possibly help, then that—it gives me hope, right? Especially working with students. If I can help with professors on campuses, or just the general body, period, understand what it means to be a college student by telling my story, then that’s what I want to do.

Others plan to give back by starting organizations to assist homeless college students. Jodi shared:

And I’ve just been asking the Lord, you know, this is bigger than me, so I know it’s got to be you to do this. So, I want to help people who are homeless, but I want—my target is the one who is newly homeless, somebody who has just lost their home or just got evicted or something that they’ve never experienced before. Jodi’s goal is to offer early intervention as a way to prevent chronic homelessness in the student’s life.
Eric described a similar need to intervene, with a focus on working with young black males. He created an organization to deliver his message:

It was—this organization kept me grounded, you know? One of the things that I would tell the young men was, while you’re going through school—because I’m dealing with 8- to 18-year-olds, so I’m a homeless guy dealing with 8- to 18-year-olds, of which they don’t know. But while they’re getting their education, I’m getting my education. I can see them achieving, I could see myself achieving.

No matter the vessel, the participants want to help others succeed. As Karen proclaimed, “So that is my biggest wish, and every day I try so hard to put together pieces for administration, to help them be able to know what that looks like. Because it still happens, especially in this day and time.”

The Needs of Homeless College Students

Imagine going to college, in- or out-of-state, with few to no resources. Homeless college students experience this challenge daily. The participants described how they were hungry, and constantly worried about where their next meal would come from. They didn’t know where they were going sleep at night. They worried about being assaulted, and about having to give too much of themselves to others in exchange for shelter. They wondered if the weather would hold up on the nights they had to sleep outside.

And yet they persisted, without regular access to basic needs like toothpaste or deodorant. These homeless college students still came to school. They continued to sit in classrooms, despite what others might think of them. They persisted because they believed that the pursuit of an education and the resulting degree would help them leave
their current circumstances behind. The participants explained how they found some of the resources they needed to support their success. When asked what they needed on campus to assist them, the participants gave a wealth of examples. Table 10 presents this list of needs.

**Off-Campus Resources**

Most post-secondary institutions are not prepared or currently able to give homeless college students the support they desperately need. Therefore, participants utilized many off-campus resources to help them survive. It should be noted that funding for off-campus resources fluctuates and may not be a reliable source of assistance for homeless college students.

Most of the participants mentioned using a shelter. Eric was able to locate a shelter that provided additional free services:

> I answered questions in class, and when you do that you bring attention to yourself. So I would make sure that I would go to different shelters and make sure I get the razors and shave and trim and whatnot and they’ll have—sometimes they would have free haircuts or whatever, and I would go and get the free haircuts and whatnot.

Jodi lived with family members and David did as well, though very infrequently. A storage facility supervisor wanted to help Precious get out of her homeless situation. Instead of calling the police, the supervisor of the storage facility where Precious was caught trespassing generously invited her to stay in her home. Precious recalled, “And she let me stay with her, and she took me to Lockheed Credit Union, that was my very first checking account.”
The participants went to various local stores, parking lots, restaurants, coffee shops, and the public library for Internet access. These locations had free access and were typically recognized as safe places to spend time. Eric shared that he received meals, clothes, toiletries, and even free haircuts from shelters and community agencies.

Although the resources provided by various state and local agencies were helpful, however, they could not fulfill all the needs of the homeless college student.

Alice mentioned a newsletter by, for, and sold by homeless college students in her area:

We have a newspaper in Madison for homeless and marginalized residents to edit it, contribute, it’s basically a magazine by this population for this population and for the greater population. It’s like a way to help folks in the community be vendors, so they sell newspapers and make money and it’s a great thing.

**On-Campus Needs**

Post-secondary institutions specialize in providing students with the tools necessary to support their success. However, homeless college students have numerous needs, many of which are for resources that other college students simply take for granted. Throughout the interviews, the participants identified needs they believed can and should be addressed for all students on campus. It was evident that the participants had thought about this issue and were eager to share their thoughts. Table 10 highlights some of the most frequently mentioned needs of homeless students.
Table 10

Participant-Cited Needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Services</th>
<th>Ability to Maintain Hygiene</th>
<th>Accommodations for Support Animals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Career Services/ Employment Opportunities</td>
<td>Communual Space</td>
<td>Communication across offices/agencies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disability Services</td>
<td>Diversity Office Inclusion</td>
<td>Federal Support Programs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial Aid Office</td>
<td>Food Security</td>
<td>Health Care</td>
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<td>Intervention</td>
<td>Longer Office/ Resource Hours</td>
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<td>Orientation</td>
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<td>Personal Counseling</td>
<td>Programs for the Homeless</td>
<td>Safety</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student Involvement</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Transportation</td>
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**Housing.** In my research, I have found that very few institutions, including the larger post-secondary institutions, provide long-term housing for homeless college students. The reasons this has not occurred vary and include, but are not limited to, budget constraints and the belief that if homeless college students are assisted or provided with housing, they will not strive to provide their own. Attention to this one detail can change the life of a homeless college student desperate to succeed.

Some of the participants shared their attempts to work with the housing office on campus to obtain access to a bed. The results were disheartening. Karen expressed:

I was at a big school, I won’t name the school, I’ll tell you off line, but they did not have housing that if a student was living off campus, they could come on campus to have shelter. It’s unfortunate that, you know, students don’t have anywhere to go if they get displaced. And you know, some of them don’t have kids and so a lot of shelters won’t take you if you don’t have children because they’re already overcrowded.
The majority of shelters are designated for women and children. What is the chance that a room can be found for a college student in need of long-term housing? The participants noted that some homeless college students need a place to live yet lack the resources to secure that space.

Jodi experienced this prior to moving in with family members:

Campus life was good; it’s just I didn’t get the cooperation I felt I needed to be able to live on campus, number one, and get the funding or the funds I needed. So pretty much my campus experience was good except for I was trying to get on-campus living, I was trying to get a dorm, and that wasn’t so good.

For some reason, they just—they kept saying, well, you don’t have enough money to get a dorm. You can’t afford a dorm. You know, I kept getting that. And I was willing to pay out of pocket, but because my—the way I wanted to pay, and I know that colleges have rules, but the way I wanted to pay didn’t line up with how they would accept it. Then they wouldn’t allow me. I wanted to—it was $2,500 a semester, so I told them, let me pay so much down and so much a month because I can do that. No, we need a thousand and some dollars now and you have to have the rest of it paid in the next couple of months. So I couldn’t live on campus, so I had to move back in with my son.

Eric reported that the housing office at his university was also unprepared to assist him and did not know how to respond to his inquiry:

I did tell a—the housing—at one point in time I told them, because I wanted to speak to whoever was in charge of the housing, I didn’t know. And I said over the phone, he was like, Well, what is it, what is it? And they would not let me go
further. And I was like, Well look, uh, I’m homeless. And it was like this big pause and I was like—and I’m on the other line thinking, I shouldn’t have said that.

So it—that’s kind of hurtful, because I don’t know what this person’s thinking and I can’t face them because I can’t look at them eye to eye and say, Gosh, I’m homeless. Because then there’s a thousand questions, Well, why is this and why is that? Do you have this and what about this and what about this? And I thought this—yeah, well, you know, it didn’t work out.

**Food insecurity.** Most of the participants shared that they often did not know where their next meal was coming from. Some did not eat an adequate meal for days at a time. However, homeless participants who reported greater social integration ate more regularly than those with less integration. This was because they would have a hand in planning an event where food was served, or hear through the campus grapevine of events that provided meals or refreshments.

Everyone who works in higher education knows that offering free food at an event helps increase student attendance. However, we rarely consider that this may be the only meal of the day for some of our attendees. Eric recalled:

The students, you know, people didn’t know, which goes back to me participating in a lot of different groups and organizations to eat, to have some type of comradeship with them, with the students on campus. So it wasn’t that bad, yeah. It was unique how I would volunteer with everybody because they was giving out food, you know, and I would never tell them.
The participants provided suggestions for post-secondary institutions seeking to address the food insecurity issues of homeless college students. Anodda suggested creating a food bank run by other students:

We should give incentives of, Here’s a food bank. If you volunteer so many hours, you get so much towards your grade, like five points. Or we’ll give you a good review, we’ll write you recommendation letters. They need to be compensated. Why? Because it’s not their problem. It really isn’t. Like because they’re here to work on their futures and if they need to work on somebody else’s future, then they need to be compensated for that. Because in the end you’re taking away from their future too, because they hear the stories and it affects them emotionally.

Alice suggested that government benefits be made accessible for both the dining halls and dining markets. Anodda agreed:

There needs to be a food program here, at every college in the United States, and it needs to be charged to their financial aid. Everybody can afford the food plan. Why? Because everybody who is homeless is approved for the Pell Grant. Right? That should automatically be a part of their Pell Grant . . . the food program that should be a part of their financial aid automatically. I think there should be a food plan program that’s charged to your financial aid because you can’t think if you’re hungry. You can’t think if you’re hungry; you just can’t. You can’t succeed if you’re hungry. You just can’t.

**Transportation.** Transportation is one of the primary concerns of homeless college students. This concern may become even more pressing depending on the
location of the institution and the availability of public transportation. A few of the participants had access to a vehicle; however, its use depended on the ability to afford gasoline, maintenance, and repairs, and to pay for any parking citations or towing they incurred. Thus even for those who possessed a vehicle transportation was not guaranteed, and as a result, class attendance could be negatively impacted.

Eric recalled missing some class days due to a lack of transportation. He noted, “some days I couldn’t go to school because I was too far away and I couldn’t get to the campus.” Precious shared, “I walked everywhere, I never—at that time in my life, I didn’t even know how to drive. So everywhere I went, I walked.”

David spoke extensively about the hardship of maintaining decent transportation due to the lack of money for gas and needed car repairs:

I tried to live with my sister, we lived in Stockbridge for a little bit, but that commute got to be too much for me. And I mean, I paid the [care repair] bill, I used my [financial aid] refund —would pay bills and things like that, but I just know like—I would get stuck [away from campus]—like I would want to go home and I would get stuck, and I would just be like, okay, I’m just going to hang around up here until I get somebody to—I can drive home [back to campus]. And sometimes that would be like—sometimes it would be a couple of days, and sometimes it would be a couple of weeks, and then when I just decided I can’t live with her anymore because it was just—I just couldn’t do it, with the commute.

Anodda suggested creating a bus system that could be paid for with financial aid monies:
I think also charged to their financial aid that a campus bus—now this should be charged to their financial aid, all of this should be charged to their financial aid so that nobody is discriminated against, like, Oh, you can’t afford it. No, there should be none of that. So, it’s like maybe you could make a system where Internet—they had MARTA cards, they have MARTA cards here you can purchase for $60.

**Technology.** Post-secondary institutions compete to be named the most technologically advanced institution of higher education. Everything from completing the application for admission, uploading your identification documentation, and sending high school transcripts to filling out the FAFSA and turning in course work is completed online. We live in an age where college attendance requires access to Wi-Fi.

Homeless college students struggle to keep up with the demands of having Wi-Fi access and a computer. The participants reported that this caused greater frustration than any other need. When asked whether it was rough to be without needed technology, Anodda replied:

No, “rough” is not the word. It’s hell, because you don’t know where your Internet is coming from, you’re always on a fucking time schedule with the library, and people look at you weird when you’re sitting outside of the library and it’s all dark and the cops are swarming.

Jodi described the difficulties she faced because of a lack of consistent access to Wi-Fi and printing services, and her wish that the institution could provide this access for all students.
I don’t know what it would take for them to do that, but that would have helped me a lot because there were times I didn’t have Wi-Fi. So, I would have to schedule some time on the weekend to go to the campus and I would stay as long as I could, until 10 pm, and then I would still need Wi-Fi. I had to go to the public library and stay—would schedule Saturday or Saturdays and I would go early and stay until closing which was really—on Saturdays they close around 5 pm, most of them. And I would pack a lunch, I would do whatever I could do to use Wi-Fi—I’ve gone to Kroger, they have this Kroger over off of Moreland Ave. in the back part that has Wi-Fi and you can go in—I’ve gone there, I’ve gone to my cousin’s house to use his Wi-Fi. I’ve gone to a friend of mine that lived around the corner from me to use her Wi-Fi and to use her printer when I was out of ink. So, I think having printing capabilities and Wi-Fi 24/7 on campus would just be great for the homeless.

Anodda agreed:

I’m not saying give it to us for free, I’m saying charge us an amount, a reasonable amount a semester just like books. Rent a book. Rent a computer. Rent Internet for a semester.

It would be a great fucking thing because if we worry about our deadlines less, then we would do better. Computers that can be purchased through financial aid because you need a computer to go to college, you need Internet to go to college. Things that can be purchased through financial aid and not necessarily charged through personal means, because no one is going to come out and say, I can’t afford Internet. I’m standing outside scraping Internet.
I think that Internet cards should be purchased with financial aid or should be available because Internet is paramount. If you don’t have Internet, you’re fucked. You are fucked, I don’t care what you say. You can’t turn anything in; you’re fucked.

So a very discreet way of helping somebody who is homeless—and people who are homeless qualify for financial aid, I know this—would be to purchase Internet cards. You know, Verizon Wireless, AT&T, could hook up with colleges and they can do this, they just don’t think of this shit because they don’t want to help people. They can support a program that can give you an Internet card or Internet access for a fee that’s charged to your financial aid, and can give you a computer that’s charged to your financial aid, because that would save a lot of fucking people and it would save people stress.

Why would it save people stress? Cause then the responsibility would fall on them. You can’t say that you don’t have Internet, because your financial aid is providing you Internet. So you can focus on the shit you have to do. Yes, you may be in a homeless shelter, but guess what, you have a computer and you have Internet access that’s provided by your financial aid.

So your surroundings might look like shit, but guess what, while your surroundings are looking like shit, you’re sitting there with a computer on your lap writing that fucking paper, writing your fucking heart out and you have the Internet to turn it in. And guess what, you just got your deadline, you’ve met your deadline, and you don’t have to worry about meeting your deadline now.
**Longer office/resource hours.** Homeless college students don’t have the resources to go home and work on their schoolwork. They have to do that at the institution, where there are resources many others take for granted, such as electricity, computer labs, free Wi-Fi, and climate-controlled buildings. All of the participants stated that they would like the offices that offer services to them, such as the library, print services, and any buildings that provide Wi-Fi and tutoring, to have extended hours. This would allow them enough time to access the Wi-Fi, complete their assignments, and print them if necessary. If homeless college students need tutoring services, there would be someone available. Practitioners must understand that once these students leave campus, none of the aforementioned resources are guaranteed to be accessible.

Anodda emphasized this when she expressed her reaction to a change in resource hours:

> Give us some—where we can get free Internet and not look like we’re poor. Open up the lab a little bit earlier, keep it open a little bit later. The fucking library, I fucking hate GSU when they took over. I fucking hate it because our fucking library was open until 10:30 p.m. when they weren’t here. Guess what, when they got here, they shortened that shit to 8:45/9:00.

Participants also identified a need for additional services from financial aid, including emergency grants. In addition, accommodations for registered support animals were desired. Alice expressed the following about her service cat:

> So the other thing was I, for a long—most of my time homeless in college I could not stay at the shelter because I had Kiki. So it was either that or Kiki. Sorry, I needed my cat. It was the only reason to keep going.
Summary

The goal of this research study was to explore the phenomenon of homeless college student’s persistence to graduation and to illuminate the essence of these students’ experience. By eliciting and examining the experiences of the research participants, the study sought to identify factors that contribute to homeless college students’ persistence to graduation. The descriptions from the participant interviews illustrated five themes. The themes include: the institutional obligation to homeless college students; the campus environment; emotional support; strengths of homeless college students; and the needs of homeless college students.

The participants described how their respective institutions did not acknowledge their existence or seem to have the ability to identify who they were and therefore, could not engage them. They spoke of there being no plan in place to support homeless college students. They shared how they held esteem for the campus environment and its ability to improve their quality of life. They commented that they felt safe and campus and used the resources they could find to supplement their lifestyles. They detailed the joy of supportive campus relationships and how this bolstered their resolve to persist. Some participants detailed their campus involvement and its benefits. The participants also acknowledged their humanity and a need to be treated with dignity. Compassion was appreciated and positively impacted the mental state of the participants. They also spoke of resiliency and a determination to persist despite all obstacles. This resulted in accounts of resourcefulness, even when being resourceful was illegal. Even still one participant, in particular, became a strong advocate for homeless college student rights. She fought for
on-campus resources on her campus, while like other participants, partook in off-campus resource offerings.
CHAPTER 5
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Housing instability and homelessness are prevalent problems in the United States (Robertson & Toro, 1999). Homeless students who find their way to college must have support in order to succeed. Postsecondary educators and administrators need to understand the influence of housing instability on a homeless student’s ability to persist to graduation if we are to remove barriers to student persistence and success (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2015).

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to explore the phenomenon of college students who are experiencing homelessness and illustrate the essence of homeless college student experiences. The study elicited and examined participants’ stories to explore the factors that contribute to homeless college students’ persistence to graduation (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; Van Manen, 1990). This research sought to illuminate how some homeless college students persist despite the obstacles they face, and to identify the types of resources institutions can provide that will improve these students’ chances of success. The interview questions focused on obtaining information about how the campus environment, students’ academic and social integration, and their resiliency influenced their persistence. The research question that guided this study was: How do homeless college students describe the factors that support their persistence to graduation?
Summary of the Findings

Using phenomenology allowed me to explore and illustrate the essence of the phenomenon of college student who experience homelessness (Van Manen, 1990). Tinto’s (1975, 1993) retention theory is the theoretical base that informed this study and provided its framework. I elicited and examined the stories of the research participants (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007) to explore the factors that contribute to homeless college students’ persistence to graduation.

I interviewed alumni from various U.S. public institutions who graduated between 2008 and 2017 and were homeless for a minimum of one academic year while they were college students, eliciting narratives of their individual experiences. Analyzing this data allowed me to identify five themes related to how the participants experienced homeless status while pursuing an education, and how the institutional environment contributed to their ability to persist in college. The themes include: the institutional obligation to homeless college students; the campus environment; emotional support; strengths of homeless college students; and the needs of homeless college students.

Institutional Obligation to Homeless College Students

Tinto (1993) stated that institutions of higher education have a commitment to their students, which they can demonstrate by providing substantive retention programs (Tinto, 1993, 2007; Tinto & Pell Institute, 2004). The findings of the present study show that institutional responsibility is not essential for homeless college student success; however, it gives a homeless college student a much better chance to succeed. Post-secondary institutions can foster a campus environment that intentionally impacts student
success, particularly in the first year (Tinto, 2007), and provide valuable interventions to help strengthen student resiliency.

“I’m Telling You We Exist”

Participants reported that institutional recognition of homeless students was extremely important to them, as such acknowledgement validated their existence. Homeless college students tend to be an invisible population. Participants noted that many people to whom they reveal their homeless status, both on and off-campus, question whether they are truly homeless or assume that what they are experiencing could not be that bad. Alice recalled a conversation with a dean who remarked, “even if we have homeless students, whatever those are, you know, they can just go home with other [students] on the holidays and stuff. I’m sure there’s just like other families somewhere that will just take them in.” Acknowledgement is vital because it combats the fear of rejection, ridicule and punishment that homeless college students possess.

The participants stated that it is important for faculty and staff to reach out to homeless college students, as these students are unlikely to reach out to others due to fear of rejection (Bensimon, 2007). The final interview question asked if participants had any other information to add pertaining to homeless college students. Participants answered that they want people to know they exist. Homeless college students recognize that they must first be acknowledged in order to move the needle and receive the backing of the administration.

At times homeless college students’ stories are not believed, or the students are blamed for the situation they are in. Homeless college students reported that they are sometimes asked, If their homelessness was indeed real, why and how would they
attempt to be college students? It is therefore important for the institutional administration to recognize the existence of this student population, guide the campus community in how to accommodate homeless college students, and set the tone for policy discussions and decisions.

Participants who became advocates at their respective institutions understood clearly the need for institutional leadership’s acknowledgement. Alice stated:

I'm telling you we exist, this is something – you don’t have to understand it but you need to respect and accept it and it’s also not – you don’t have some inherent right to question and investigate my identity. You know what I'm saying? I don’t walk up to a native American student on campus and say, something like that. That would never be appropriate, it would make no sense. Those are the kind of people that drive me nuts right now.

In addition, Alice expressed, “Ignoring the homeless college student population will not make them go away. The only thing that will do is cause homeless college students to feel that they are not accepted members of the campus community and therefore unwelcome”.

“I Learned How To Be A Chameleon”

While identifying the homeless college student population is important, however, there are a limited number of ways to do so (Berg-Cross & Green, 2009; Field, 2015b). The current identification methods are through a student’s disclosure on the Free Application for Federal Student aid (FAFSA) as homeless, in danger of being homeless, or independent (U.S. Department of Education, 2015) or through the student’s self-identification. Self-identification may occur through accessing services on campus,
confiding in someone who is trusted, or word-of-mouth. Homeless students may also be identified when they are seen sleeping outside, in a vehicle, or inside a campus facility. University police, if properly trained, can provide valuable assistance in identifying homeless college students.

While the participants in the study reported that it was difficult for them to reveal their status to others due to the stigma they might face, they spoke in detail about wanting to be identified, if the identification would help them access support services. The participants emphasized the importance of good observation skills for institutional employees who want to help this population. If a student looks shabby, wears worn or torn clothing, looks thin, stares at food but is never seen eating themselves, sleeps in class frequently, appears confused or unable to think clearly, or is unable to afford textbooks and other course supplies, they may be homeless.

Hygiene may be another possible sign of homelessness but is not always a reliable indicator of a student’s housing status. The participants were very aware of hygiene, both their own and others’, and recognized that an inability to maintain good standards of hygiene made one stand out as different. This led some participants to go to great lengths to bathe; be well groomed; and wear decent, clean clothing. Some of the participants struggled to maintain an acceptable level of hygiene. The participants who succeeded in maintaining conventional hygiene were aware that it was more difficult to identify them as homeless. Eric explained:

... I would make sure that I would go to different shelters and make sure I get the razors and shave and trim and what not and they'll have – sometimes they would
have free haircuts or whatever and I would go and get the free haircuts and what
not, and I learned how to be a chameleon...

“And That’s What Kept Me Going”

For the institution to succeed in engaging homeless college students, it must
create a sense of belonging. Once homeless college students are identified, it is very
important to engage them in a way that is not belittling and does not make assumptions
about who they are or why they are homeless. Engagement encourages their active
participation in the process of receiving an education. The participants all stated that they
wanted to be treated like everyone else. Specifically, they wanted to be treated as though
they were an asset to their institution and not a burden.

The participants were very grateful to anyone who engaged them in a respectful
manner. Common decency went a long way in engaging this population. They did not
want to be treated differently from other students, or be made to feel that they did not
belong due to their circumstances. Moreover, the participants needed someone to show
that they cared. They expressed respect and gratitude for members of the community who
praised them and challenged them academically. The participants just wanted the same
college experience they perceived all other students were given.

The participants gave example after example of negative interactions with the
campus community that occurred once they revealed they were homeless or lacked the
means to purchase items that other students could. The reaction they commonly received
was that if they did not have money for housing, program fees, food, or textbooks, they
should not be enrolled in college. These interactions can break the spirit of individuals
who are doing everything in their power to achieve their goal of earning a degree so they can improve their situation and status in life.

Some participants also noted that campus-wide training on how to engage homeless college students would be helpful. Such training should begin with the administration, who can then assist in disseminating the information more broadly. Faculty, staff and campus police could receive some training on what is appropriate when speaking to homeless college students, and what resources can be offered in terms of support. Anodda gave an example of a university police officer that went out of his way to engage her regularly:

The cop, he no longer works here because he got transferred, he was my friend. And he would walk me to that bus stop every night because I was scared to stay there by myself. He would always walk me there and he got transferred downtown and I still have to go and see him and tell him that I graduated, I never got to tell him. But he always walked me to the bus stop and he always asked me, did you get a lot done today? And I said, yeah. And that’s what kept me – that’s part of what kept me going and he didn’t know that I – he didn’t really know about the homelessness...

Participants also encouraged institutions to inform all students of campus resources during orientation and in programs throughout the year, as a means of providing students with needed information and helping peers guide students to available resources.

**Purposeful Planning**

One participant proposed that an effective way to inform the campus community that the administration is aware of and actively supports the homeless student population
would be to incorporate a homeless student initiative into the institution’s strategic plan. Strategic plans are pledges that include an outline for implementing an action plan. Including this initiative would therefore demonstrate the institution’s commitment to the homeless student population, elicit participation from all areas of the institution, and increase institutional awareness.

Such an initiative would facilitate a cultural shift at the institution and affirm that the homeless student population is important, even critical, to the university’s success. It would also help to normalize the work associated with assisting homeless college students. Developing and implementing an action plan would enable the institution to begin collecting data on the homeless student population and evaluate the results of the institution’s efforts to serve them.

Commissioning a task force on the homeless student population would provide additional support to facilitate this strategic plan. This task force could bring together all parties whose contributions are needed to best assist this population, including the institution’s President, Vice Presidents of Academic and Student Affairs, Dean of Students, Faculty and Staff Senate chairs, and president of the Student Government Association. The task force might also include representatives from Military Outreach, the Office of Technology, Facilities Management, the University Police, Financial Aid, Student Accounts, the Cashier’s or Bursar’s Office, Student Housing, the designated liaison for homeless students, and any other relevant offices. This task force would lead the charge to identify and implement needed support for homeless college students.
The Campus Environment

The campus environment of a post-secondary institution is a key influence on the academic integration, social integration, and resiliency of homeless college students, and provides available support services, resources, and other interventions that influence homeless student success (Bensimon, 2007; Flemings et al., 2005). A mutual influence and interconnectedness exists between the campus environment, the students who shape that environment, and the retention of those students (Tinto, 1975, 2007). The research participants viewed and experienced the campus environment in various ways, reporting both positive and negative aspects of this environment. Some participants considered it a safe haven while others spoke of the hostility they experienced on campus, leading to disparities in whether they felt welcomed as a part of the campus community.

Participants who indicated they felt safe on campus were typically very familiar with the campus and the resources available to assist them. This was usually due to the participant’s extensive involvement in campus activities, which provided them with a thorough knowledge of campus resources. These participants were also able to establish and nurture relationships on campus with faculty, staff, and/or students, which fostered their perception that the campus was home.

Other participants felt as though they never quite fit in or became a full member of the campus community. These participants often lacked the ability to blend in and felt uncomfortable in the campus environment, which prevented them from building relationships on campus. These students were hyperaware of being different and felt as though they were never part of the fabric of the institution. Nevertheless, often these
participants too called campus *home*, because they spent the majority of their time on campus and for years it was their refuge.

“I Took A Gamble On Myself”

It is common during the college years for students to reflect on who they are and what they want to become. The participants experienced this period of self-discovery as well. They set goals and were driven to improve their lives by pursuing a college degree. This aligns with research findings that the majority of former foster youth college students believed they must obtain a college degree to have a better life (Merdinger et al., 2005).

Homeless college students live in dire circumstances in order to pursue their college degree. Many of the participants believe that earning a degree will provide them with the stability they desperately need in their lives. Many come from troubled homes and suffered deprivation caused primarily by poverty. Other participants grew up in middle-class homes until family health emergencies created financial difficulties that undermined their family’s financial security.

The participants believed that obtaining a college education was the path to insuring a financially secure future. By achieving financial security the participants hope to live full and fruitful lives themselves and to improve the lives of their families. Some participants wanted to prove that they could be more, and do more, than the examples they saw growing up. Anodda declared that she did not want to become a statistic. Other participants also wanted to show that they could make it out even when no one else could, and that they were not doomed to the same outcomes as others in their communities or even in their own homes.
The participants viewed education as the tool that would help them reach their goal of living their best life and becoming their best self. They persisted, despite the obstacles to pursue a degree. If this meant living without basic needs for a few years, the participants thought it was well worth the pain, sorrow, and shame they endured to do so. Short-term pain equals long-term gain. So, as Alice stated, “I took a gamble on myself, I guess, because I knew what my fate was going to be otherwise”.

**Home Sweet Home**

Participants described the campus as providing a sense of safety and security. They held this view for several reasons. These participants had no official place to call home. The uncertainty of where they would stay or sleep at night meant that the homeless college students spent as much time as possible on campus, and as a result, they often considered the campus home. In addition, many of the participants found various places on campus in which to sleep at night. Campus buildings provided temperature-controlled, secure, and private spaces in which to sleep, offering a reprieve from the fear of being accosted or abused.

**Accommodating Basic Needs**

A lack of money can make it difficult or impossible to secure stable housing, transportation, clothing, and food (Berg-Cross & Green, 2009; NCHE, 2012). Homeless college students often lack the basic needs most people tend to take for granted. These needs range from shelter, water, food, transportation, health care, technology and more.

The participants chose to take shelter in a number of places (Berg-Cross & Green, 2009), including campus buildings, homeless shelters, jail, bridges, libraries, unlocked storage units, basements, drug houses, cars, and the outdoors. The majority of the
locations were unsafe, but students selected them because they had limited options that
offered relative privacy and therefore provided a sense of security. When squatting, the
participants were sure to be discreet, not wanting to be caught by law enforcement.

The weather was a key factor in how comfortable one could be sleeping outside. Some of the participants spoke of being cold or wet while sleeping outside. A few of them shared stories of how they managed climate control in their vehicles and how the weather increased their chances of getting caught sleeping in their car.

The students reported that sheltered indoor locations were not necessarily any better than the available outdoor options. Eric recalled that he had a difficult time studying for exams while living with addicts in a crack house. Anodda shared details about the humiliation and shame of staying in a homeless shelter. She spoke of the mental abuse that led her to risk sleeping on a train or out in the open, and even to risk going to jail rather than returning to the shelter. Jodi stayed at her son’s apartment, yet reported having no peace of mind and no space to call her own there. Jodi constantly felt confined and worried daily whether she would be able to remain in her son’s home, and looked forward to finding a home of her own.

For many of the participants, shelter was the least of their concerns, as other necessities superseded the need for shelter at night. It was during the many daytime hours, when they were in contact with other people, which their lack of resources wore on their minds constantly. The participants needed toiletries and a place with running water to maintain their hygiene. They sometimes went for days at time without a meal. They were unable to receive written communications from their post-secondary institution or other organizations because of the lack of a mailing address.
Additionally, participants reported that it was difficult to manage the resources they did receive because on- and off-campus offices and agencies did not communicate with one another. Often campus entities would provide similar resources without knowing that their efforts were duplicated on campus. This prevented institutions from using their funds efficiently to provide the variety of resources desperately needed by homeless college students. Lastly, the offices, clubs, and organizations that did attempt to help homeless college students rarely spoke to them directly or asked them to identify their most pressing needs. This lack of communication resulted in lost opportunities to help these students and make the greatest impact.

“If You Treat Us Like We Can, We Will”

Academic integration is attained when individuals understand their role as a student, identify academic norms and values, and achieve academic success (Tinto, 1975). Hoyt and Winn (2004) recommended academic interventions such as early alert systems, mentor programs, tutoring services, supplemental instruction, cohort study and support groups, accessible faculty office hours, and first-year seminars to support college student success. In addition, smaller, more informal interactions with homeless college students can have a significant impact on their ability to integrate academically.

“Scholarly faculty participation” (p. 15) can also promote academic integration (Arnold, 1999). Eric achieved academic integration by having continuous interaction with his black male faculty members during their office hours. This provided opportunities for one-on-one teaching and mentoring that enhanced Eric’s ability to succeed. Similarly, Precious shared a story of her interaction with a public speaking professor that forever changed her life. This professor told Precious she was good at something and encouraged
her. Precious noted that it was the first time anyone had ever encouraged her that way. Not only did she do well in his class, but her newfound confidence helped her open up to other opportunities and possibilities. She found the courage to begin walking into places she had felt excluded from prior to his encouragement. As a result of a single professor’s positive words, Precious found the inner strength she needed to persist and succeed academically.

Sometimes a word of advice or a nudge of encouragement is all that is needed for college students to see where they fit on a campus. Homeless college students already have the desire to succeed. Campus constituents who take the time to look past a student’s appearance and into their heart can make an enormous difference in that student’s life. When asked a final question of what do you wish college administrators, faculty, and staff knew about homeless college students, Anodda answered that the state of being in homelessness was not their fault and that there are there to receive an education. She wanted college employees to not judge homeless college students by their “circumstances” or homeless condition. She pressed that homeless college students should be judged by their “skill” or what they could do and how they perform in the classroom. Anodda also stated, “Don’t feel sorry for us; improve our situation. We’re not a fucking sad puppy dog looking for a fucking bone, we’re looking for equal treatment fucking because if you treat us like we can, we will”.

“I Had Good Experiences On Campus”

A sense of belonging and the ability to interact positively and effectively with various campus constituents helped the participants achieve social integration (Tinto, 1975) and facilitated their journey to degree completion. The relationships that made
them feel like full members of the campus community resulted from taking the risk of interacting with others. Establishing a sense of belonging can further expand students’ networks on campus, which can increase retention (Arnold, 1999; Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 1975). The participants who were actively involved on campus achieved higher levels of social integration. They were also typically the participants who were able to maintain an acceptable level of hygiene and a more conventional appearance, which made it easier for them to socialize.

Actively involved participants had their finger on the pulse of the institution. They were more likely to know what resources were available, and when and where to find them. Through their leadership roles they were even able to create additional resources for students. Holding student leadership roles on campus enabled them to avoid some of the obstacles to persistence, like isolation and lack of knowledge about resources. Jodi shared, “My experience – actually I had good experiences on campus with my professors. I took some classes online, but on campus itself, I enjoyed the classroom setting. The students were very accommodating”.

Emotional Support

Homeless college students need emotional support, yet are unlikely to reach out to others due to fear of rejection (Bensimon, 2007). Thus, practitioners must seek opportunities to provide such support. Participants reported experiencing a wide range of emotions while pursuing a degree, which varied from strongly positive (i.e., appreciation, happiness, pride, and self-assurance) to strongly negative (i.e., anger, envy, and guilt). Without adequate support, participants often experienced a host of negative emotions. Some recalled that they experienced depression (Greene et al., 1997; Robertson, 1989;
Toro et al., 2007) and/or felt suicidal (Green et al., 1997; Kidd & Carroll, 2007; Toro et al., 2007) at times. Although research has found that substance abuse is prevalent among homeless populations in general (Green et al., 1997; Toro et al., 2007), this was not found to be the true among the college students in this study.

The ability to forge relationships on campus, and the comfort and strength drawn from the ability to connect with others, made a huge difference in the lives of homeless college students. It was also enormously beneficial for the participants to see that someone was invested in them. Knowing that someone believed in them and was rooting for their success provided a sense of hope. It caused them to push harder and gave them a view of something positive about themselves.

Each of the participants feared disclosing their homeless status to others on campus, believing that if their status was known they would be punished in some way. They also worried that they would be treated differently from other college students when what they wanted most was to blend in, or at a minimum, not stand out as different. The participants wanted to avoid feeling embarrassed about their homeless status and feared they would be treated poorly if others know that they were homeless.

The participants recognized that society tends to view homelessness as a result of laziness, substance abuse, or mental illness (Aberson & McVean, 2008; Phillips, 2015). Even worse, many people assume that homeless individuals must be criminals (Aberson & McVean, 2008). Homeless college students are aware that many people view homelessness as a condition of one’s own making, and they did not want to be labeled unfairly or judged to be lacking (Aberson & McVean, 2008; Fields, 2015b; Phillip, 2015; Wynne et al., 2014). They wanted to be seen as people, not as degenerates.
Whether real or perceived, the sting of being stigmatized prevented the participants from sharing their homeless status unless absolutely necessary. Non-disclosure was seen as a way to fit in, and viewed as preferable to dealing with microaggressions, verbal and nonverbal. Alice reported “parroting” others around her in an attempt to fit in, a strategy that tended to make her feel that she was losing her sense of self. Alice and other participants described how the constant need to suppress who they were resulted in a loss of freedom. Yet such hiding felt necessary due to their fear of the negative outcomes that might occur if others discovered they were homeless.

However, at times participants had no choice but to disclose their homeless status. Precious stated:

So, I remember one day, I had gone to – wherever [staff member] was working that day and time, but they needed my address because they couldn’t – they didn’t have anything for me and I had to break down and tell her I was – I didn’t have any place to stay . . . . She said, what you mean you don’t have a place to stay?

Well, I don’t have a place to stay. So that’s how I had to tell.

They also disclosed their homeless status voluntarily to people they trusted to keep this information confidential (Wynne et al., 2014). Homeless college students are more trusting of those who demonstrate compassion for them, and those who look past the exterior to see them for who they are and what they are capable of.

Compassion can be conveyed in numerous ways. Anodda recalled how a compassionate moment fueled her desire to succeed:

So, the smell of food calms me down, so I was taking—I was standing in the lunchroom acting like I could buy something off a menu and I was just closing
my eyes and I was inhaling, I looked like I was fucking crazy. And this guy, he asked me, Do you want something to eat? I said, I can’t, I said, I’m not that hungry. In my mind I was saying, I can’t afford shit. I told him, I’m not that hungry; I’m just standing here.

And I left and I went to go sit at the table and I’ll never look at a chicken quesadilla ever again, like the same way ever again, because I only had $1.50 in my pocket and I don’t know if I looked like I was hungry, I don’t know if I looked like I was weird. But, he gave me chicken quesadillas underneath the table because I hadn’t eaten in three days and it was like those little experiences, you take that and you’re like, Okay, this person helped me progress, now I owe it to this person to succeed.

Compassion is not only offering someone a place to sleep for the night, asking their opinion, giving them food when they are hungry, or allowing them extra time to take a test because their car, which is also their home, was towed by the city. Compassion can be speaking to someone, asking them about their day and waiting to hear the answer. It can be having a conversation. It can be treating a homeless college student like a human being.

**Strengths of Homeless College Students**

Homeless college students continue striving toward a goal despite the innumerable challenges they face each and every day. The participants all exhibited outstanding strength and tenacity and a tremendous determination to succeed in life. Their innate strengths unquestionably contributed to their ability to persist to graduation.
Made of Vibranium

The participants demonstrated intelligence in their decisions and responses to their difficult conditions. Resiliency is defined in this study as “the many instances in which an individual is able to adapt to and thrive despite adverse conditions” (Gupton, 2016, p. 228). Despite the obstacles they faced, the participants were able to cope (Gupton, 2016) by adapting to these stressors (Garmezy, 1991), and such coping skills may help them advance toward their goals. The participants believed they had a right to an education and that an education would improve their lives, so they persisted in their struggle to succeed.

Garmezy (1991) and Gupton (2016) identified “the person’s intelligence and disposition” (p. 229) along with “family support and external support from institutions and individuals outside the family” (p. 230) as influences that enhance resiliency. By virtue of their college attendance and completion, the participants demonstrated resilience and achieved success. They did not give up but kept pressing toward the finish line of graduation. Every decision they made was deliberate and with a little help from others, they stayed steadfastly committed to their goal. As Jodi stated, her single aim was to “get it done; get it done.”

Just Call Me MacGyver

Resourcefulness was another dominant strength of the research participants. Homeless college students must be very creative in accessing the resources they need to succeed. For example Precious said the following about one of the artifacts she brought to the interview:
Okay, my artifact is Altoids because this is all I used to eat all the time because I had no food and I didn’t have a tooth brush or tooth paste. So I would just keep this all the time and when I was hungry I would just eat them.

Another example is that all of the participants expressed the difficulty of completing homework without a home base or consistent Internet access. They often found ways to stay outside of campus buildings after closing, or outside other places of business, to access Wi-Fi after hours in order to complete assignments.

In addition, participants also took advantage of the resources offered by various homeless shelters, food banks, and community centers, often obtaining clothing and toiletries from these agencies. Most participants indicated that their post-secondary institutions had health centers that provided toiletries as well. Finally, libraries provided much needed textbooks and an occasional place to sleep for more than one participant.

“I got arrested”. Many of the participants resorted to committing petty illegal acts to better manage their homeless situation (Greene et al., 1997; Merdinger et al., 2005; Toro et al., 2007). Loitering on campus was commonplace and when the participants had no place to sleep at night, they sometimes entered spaces on and off campus unlawfully. Even if a homeless college student had a vehicle in which to sleep, city ordinances often made it illegal to do so. One participant revealed that they shoplifted toiletries when needed, while another admitted performing sexual acts for shelter. And Anodda stated, “I got arrested during a semester and I failed all four of those classes”. Regardless of the illegal act, in most cases, the participants tried to minimize the harm to others as they did what they felt must be done for survival.

“That’s When I...Became an Activist”
Most homeless students lack access to general information and are unaware of the rights and resources available to them (Aviles de Bradley, 2011; Wynne et al., 2014). This was also true for the homeless college student participants. Most of the participants stated that they chose to participate in the study to help other homeless college students. They understand what it is like to live through this experience and want practitioners to understand the phenomenon, so other homeless college students can receive the assistance and understanding they need to succeed.

Homeless college student activism is important because of the need for authentic and informed voices at the table, sharing the experiences and needs of the population. In addition to Alice’s policy work on campus, Eric founded an organization to help black male youth in an attempt to intervene early, before they became college-aged. Others, such as Jodi, hoped to find ways to assist the homeless college student population as they were experiencing the phenomenon. While Alice detailed:

We have a newspaper in [town] for homeless and marginalized residents to edit it, contribute, it’s basically a magazine by this population for this population and for the greater population. It’s like a way to help folks in the community be vendors, so they sell newspapers and make money and it’s a great thing. So, they knew that I was a homeless college student and everyone had a plan for me, everyone had like an agenda for me, they're like, oh my gosh, you should – you know, you should do – you should talk – you should go to a talk and talk to people in the community about the fact that homeless college students exist or, you know – everyone just felt that I should do something that I didn’t want to do. I didn’t want people to know those things about me. It wasn’t until I was a dropout that a lot of
things changed for me and my dropout year was the most important – the hardest year and most important year of my whole life. That’s when I, I guess you could say, became an activist.

**Needs of Homeless College Students**

Every college student needs access to appropriate resources to support their academic achievement and success. It is no different for homeless college students. The participants in this study shared how they met their needs using on- and off-campus support.

**Community Resources**

The majority of post-secondary institutions are not currently prepared or able to provide homeless college students with the support they need. This was a discovery the participants made early in their college careers. Due to the lack of on-campus resources, the participants utilized any off-campus resources they were able to identify.

Participants also took advantage of the resources offered by various homeless shelters, food banks, and community centers, often acquiring clothing and toiletries from these agencies. The participants would frequent various local stores, parking lots, restaurants, coffee shops, and the local library for Internet access. These locations had free Wi-Fi access and were recognized as safe places to spend time.

Some of the participants received assistance from family or friends. Resources were rarely turned down, as they did not know when they would have access to these opportunities again. The participants were grateful to receive these resources, but they did not fulfill the overall needs of the homeless college students.
“I Didn’t Know”

A stunning fact was that the participants acknowledged they did not know all the resources available to them on campus. They explained that this was either because they were afraid to ask or because those whom they did ask did not know. One example is that Precious used a sink to bathe for years because she had no idea the gym had locker rooms with the amenities in which to shower. Had she known this resource existed, she would have utilized it. Eric also spoke of a lack of awareness concerning a food resource on-campus:

I just heard this, that they had this little cubby place where there were sandwiches, had I known that, I would have been all in that sandwich, but I didn’t know. So—and I'm just finding out, is this something new, is this something that’s been there, and why didn’t I know about it.

Some of the participants noted that if someone had intervened and simply asked them what their needs were, they would have informed them and perhaps received additional information about what the campus offered. Throughout the interviews, the participants identified various needs they believe can and should be provided for all students on campus. Table 3 presents a list of these needs. The following sections highlight some of the most frequently mentioned needs.

**For rent.** A lack of housing is a major concern for a homeless college student. Without housing, students are left to carry all of their belonging around with them and lack a designated place to rest, sleep, call home, manage hygiene, or study after hours. Post-secondary institutions are not prepared to offer long-term housing solutions for homeless college students. Neither are the majority of homeless shelters, which are often
designated for women and children and/or for short-term placement only. The participants found that even when they asked about on-campus housing options, nothing was available for them. They needed flexibility in room choices, plans, and payment options that were simply not available.

“**You can’t succeed if you’re hungry. You just can’t.**” Going through the day with nothing to eat was a reality for most of the participants. The participants shared that they often did not know where their next meal was coming from; some reported not eating for days at a time on a regular basis. Anodda stated that she was always hungry and spoke of being hungry during the interview. Hunger can be a way of life for the homeless college student, and this issue must be addressed if institutions are to create an optimal learning environment for students.

Participants with greater social integration reported eating more regularly than those who were less socially involved on campus. These students knew which events offered free food to students, providing what was often the only meal a homeless college student would eat all day. The participants readily provided suggestions for post-secondary institutions seeking to ease food insecurity for homeless college students. They suggested establishing a food bank or food pantry on campus and involving the campus community and local businesses in donating food items. One of the most popular suggestions was that financial aid allocations could be available to purchase meal plans. If this were possible, homeless college students would be assured of their ability to obtain food on a regular basis.

**Need a Lyft?** Transportation is an important resource for homeless college students. The participants spoke of the need for reliable transportation to attend school.
Several of the participants slept off campus so it was vital that they be able to return when needed. The lack of a vehicle could be a hindrance. So, too, was a lack of money for gasoline and repairs that sometimes hampered the students’ ability to get to campus. Some homeless college student vehicles were targets and would be towed for being parked in an unauthorized location. The participants recommended providing a campus bus system that could run from campus to campus and to local community locations. Anodda proposed that offering transit cards that could be paid for with financial aid dollars would be of great help to the homeless college student.

What is the Wi-Fi password? Unquestionably, attending a post-secondary institution in the 21st century requires the extensive use of technology, and contemporary students cannot succeed in college without consistent, reliable Internet access. Students are strongly encouraged to own a laptop or similar device, and it is difficult to complete assignments without one. The libraries and computer labs with printers are available for student use, but only for limited periods of time daily, and this may not be enough time for students to complete their assignments.

Even if a homeless college student owns a computer, they are unlikely to have the funds to pay for Wi-Fi, so they must rely on accessing Wi-Fi at the institution or other locations, such as the public library or Starbucks. Without this access, students are unable to complete their work. Participants suggested providing students the option of purchasing laptops and Internet cards with financial aid.

If you build it, they will come. All of the participants expressed a need for the university offices that provide services they utilize, such as the campus library, print services, tutoring, and buildings with Wi-Fi, to have extended hours. Expanding the hours
campus services are available would provide more of a one-stop shop for homeless college students, who do not have the luxury of beginning to study on campus and finishing at home. They need to have services available to them in the here and now, as this was all they had to rely on.

If a homeless student was forced to leave campus because it was closing, they would lose the ability to access power for their laptop, connect to the Internet, and receive tutoring when they needed it. Several participants mentioned lingering outside, in parking lots and behind buildings, to stay connected and retain Wi-Fi access. Longer office and resource hours would provide them the ability to meet deadlines in a timely manner and prevent them from having to loiter in potentially dangerous areas, trying to access what they need to complete an assignment.

**Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study underline the factors that contribute to homeless college student persistence. The participants gladly took part in the study in the hope that the data they contributed will assist practitioners in supporting homeless college student success. This study has a variety of implications for practice and suggests a number of ways post-secondary institutions can contribute to the academic success and persistence of homeless college students.

I have found that the implications of this study have already influenced how I view my role at my institution, as well as, how I view the experiences of the homeless college students I encounter. There has been a shift in my practice to take care to avoid assumptions and to listen intently to the students’ needs. I am a person of contact for homeless college students on my campus. My responsibilities include providing
immediate assistance and referring students to support services, to include the University homeless college student liaison. I also educate others on campus by providing contact information, as well as, listings of available resources.

This study has had a large impact on how I feel about this work and how I now approach my work with homeless college students. I feel a responsibility to share my findings with practitioners so that the students actual needs will be addressed appropriately. This is best accomplished by effectively communicating with each homeless college student I encountered. I interact with this population in a respectful manner and with the understanding that the circumstances that got them to homelessness will be unique. I am also more observant, looking for possible signs of homelessness and look for cues that a student would like me to ask more probing questions. I now offer resources to students readily if something seems amiss instead of waiting for them to approach me. I never lose sight of the fact that this homeless college student is making a great sacrifice to persist toward a degree. I acknowledge that they are as strong as they are sensitive. I now take greater care to encourage and give support words and services. I understand that I am serving as a lifeline to them in that moment.

As a practitioner, it is my hope that homeless college students of post-secondary institutions will be at the forefront of my fellow practitioners and administrators minds and not an afterthought. We need a top-down support system to best assist homeless college students and ensure that they are receiving what they should as members of the student body in a fair and unbiased manner. Funding should be allocated for this support and donations sought to provide sustainable care.
Such support can have a tremendous influence on homeless college students. It can improve their quality of life, assisting in making or breaking them. It can be the difference between persisting and dropping out, giving up. Alice summed up her feelings about this, stating:

Other administrators who will give you a philosophical equation, like try me, and they’ll say, well, you know it’s the age-old question of we have a certain amount of limited resources that we can divide, so there are divisible limited resources that we can allocate to 10 students who are impacted by homelessness gravely, or we can allocate it to 10,000 students to build some new part of the stadium. You know, and it’s this—that’s a very philosophical question that happens a lot in like bioethics and healthcare and how you allocate resources for different ailments, and those kinds of questions are bonkers. Not only is the data not right, because it’s not 10 to 10,000, . . . —that is so far from accurate—you know, our quality of life is 0.2 and you’re trying to improve the quality of preference and enjoyment and experience for someone whose quality of life is already like 0.9. How dare you. Justify that for me.

**Institutional Support**

The findings of this study identify a variety of ways for post-secondary institutions to meet their obligations to the homeless college student population. This can start with a basic acknowledgement by the administration that these students exist and are enrolled at the institution and a commitment to support them. Institutions can help improve the quality of life for homeless college students by making sure they know they are welcome on campus and comprise an integral part of the campus community.
Once acknowledgement and a commitment are established, the institution can move forward with developing a strategy to accommodate the students or, at a minimum, support them by providing the resources needed for success. Such an approach may include incorporating a homeless college student initiative into the institution’s strategic plan and appointing a task force to plan and program for the homeless student population. Putting concrete plans into motion will ensure that the entire university and community at large understand the importance of this initiative and, consequently, the value of this student population to the institution. These actions will affirm the administration’s commitment to its homeless college student population and demonstrate to the students that they are integral members of the campus community.

Policy changes should be implemented, where appropriate, to be inclusive of the homeless college student population. Alice noted insightfully that homeless students do not fit in or even officially exist on her campus, as they are not even named as a marginalized population:

So yeah, the lack of support was the fact that my diversity office didn’t recognize socioeconomic status or education, occupation, and income level as being an integral component of your life, of how you are perceived, of how you perceive, of how you navigate the world at all, and that that has something and everything to do with higher education, literally something and everything.

Having the ability to identify homeless college students is a vital first step for post-secondary institutions; simply put, you cannot help someone if you cannot identify them. It is recommended that institutions actively check the disclosures on FAFSA to
identify homeless college students. The participants all stated that they wanted an intervention; they were just too afraid to ask for help themselves.

Lastly, this study found that there is diversity in the homeless college student population. The participants of this study were found to be between the ages of 25 and 61. Two of the seven participants were White, while there were five women and two men in the sample. The average length of homelessness was 2.67 years. Three of the seven participants were first-generation college students. Two were U.S. military veterans and four participants identified as having a disability. The diversity in the sample is an indication that homelessness can affect anyone. Stereotypes cannot be relied on to identify this population of students. The participant demographics can be viewed in Table 1 on page 139.

**Institutional agent.** Another way to identify and support homeless college students is to designate an individual at each institution whose primary responsibility is to work with this population. Many of the participants suggested that institutions should identify a point person to serve as the initial contact for homeless college students. This proposal mirrors the recommendation in the research literature to designate “institutional agents” (Benismon, 2007, p. 443) who are responsible for guiding homeless college students to appropriate resources and who affirm the students’ belief in themselves (Bensimon, 2007; Flemings et al., 2005). These institutional agents or advocates can be an invaluable tool for increasing homeless student persistence and success.

This person would serve as an institutional agent or homeless student liaison who is aware of all the support services available to homeless college students, and can
provide accurate and complete information about these resources. The position would provide a visible and safe place for students to report their homeless status.

The institutional agent’s role would also encompass communicating with various offices and local, state, and federal agencies to assist in processing documentation and to maximize possible benefits. This individual would also encourage these students and provide the emotional and mental support they need. The person in this role must have demonstrated an interest in this type of work and a passion for student success, as they will have a key role in engaging homeless college students.

Other responsibilities associated with this role may include leading the homeless student initiative task force, managing a food pantry, training campus constituents on how to engage this population, providing a communal space for homeless students to gather, planning campus programs and events for all campus constituents, creating a marketing plan, developing materials for distribution at new student orientation, collecting homeless college student data, and serving as a contact person and liaison for all campus offices and areas that provide homeless college student assistance. For example, career services could work with the institutional agent to provide employment opportunities on and off campus. Ideally, this position would serve as a one-stop shop, providing an array of essential resources and services to support homeless college student retention.

**Financial resources.** To significantly increase homeless students’ sense of security and access to needed resources, institutions should provide options for housing, the means to obtain food and basic toiletries, and access to other needs such as
transportation, textbooks, technology, counseling, and health care. In order to accomplish this, institutions must be able to fund these necessities.

Currently, student service fees, paid by students each academic term, pay for some of these on-campus services at most institutions. Student can typically access counseling and health care at no additional cost or at a subsidized student rate. Student health centers often provide free sample-sized toiletries, which are donated to the school by manufacturers or marketing companies. Student often have access to gym or fitness center facilities to take care of hygiene needs. The participants all felt that the institution could provide for the remainder of all students’ basic needs, regardless of housing status, by utilizing financial aid.

The financial aid office can be a powerful partner in meeting the needs of homeless college students, and it is possible that financial aid dollars could be approved to pay for some of these needs. Some institutions already allow textbook rentals and computer equipment to be purchased with financial aid dollars. The participants in this study suggested that students should also be able to use financial aid to opt in to services that would pay for necessities such as Internet access, transportation, meal plans, gym or fitness center membership fees, and housing expenses.

Financial aid can also be a factor in the ability to pay for on-campus housing. Homeless college students may have little to no regular income. They need a variety of options for housing, including flexible payment options. If monthly payments are not acceptable, emergency funding and need-based loans may needed to finance down payments and/or security deposits on a residence. This would allow the student to afford housing with a limited budget. Sometimes students just need assistance to get in the door.
**Extended office hours.** The participants emphasized the need for extended hours of operation for offices that provide services that homeless college students consume. They need the library to stay open as late as possible, as this is where they plug in their laptops and use the Wi-Fi to complete assignments. They need to use these services late in the evening, early in the morning, and on the weekends, as well as during regular business hours. This is necessary because once they leave campus, they are unlikely to have access to technology in the places they sleep overnight. Participants also need longer hours for academic services such as tutoring. They need to capitalize on their time on campus, which translates into using campus resources as much as possible.

**Student Voice**

It is also important for students utilize their voices to speak out about their needs and request the support they require. Too often the participants of the study indicated that they held fears of the repercussion of disclosing their housing status. Homeless college students need to understand and believe that they have the same rights and voice in matters that affect them as housed students. They can and should advocate for improved conditions and accommodation on campus. Once they do so, administration will take notice of their involvement. We need their voices to participate in brainstorming session and to have a place at planning and decision-making tables.

**Deviation from Literature**

There is little literature available on the homeless college student experience. However, I must point out that there are times that my findings from my participants differ slightly from the literature that does exist. Although the literature states a number of homeless college students were likely in the foster care system, this did not present in
my study. None of my participants came from the foster care system. Also, only three of the seven participants were first-generation college student, which is contrary to the literature. In addition, the participants did not speak of struggling with an academic gap. Finally, although the literature indicated drug and alcohol abuse was prevalent in homeless population, the participants of this study did not reveal substance abuse problems. It is my hope that these findings will discontinue the stereotype assigned to homeless college students.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study explored the phenomenon and illustrated the essence of homeless college student experiences (Van Manen, 1990) by eliciting and examining the participants’ stories (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007) to explore the factors that contribute to homeless college students’ persistence to graduation. The study sought to provide insight into how some homeless college students persist despite the obstacles they face, and to identify the types of resources institutions can provide that will improve these students’ chances of success.

Overall, there is little data available about homeless college student experiences. Most of the data that exist focuses on homeless youth who have aged out of the foster care system. Since the initial literature review was completed, other researchers have begun studies, such as, research on housing and food insecurity discussed in popular press. In fact, the day before my dissertation defense national press announced the findings of a study on hunger and homeless in college conducted by the Wisconsin HOPE Lab (Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, Schneider, Hernandez & Cady, 2018). Reference to this research is suggested for upcoming studies.
It is recommended that future studies address identified barriers to persistence, which were noted by the participants in this study. Scant literature exists examining these factors, or others like tenacity, in homeless college student experiences. A full list of identified barriers to persistence is presented in Table 11.

Table 11

*Participant-Cited Barriers to Persistence*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Achievement Gap</th>
<th>Cognitive and Physical Victimization</th>
<th>Discrimination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Elements</td>
<td>Exploitation</td>
<td>Food Insecurity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostile Environment</td>
<td>Housing Instability</td>
<td>Indifference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Ability to Maintain Hygiene</td>
<td>Lack of Campus Resources</td>
<td>Lack of Data on Homeless College Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Direct Communication with Homeless College Students</td>
<td>Lack of Empathy</td>
<td>Lack of Employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Family Support</td>
<td>Lack of Finances</td>
<td>Lack of Guidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Health Care</td>
<td>Lack of Home Address</td>
<td>Lack of Privacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Sleep</td>
<td>Lack of Technology</td>
<td>Lack of Training Concerning Homeless College Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Transportation</td>
<td>Lack of Knowledge of Existing Campus Resources</td>
<td>Learning Disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Self-Esteem</td>
<td>Mental Health Issues</td>
<td>Microaggression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stopping Out</td>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>Substance Abuse</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For example, available research pronounces that homeless students have an achievement gap, which a significant barrier to their success (Butts, 1937; Coley et al., 2013; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010; Tinto & Pell Institute, 2004; Toro et al., 2007). However, this was not a factor presented by the participants of this study. Additional research can be done to find whether such a barrier exists for homeless college students.

In addition, research into how college students become homeless and how their finances were influenced could be useful to practitioners. They may discover ways to correct damaging current behavior or even address the causes before they have devastating consequences.

Also, there is no available national data on graduation rates for homeless college students (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2016). Additional information would allow researchers to discover what actions or forms of support create positive outcomes for this population. This would allow post-secondary institutions to direct their resources, including both financial and human capital, toward the areas likely to yield the best results.

Additionally, it would be worthwhile to conduct research on the tension the participants experienced when discussing whether they should or should not disclosure their homeless status. They desperately wanted support services yet, disclosure was associated with fear of negative outcomes should they be discovered as homeless. They feared that punishment would ensue. In order to assist homeless college students, they must be properly identified. Research on how to bypass this tension or negative emotions tied to disclosure would be helpful to post-secondary institutions as it would improve the
ability of institutional agents to provide the services and resources homeless college students desperately need.

Finally, this study utilized the literature-based title of ‘homeless college students’ to describe the participants. It is recommended that future research use person-first language to depict college students who have experienced the phenomenon of homelessness. This would align with the language used to address other populations affected by a condition.

**Conclusion**

_I wish they knew how badly we want to succeed, how badly we want to change our circumstances. Help us change our circumstances, not by being sorry for us, not by saying, “Poor you.” (Anodda)_

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to explore the phenomenon of college students who are experiencing homelessness and illustrate the essence of homeless college student experiences (Van Manen, 1990) by eliciting and examining the participants’ stories (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007) to explore the factors that contribute to homeless college students’ persistence to graduation. This study identified five themes related to how the participants experienced homelessness while pursuing an education, and how the institutional environment contributed to their ability to persist in college. The themes included: the institutional obligation to homeless college students; the campus environment; emotional support; the strengths of homeless college students; and the needs of homeless college students.

Using these themes as a guide, the study identified recommendations to support homeless college students’ persistence and academic success. These included providing
greater institutional support, utilizing student voice, identifying an institutional agent, making financial resources available, and extending the hours for campus offices and services. It was recommended that future studies explore identified barriers to persistence for homeless college students, along with their tenacity, financial literacy, fear of disclosure, use of first person language to describe this population and graduation rates.
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http://doi.org/10.1177/1049732313507752


http://www.jstor.org/stable/1170024


Dear [Participant Name]:

I am a graduate student under the direction of Dr. Diane L. Cooper in the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services at the University of Georgia. I invite you to participate in a research study entitled, “The Impact of Campus Environments on Homeless Students’ Persistence to Graduation.” The purpose of this study is to explore how college students who have experienced homelessness perceive the impact of the campus environment on their persistence to graduation. The potential benefit of this study is to provide practitioners and students insight into how to best serve homeless college students and provide the support needed to bolster retention efforts.

You were identified as a potential participant by Hoping Others Project Excellence (HOPE), Ross College, or VOYAGE. You're eligible to participate in this study because you graduated from a post-secondary institution and were homeless for a minimum of one academic year during college.

Your participation will involve a two-part interview. The first part of the interview will utilize artifact sharing, a form of collecting visual data. Each participant will be asked to bring one or more artifacts with them to our meeting for the artifact sharing portion of the interview. The participant will use the artifact(s) to depict their story and will narrate their experience as a homeless college student, expressing the meaning of their personal experiences, connecting to the research question. The second part of the interview will occur the same day and will be a semi-structured interview using a set of open-ended interview questions. The interview location will be based on the preference of each participant. The time commitment per participant is 1.0 to 1.5 hours for the two-part interview and 1.0 hour for the transcription review, for a total of 2.0 to 2.5 hours of participation.

I acknowledge that revisiting these memories may cause an uprising of emotions for the participant. A list of counseling resources will be provided to each participant at the conclusion of the interviews.

Please note that participation in this study is voluntary and you may choose to end your participation at any time. Compensation is not provided.

If you would like additional information about this study, please feel free to call me at (678) 575- 8460 or send an e-mail to indiab@uga.edu. Thank you for your consideration!
Sincerely,

India Blackburn
APPENDIX B
CRITERIA SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE

Participant ID: ______________________

(To be completed by potential participant prior to participation)

Please answer the following questions (circle one)

1. Did you graduate from a post-secondary institution? YES NO

2. Where you homeless for a minimum of one academic year during college? YES NO

If you answered YES to both questions, you are eligible to participate.

If you answered NO to either question, you are not eligible to participate.
APPENDIX C

INSTRUCTIONS TO PARTICIPANTS

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
The purpose of this research is to explore how college students were homeless perceive the impact of campus environments on their persistence to degree completion. I will gain perspective by asking alumni who were homeless for periods of time while in college to share their personal experiences. I am particularly interested in obtaining information on how the campus environment, academic integration, social integration and resiliency impacted their persistence. This study will provide information on how homeless college students were able to persist and what resources institutions can provide to assist in this process.

ROLE OF PARTICIPANT
The role of the participant is to participate in a two-part interview. During the first part of the interview, each participant will be asked to bring one or more artifacts with them to our meeting for the artifact sharing portion of the interview. The participant will use the artifact(s) to depict their story and will narrate their experience as a homeless college student, expressing the meaning of their personal experiences, connecting to the research question.

The artifacts I will ask you to provide for this interview will be used solely for the purpose of the study. I will take photographs of the artifacts during the interview. (Note: Photos will be uploaded to create digital images. Digital images will be kept on a password-protected system).

The second part of the interview will occur the same day and will be a semi-structured interview using a standard set of open-ended interview questions. The interview location will be based on the preference of each participant.

Commit 1.0 to 1.5 hours for the two-part interview and 1.0 hour for the transcription review, for a total of 2.0 to 2.5 hours of participation in the study.

NEXT STEPS:
1. Schedule a date, time, and location for the interview.
2. Check your email for the consent form. Read prior to the interview in preparation to review together.
3. Bring your artifact(s) to the interview.
APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
CONSENT FORM
THE IMPACT OF CAMPUS ENVIRONMENTS ON HOMELESS STUDENTS’ PERSISTENCE TO GRADUATION

Researcher’s Statement
I am asking you to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you the information about the study so you can decide whether to be in the study or not. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called “informed consent.” A copy of this form will be given to you.

Principal Investigator: Dr. Diane L. Cooper
Counseling and Human Development Services
(706) 542-1812 or dlicooper@uga.edu

Co-Investigator: India Blackburn
Counseling and Human Development Services
(678) 575-8460 or indiab@uga.edu

Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this research is to explore how former college students who were homeless perceive the impact of campus environments on their persistence to graduation. I will gain perspective by asking alumni who were homeless for periods of time while they were a student to share their personal experiences. I am particularly interested in obtaining information on how the campus environment, academic integration, social integration, and resiliency impacted their persistence. This study will provide information on how homeless college students were able to persist and what resources institutions can provide to assist in this process.

Study Procedures
If you agree to participate, you will be asked to:
• Participate in a two-part interview. The first part of the interview will utilize artifact sharing, a form of collecting visual data. Each participant will be asked to bring one or more artifacts with them to our meeting for the artifact sharing portion of the interview. You will use the artifact(s) to depict your story and will narrate their experience as a homeless college student, expressing the meaning of their personal experiences, connecting to the research question. We will also have you fill out a brief questionnaire. The second part of the interview will occur the same day and will be a semi-structured interview using a standard set of open-ended interview questions. The interview location will be based on your preference. The total time for the interview will be approximately 1.0 to 1.5 hours. There will also be an opportunity to review your transcript, which will take approximately 1 hour.

• Commit 1.0 to 1.5 hours for the two-part interview and 1.0 hour for the transcription review, for a total of 2.0 to 2.5 hours of participation in the study.

Risks and discomforts
• The researcher acknowledges that revisiting these memories may cause an uprising of emotions for the participant.
• A list of counseling resources will be provided to each participant at the conclusion of the interviews.

Benefits
• There are no direct benefits to the participant.
• The expected benefit of this study is to provide practitioners and students insight into how to most effectively serve homeless college students and provide the support needed to bolster retention efforts.

Incentives for participation
None

Audio/Video Recording
The recordings of both the artifact sharing interview and the semi-structured interview will be transcribed, then analyzed together. A professional transcriptionist, not the researcher, will complete the transcription. The transcription will be cross-referenced or checked against the recordings for accuracy by the researcher and then the recordings will be destroyed. The transcripts will be de-identified and housed on a secure server and a flash drive will be kept in a locked file cabinet at the home of the researcher.

Privacy/Confidentiality
The researcher will uphold confidentiality throughout the research process. Confidentiality will be maintained by assigning each participant a pseudonym. The data collected from each participant will be labeled with the pseudonym only. The interviews will be transcribed, after which the recordings will be destroyed. The transcripts will be secured in a locked file cabinet and on a secure server. The project’s research records
may be reviewed by departments at the University of Georgia responsible for regulatory and research oversight.

Researchers will not release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent unless required by law.

**Taking Part is Voluntary**
Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**If You Have Questions**
The main researcher conducting this study is Diane L. Cooper, a professor at the University of Georgia. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Diane L. Cooper at dlcooper@uga.edu or at (706) 542-1812. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at (706) 542-3199 or irb@uga.edu.

**Research Subject’s Consent to Participate in Research:**
To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. Your signature below indicates that you have read or had read to you this entire consent form, and have had all of your questions answered.

________________________________________  ___________________________  __________
Name of Researcher  Signature  Date

________________________________________  ___________________________  __________
Name of Participant  Signature  Date

Please sign both copies, keep one, and return one to the researcher.
APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Participant ID: ______________________

Interviewer:

Date:

Time:

Location:

Instruments Used:

A. Criteria Screening Questionnaire
B. Informed Consent Form
C. Personal Data Sheet
D. Artifact sharing Questionnaire
E. Semi-Structured Interview Questionnaire

Other topics discussed:

Documents obtained:

Interview Comments:
APPENDIX F

PERSONAL DATA SHEET

Participant ID: ______________________

(To be completed by potential participant prior to interview.)

Please provide the following information:

1. Age:
2. Gender:
3. Ethnicity:
4. Number of years/months as homeless college student: ____years ___ months
5. First-generation college student?
6. Year awarded Bachelor’s degree:
7. Highest level of education:
8. Current housing status (circle one): Stable Housing
   At Risk of Losing Housing
   Homeless
APPENDIX G

ARTIFACT SHARING QUESTIONNAIRE

Participant ID: ______________________

(Interview, Part 1)

For each artifact:

1. Tell me about your artifact.

2. What is the origin of the artifact?

3. How does the artifact describe your experience?

4. How does the artifact answer the research question?
APPENDIX H

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Participant ID: ______________________

(Interview, Part 2)

1. Explain why you pursued a college education.

2. Tell me about the time you spent as a homeless college student.

3. Thinking of your experience, describe the campus environment of the institution.

4. Describe how you felt as a member of the campus community.

5. Did your share your homeless status with others on campus? If so, whom and how?

6. What factors hindered your success?

7. What factors contributed to your success?

8. What campus resources or support didn’t you have that would have contributed to your success?

9. What do you wish student affairs practitioners knew about homeless college students?

10. Provide a metaphor that describes your experience as a homeless college student.

11. Why are you interested in participating in this study?

12. Is there anything you would like to add?
APPENDIX I

HEALTH PROVIDERS

THE CENTER FOR COUNSELING AND PERSONAL EVALUATION
The University of Georgia
424 Aderhold Hall
110 Carlton Street
Athens, Georgia 30602
Phone: 706-542-8508
https://coe.uga.edu/directory/units/counseling-personal-evaluation

GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF BEHAVIORAL HEALTH & DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES
Two Peachtree Street, N.W.
24th Floor
Atlanta, Georgia 30303
Commissioner's Office
404-657-2252
https://dbhdd.georgia.gov

MENTAL HEALTH GEORGIA
3547 Habersham At Northlake
Tucker, Georgia 30084
Main Office: (678) 406-9707
Main Fax: (678) 406-9881
Email: contact@mentalhealthgeorgia.com
http://www.mentalhealthgeorgia.com

THE COBB COUNTY COMMUNITY SERVICES BOARD
AND THE DOUGLAS COUNTY COMMUNITY SERVICES BOARD
770-422-0202 – Access center for information and appointments
http://www.cobbcsb.com
Behavioral Health Crisis Center
1758 County Services Parkway, SE
Marietta, GA 30008
Phone: 404-794-4857

Outpatient Services
Cobb Outpatient Services
1650 County Services Parkway Marietta, GA 30008
Phone: 770-514-2422

Douglas Outpatient Services
680 Thornton Way
Lithia Springs, GA 30122
Phone: 770-949-8082