Information Behaviors of Homeless Education Experts for Supporting College-Bound Students

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The transition from high school to higher education can be difficult for any student. For the 100,000 high school seniors each year who experience homelessness, the challenges around transitioning to higher education are magnified, causing many to forego college altogether. This emerging research study sought to understand how McKinney-Vento homeless liaisons at the state, regional, and school district levels find and use information to support homeless students' transition to higher education. Findings suggest the need for single points of contact on college campuses; uniformity of supports; and information available to liaisons, students, and families.
Keywords: homeless students, McKinney-Vento Act, transition to college

The transition from high school to higher education can be challenging for any student. Navigating the vagaries of testing, submitting applications, and eventually, navigating financial aid and advising is often confusing, if not overwhelming. These challenges are especially onerous for students who are first-generation college goers, undocumented, or otherwise lack the social capital and networking links of the most privileged and affluent students. For the 100,000 high school seniors each year who experience homelessness (National Center for Homeless Education, 2020, p. 11), the challenges around transitioning to higher education are magnified, causing many to forego college altogether. To date, much less has been written about the transition to college for homeless youth than for foster youth, although it is certainly true that these populations overlap (Zlotnick, 2009). This gap in the research is especially surprising given that federal law mandates protections for students experiencing homelessness in the P-12 setting, including the designation of a homeless liaison (often called a McKinney-Vento liaison) in every public school district. However, the lack of similarly mandated support for students in higher education can be viewed as a root cause of many of the struggles faced by students experiencing homelessness. Much of the

college-going process requires access to information that warrants assistance from institutional agents at the high school or college (Skobba et al., 2018). For students who are protected under the McKinney-Vento Act, agents at the high school level are likely their school, district, or even state homeless liaison. Studies of information seeking and use explore how individuals try to find the information, often in response to a need, to complete a finite task or solve a problem (Savolainen, 2017). Thus, this emerging research study sought to understand how McKinney-Vento liaisons at the state, region, and school district level find and use information to support homeless students' transition to higher education.

Literature Review

HOMELESSNESS AND HIGHER EDUCATION
The research on homeless students and higher education is scant. What does exist tends to be descriptive, focusing on the ill effects of housing instability and food insecurity on student persistence and success (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Gupton, 2017; Hallett & Crutchfield, 2017; Hallett et al., 2019). Most recently, Skobba et al. (2022) explored the housing pathways and resources of college students who were experiencing homelessness. The few studies that have described the transition process from high school to college for students experiencing homelessness also include students who have been in foster care or are case studies of colleges with support programs for homeless and foster care students. For example, Huang et al. (2018) described a mentoring program for foster care and homeless students at a college in the Southeastern United States that was part of a larger network of supports for students who have experienced homelessness or foster care placements. Skobba et al. (2018) offered one of the only studies on homeless students' transition to higher education. In their study (which also included foster care students), they noted that

> teachers and counselors also serves [sic] as source of social leverage by connecting students to vital information. Students frequently described the role of a teacher or counseling [sic] in providing the information they needed but did not know to apply to college, for scholarships, and financial aid, as well as access to financial support for application fees and fees for college entrance exams. (Skobba et al., 2018, p. 202)

Similarly, Hallett et al. (2018) emphasized the importance of having knowledgeable adults who can provide access to information about going to college. They explained that "A lack of connection with key individuals who are valuable sources of information and support may negatively impact [homeless students'] ability to remain enrolled in college" (Hallett et al., 2018, p. 40). Skobba et al. (2018) made a similar observation: "access to information and resources…is often limited or missing for students who have experienced foster care or homelessness" (p. 202).

P-12 MCKINNEY-VENTO LIAISONS

Federal education law mandates that every state have a homeless education coordinator and every school district have a designated homeless liaison. Often called McKinney-Vento liaisons for the law that protects the educational rights of students experiencing homelessness, district-level homeless education content experts often serve multiple roles in addition to their work with homeless students. Homeless liaisons are expected to identify and enroll students who are experiencing homelessness in school, provide the transportation and other supports students need to have a full and equal opportunity for school success, participate in professional development, train other school staff on issues related to student homelessness, and make information about rights and protections available to students and families (Schoolhouse Connection, 2018). For liaisons working with older students, one responsibility related to college going is that they ensure that "unaccompanied homeless youth are informed, and receive verification, of their status as independent students for college financial aid" (Schoolhouse Connection, 2018). Unaccompanied youth are those who are living apart from their families and are often "couch-surfing" or staying temporarily with friends or other relatives. For high school students who are experiencing homelessness with their family, particularly those who are "doubled-up" or sharing housing with others, the supports and resources are even more limited, even if the student has self-identified as homeless.

BENEFITS OF A SINGLE CONTACT

There is a growing consensus that having a single point of contact (SPOC) on college campuses for students experiencing homelessness would support student success and persistence. Zlotnick (2009) pointed out the importance of SPOCs for individuals and families experiencing homelessness or with foster care involvement for reducing the number of times they need to share difficult information about their situations. Having a central person in the college setting is equally beneficial, especially if that person has strong ties to public school McKinney-Vento liaisons and community resources and is a competent institutional agent who can help students navigate departments and documentation on campus. Huang et al. (2018) noted the importance of social supports for students who have experienced homelessness or foster care placement, explaining that "former foster youth and homeless youth may have limited opportunities to develop relationships with supportive adults" (p. 211). Beyond providing much-needed formal and informal adult supports for students who are homeless, designating "a single point of contact sends the message that students are welcome and supported on campus" (Hallett et al., 2018, p. 48). For students who experience homelessness in high school and work with a McKinney-Vento liaison, having a SPOC at college can mean a warm handoff to someone who understands the students' situation and specific needs. For students who become homeless or housing insecure in college, a SPOC reduces the stigma of having to seek help from multiple sources.

INFORMATION SEEKING

Information seeking is often included as one aspect of human information behavior, wherein the seeker attempts to find information in order to meet an information need or complete a task. The study of information seeking has a long history in library and information science, where researchers have looked at the information-seeking behaviors exhibited by professionals of different types, students, and individuals in their everyday lives. A number of theoretical models for information seeking have also been theorized, with Kuhlthau (1991) describing information seeking as a situation where

> The individual is actively involved in finding meaning which fits in with what he or she already knows, which is not necessarily the same answer for all, but sense-making within a personal frame of reference. Information from various sources is assimilated into what is already known through a series of choices. (p. 361)

According to Savolainen (2017), information seeking is a subset of human information behavior "which encompasses the range of ways employed in discovering and accessing information resources (both humans and systems) in response to goals and intentions" (p. 4). Information seeking is often theorized as originating from a triggering need, although the seeker may not know what information will meet the need when they begin their search (Savolainen, 2017).

McKinney-Vento liaisons bring an array of prior experience and skills to their roles connecting students who are homeless to resources and information. Information seeking becomes especially vital when helping students transition from high school to higher education, particularly since individual states and campuses offer different resources and supports for homeless youth. Thus, this study seeks to explore the methods and strategies used by McKinney-Vento liaisons to find information about higher education, how they share that information with students and families, and what barriers or obstacles exist to finding and using this information effectively.

METHOD

Approval from the CUNY Integrated Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained for this project prior to the recruitment of participants. Under the McKinney-Vento Act, the names and contact information for state, regional, and school district-level homeless education content experts must be publicly available. These lists are updated annually and posted on the websites of the individual state departments of education. To recruit participants for this study, the names and email addresses of all state-level coordinators were compiled into one dataset, and the names and email addresses of all school district liaisons for whom these data exist[1] were compiled into another. An

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[1] Massachusetts does not make the email addresses of McKinney-Vento liaisons public, only addresses and phone numbers. Thus, liaisons from Massachusetts were not included in the recruitment sample.

email was sent to the state coordinators describing the research project and asking for voluntary participation in an online focus group to discuss how homeless content experts find and use information to support students' transitions to higher education. Because the dataset for the district liaisons was so large (over 15,500 contacts), I selected multiple randomized sets of 100 liaisons to email in batches. Despite the annual updating of the contact information, large numbers of emails came back as undeliverable. Through these "cold" requests for participation, five state-level coordinators and 13 school district or regional liaisons agreed to participate in the online focus groups. However, the timing of the research project coincided with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and many potential participants were unavailable for the originally scheduled focus groups. Thus, the preliminary research for this study involved one online focus group with three liaisons and individual phone interviews with five more (Table 1). As such, the study described here will be viewed as a pilot study.

Table 1. *Participants*

Pseudonym	Data collection method	Homeless education role	Area of the country
Donna	Focus group	Regional	Mid-Atlantic
Samantha	Focus group	Regional	Mid-Atlantic
Alison	Focus group	District	Mid-Atlantic
Paula	Interview	State	South Atlantic
Linda	Interview	State	South Atlantic
Phoebe	Interview	District	Mid-Atlantic
Cindy	Interview	District	Mid-Atlantic
Margaret	Interview	District	Midwest

The data gathering took place in spring 2020, just as schools were transitioning to remote learning or closure for COVID-19. All participants were working from home at the time of the focus group and interviews. The focus group and phone interviews used open-ended qualitative questions to prompt responses as needed during the discussions and were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

FINDINGS

The preliminary data analysis revealed a number of common themes and concerns around finding and using information to assist students in their transition to higher education. Many of these concerns are related to systemic or operational factors about information that is hard to find or may vary from college to college. Understandably, students who are experiencing homelessness are deeply concerned about the cost of college, and the process of applying for financial aid becomes especially onerous for them. Part of the original impetus for the McKinney-Vento Act was the realization that families who were homeless often did not have access to birth certificates and other documents required for children's school registration. Without this paperwork, school districts would not enroll homeless students, thus further interrupting their educations. A provision of the Act requires schools to enroll homeless P-12 students even without the typically required paperwork.

The same provisions are not made for college students, however. Phoebe described how young people who are estranged from their families or whose families were not able to find or hold documents as a result of homelessness might not have access to their own identification documents or information from their parents for completing the FAFSA. Several participants explained that students who graduate high school as unaccompanied homeless youth under McKinney-Vento are able to use a letter from their high school liaison as proof of homeless status when they initially apply for financial aid, allowing them to apply as independent students regardless of age. Students are required to recertify their status every year or every semester, depending on individual college requirements. While students can keep in contact with their high school liaison for this, it is ultimately up to the colleges to decide whether to accept these letters as proof of homeless status after the initial semester.

Another concern raised by most participants was how to help students navigate the vast inconsistencies in procedures and processes from college to college, even within the same community or university system. For example, Linda described how in her south Atlantic state, students who are homeless qualify for free tuition waivers at public colleges and universities, yet each college handles the waiver differently, and the responsibility for working with these students is assumed by different roles and departments on each campus. Thus, a significant piece of information seeking for Linda as a state-level coordinator was keeping track of how individual colleges deal with the waiver, who or what department to contact at each school, and then making that information available to liaisons at the local level. Similarly, several participants mentioned that one of the most challenging parts of helping a student transition to higher education was figuring out what options around housing would be available to them during school breaks and vacations. This is another process that varies from school to school, and the information is rarely advertised by colleges, even to enrolled

students. According to the content experts in this study, break housing is often negotiated on a situational basis, meaning that students would need to know they *could* ask for it and who to go to for that information.

The participants in this study noted positive experiences and opportunities for information seeking and sharing. Most notably, the liaisons often spoke about forging close relationships with others in their learning communities who had expert knowledge of the college-going process. For example, Cindy described working closely with the full-time transition specialists in her program for students with disabilities. Because of the personal attention necessitated by the students' IEPs, there was a greater opportunity for individualized attention as they transitioned to higher education. Similarly, Phoebe noted the value of her position as part of a team of counselors and social workers who share contacts and referrals and work closely and collaboratively with the larger community to share resources with students. Moreover, several participants emphasized the importance of "near-peer" support for students, where formerly homeless students who were currently attending or had recently graduated from college acted as mentors and sources of information.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the focus group and interview participants described a blend of formal and informal information-seeking behaviors that they used to support students' transitions from high school to higher education. Those liaisons who were most comfortable and successful with supporting students' transition to higher education had invested significant time and effort into building their own information networks. These networks tended to shift depending on external factors; however, they most often related to increased responsibilities in other areas, frequently because of budget and other operational decisions. The high turnover in positions on college campuses and community organizations also made it challenging to provide consistent referrals or obtain current information.

Homeless education content experts' information seeking included attending community meetings; conducting internet research about individual colleges, scholarships, and other support programs; and cold-calling individuals and organizations that may be of potential help to students. The information gleaned from the contacts they cultivated was then shared with students and families based on their individual needs.

The findings from this exploratory pilot study emphasize the need for SPOCs on every higher education campus to work with homeless students in their transition to college and during their years on campus. Additionally, increasing the consistency of supports available for homeless students as they transition from high school to higher education

would also help students and P-12 staff. Another recommendation for practice based on the study's initial findings is making information about college going available to students and school staff in more centralized and organized ways, replicating the liaisons' own information collections through strategies that are broader and more accessible. Recently, Stidum et al. (2021) created a policy brief with recommendations for serving students experiencing homelessness at colleges in the southern United States, including the transition from high school to college. They also recommended having dedicated homeless education specialists in higher education, as well as making resources and procedures more transparent for students.

Peer or "near-peer" support in the college community for students experiencing homelessness is worthy of additional study. Research has indicated that students from other types of marginalized backgrounds have benefited from peer-to-peer support. For example, in their study of college students with foster care experience, Katz and Geiger (2020) found many relied on peers for emotional, academic, and financial support. Importantly, some participants noted that having foster care experience in common did not necessarily mean they could relate to each other. Lee and Harris (2020) looked at the experiences of lower-income, first-generation, or working-class students (LIFGWC) at selective colleges and found that counterspaces and counterstructures provided opportunities to address microaggressions targeting their class backgrounds. In particular, counterstructures were more formalized organizations and services developed by students to support their LIFGWC peers and counter inequitable treatment from other students and the colleges.

While these findings support the need for SPOCs and consistent practices at colleges and universities to support the transition into college of students who are experiencing homelessness, further study is needed. The original plan for this qualitative study was to act as the first stage of a larger mixed methods research project; it is hoped that further analysis of the data will inform a quantitative survey to sample a larger population of McKinney-Vento liaisons. However, based on the review of literature, the increasing role of McKinney-Vento liaisons in P-12 settings, and the results of even this small study, it is clear that colleges and universities should consider specific and targeted attention for students who are homeless beginning at the admissions period and continuing through graduation.

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