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Resource Relationship Characteristics of Homeless Youth Accessing Higher Education Opportunities

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Abstract: This phenomenological study sought to explore how resource relationships impact college independent students during his/her homeless experience, while accessing higher education opportunities. Six students were interviewed at a Colorado university about their individual experiences. It was found that experiences pertaining to collegiate aspirations, educational barriers, accessing resource opportunities, and finding supplemental support were shared between the participants. Three major areas were identified as access areas for finding support including educational settings, community organizations, and intimate connections. These relationships assisted in providing social capital, based primarily on trust, as well as skill building and navigating the process of accessing college opportunities.

Keywords: *homeless youth, unaccompanied youth, independent student, resource relationship, access areas, higher education*

INTRODUCTION

Homeless and out-of-home placement experiences typically differ in ways that allow individuals to navigate social systems by unique, yet complicated ways. In the United States, the ever growing homeless population is one that has continued to catch the attention of policy makers and concerned citizens alike. As such, the phenomenon of youth homelessness forces some policy makers to develop ideas that attempt to better define the population in order to gain support for such an under-represented subgroup of society. The initial purpose for conducting this study is to look at the transition process of homeless and independent students into higher education settings by utilizing mentor relationships which provide social capital and lead to a successful transition. Trying to generalize methods and ideas becomes increasingly difficult, however, as the homeless youth population is one that represents a wide variety of personalities, experiences, and outcomes.

In the continuous effort to understand such an at-risk population, it is noted that homeless youth are at a disadvantage in a variety of different areas, including educational attainment. Likewise, the lack of access to social capital resources suggests a negative effect on the success and

development of at-risk youth. In the field of education, homeless youth (particularly at the collegiate level) are primarily identified as independent students. The success rates of this population reflect that homeless students typically fall below state academic standards as compared to non-homeless students or those with high instances of moving (or, highly mobile). Obradović, Long, Cutuli, Chan, Hinz, Heistad, and Masten (2009) provide longitudinal evidence offering that the deprivation of educational success results in an even greater separation between homeless and highly mobile students, and those who have not experienced out-of-home backgrounds. Such findings suggest that increased barriers to education involving college preparedness play a role in the actuality that homeless students are at a greater disadvantage for accessing and transitioning into higher education settings. Social capital also plays a major role in the success and development of at-risk youth. Mentor relationships, in the conventional sense, have the capability to overcome these deficiencies within interactions between them and the student.

In this study, a phenomenological approach was used to explore the experiences formerly homeless independent college students may have had working with mentors. This paper includes a

thorough analysis of existing literature that focuses on homelessness within the adolescent population, on social capital and the positive and negative effects of having it, and mentors and their role as resource providers. Also included is an overview of research procedures and the data collecting process, as well a discussion of limitations to the study. A conclusion section will include a description of this study's implications as well as recommendations for future research in this field.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over a three year period, the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) reported a steady increase in the homeless youth population within primary and secondary schools in the United States. The report showed that, in the 2009-2010 school year, 939,903 students were reported homeless and were enrolled in Local Education Agencies (LEAs) that may or may not have been provided with McKinney-Vento subgrants¹. This had been an 18% increase over the three-year period observed (NCHE, 2011). Likewise, in the 2007-2008 school year, the NCHE (2011) found a 17% increase in homeless students enrolled in American primary and secondary schools as compared to the rates found the 2006-2007 school year. Gradual increases infer that each year a growing number of homeless students are compelled to navigate complicated and differentiated systems, shaping their access to resources and their chances at success.

Homelessness, as defined by the U.S. federal government, under the office of the Law Revision Counsel, U.S. House of Representatives (2010), is specified by two major criteria:

- (1) An individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and
- (2) An individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is:

- A supervised public or private shelter,
- An institution that provides a temporary residence for persons intended to be institutionalized, or
- A public or private place not designed or commonly used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.

In conjunction with federal interpretations and standards of homelessness and homeless individuals, many researchers have developed similar definitions of homelessness and homeless individuals. For example, for persons under the age of 18, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act provides a clear list of identifiers of homeless youth and minors. The Act declares homeless youth as individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate night-time residence, and include youth who:

- Share residence of other persons due to loss of housing, financial difficulties, or similar reasons;
- Live in a motel, hotel, trail park, or camping ground due to lack of adequate alternatives;
- Live in an emergency transitional shelter;
- Are abandoned in hospitals;
- Are awaiting foster care placement;
- Have a nighttime residence (either public or private) that is not commonly used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings;
- Are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, public transportation stations, or similar settings;
- Migratory children who qualify as homeless for the various circumstances listed previously. (M-VHAA, 2002)

In general terms, homeless youth are usually defined in broad yet varying ways. Robertson and Torro (1999) use a working definition for homeless youth under the age of 18 as individuals who have spent at least one night in either an

education, and retention, as well as other resources for the homeless youth population (NCHE, 2011:21)

¹ McKinney-Vento subgrants are funding opportunities to schools that may be used to provide such resources as tutoring, professional development, early childhood

emergency shelter, in an outdoor environment, or improvised shelter, without parental or guardian supervision. Amidst flexible definitions of both general homelessness and homeless youth, many researchers suggest that producing a simple, all-encompassing, definition, is particularly difficult given the various types of homelessness and circumstances that lead to a unique homeless experience (Robertson & Torro, 1999). Consequently, research on homeless adolescents becomes increasingly difficult to construct, navigate, and produce. In an attempt to work with this population, however, understanding differences in experiences and outcomes may provide a greater overview of homeless youth navigating out-of-home placement experiences.

Independent Students

The term *independent student* has traditionally been used as an indication tool for post-secondary institutions that allocate resources and funds to qualifying students (Higher Education Act [HEA], 1965). The purpose of creating an independent student category of college students is primarily for financial aid offices to readily identify students who may require assistance in terms of funding their post-secondary career. To determine eligibility, university counselors use information from the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). The 2011-2012 Award Year criteria for independent students, as stated in the Higher Education Act (HEA, 1965), identifies in great detail many types of students who may qualify as financially independent. For this study, FAFSA and HEA requirements for independent students included:

- At any time since the age of 13, both parents were deceased, the student was in foster care, or the student was a dependent/ward of the court;
- As determined by a court in the student's state of legal residence, the student is now or was upon reaching the age of majority, an emancipated minor (released from control by his or her parent or guardian);
- Determined by a court in the student's state of legal residence, the student is now

or was upon reaching the age of majority, in legal guardianship;

- On or after July 1, 2010, was determined by a high school or school district homeless liaison to be an unaccompanied youth who was homeless;
- On or after July 1, 2010, was determined by the director of an emergency shelter or transitional housing program funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to be an unaccompanied youth who was homeless.
- On or after July 1, 2010, was determined by a director of a runaway or homeless youth basic center or transitional living program to be an unaccompanied youth who was homeless or was self-supporting and at risk of being homeless;
- Was determined by the college financial aid administrator to be an unaccompanied youth who is homeless or is self-supporting and at risk of being homeless (HEA, 1965).

Many collegiate institutions utilize an abbreviated list for criteria, solely focusing on age, military status, dependency status, and homeless status. For the purpose of this research, primary focus will continue to be on categories pertaining directly to those who qualify as homeless students.

Trends in Educational Success

Researchers for decades have issued reports that reiterate the negative effects homelessness has on an individual navigating his or her unique homeless experience. With reference to educational achievement, Obradović et al. (2009) produce longitudinal evidence that homeless and highly mobile students collectively fell below national standards in academic programs in all grade cohorts. Obradović et al. (2009) take care to note that negative effects worsen as student progress through the education system. Furthermore, the rate of high school graduation for homeless students has been of particular concern to researchers. (Wolanin, 2005) notes that approximately 50% of foster youth complete high school by the age of 18, and about 77%

(Courtney, Dworsky, Cusick, Havlicek, Pérez, & Keller, 2007) of surveyed 21 year old former foster youth had graduated high school. Even still, the rates of foster youth who have obtained a high school diploma who actually attend college afterwards is significantly lower than those not in foster care.

Barriers to Higher Education

A relevant literature suggests the following six major barriers foster youth face in gaining access to post-secondary opportunities. These barriers include:

- A lack of encouragement from child welfare systems
- A lack of preparedness for college level work
- A lack of primary financial support
- A lack knowledge of financial aid opportunities since qualifying as a ward of the court
- Possible mental and behavioral problems that may be more apparent compared to non-foster youth students
- A significant lack of student support personnel familiarity with how to address and handle the needs of incoming homeless students (Emerson, 2006; Davis 2006; Dworsky and Perez, 2010)

Limitations of Resource Programs

Various colleges and universities provide a wide range of assistance to incoming independent students with backgrounds rooted in homelessness. Nevertheless, even where there are programs dedicated to assisting homeless youth get into, stay in, and graduate from college, many challenges become present that make such a goal difficult. Dworsky and Perez (2010) note in their study that programs designed to assist homeless students face challenges that pertain to foster youth not having access to information about post-secondary options, financial aid, admissions requirements, or campus support programs. Additionally, homeless youth program directors discussed challenges in trying to provide sustained financial resources for their students (Dworsky & Perez, 2010).

Theoretical Framework

French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of capital has traditionally been viewed as a means of gaining and measuring one's access to or possession of resources both materialistic and personal. Bourdieu outlines four main types of capital, which include social, cultural, economic, and symbolic. For this study, social capital will be used as the primary focus and can be used most fluidly with the homeless youth population.

Social Capital Defined. In a general sense, social capital is used to illustrate Bourdieu's theory of field and social networking. Ritzer (2008) briefly describes social capital as the significant relationships between people. However broad, social capital has been noted as a key factor in networking relationships and developing valued connections between individuals. Coleman (2002) notes that social capital creates changes in the connections people create that initiate action. Through these relationships, a variety of characteristics that a personal relationship can ultimately benefit from is produced. Coleman (2002) notes that groups who maintain a greater level of trust and reliance are more likely to be dramatically more successful and accomplished than a group lacking in trust and resilience. From any relationship, understanding its function and the role of each actor would be of unique significance. Coleman (2002) continues that the function of actors, through specific aspects of social structure, is to be resources usable to achieve each member's desired interests.

Homeless Youth and Social Capital. Coleman (2002) provides a variety of indicators of social capital, including trust and obligation, which can be used to analyze and evaluate relationships defined by capital. Bantchevska, Bartle-Haring, Dashora, Glebova, and Slesnick (2008) use Coleman's indicators as a theoretical framework for their studies on social capital and problem behaviors among homeless youth. These indicators include,

- Mutual aid
- Connection with social institutions

- Family structure among the parents of the participant (single versus two parents)
- Total number of siblings
- Years participant was raised by both biological parents
- Parental educational attainment level (Bantchevska et al. 2008)

Problem Behaviors and Lack of Capital

Similar interpretations of social capital are used to apply theory to relationships that homeless maintain. In practice, social capital has been of particular interest to researchers focusing on the negative effects of a lack of social capital, or the instance of negative social networking and homeless youth.

Bantchevska et al. (2008) used a social capital approach to analyze problem behaviors within the homeless youth community. They maintained that social capital is the aspects of social structure and the network of relationships between people. They also include relationships between an individual and family members, and the community that facilitate action within the structure (Bantchevska et al., 2008). Nevertheless, Bantchevska et al. (2008) found that where there was a lack of social capital, there was an increase of problem behaviors. The research also found a positive relationship between social capital and the rate of days spent homeless and risks of HIV (2008).

Other researchers have found major links between the lack of social capital and increased rates of crime (Verner & Alda, 2004). As Verner and Alda (2004) point out, in areas where crime and violence is high, there also leaves little room for a positive growth in social capital. Likewise, Forsyth and Adams (2004) maintain that a relationship between social capital and school performance exists. Given the research linking educational performance and social capital, Forsyth and Adams (2004) found that where there was an increase in trust between students and teachers, there was an increase in school performance.

Mentor Roles and Relationships

Mech, Pryde, and Rycraft (1995) define the term *mentor* as a wise and trusted teacher or counselor, and continue that a mentor's sole purpose in is to help his/her student to develop a sense of competence, increase the level of skill, and to improve their overall performance. Research also points to two main types of mentoring (natural/organic and structured) that are typically used in most connection settings.

Structured Mentoring Programs. Research have provides evidence that the presence of mentors, for both homeless and at-risk youth has a positive effect on youth development (Osterling and Hines, 2006; de Anda, 2001; Mech, Pryde, and Rycraft, 1995). Mech, Pryde, and Rycraft (1995) noted that foster care tends to isolate youth from the community, thus creating barriers to valuable resources. They also mention that mentor programs for foster youth had traditionally been scarce and lacked visibility (Mech, Pryde, and Rycraft, 1995). Researchers have since provided empirical evidence suggesting that mentor programs for at-risk youth as a whole have become more popular (DuBois et al., 2002). According to De Anda (2001), programs for at-risk youth such as Big Brothers, Big Sisters, a nationally recognized youth development organization have become more visible. Nevertheless, programs that allocate resources directly to the homeless youth population are still scarce, or rather less visible than those for at-risk youth as a whole.

Role of Mentoring Programs. Hamilton, Hamilton, Hirsh, Hughes, King, and Maron (2006) provide evidence suggesting that those who are in need most of a positive role-model or mentor usually tend to not have adequate means to accessing one. De Anda (2001) reported common responses by research participants as to why they sought out a mentor in a structured setting, including:

1. Having someone to talk to;
2. Having someone to do things with;
3. Had extra time, therefore, wanted a mentor to do things with. (de Anda 2001)

According to Mech, Pryde, and Rycraft (1995), mentor programs fulfill the needs provided in the de Anda study. Mentors were able to provide a safe and trusting environment, which was especially helpful to youth in an out-of-home placement setting (Mech, Pryde, & Rycraft, 1995). Nevertheless, in a college setting, assistance in locating access to college institutions seemed to be a scarce focus for these mentor programs.

Post-Secondary Support Programs. Resource programs exist at the college level that strive to provide support to independent students that come from homeless-type backgrounds. Despite having these programs, empirical evidence suggests that significant barriers arise when attempting to assist homeless youth that transition into higher education settings as independent students. These barriers included lacking the professional experience required to deal with the social, financial and educational adversities homeless youth face, as well as needing to support the homeless student financially for a prolonged period of time (Dworsky & Perez, 2010).

Of primary concern, attention to the possible failure in mentoring relationships that are constructed through specific mentor programs in hardly addressed in the literature. As research shows, mentor programs as a whole show promising results that suggest mentor programs and mentee success is possible. Mention of relationships that do not work out appear to be overlooked, especially those for homeless youth.

Natural and Organic Mentoring. There exists significant differences between structured types mentor programs, and mentor relationships that evolve independently. Natural (or organic) mentoring is, as Hamilton et al.(2006) suggest, the most common form of mentor relationship formation possible. Natural mentoring refers to the building of mentor relationships free of specific organizational forces. As noted by Hamilton et al. (2006) mentor programs generally occur to serve populations that traditionally do not have access to positive resource relationships. Thus, natural mentoring in the most authentic

form differs dramatically from structured mentor programs particularly within the development of these relationships. Hamilton et al. (2006) use four environments to identify areas where natural mentor relationships typically form, including: classrooms, youth development organizations, work and service-learning, and faith-based organizations. Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck, and Connell (1998) echo these findings by claiming that in educational settings, where there is a positive relationship between the teacher and student, he/she's academic achievement and success was likely to rise.

Mentors as a Social Capital Provider. Despite such promising studies, previously conducted research is significantly limited and lacks a specific focus on college-level independent students, their experiences in transitioning into a higher education institution, or on possible mentors obtained either through a natural or structured process. Such research could be beneficial because mentors would be in a key position to provide social capital to others. This, then, could lead to greater opportunities for homeless youth and successful transitions into post-secondary settings. Research of this type could also potentially lead to reassessment, and implementation of policies and programs specifically for homeless youth to maintain a greater representation in higher education settings and other professional areas.

METHODS

For the purpose of this study, a phenomenological approach was used in order to fully understand what types of resource relationships homeless students maintained prior to accessing college opportunities. From this approach, the study will be able to produce findings that can ultimately benefit future scholars seeking to expand the literature on homeless youths' transition into higher education with the assistance of key relationships. Likewise, this approach will allow for future studies to continue research that links social capital, homeless youth, and the benefits of mentoring. Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell (2004) note that phenomenological

research is a greatly rigorous, yet thorough form of qualitative research. Moustakas (1994) notes that phenomenological methodology focuses on consciousness, and how one perceives things, aiming to understand the meaning of the experiences had by individuals. From Moustakas' approach we can conclude that phenomenological studies explore the phenomenon being studied; in this case, how college-level independent students mentor relationships.

Participants

Participants will include six independent students a mid-sized Colorado university with a past homeless experience. These students will qualify as independent students as defined by the Higher Education Act, and the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. Participants include undergraduate students from a variety of majors and disciplines.

Sampling Procedure

Independent students qualify as a hard-to-reach sample since regulations are in place that prohibit direct contact, unless initially done by school officials or personnel. Few sampling models exist that allow direct access to such concealed groups. Nevertheless, Faugier and Sargeant (1997) suggest a type of convenience sampling called snowball sampling when working with hard-to-reach populations. For the purposes of this study, the lead researcher will contact state officials within the Colorado Department of Education including the Director of Outreach and Access to obtain contact information for the Single Point of Contact (SPOC) and other university faculty that work with homeless/independent students at the sample university. SPOCs received information about voluntary participation in this study and instructions to pass information on to the students they work with within the institution. Should a student be interested in participating in the study, SPOCs then asked the student's permission to

pass on contact information to the lead researcher, where direct contact was then made.

Instrumentation

In order to guide the relatively structured interviews, certain questions will be used that will focus primarily on the relationships built between the student and his or her resource relationships. It should be noted that the questions will be open-ended, and left to the respondent to provide reliable answers. Those questions include:

- How did you first encounter your mentor?
- What does having a mentor mean to you?
- What characteristics does your mentor possess that have benefited you?
- What environment did you come to get to know your mentor?
- In what ways did your mentor assist or motivate you in accessing higher education?
- What have you taken away from your experiences having a mentor?
- What position or occupation does your mentor occupy?

The lead researcher met with each participant in a neutral on-campus location to conduct the interviews. Each interview took approximately 30 minutes to an hour and was audiotaped for later transcription.²

Data Analysis

Upon completing data collection, analysis procedures included a summary of significant statements throughout each conducted interview. From this we may be able to generalize findings suggesting that resource relationships for homeless and independent students may share similar characteristics within the sample. Likewise, a comparison between each respondent was done, following the identification of individual significant statements. By looking for similarities, certain themes may become present that could contribute to further understanding general characteristics of both mentors for

provide a signature on the consent form in the beginning of each session.

² For this portion of data collection, participants will be asked permission to audiotape each interview session. This will be supplemented by a area to

homeless youth and resource relationships. Lastly, categorizing the data, such as mentor environments and occupations was done. By doing so, trends may be identified that may lead to implications for future research that explores how homeless and independent students can better access positive mentor relationships, and how the student can better benefit from these relationships.

FINDINGS

Through semi-structured interviews, each participant discussed a series of topics pertaining to their experiences as a homeless youth and working with resource relationships. Many findings linked to each participant's experiences were made, which shed light to various themes that clearly stuck out between the majority of the participants. Overall, each participant had mentioned their goals in continuing their education, as well as aspirations for the future. Barriers in accessing higher education settings were also a reoccurrence, particularly with financial support. Accessing resources, as well as obtaining outside support were two other common topics brought up that suggested a certain challenge finding resource support systems, but once obtained had proved to be valuable. Lastly, trust as a major piece in developing significant and positive relationships with others – family, friends, and mentors – particularly in providing resources in support, social capital, and skills to the participant.

In order to continue, it is important to acknowledge the variety of experiences had by each participant, notably their out-of-home placement experience(s). One of the primary reasons defining *homeless youth* and *independent students* as terms are because of the vast possible experiences any given unaccompanied youth may have. This proved to be the case even with such a limited sample, where experiences range from single homeless experiences to multiple experiences, often times more complex. Provided below is a general synopsis of each participant and their experiences and a homeless youth and working with resource relationships, including mentors (Table 1). For each participant's care,

pseudonyms were assigned to conceal his or her identity. Likewise, throughout this document, all names of people and places have also been changed for the sake of protecting others' identities, as well.

Theme 1: Educational Goals, Aspirations, and Success

Statements regarding the participant's educational goals and primary post-secondary schooling, perceptions of their current successes, and attitudes towards their own futures were perhaps the most frequent made within data collection. Although similar sentiments were made, it became increasingly critical to acknowledge the differences in experiences between each participant during their process of accessing higher education opportunities.

Goals in Continuing Educational Experiences
– “I’ve always wanted to go to college...”

Many of the participants, when discussing his/her journey accessing higher education opportunities, discussed a significant level of desire to go to college. Despite initial support or having not yet had access to significant resource relationships, interest in one day attending college seemed to stand out as the single most driving factor for persevering through the access process.

Differences between the participants and their families were not observed to always have an effect on their relationship. A lack of familial support did seem to play a role in the self-motivation perceptions of some of the participants, which had seemed to be alleviated by the resource relationships made by the participants. In those instances, a lack of emotional support from primary family members did seem to have a negative effect on the participant's perceptions of his or her primary family. For Zoë, this is what drove her ambition to continue into college settings, after adapting to the goals of the people she lived with who collectively saw college as a critical part of advancement into adulthood. She had stated, “...[T]hey were very big on getting all their kids to go to college, so they were big on having me go as well. So their goal was to get me to go to

college.” This adaptation of goal perceptions Zoë demonstrated was critical in her developing desire to want to go on to continue her education in a college setting.

Other participants exclaimed similar desires of wanting to go on to college, but differences in access to personal resources would play a major role in determining the experiences had transitioning into college settings. Nevertheless, for some of the participants, beginning the application process and locating schools to apply to turned out to be less of an overbearing obstacle

than had originally been thought. For Carlos, who began the process of finding schools and visiting them in his freshman year of high school, his main goal was to get to college and explore all available opportunities:

[S]ince freshman year I started visiting schools and ended up visiting over like 50 schools before I became a senior and started applying. So I visited some that I was going to apply to then, so that was interesting. (Carlos)

Table 1
Characteristics of Research Participants – Biographical Sketch

Participant	Independent Type	Significant Relationships
<i>Brittany</i>	Court issued separation	School Counselor College Administrator*
<i>Zoë</i>	Run Away Foster Care Street Youth Homeless Shelter Stayed with Friends	Friend’s Parents Friend’s Father*
<i>Tori</i>	Foster Care Homeless Shelter	School Teacher* Caseworker* Foster Care Provider** College Professors** Family: Grandfather
<i>Sarita</i>	Orphan - Adopted to US Abandoned Foster Youth	School Teacher* School Counselor
<i>Aaron</i>	Ward of the Court	Support Programs School Counselor Family: Brother
<i>Carlos</i>	Emancipated Youth	School Counselor* Youth Group Leader* Close Friend

*Identified Mentor; **Continued Support Post-Secondary

Like Carlos, Aaron had spent a significant amount of time exploring out of state colleges,

saying, “...I knew I wanted to go to college, like, I knew I wanted to go to college, but I didn’t really have a destination I guess.” Total, there

were four cases in which the participants either took advantage of classes or other scholastic opportunities that allowed a glimpse of knowledge about the typical college setting, the application process, or how and where to consider going for schooling.

In regards to the application process itself, some discovered that the application process was not challenging as initially expected. For example, Tori said, “I just figured it to be more stressful than it was. I applied to three schools. I got into all three of them, and I chose [this school] because I liked the people that were here.” It became clearer that, due to the skills she had learned in a high school English course, which incorporated and encouraged college enrollment into the curriculum, Tori developed a greater understanding of the process as a whole.

*Understanding Situations and Role in Life –
“We can control how well we do in the
future...”*

Many participants found his or her desire to continue on to college to be a product of their own independence and proclaimed self-motivation. Despite past experiences, there seemed to be a connection between the desire to go to college and the understanding that the participant had control over the future. Aaron had discussed this in detail when explaining his motivation for continuing school, despite his and his brother being taken away from his mother due to her abuse of the drug methamphetamine:

It took us a while to figure it out because, I mean, it was hard, but we wanted to go to college and stuff, and we wanted to be successful. Like I said earlier, it's not in our control, but we can control how well we do in the future and stuff. (Aaron)

This sort of resilience is also what led many of the participants to, in a sense, come out of their experiences with focused educational goals and aspirations. Essentially, this seemed to become a tool for better overcoming obstacles such as familial difficulties and ultimately obtaining a college education:

We are definitely a special group that go through that, I mean, a lot of people go through different things, but it's definitely something tough to go through, especially during those years. It's something that makes us stronger, and more resilient. (Carlos)

This also seemed to lead to a deeper value for working with resource relationships and obtaining other beneficial opportunities such as long-term connections and access to post-secondary opportunities. In some cases, however, a fallout between participants and his or her primary family occurred, which was usually dependent upon the severity of each instance leading to an out-of-home placement, or the relationship between family members in general. For example, Brittany discovered a significant lack of familial support upon beginning and successfully transitioning into a stable college setting:

[O]nce I moved off to campus my freshman year I really didn't have anybody. My aunt didn't really want to take care of me anymore. My dad didn't want to take care of me anymore. So it was just me. (Brittany)

This led to a trying attempt to locate supplementary resources at the campus level to fulfill those gaps left by her family. As a result, Brittany developed a greater desire to continue with college, especially after developing resource relationships while on campus with people associated with programs geared towards assisting students to begin with.

*Optimism and Perceptions of Current and
Future Success – “...Hey, I am in college!”*

Upon reflecting back, the participants noted their accomplishments and current success, despite facing a variety of different adversities and shortcomings. A few of the participants had noted previous doubts about coming to college, including a lack of knowledge of existing opportunities. For Zoë, who had experienced multiple homeless experiences and abuse from her family had this to say about her recent successes and self-pride:

It is very... very exciting. I mean knowing that you made it from coming from and abusive family... and now you are sitting college and you are totally separate from them and knowing that they never went to college and now you are is huge. And especially when they tell you you're never going to get there, you aren't smart enough. You're like, no, you're wrong. So it is very exciting knowing that, hey, I am in college! I made it this far. (Zoë)

Crediting their success to resilience and independence was a popular theme between the participants. After overcoming her homeless experience, Sarita also saw a great deal of optimism in regard to her current success and future goals, particularly with her projected planned profession, where she seeks to provide support to others experiencing homelessness. She said, "I'm looking at going to grad school for rehabilitative counseling that way I can work with [the homeless] population a little better. Give them those resources..."

This drive to continue their education beyond a bachelors degree was also not uncommon for most of the participants interviewed, and in fact four of the participants including Sarita all share dreams of obtaining either masters or doctoral degrees, or both. It would appear that through creating and maintaining meaningful connections with others, most participants gained both the confidence and skills to advance beyond what would be typically expected of the traditional unaccompanied/homeless youth.

Theme 2: Educational Barriers, Hurdles, and Deficiencies

Typically, homeless youth transitioning into college settings as independent homeless students face a variety of barriers and deficiencies that could limit his or her chances at successfully enrolling in post-secondary opportunities. Some deficiencies, such as the aforementioned lack of familial support upon accessing higher education, can be credited to why many college students do not obtain access to post-secondary opportunities

(Wolanin, 2005). Such claims were had between participants within this study, as well. Although different in scenario and severity, each participant expressed a variety of barriers including financial planning, knowledge of various opportunities, and general support and awareness.

Facing Looming Financial Barriers to Higher Education – "I knew, even if I had my family, I wouldn't be able to pay for college."

Financial struggles were easily the most brought up barrier that the participants experienced. Many participants expressed significant financial worries based on financing for school, affording application fees, and handling with student loan debt. Much of these worries were established throughout the interviews as a lack of knowledge regarding financial support opportunities. In most cases, homeless students are eligible to qualify for a significant amount of financial support through Federal grants and loans, as well as from scholarship programs that service this particular group (HEA, 1965; Wolanin, 2005). Nevertheless, many participants claimed that they initially did not know how to pay for school. Carlos, for example, knew that he would still struggle to pay for school, despite the application process being much easier than anticipated, saying, "...[F]inancially, even if I had my parents in the picture it would have been tough."

Although this at first glance appeared to be a struggle, his perceptions of where he ultimately ended up going to school seemed to have served him well. This, Carlos later claims, is because of the financial package he received to come attend school:

Growing up in [this city] was hard because everyone going to all these big schools like, 'Oh yeah, I am going to USC, my parents are paying for it.' I'm like, I could have gone somewhere you know, but... This is where I ended up, and its perfect. (Carlos)

This was the case for other participants, as well, and in Aaron's case, he was able to gain

access to a collegiate scholarship program, which has been a major financial support attributed to his journey accessing higher education. Before accessing resource relationships, Aaron was less knowledgeable of financial opportunities for independent students that could greatly benefit planning to finance one's college experience. Programs such as the program Aaron was a part of, for example, provide supplemental financial aid, which make up for left over financial costs of higher education. Aside from that, Aaron had little knowledge of what was available to perspective independent college students:

They helped me in great amounts of like trying to figure out as many scholarships as I could to make college affordable and I got the [scholarship program] through. I mean, it was intense and there was a lot of hard work, but... (Aaron)

One area that seemed to be of greatest financial unawareness was the opportunity to waive application fees, which are typically contingent upon the applicant's financial standing. One participant in general completely acknowledged his lack of knowing about waiver opportunities. He had this to say:

There's stuff that you're missing out, like waivers for your application fees. Like that, I had no clue that I could've bypassed that. I was wondering, okay, how much money do I need to save and everything to pay that. (Carlos)

Financial worries seemed to be the greatest factor in determining continuing on to college by most all the participants, and with waivers, some relief was obtained, as in the case with Carlos. In each of these instances, the participants obtained awareness of such opportunities through his or her resource relationships. Tori, for example, claims she has benefited greatly from the financial resources she gathered from her identified mentors:

[I] wouldn't be able to afford it on my own. I knew I wouldn't be able to afford school at all just by working... And I am

actually not in debt at all thanks to those two. (Tori)

Tori felt that the support obtained from her resource relationships was a key factor in her educational journey. Because of this, she exclaims that she sees herself as slightly more responsible in her spending compared to what she describes her peers as the typical college student who spend their money on things like alcohol.

Getting Started and How to Do it – "I wasn't even sure what colleges there were."

In regards to beginning the navigation process of accessing higher education opportunities, many of the participants described a lack of knowledge regarding how to get started and simply what to do. Despite a growing interest in continuing on to college, lack of knowing how to get to begin can be credited to multiple variables such as being a first generation student and/or not having a stable primary relationship system. Being highly mobile, therefore not being able to build relationships in time to discuss college opportunities also played a role.

This was most apparent with Zoë, whose primary resource relationship was her schoolmate's father whom she'd lived with for a period of time. Prior to living with this family, Zoë had not explored any collegiate possibilities, nor did she mention any initial drive to go to college until adapting this new goal established by this new family. Once exploring options with the father of the household, whom she identified as a mentor figure, she began to develop a keen interest in going to college. She said, "He did do a lot of the research to help me figure out what colleges there was because I wasn't even really sure what colleges there are." Speaking from that, she expressed her lack of knowing the different colleges and opportunities was a challenge, since her mentor was the first person to sit and have those types of conversations with her.

Another participant also mentioned instances when she was a little unclear about processes of applying to different colleges. In this case, she was prepared to acknowledge those areas that were unclear, and find someone to help out:

Yeah, [my caseworker] was just able to answer any questions I had about why I would need to do certain things. [My teacher] was kind of there for the building block. She was the one who said, ‘well, there’s this website, and this website, this website. You need to apply now, rather than next year... because it will help you in the future. (Tori)

For Brittany, much was the same, however, unlike other participants, she had a pre-existing desire to go to college and obtain a degree. She noted her independence and mentioned that she had a tendency to be reluctant to ask for help or assistance, since she was so used to doing things on her own. In the end, she too stated that she didn’t know what to do or where to go. This was also a driving factor that led to accessing help from her school’s guidance counselor.

Locating Personal Support – “It makes it hard for them to achieve their goals.”

Finding adequate support from friends, family, and other groups can be a difficult process in general. Such was the case for many of the participants who had mentioned that not only having support, but also locating services or resources tended to be fairly challenging prior to entering college. Namely, for students without an initial positive primary system, it was common that he or she may face a lack of support from his or her immediate family members. Zoë found this to be a challenge, but as was mentioned earlier, she was able to overcome and acknowledge her success in a more positive light. Sarita, too, experienced instances where her goals would be questioned, availing room for support from her identified resource relationships:

That’s important because in the end, if a person is constantly being talked down and told... and even if they don’t believe it, it still gets them down and makes it harder for them to achieve their goals. (Sarita)

Building support systems can attribute to a person’s successful enrollment into college

settings. Likewise, where there is a lack of support, including from a person’s family system, there holds the potential to create a barrier between the perspective student and post-secondary opportunities may arise (Wolanin, 2005). These findings are similar to ones listed as educational access barriers found in previous studies, indicating an explanation for low college enrollment characteristics of at-risk youth. In this study, where abuse was also involved, including verbal criticism, such as the case with Zoë and her biological family, similar challenges arose that appeared to result in a lack of confidence, security, and stability. In regards to educational attainment, Sarita, for example, maintained a lack of personal confidence, resulting in being highly critical of herself, along with moments of discernible self-doubt.

Each of these observed deficiencies were alleviated by utilizing resource relationships, and in most cases, someone whom the participant identified as a mentor figure. Sarita had said, “[my mentor] was always pushing me and told me I can do better and I was doing the best that I can, because I am really hard on myself.” She continued by mentioning that a significant amount of encouragement was provided by her mentor, who was a high school teacher, which motivated her to continue persevering both in her class and in applying to colleges.

Theme 3: Access to Resources and Finding Support

Finding Resources Prior to Accessing College – “...There was nothing out there... they really had no clue...”

While attempting to navigate their own homeless experiences, access to resources prior to entering college posed a major challenge to most of the participants in this study. This was a particular problem once the participant had identified an area in which they needed the most support. One participant expressed the difficulty of trying to navigate systems such as secondary schools where there was little knowledge of what a homeless/independent student is:

There was no programs, there was nothing out there. And when I started at my second high school, they really had no clue what an unaccompanied youth was... so I had to sit there and explain it to them. (Zoë)

Experiencing this type of alienation only appeared to have lessened the students' capability of locating viable resources for either beginning the college access journey, or general support. This would also limit the ability of schools to provide adequate support needed by homeless youth in school systems. Zoë, in particular, continues by mentioning that having this support would not only have been helpful to her, including having access to even basic forms of support systems, such as programs, organizations, people dedicated to assisting homeless youth in schools. Likewise, she had mentioned that educational settings would be the most practical area for providing support and awareness since it is required to attend junior high and at least most of high school, given the legal age requirement to drop out of school.

Sarita also spoke of the necessity of providing support prior to accessing higher education settings and the evident lack of understanding of her situation, noting the difficulty in having to constantly explain her situation to others who didn't understand:

[W]e need... more awareness of [homeless youth]. People are unaware. I don't know if it's because they choose to look away or what it is. They're not really aware it's really an issue. (Sarita)

Although most participants experienced a lack of support in the form of awareness and understanding in high school settings, others did not share the same experiences, implying that specific resources opportunities are available in some areas but not others. For example, Aaron gained much of his support from student support programs such as *High Horizons*, a program that provides counseling and awareness to at-risk students. Much of the support Aaron received from these types of programs included intensive assistance in finding and applying for financial

opportunities for college. As a result, this made Aaron a strong candidate for other support programs. Nevertheless, Aaron had mentioned that awareness of his independent status had only been by his high school guidance counselor who had previously worked with his brother.

Because of Aaron's brother, awareness of his situation made it easier to gain access to positive support systems. This differs from most of the experiences had by other participants who found a significant lack of awareness and understanding of homeless youth, as well as support for that particular population.

Opportunities for Resource Access upon Entering College – “Once they'd seen I was an independent student, I got that right away.”

Despite a reported lack of support and awareness within high school settings, a major theme in the research revealed there to be positive resource opportunities for independent students at the collegiate level. In each instance, these resources were helpful in a variety of different ways, and in many cases played a major role in deciding where to continue their educational experiences. Financial support was perhaps the greatest form of support provided to the student, noting that a few of the participants were debt free due to a mixture of financial aid and scholarships.

As previously mentioned, the term *independent student* is primarily used by university financial aid offices to determine a student's financial eligibility. If a student qualifies as independent (see HEA, 1965) they may be eligible for certain financial support such as federal and state need-based grants, and/or students loans. In this case, homeless youth transitioning into college may be eligible to qualify as financially independent.

Each participant noted certain financial struggles that would otherwise not allow them to fully fund their higher education career. Carlos was one whose ultimate decision to attend his university was primarily based on the financial aid package offered by the school. In fact, when

asked why he ended up choosing the school he now attends, he said this:

It was really the financial package for everything. I think that was always something important... I didn't want to take out loans. I mean, I was by myself, so taking loans was not the thing for me... I'm glad I got accepted here with good academic financial standing. (Carlos)

In conjunction with accommodating financial support, existing campus programs were also found to benefit most participants. Characteristically, these programs shared a common interest in providing support to a particular traditionally disadvantaged group. One program in particular is a TRIO program funded as Student Support Services (SSS) through the US Federal government that assists first-generation students on campus. Some programs exist at the colligate level that aim to provide support to homeless/independent students. Nevertheless, these programs are fairly unique and scarce. The support services offered to independent students at the sample university is a program that offers general support to incoming independent students through close work with campus SPOCs and a designated academic advisor. This support is continuously offered as the student progresses through their educational career. For Zoë, this support was greatly helpful and sort of relief of the lack of structural support she had received in the past:

[This school] helped a lot because there is a program for independent students. There is a program for, you know, first generation students, low income. So that was really a big help with [this school]... Once they seen that I was an independent student, I got that right away. And that's what picked me up and dragged me right into [this school]. (Zoë)

Sarita, for example, noted the value and appreciation of this support and looked for those resources upon arriving to campus to start school, amidst being overwhelmed at the start of her

freshman year. Despite the support, however, Sarita also mentioned flaws in the program, saying, "It would be nice to have some consistency," continuing by mentioning experiencing a lack of consistency prior to coming to college. She continued by saying that "that consistency piece is really nice, because I'm like 'okay, I don't want to have to start all over and be back at square one.'" In regards to mentoring, she noted that consistency would inevitably be crucial since, without it, it would only perpetuate the cycle of inconsistency traditionally faced by homeless students. This is reflective of the challenges is having and maintaining a homeless youth support program represented by Dworsky and Perez (see Dworsky & Perez, 2010). In this case, however, high turnover rates became the greatest issue described by Sarita.

Giving Back by Providing Resources – "I love it. It really brings light to your eyes..."

From each of their own experiences either working with mentors or utilizing existing resource relationships, a handful of participants noted the importance of mentoring as a means of providing support to others. Because of the value held by their experiences, many participants now seek to mentor and provide resources to others. Some participants had mentored in the past through structured mentoring programs as opposed to natural mentoring (see Hamilton et al., 2006), but each experience involved the participant working with someone to provide a variety of different resources. For those who had not mentored in the past, the desire was present to mentor mostly through a structured process.

Carlos was one participant, for example, who had both mentored in the past and continued to mentor in the present through a local outreach program. On his experiences working with some of the local youth, he had said, "I love it. It really brings light to you eyes." Seeing the difference he was making in other's lives was not only impactful for his student, but himself as a mentor. Sarita, too, held a role as a mentor for other unaccompanied youth by teaching with the

CHAFEE program, which is designed to help build skills for youth transitioning into emancipation.

I think that's a huge piece for a lot of kids, because I have in the past worked with kids... There are so many options out there. When I taught at a CHAFEE program that was one of the things I got to help teach in one of the classes. (Sarita)

Being able to provide to others was important for most participants. For Aaron, it was much the same. In his case, one of the greatest things he took away from working with a mentor relationship was a developing passion to want to mentor others through sports, which he had previously used as an outlet from the negative experiences he faced at home:

I actually think [my mentoring experience] kind of encouraged me to be a mentor. I always wanted to do coaching because I love sports and stuff. And I kind of found sports as an escape to get away from like, people that did drugs and stuff. And so I guess I've always wanted to be a mentor. (Aaron)

Differences aside, the ability to mentor others seemed to something of value to each of them, which derived from positive experiences being mentored, themselves. For Carlos, after fully realizing how much support he received from his mentors, he said, "now it's time for me to give back, now that I was stable... I have the time and the talents to help out." This response mirrored what both Aaron said – "if you can do something, and do it well, especially with mentoring, pass it on." and what Sarita said – "they might not have that access to a consistent school, or whatever it may be." For Sarita, her experiences are also what drove her desire to continue working with the homeless population as a future career to assist families experiencing homelessness, especially with children, stating that "there are resources and hope, and it will get better."

Theme 4: Networking Characteristics and Supplemental Support

Friends and Family in the Context of Resource Relationships – "We supported each other."

Aside from the direct mentoring relationships that most of the participants had, many also gave credit to supplemental resource relationships where, in an informal aspect, support was still a byproduct of their interaction. The two main areas this occurred were within close bonds between the participant and a friend, and the relationship of the participant and a significant family member. In each case, these relationships were built as a result of understanding each other's situation and experiences due to experiencing the same or similar circumstances as the benefactor.

In Aaron's case, he and his brother were both became a ward of the court after being separated from their mother due to drug abuse and a negative home environment. Many times throughout his interview Aaron mentioned his close bond with his older brother. This later resulted in him relying on his brother for different forms of assistance, including navigating the college access process. Most importantly, however, Aaron felt that his brother was one of the few he could both trust and depend on:

We kind of had hard times, and so like, for a while he was just that person I could trust... I just wasn't ready to trust anybody but him because I knew that nothing he was going to do was going to hurt me, and we were in it together, just in life... he just was kind of the only person I could look up to. (Aaron)

This type of support ultimately aided Aaron in coping with his family situation, later saying that he has since moved on and has established a new family with his uncle's family and his brother.

Finding that type of support was similar to Carlos, who stayed with friends on and off before

beginning his emancipation process. In this case, his friend had also experienced family struggles that Carlos could relate to, which helped both of them rely on each other for support and understanding. Again, Carlos found this sort of support helpful in coping with his own problems at home:

We supported each other. His parents weren't in the greatest situation either. His dad wasn't living at home, and his mom was an alcoholic. So that was nice to have that support of each other that we were going through tough times and we didn't have anyone but each other. So that was crucial, I guess... we were both looking for that mentor. (Carlos)

In these cases, however, the participants did make it a point to indicate that they do not see either of these relationships as mentor relationships, but nonetheless crucial in their attempt to locate positive support systems. This differs slightly than the experiences had by Tori, who reported utilizing her grandfather's relationship as a possible mentor relationship, but definitely a form of support.

Establishing Mentoring Relationships in College Settings – "I'm not even sure they know I count them as mentors..."

For some, mentor relationships were built in the higher education setting upon successfully transitioning into college, as well as some who continued a relationship with their mentors for high school. In this aspect, it was clear that many of the participants sought out continued support once in college for a variety of different needs. When resource programs did not fulfill this support, it was apparently done through close bonds with members of the campus community. For example, Tori reported building close bonds with many of the professors in her discipline. These relationships provided the normal academic support and advice one might expect of a typical professor-student interaction, but also provided personal support. From her perspective, these relationships with her professors *were* mentor

relationships, adding, "The people who help me now, I'm not even sure they're aware that I consider them mentors." She also expressed that she feels that her professors might actually just see their relationship with Tori as a typical professor-student relationship, implying that perhaps mentors don't need to be aware of the impact they are having on those they are assisting.

In that regard, Brittany, who did not specifically identify a mentor prior to coming to college, initially identified a program administrator at the college level as her mentor. Again, this suggests that locating positive resource support systems even after transitioning into college was still important to many participants who may or may not have had experienced valuable support relationships in high school.

DISCUSSION

Previously collected empirical data would suggest that there exists a positive correlation between mentoring at-risk youth and the success obtained by him or her. Likewise, were there was a lack in social capital there showed a dramatic increase in problem behaviors within the at-risk youth population. Because homeless youth traditionally experience a variety of different adversities, mentoring in the context of providing an array of resources to homeless youth would be ideal. What was found through the data was that, although maintaining positive relationships with others worked in providing different types of support to each participant, the degree to which they considered that experience a mentor relationship in the traditional sense was not always clear. In most all cases where a mentor was identified, it was only after being asked by the interviewer, implying that perhaps not every participant whom identified a mentor actually put forth prior consideration to the idea until that moment.

Despite this, each participant nevertheless was able to identify significant relationships that were vital to his or her quest for accessing higher education and locating proper support systems in an attempt to cope with his or her situation at

home. In this study, these relationships, as well as the identified mentor experiences, are referred to as *resource relationships*. In each case, participants were successful in identifying some type of positive resource relationship that maintained a significant impact on his or her life. Provided below is a summary of each focal point of the research applied to the findings in the data.

Mentors and Resource Relationships as Key Support

In an attempt to bridge the gap between access rates of homeless students into higher education settings, this research looked at how mentors and resource relationships could be used as a mechanism for providing support. How successful these relationships ended up being was completely dependent on the participant's view of his or her experiences. Ultimately, each participant was able to identify at least one person who was particularly helpful in the navigation process of accessing higher education opportunities, as well as support in coping with his or her personal adversities. As a result, it can be concluded that resource relationships made by homeless students can benefit them in a variety of different ways, not limited to college access.

Providing support to students who are experiencing challenges at home that result in array of different out-of-home situations may cause being a mentor to be difficult by tradition definition (see Mech, Pryde, & Rycraft, 1995). Nevertheless, the types of support given to these students were often times as simple as providing encouragement to achieve his or her goals, and/or that he or she was "good enough." This was the case for Sarita, who noted that she had always been hard on herself, but that her mentor had always encouraged her to try harder and supported her in applying to colleges during her senior year of high school. This type of support appeared to be valuable considering the rate of negative support characteristics shown primarily by family members and those closest to them in the form of discouragement.

Navigation was one of the greatest forms of support resources relationships offered to the

participants, since there appeared to be a lack of knowledge pertaining to available educational and financial opportunities. How to get started and what to do were common themes found in the data; the likelihood of deficient familial support and understanding were also observed. Mentors and other resource relationships were often knowledgeable of existing resources available to those they were attempting to assist. This allowed for greater access potential to college opportunities. Likewise, mentors established once in college (ex. Brittany and her mentor at the college level) prove to be viable outlets for gaining access to necessary resources in college.

Building skills and continuing to utilize them were also observed. For Sarita, many of these skills, she found, are applicable to her future career goals in social work, as well as continuing to locate resources for herself in the future:

...my high school counselor really taught me how to find my resources, which is a skill I still use today – and how to network... which is important, especially in the career path that I am choosing. But just in general... because you know there are resources out there, for whatever you need them, you know where to go. (Sarita)

Likewise, for Tori, skills pertaining to resource finding and navigating processes that she learned in her class by one of her mentors were also learned and transferable to college situations in the future.

In a more abstract sense, providing participants with certain personal resources – stability, security, and inclusiveness – were forms of support that appear to be direct byproducts of developing *trust*. In many cases, especially in cases where the participant lived with their mentor(s) for a period of time (see Zoë and Carlos), when trust was established, so too were other factors that allowed for the participant to focus and settle in a safe and accepting environment. "I didn't have to worry about those things so much," said Carlos, referring to having to be prepared to leave a place with insufficient notice or time to prepare. This allowed him to

spend more energy on applying to school and scholarships. For Zoë, much was the same. Upon leaving her family and moving in with her friend from school, she was immediately welcomed and was “treated like family.”

In terms of social capital, trust was the greatest component presented from the data. Coleman (2002) uses social capital to define the significant relationships built between two individuals, primarily based on the idea of building trust to ensure meaningful connections. For many of the participants, their experiences resulted in a variety of challenges ranging from a difficulty trusting others, to finding someone who understood them and their circumstances. In many cases, this characteristic was what ultimately decided their willingness to work with someone else; for others, it was simply a positive trait believed to be necessary in developing a fundamentally successful resource relationship. When discussing what characteristics a mentor should have in order to be successful in assisting others, Brittany said this:

Well I guess it would be someone that you trust to know that you don't know what to do, because that's embarrassing, not knowing what to do – not knowing where to go. And do you need someone who you can say 'hey, I'm really lost.' (Brittany)

Helpful and Positive Resource Characteristics

Considering how in depth a potential resource relationship could be, assessing the traits and characteristics that members of these relationships maintain could provide insight as to what is valued and required of mentors for homeless youth. From the data, there were clear commonalities between resource providers that implied a significant reverence to, that participants felt were both helpful from their experiences, and potentially beneficial to mentor relationships as a whole. As a result, two main types of characteristics were observed, which will be identified as *emotional characteristics* and *practical characteristics*. Each is broken down

into their respective categories, which provide different resources.

Under the emotional category, trust was, again, a common trait had by mentors, or desired of the participants. Building relationships based on trust appeared to make it easier to build a closer bond with the participant and their support member. Empathy and understanding, in terms of the participant's situation, were also beneficial emotional characteristics. It was often the case that empathy and understanding played a major role with trust and relationship development. For example, in the family that Zoë stayed with, the mother had undergone similar experiences as an unaccompanied youth in the past. This ultimately allowed for Zoë to trust her more easily, since the mother more easily understood her situation and was able to provide that support to her.

Understanding was also deemed important for mentors to have so as not to assume anything about the participant's experiences, and be more equipped to assist him or her in reaching their goals. Sarita mentioned this, as well, when discussing the possible effectiveness of mentors and mentor programs. Likewise, Zoë elaborated more on being aware and understanding of the homeless youth population so that resource systems may be readily able to assist independent student when necessary. Other characteristics, including awareness, open-mindedness, and openness, were also mentioned.

Practical characteristics such as guidance, being knowledgeable, and being resourceful were found to be some of the greatest traits had by a mentor. This came from the notion that as mentors and resource relationships are attempting to help their student gain access to post-secondary opportunities, it should be expected that these members should be equipped with the ability to *guide* a student to where they need to go, what they need to do, and how to do it. Such characteristics as patience, listening, and dedication were also key in effective resource relationship development and application.

Roles and Position in Lives

After identifying key characteristics, gaining insight as to where these relationships were actually developed could heighten the understanding of where resource relationships are ultimately available. This would prove to be valuable, given that from this data and other empirical research, specific barriers preside that traditionally restrict homeless youth in gaining access to college opportunities (see Dworsky & Perez, 2010). Overall, these roles have been divided into three main access areas: *educational settings, community organizations, and intimate connections*. Each area maintains a different list of types of individuals, which is similar to the characterization offered by previous research (see Hamilton et al. 2006)

Educational Settings. Perhaps the most apparent setting to locate effective resource relationships was found to be within educational settings, both before and during accessing college opportunities. Between the participants, teachers, guidance counselors, program administrators, and support programs were offered as the most common forms of resource relationships found in educational settings. Much of this was credited to the pre-existing knowledge/assumption that high school guidance counselors, for example, were trained in how to assist students seeking to gain access to post-secondary opportunities. For Sarita, her support came from both her counselor and her teacher, identifying the latter as a mentor figure. Tori had similar experiences with a high school English teacher. For her, she knew that that teacher could help her, since the college application process was incorporated in the class. She said that it “was one of the reasons why I enrolled in [her] class in the first place, because I knew I wanted to go to college, I just didn’t know how to go about doing it.”

In other cases, such as Brittany’s, utilizing resources available on campus was something she took advantage of quickly. Instances such as this, and the experiences had by Aaron, whose main support came from the student support organizations, make navigating systems and locating resources easier since these programs a

typically equipped with individuals trained to provide those resources.

Community Organizations. In this area, it was common to find more specific assistance, either voluntary or by requirement. For instance, Tori’s social caseworker was identified as one of her mentors. These relationships are designated by social service systems, therefore limit whom you work with, but are also required to provide his or her case-member with necessary resources, which depend on the youth’s circumstances. For Tori, the relationship she built with her caseworker took on a “parental type role.” This was able to help her more effectively apply to school, as well as understand the process as a whole.

For Carlos, working with his youth-group leader apart of the church he attended was a meaningful and effective mentor relationship. During his interview, Carlos repeatedly commented on the significance of this relationship, where he was able to solidify his religious beliefs. Although faith-based organizations are lesser known as possible environments for developing mentor/mentee relationships, empirical research suggests that they can still provide adequate support for mentee participants (Hamilton et al. 2006; Maton, Sto. Domingo, King 2005).

Aside from support, research shows that mentors in a religious setting can also provide a certain level of social capital, referring to Bourdieu’s concept of social capital and trust and responsibility within relationships. Smith (2003) notes that religious organizations allow opportunities for youth to interact with a trusted mentor, thus enabling the youth to network with other adults and peers to build social capital. Likewise, youth development organizations are not as heavily recognized as an area where mentor relationships can be built. Subsequently, Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, and Foster (1998) note that youth development programs provide opportunities for youth to become engaged, competent, and responsible adults. A way this is done is through 1-on-1 mentoring relationships between a caring adult the student.

Intimate Connections. Aside from formal mentoring relationships, it was common for participants to also maintain resource relationships with others outside of school and community settings. The main areas these were created in were through family and friends, and in a few cases included live-in situations. For Zoë, this was the case, living with her friend's family for a period of time. Here she learned about the college process and how to gain access to certain financial and academic resources. For Carlos, the relationship he built with his friend, although not a mentor figure, was still conducive to his attempt at coping with his own family situation. Aaron and his brother are another form of connection that proved to be helpful to Aaron during his out-of-home placement experience.

CONCLUSION AND RECCOMENDATIONS

Research Limitations

Limitations of this study include the sample size. From the targeted mid-sized university used in this study, having a limited population to initially sample from was inevitable. Likewise, since there are such characteristically limited numbers of independent students with a prior homeless experience at most institutions, only a handful of students could actually qualify for this study. Time to complete the project could also be viewed as a potential limitation, since it affected the number of participants that could have been surveyed. Nevertheless, due to the nature of this project, such a small pool of participants would already have been likely. Finally, the means in which were taken to gain participants by contacting campus staff designated to work with independent students could be seen as faulty, since the sample is limited to the number of students contacted, as well as only the students they are in contact with. As a result of these limitations, these findings cannot be generalizable to the greater homeless youth population without bias.

Participant Recommendations and Implications

During each interview, sentiments were made to the importance of this research by the participants. Most participants felt that the homeless and independent student population was so under-looked that it was a relief to see an attempt made to reveal the circumstances that allow some to enter college, shedding light to the greater homeless youth issue. It should also be noted that each participant was excited to be involved and expressed interest in future involvement in seeing what came out of the research. In the end, various suggestions were made by the participants implying a greater need for awareness of homeless and unaccompanied youth, as well as strategies on how to assist them. As far as this study, one participant suggested the primary researcher's own experiences and motives for completing this project.

Implications for Future Research

Homeless youth continue to face a mass array of adversities and deficiencies that prove to limit mobility in areas of academic achievement. Although this research was focused on how mentors can be of assistance to homeless youth who undergo accessing higher education opportunities, many questions remain unsolved. As seen from the data, certain barriers prohibit independent students accessing post-secondary opportunities. Future research on effective methods in overcoming those barriers would greatly serve the homeless student population, as well as studies that focus on providing supplemental resource opportunities for at-risk youth. Such empirical evidence could potentially lead to increased rates of homeless youth who continue their educational experiences past secondary schooling, securing the gap between homeless and non-homeless students in the educational field. Also, assessing the accessibility and availability of resource relationships for independent students prior to accessing higher education settings would be beneficial to the homeless youth community. Such findings could assist to a greater assessment of the opportunities available to independent students in order to ensure success. Lastly, future research should also

include mentor perspectives of assisting homeless and independent youth into college settings.

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