Higher Education Liaisons for Students Experiencing Homelessness: Role Preparation and Professional Development Needs

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Cover Page Footnote

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Homelessness among college students is an increasing concern on campuses across the U.S. Homelessness during college is associated with food insecurity, mental health concerns, and academic challenges including dropped classes, low GRE, and delayed degree completion. Homeless education liaisons—a role often filled by financial aid officers—are tasked with assisting students experiencing homelessness as the students navigate systems of support for basic needs while pursuing their degrees. Little is known about the perspectives or experiences of these professionals in terms of their role as a liaison. Our aim was to inform efforts to support these professionals by gaining an understanding of the knowledge and experiences of liaisons and their professional development preferences and needs. Based on survey data collected from 49 liaisons in four states, we identified gaps in understanding of college student homelessness, such as underestimates of the rate of student homelessness. We pinpointed areas of potential professional development including methods to identify and reach all students at risk for or experiencing homelessness and approaches for collaboration with community partners. We found that liaisons welcomed professional development and preferred online training and peer support as approaches to gain knowledge and skills to fulfill their critical roles.

Keywords: *higher education liaisons; single points of contact; homeless students*

College student homelessness occurs at alarming rates, with recent national studies showing rates around 15% (Cornett & Fletcher, 2022; The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021). Rates increased dramatically during the COVID pandemic, as did other forms of basic needs insecurity such as food insecurity, essential transportation, health care, and childcare (Goldrick-Rab, 2021). To illustrate, on our campus in 2017, 9.6% of students had experienced homelessness during the prior year (Haskett et al., 2020); in October 2020, 15% of students had been homeless in the first seven months of the pandemic (Haskett et al., 2021). Initiatives on campuses to support students at risk of homelessness have become more common. A survey of 469 higher education institutions conducted by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO, 2020) showed that almost all institutions offered at least one resource for basic needs insecurity. The aim of this study was to examine one specific resource – the availability of a designated professional to identify and support students experiencing homelessness.

Review Of Literature

Challenges Associated with Homelessness

Homelessness involves more than lack of safe and stable housing. College student homelessness is associated with students' health and wellness (Cornett & Fletcher, 2022; Leung et al., 2021) and academic challenges including lower engagement in classes (Hallett & Freas, 2017) and lower course grades and degree completion (Silva et al., 2017; Wood & Harris, 2022) compared to stably housed students. Young adults (18–25 years) who experience homelessness at some point in their lives are 87% more likely to discontinue school than peers who never experienced homelessness (Center for Promise, 2014). The AACRAO (2020) survey showed that 86% of higher education institutions identified food or housing insecurity as a driver of non-completion.

Given the host of negative factors associated with homelessness among students, housing insecurity and homelessness should be a serious concern for higher education professionals. Support and resources to address the needs of homeless students on individual college campuses vary widely. Some campuses offer housing scholarships or vouchers, priority for on-campus housing, and/or tuition or fee waivers for homeless students. We know of only one study (Huang et al., 2019) that examined the impact of college

support programs for students experiencing homelessness. A range of financial resources and personal mentoring and coaching were provided. Results showed that early enrollment and longer participation in the support program were associated with higher GPAs. There was no evaluation of the impact of individual components of the support program, so the effect of students' relationships with an individual advisor or mentor is unknown.

Higher Education Liaisons/Single Points of Contact

To offer appropriate support for students facing homelessness, staff across college campuses must be prepared to meet the unique needs of students at risk of homelessness. As noted by Goldrick-Rab (2021), we must acknowledge that "students are humans first" and offer basic needs for success, just as students are provided with meals in K-12 education because it is known that hungry students struggle to meet their academic potential. With respect to housing, in K-12 education, the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act mandates that schools identify a professional to ensure that homeless students' educational rights are protected and that students receive resources to support their education. Currently, there is no comparable federal law to support college students experiencing homelessness. Of respondents to the AACRAO (2020) survey, 37% indicated that there was at least one staff member at their institution who was dedicated to student basic needs, suggesting that this type of position is not uncommon yet is not standard practice. The single point-of-contact model involves the availability of designated supportive college professionals who identify students at risk for and experiencing homelessness and support those students' navigation of support systems and resources. The goal of these liaisons is to foster wellness, retention, and graduation among students with unstable housing. Because college financial aid administrators are one of the few professionals who can determine independent status of unaccompanied homeless youth on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), these professionals are often selected for liaison positions. Although there is no federal legislation for single points of contact at post-secondary institutions, to date seven states have passed legislation mandating that institutions of higher education have a single point of contact in place (Schoolhouse Connection, 2020).

Efforts to elucidate the experiences of liaisons have been scarce, with almost all studies describing the role from the perspective of students who receive services. Students have noted variable experiences; some students reported that they felt supported by the professionals they were connected to, but others felt frustrated by the lack of understanding and services available (Hallet et al., 2018; Quarles, 2021). Students found it difficult to connect with resources and systems of support because contact information for liaisons was not accessible (Hallet et al., 2018). When asked in the AACRAO (2020) survey about confidence in students' ability to access basic needs resources on their campuses, 32% of respondents were either "not confident at all" or were "slightly confident." This challenge was likely exacerbated by the COVID pandemic. In a study of community college students and staff members, McKinnon-Crowley (2022) found that connections between students and financial aid staff were made harder by the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, students had relied on in-person offices to forge relationships and build trust with financial aid staff and this became almost impossible when campuses shut down because there was initially no phone access, inconsistent responders to the financial aid email address, and slower response times to urgent financial concerns.

Based on our review, there is only one prior study of liaisons on college campuses. Hyatt and colleagues (2019) found that liaisons in community colleges in California reported that the primary challenges in their role were institutional issues such as lack of funding and supportive policies combined with inaccurate identification of students experiencing homelessness. Liaisons reported that housing was the most difficult student need to meet. Other common needs were assistance with FAFSA completion, mental health services, supportive services off campus, and assistance with food benefits.

Current Study

Given the essential assistance and advocacy that liaisons can potentially provide for students navigating a complex and frustrating system of resources, information is needed from liaisons' perspectives to provide direction for support of these professionals. We aimed to investigate the experiences of liaisons in four states to inform implementation of the single point of contact model at higher education institutions. We used a survey method to address our questions related to liaisons' preparation for their role, their practices and the types of services they provided to students, and their perceived need and preferences for professional development.

Methods

Participants

Forty-nine (49) professionals who served in liaison roles participated; 21 liaisons (43%) were at community colleges, 19 (39%) were at four-year colleges with graduate programs, and 9 (18%) were at four-year colleges without graduate programs. In terms of job titles, 19 identified primarily as a liaison or single/designated point of contact; 13 identified as financial aid officers or directors; 6 identified as a counselor/advisor; 3 as a case manager; 7 as "other" (e.g., dean, director of student support services, director of single stop); and 2 did not report their primary job title. Nearly half (43%) had graduate degrees in various fields (e.g., higher education, counseling, English). With respect to length of time working with homeless students, seven liaisons had 10+ years of experience, 17 had 5-10 years, 12 had 2-5 years, and 10 had fewer than 2 years (3 did not reply).

Procedures and Measure

To reach liaisons in State 1 (n=97), we obtained a list of liaisons from the state Homeless Education Program. To reach liaisons in State 2 (n=55), we collaborated with the state director who forwarded our invitation to liaisons in her state. We obtained a public online list of liaisons in State 3 (n=37) and State 4 (n=13). In all, invitations were sent via email to 202 liaisons; 79 consented to participate (39%) and 40 (19.8%) completed the survey. The survey was a modification of a survey developed by the California State University system (Hyatt et al., 2019). Our version included 23 questions about liaisons' (a) professional background, (b) preparation for the role, (c) services provided to students, and (d) perceived need and preferences for professional development. Responses were anonymous. Participants had an option to enter a drawing for a gift card. Our university IRB approved the study procedures.

Results And Discussion

Preparation for the Role

Only one-half of the liaisons reported that their institution provided appropriate guidance for them to assist students who experienced homelessness (55%) and adequately staffed and funded the liaison role (51%). In terms of training received for their job responsibilities, 25% had received no special training; however, 92% had engaged in self-directed learning and/or taken advantage of relevant professional training opportunities.

Liaisons' Services

Liaisons were asked to estimate the annual rate of homelessness on their campus; 20% indicated that they did not know the rate. The majority (55%) estimated the rate to be 1-5% and very few (11%) estimated that the rate was higher than 10%. It was interesting that the vast majority of liaisons who estimated the rate (95.5%) were confident that their estimate was accurate. The most common basis for their estimate (51%) was the number of students referred to them; 38% of liaisons relied on students' FAFSA; only 11% of liaisons used student body data on homelessness. During a typical week, 73% of the liaisons assisted fewer than 6 students experiencing homelessness. Most (80%) of the liaisons devoted 10% or less of their time to liaison duties. Only 47% of the liaisons' names and contact information were available on the university website as the point of contact for students experiencing homelessness.

These findings indicate that liaisons' estimates of rates of homelessness are much lower than expected based on national studies showing that about 15% of college students likely experience homelessness annually (The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021). However, it should be expected that estimates of homelessness and number of students served were low because liaisons tended to rely on referrals from other professionals or students themselves. Reliance on self-referrals is unfortunate because contact information for liaisons was rarely public. Even if that information had been available, research shows that students are reluctant to seek support for basic needs due to stigma (Gupton, 2017) and they face difficulties knowing who specifically to contact and often feel uncomfortable reaching out to that staff member (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2021).

Reliance on FAFSA data to estimate rates of student homelessness is also problematic because episodes of homelessness occur throughout the year, not only at the time the FAFSA is completed. Furthermore, most graduate students do not complete the FAFSA, so homelessness among graduate students would be grossly underestimated by liaisons who rely on FAFSA data. Data on our campus (Haskett et al., 2020) shows that homelessness is more common among graduate students—especially students pursuing master's degrees—than among undergraduates. Together, findings suggest that a significant proportion of homeless and housing insecure students likely are not identified or served by liaisons whose role is to support these students.

When asked to indicate the three highest needs of students they serve, about half of liaisons (52%) indicated that connection to housing or shelters was a prominent need. Interestingly, many (45.8%) indicated that they connected students to outside housing resources rather than providing housing support on campus (18%); 27.3% of liaisons provided on-campus housing resources *and* referred students to off-campus resources. Other high needs included computer/internet access (44.8%), transportation assistance (44.8%), counseling (32.6%), employment assistance (34.6%), FAFSA completion assistance (18.3%), and childcare assistance (16.3%). There tended to be a range in which these services were provided on campus or referred out to community agencies, with school supplies (50%), FAFSA support (75.6%), and counseling (50%) tending to be provided in-house while students were more likely to be referred to off campus assistance with transportation (65%) and childcare (75%). Further, completing applications for governmental support programs like SNAP and TANF were the most likely services to be referred out, at 81.8% and 86.4%, respectively.

Although it is understandable that all services cannot be provided on campus, it is important to understand the degree to which services provided by liaisons match students' needs. Our data indicate that providing support for federal applications like the FAFSA are a common strength among these professionals; they seem to be less familiar with support for other federal aid applications (SNAP, TANF). Allison (2018) found that only 3% of college students receive SNAP benefits but an estimated 18% qualify. Providing liaisons with training in completion of these applications could be a means of expediting the flow of services and support to students. Further, particularly for needs like housing and transportation, it is important to understand what the reality of referrals to community services might entail for students in higher education. Students' variable course and work schedules mean that housing far from campus without a means of transportation could be highly disruptive to their ability to attend and engage with classes. Further, it can be extremely difficult to balance the responsibilities of employment, requirements of local housing agencies, and college coursework (Crutchfield, 2018; Gupton, 2017). Efforts to understand the support available to students

in the community as well as creation of institutional support programs to address these needs on campus could be particularly impactful for meeting the needs of students experiencing homelessness.

Needs for Support/Training

Liaisons indicated interest in receiving training on a wide range of topics. The most requested topics were resources available for students experiencing homelessness (76%) and methods to identify and provide outreach to students experiencing homelessness (72%). More than 50% of liaisons were interested in training on (a) establishing and strengthening partnerships on and off campus, (b) financial aid support for students experiencing homelessness, (c) health/wellness and food resources, and (d) policy requirements for students experiencing homelessness. Liaisons were somewhat less interested in training on resources for student parents (46%) and support for students transitioning from high school (39%). When asked to rank their preferred training formats, liaisons were most interested in formal training sessions, webinars, and workshops, and they preferred online options (84%) to in-person training (66%). Most liaisons (73%) also indicated strong interest in connecting with other professionals virtually (i.e. creating a virtual peer support group) as a means of supplementing more formal training.

As noted above, about one-half of the liaisons perceived their preparation and resources to be adequate which is not surprising since supporting students experiencing homelessness was a relatively minor function in their job responsibilities and they were serving few students. Even so, liaisons did indicate a desire for professional development. Therefore, efforts to provide formal training for liaisons are warranted, especially about resources and strategies for connecting and supporting students and information related to capturing the true scope of students needing services (i.e., limits in current data collection efforts). Further, as liaisons are usually operating as a "lone wolf" in their institution, creating a support group (i.e., email list-serve) could be powerful to (a) connect liaisons from surrounding institutions so they can share lived experiences and receive support from those in a similar position and (b) connect liaisons to community partners outside the institution to strengthen working relationships that could benefit students.

Implications for Practice

Our findings are generally consistent with those of the study of liaisons at community colleges in California (Hyatt et al., 2019), suggesting that liaisons' experiences might be similar across states and types of institutions, as well as the struggles campus support staff have faced in supporting underrepresented students (Berumen et al., 2015). Liaisons are providing essential services for students at risk for housing insecurity, but our results suggest that they are not sufficiently trained or supported in their roles and are not equipped with tools to reach and advocate for the full population of students experiencing homelessness at their institutions.

Increased awareness of the rates of homelessness among college students is a reasonable first step in efforts to enhance services provided. Greater awareness among administrators could be the basis for recruitment of a sufficient number of liaisons and for providing comprehensive professional development opportunities to prepare them for the role. Outreach strategies should be a focus of training, as most liaisons were relying on referrals and annual FAFSA data rather than proactively reaching out to students at risk for homelessness. Given the central role of the FAFSA in determination of homeless status, liaisons might benefit from greater awareness of the use of FAFSA information. Webinars such as that delivered by the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA, 2020) should be widely available. Many useful tools and tips for higher education liaisons are available from the National Center for Homeless Education and SchoolHouse Connection, and links to their websites should be made available to liaisons. Liaisons should be highly visible via the university website and other mechanisms across campus such as counseling centers,

advising centers, food pantries, and wellness centers (Eichelberger et al., 2017). Professionals who serve as liaisons should have formal opportunities for ongoing professional development and connection to one another across campuses. Finally, we encourage advocates for college student housing security to push for legislation to ensure that there are liaisons available to students on every U.S. higher education campus.

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