

# Campus of Opportunity: A Qualitative Analysis of Homeless Students in Community College

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## Abstract

**Objective:** Community colleges are gateways of access to higher education for many underrepresented students. One group that has received little attention in the community college research literature is homeless youth. The objective of this research is to address the following research questions: (a) What might be learned from the narratives of homeless youth and their experiences in postsecondary education? and (b) How might community colleges promote interpersonal and institutional resilience for homeless students? **Method:** Utilizing qualitative research techniques, this article reviews the experiences of homeless youth attending community college and explores the ways in which community colleges might serve as sites for fostering resilience and stability in the lives of homeless students. **Results:** The results of this empirical work suggest that although homeless students do benefit from enrolling in community college, some of the benefits are not salient to them and they are unable to take full advantage of institutional resources. **Contributions:** The findings from this study contribute to the literature on low-income students' experiences in community college and add the voices and experiences of homeless youth.

## Keywords

homelessness, homeless youth, qualitative, access to education, resilience

Community colleges have an important place in the educational infrastructure of the United States. Historically, community colleges have been a primary vehicle for

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increasing access to postsecondary education (Pusser & Levin, 2009). In 1947, the Truman Commission report, *Higher Education for American Democracy*, articulated the role of higher education in American democracy (Hutcheson, 2007) by establishing a network of community colleges to meet the country's current demand for access to postsecondary education and need to train a workforce of returning servicemen. More recently, President Barack Obama had renewed the conversation regarding the role of higher education, in particular community colleges, in democracy and workforce preparation through two initiatives. First, his College Completion Challenge calls for an increase of five million students completing degrees by 2020 (Brandon, 2009). Second, President Obama had sought to make community college more affordable through the America's College Promise plan that would make the first 2 years of community college free (Smith, 2015). These two policy initiatives illustrate the importance of community colleges in providing general education and workforce training and in serving as an engine of social mobility in the United States. As federal and state legislatures focus on increasing access and completion at community colleges, one subgroup of low-income students that could benefit from these policy changes, but has not been studied, are homeless students.

Homeless and highly mobile students (students who enroll in two or more public schools in an academic year) represent a small but significant population in postsecondary education. As I address later, the correlation between mobility and homelessness has led some to now refer to homeless students as homeless and/or highly mobile students. In 2012, of the students who identified as independents on their Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), 58,000 identified as homeless according to the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (Gross, 2013). While the FAFSA data provide some indication of how many homeless students are in higher education, colleges and universities are still not required to keep track of homeless students at the institution, suggesting that the homeless student population is much larger than reflected in FAFSA data.

Homeless and highly mobile youth represent a highly diverse population. Gender, race/ethnicity, past experience, educational ability, support systems, and family structure run the gamut for students experiencing homelessness. While it is a difficult population to identify, a few numbers exist. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention reports nationally 68% are 15 to 17 years old, and 57% of homeless youth identify White, 27% identify as Black or African American, and 3% identify as American Indian or Alaskan Native (Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlak, 2002). No solid numbers on gender, family background, or income exist. While there are several distinct types of homeless youth, this article focuses on unaccompanied minors or individuals younger than 24 years, who are homeless and separated from their family. There are an estimated 50,000 homeless youth who are unaccompanied (Henry, Shivji, de Sousa, & Cohen, 2015). Unaccompanied youth can be found living on the streets, in shelters, and many spend their nights doubled up, housed with friends or relatives, until they are able to find a more permanent solution or are no longer welcome (Hammer et al., 2002).

Despite the increased media attention to homeless students attending colleges and universities across the country (Furst, 2010; Gross, 2013), little educational research exists related to this particular student population (Gupton, 2013, 2014). This study examines and presents the educational experiences of homeless students in community college with attention to the ways in which homelessness affects an individual's postsecondary educational experience. The primary research questions driving this study are as follows:

**Research Question 1:** What might be learned from the narratives of homeless youth and their experiences in postsecondary education?

**Research Question 2:** How might community colleges promote interpersonal and institutional resilience for homeless students?

To address the two research questions, this study employs cultural narratives as a methodology to examine the educational experiences of homeless youth who attended community college. In what follows, I discuss the theoretical and methodological framework. This article illustrates the participants' experience through qualitative narratives composed from the interview data; I then transition to a discussion of the results and findings that have emerged from the study in relation to the two posed research questions.

## Youth Homeless in the United States

In the United States, an estimated 1.7 million youth, younger than 18 years, experience homelessness each year (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2008). Experiencing homelessness is generally thought of and defined as the absence of a stable, safe, and adequate nighttime residence. Recent scholarship suggests that the experience of homelessness is intimately tied with issues of health, mental health, poverty, violence, substance abuse, broken family systems, foster care, racial and ethnic disparities, sexual orientation, gender identity, culture, and education (Gupton, 2013, 2014; Hallett, 2010; Hallett & Westland, 2015; Masten, Herbers, Desjardins, McCormick, Sapienza, Long, & Zeleno, 2012; Tierney & Hallett, 2012). Homelessness is not merely a crisis of inadequate housing; rather, it is an example of the intersection of multiple forms of marginality within systems of inequity.

The research on youth homelessness identifies three consistent patterns (Gupton, 2013, 2014). First, poverty is continually linked to adolescent homelessness. In their foundational study on homeless youth, Bassuk and Rosenberg (1988) found that the experience of homelessness exacerbates the experience of poverty. As individuals and families in poverty have fewer economic resources, they are at greater risk of losing their housing if their income is disrupted (e.g., loss of employment or other unexpected costs). Once an individual or family enters into homelessness, it becomes increasingly difficult to return to a place of economic stability. Bassuk and Rosenberg (1988) suggested the experience of homelessness adversely affects mental, emotional, and physical well-being, in addition to economic and housing stability. Furthermore,

studies suggest that a disproportionate percentage of homeless youth come from low-income and working class families with a household income below the poverty line (Haber & Toro, 2004). The homeless youth population in the United States is largely tied to poverty and economic hardship. Like homeless adults, homeless youth can find themselves stuck in a cycle of poverty in which they cannot gain economic or personal stability.

Next, youth experiencing homelessness have a greater likelihood of experiencing familial conflict or separation from their immediate family (Greenblatt & Robertson, 1993; Robertson, 1989). The experience of strife and conflict within their family cause some youth to voluntarily or forcibly leave home. Furthermore, family conflict might also result in youth entering into social systems (foster care or juvenile justice systems) if they are removed because of neglect, abuse, or violence and placed in the care of the state. Multiple studies have focused on the increased levels of family conflict, mental or physical trauma, and other educational or developmental issues for homeless students (Buckner, 2008; Cutuli et al., 2013; Herbers et al., 2012; Masten et al., 2012; Obradović, Long, Cutuli, Chan, Hinz, Heistad, & Masten, 2009; Samuels, Shinn, & Buckner, 2010). Separation from immediate family, whether by choice or force, breaks important ties of social support and makes it difficult for young people to build new trusting relationships. Finally, homelessness is more highly associated with residential mobility and other multiple risk factors that lead to grade retention and dropout (B. Wolff, 2000). The increased frequency of residential mobility in homeless youth and families may be distinct from other low-income students (Ziesemer, Marcoux, & Marwell, 1994). When youth do not expect to remain in a school for an appreciable time, making friends or investing in homework can seem like a pointless endeavor (Cauce, 2000; Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003).

Given the myriad of issues that homeless youth might experience, the goal of a college degree may appear impractical if not impossible or improbable for homeless adolescents. A few studies have surveyed homeless youth about their postsecondary aspirations. Rafferty, Shinn, and Weitzman (2004) found that 85% of formerly homeless youth in New York indicated they planned to attend postsecondary education as compared with 96% of students who had never been homeless. Similarly, Masten, Miliotos, Graham-Berman, Ramirez, and Neemann (1993) found that education was important for homeless students. Homelessness causes a great deal of chaos in the lives of youth, which makes placing trust in adults or institutions difficult to conceptualize. To be sure, the primary concern of homeless youth is to find a stable and safe living environment. Beyond meeting fundamental needs, entrance into postsecondary education might allow homeless youth a space and opportunity to build bonds of trust with peers and adults, in addition to a stable and independent life. Yet, this requires postsecondary institutions that recognize and understand the unique needs of homeless youth and are willing to organize resources to meet their needs. This study explores the lives of four homeless adolescents who enrolled in community college and provides an opportunity to hear directly from the participants about their experiences with homelessness and education.

## **Resilience as a Theoretical Framework**

This study is framed around resilience theory. Resilience theory is a positive psychology or strengths-based approach to understanding human development (Zimmerman, 2013). Resilience offers insights into why some children and youth are able to endure and persevere through traumatic experiences (Garmezy, 1991; Masten, 2001). Resilience theory has been primarily used educational psychology in school district-wide quantitative studies of homeless students (Masten, 2001; Masten et al., 1999; Masten et al., 1993). The premise of resilience is that individuals with certain traits and dispositions are able to recover from various life stressors. Studies of resilience support the view that human psychological development is buffered and self-correcting (Luthar, 1999; Masten et al., 1999). Buffering and self-correcting refer to an individual's ability to adapt to negative outcomes or experiences and find alternate solutions. Resilience theory holds promise for homeless youth as it implies that a positive attitude and constructive choices might create positive outcomes that help homeless adolescents become stable and healthy adults (Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005). For example, a student experiencing homelessness who is able to find shelter, create and sustain supportive relationships, and continue the process of personal development is more likely to locate a pathway out of homelessness.

As a conceptual framework, resilience theory has three interrelated components: (a) individual characteristics, (b) close interpersonal relationships, and (c) institutional forms of social support (Garmezy, 1991; Werner & Smith, 1992). As this study did not include psychological based surveying or testing related to personal characteristics of resilience in the participants, I focus on the second and third components of resilience.

### ***Resilience as a Personal Trait***

The primary factor in developing resilience relates to individuals' intelligence and disposition. A high intelligence and an easygoing disposition are frequently cited as characteristics of resilient youth (Luthar, 1993; Rutter, 1996; S. Wolff, 1995). Youth who possess above average cognitive abilities are able to understand their current situation. Furthermore, intelligence allows youth to know what is within and what is beyond their control and decide on a coping strategy or find a more supportive environment (Block & Kremen, 1996). In a study of 132 college students, Campbell-Sills, Cohan, and Stein (2006) found that individuals who experienced childhood neglect and who scored high on resilience reported fewer current psychiatric symptoms than individuals who did not experience childhood neglect and who, also, scored high on resilience. Their finding is consistent with the contention that resilience constitutes not just recovery but also growth and strengthening from adversity (Zimmerman, 2013).

### ***Resilience as Interpersonal Support***

The second factor of resilience in youth is interpersonal support. Other individuals, in particular family members, provide validation to mediate stressful conditions. Research

on stress-resilient children has shown that parents with positive parental attitudes were more involved in their children's lives (Gribble et al., 1993). For homeless youth, high levels of family conflict may also have a negative impact, particularly if the child and the parent have a positive relationship early in the child's development (Conrad & Hammen, 1993). The interpersonal dimension of resilience relates to the ways in which promotive factors enable individuals to build supportive relationships despite the experience of trauma (e.g., homelessness; Zimmerman, 2013).

### *Resilience as Institutional Support*

The third common factor of resilient youth is external support from institutions. For example, participation in afterschool programs or extracurricular activities might serve as sources to promote resilience. Furthermore, a religious or educational institution that fosters hope, stability, and competence in youth aids the development of resilience. Locating and gaining access to external support networks relates to the first factor of resilience—intelligence. Research has shown that youth who recognize opportunities for support and engender trust in others are more likely to benefit from external relationships (Milgram & Palti, 1993). As many youth experience family conflict, external adults and institutions offer protection from the chaos of home. With regard to homeless youth, schools, shelters, and religious institutions provide safe havens for youth and can help them transition to independent living (Garmezy, 1991).

As postsecondary institutions focus on developing competencies in individuals, community colleges are potential sites to help in the development of resilience (Ross, Smith, Casey, & Slavin, 1995). Colleges and universities have supportive services that have the potential to provide relief from the stressors of homelessness. Furthermore, postsecondary institutions provide students with a space to form positive relationships with peers, faculty members, administrators, and others in the campus community. Colleges and universities also offer multiple extracurricular activities that might serve as forms of external support (Consortium on the School-Based Promotion of Social Competence, 1996). When students participate in activities from athletics to the year-book committee, they are able to form positive networks of social support. Based on the literature, I argue that resilience is like psychological and emotional armor that individuals utilize to cope with the experience of stress and trauma. The strength of resilience theory is that it illustrates the characteristics needed to cope with adversity and make smooth transitions in the development toward adulthood.

### **Method**

This study is based in the narrative inquiry tradition in qualitative research (Riessman, 1993). Narrative inquiry is a useful research technique to examine the ways in which participants make meaning of their experiences as personal narratives. As narrative inquiry is concerned with subjective meaning making, this study does not offer generalizable knowledge about the experiences of all homeless individuals; rather, the findings and conclusions presented in this study are a form of naturalistic generalization (Stake & Trumbull, 1982).

To illustrate how the participants' constructed meaning from their experiences, I composed personal narratives for each student based on interview and observational data. The narratives are individual stories through which people come to understand their identity, social location, and other agents (Somers, 1994). The personal narratives also serve to guide an individual's action and shape patterns of social relations (Lamont & Small, 2008). The personal narratives individuals construct help them to make sense of their identity and the barriers they might experience in attempting to achieve their future goals. In that sense, cultural narratives might be used to explain structurally reproductive agency and structurally transformative agency. Cultural narratives allow the reader to ascertain whether the participant's choices transformed or overcame barriers. These cultural narratives can also reveal how an individual's choices reproduced or compounded problems or challenges they experience. As Michele Lamont and Mario Small (2008) pointed out, "The narrative perspective is particularly useful in demonstrating how self-conception, including one's sense of self-limitations and responsibility toward others, influences action" (p. 16).

### *Setting*

Los Angeles County has the largest population of homeless individuals in the United States. It is estimated that there are roughly 88,000 people homeless each night in Los Angeles County; of those, 15,000 are youth younger than 18 years (Los Angeles Coalition to End Hunger and Homelessness, 2006). The Economic Roundtable estimates that "over half of the 1,000 foster youth emancipated each year . . . become homeless, and over half of homeless youth enter the justice system" (Fleming, Burns, & Haydamack, 2004). The national data, mentioned previously, and local statistics highlight the scope of how many individuals are already experiencing homelessness or are close to becoming homeless.

In terms of the setting for postsecondary education, the Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD) is one of the nation's largest community college districts and offers nine different institutions within the district. Although LACCD is a large district with a host of institutional options, it is adjacent to the Santa Monica Community College District, which has one institution, Santa Monica College (SMC). SMC considers itself a leader among community colleges in California in terms of transfer to 4-year institutions. Two of the participants in this study attended SMC and two attended community colleges in LACCD. Those who attended SMC not only had transfer in mind but also liked the allure of SMC's proximity to the beach.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

My aim in this study was to collect data that revealed the life stories of my participants, and in particular illustrated how they made or were preparing to make the transition to community college. In 2010, I recruited four homeless students for this study employing three selection criteria: (a) be between the ages of 16 and 24, (b) currently



**Table 1.** Participant Demographics During Initial Interview.

| Name    | Age | Race/<br>ethnicity | Gender | Highest grade<br>completed | HSD or<br>GED | College<br>choice | Years since<br>left home | DCFS |
|---------|-----|--------------------|--------|----------------------------|---------------|-------------------|--------------------------|------|
| Kevin   | 17  | Black              | M      | 12                         | HSD           | SMC               | 2                        | Yes  |
| Thomas  | 20  | Black              | M      | 9                          | GED           | LACC              | 2                        | Yes  |
| Sequoia | 17  | Black              | F      | 10                         | GED           | SMC               | 4                        | Yes  |
| Jenny   | 21  | Black              | F      | 12                         | HSD           | LAVC              | 5                        | Yes  |

Note. HSD = high school diploma; GED = General Equivalency Diploma; DCFS = Department of Child and Family Services; SMC = Santa Monica College; LACC = Los Angeles Community College; LAVC = Los Angeles Valley College.

attending a postsecondary institution or have attended a postsecondary institution, (c) experienced homelessness, defined as having lived on the streets or in a shelter for at least a 1-month period over the past 2 years, or is currently homeless in Los Angeles. Follow-up interviews were conducted with each participant in 2016.

My primary site for data collection was the Southern California Youth Network (SCYN). SCYN is a nonprofit organization that works with and provides shelter to homeless adolescents. SCYN operates three different facilities for homeless youth: an emergency shelter, a short-term group home (maximum stay of 9 months), and a long-term group home (youth can stay from the age of 17-21). I was introduced to potential participants through an SCYN staff member. Each interview focused on different aspects of the participant’s life: life story, educational experiences, and social networks. To understand the context in which they live, I spent a great deal of time observing participants at their group home or shelter, high school, community college, and various social or leisure activities. Over an 8-month period, each participant took part in at least three 1-hour interviews. Table 1 presents the demographics and educational information of the sample at the time of the initial interview. I also conducted follow-up interviews with each participant. These interviews were informal and lasted 30 minutes.

I analyzed the data using a hermeneutic style of data analysis (Creswell, 1997) to find connections between the participant’s life story and the context in which the events took place. By comparing common themes found in the interviews and observations, a picture of the individual’s pathway to college emerged. Observational data were analyzed through the constant comparative and emergent theme process. To align the observational field notes with the interview transcripts, I composed composite summaries related to the emergent themes from both data sources. I made composite summaries for each participant. This process allowed me to track the different dimensions of the participants’ cultural narrative. Through this process, I was able to identify the areas that I needed to follow-up on in the interviews, as well as additional moments for observation. As the sample size for this project was small, I did not utilize qualitative data analysis software. After analyzing the data, I composed narratives of the participants’ transition to college.



### *Issues of Trustworthiness*

Ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research involves multiple layers (content, interpretation, and researcher biases) when working from an interpretive framework (Luria, 1979). First are the concerns about the trustworthiness of content. As the interpretation and construction of participant meanings is a difficult task, the individual researcher must take careful steps to preserve his or her data record. Creswell and Miller (2000) suggested creating an audit trail of field notes so that others can see if the researcher's assumptions are grounded in the data. I created an audit trail to make certain that interview transcripts and observational field notes accurately reflected what was said or occurred. I audio recorded most interviews although Sequoia elected not to be recorded. In her case, I took diligent notes on her responses to interview questions. I transcribed all audio recording, thus creating a written and audio record of each interview. Furthermore, I typed up handwritten field notes immediately after the interviews, along with any other observations that were not recorded while in the field. In addition, I provided my field notes to an external reviewer to check the researcher's interpretations of the data (Schwandt & Halpern, 1988). The external reviewer examined the field notes and drafts of the cultural narratives and provided feedback on any areas of the narrative he or she felt did not reflect information in field notes. As there are multiple truths in an interpretive framework, the researcher and the participant work to co-construct a mutual understanding and interpretation of the participant's statement. Langness and Frank (1981) described this as two voices in harmony. To co-construct meaning, I employed member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to allow participants to read what they had said and make changes if they felt they have been misinterpreted.

### *Limitations*

The limitations of this study are fourfold. First, this study focuses on the participants' narratives and not the institutional narrative. In conducting this line of inquiry, my interest was on the participants and their experiences. While I think there is a need for research that focuses on the institution, that was not the intent of this study. Second, this study is not longitudinal and does not continuously follow the participants through their journey in postsecondary education. Although follow-up interviews were conducted, they do not replace the data that might have been gathered from participants during observation and interview. As data collection for the study ended prior to any of the students completing a degree or deciding to leave college, their futures within higher education are still undetermined. Thus, the findings from this study reflect only the beginning of the participant's transition into community college. The third limitation is that the study only explores the experiences of homeless youth and does not incorporate homeless students who are older than 25 years. The study of homeless adults in community college is important, but goes beyond the scope of this project. Homeless adults represent a distinct segment of the homeless population, with unique concerns that do not overlap with homeless youth. As such, I elected not to include

them in this study. The final limitation of this study is the small sample size, limiting the ability to make broad generalizations. Furthermore, this small sample does not represent the demographics of the homeless youth population. Although they were not excluded from participating in the study, individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) were not included in the sample. Youth who identify as LGBT make up a significant portion of the homeless youth population and future research should include their voices. Given the diversity within the homeless youth population, I do not claim that the narratives presented here represent the experiences of all homeless students. Rather, I suggest that the narratives presented in this study help to advance the literature on improving access and persistence for subpopulations of low-income students.

## Cultural Narratives

To illustrate the experience of homelessness while navigating postsecondary education, I have composed narratives of four study participants. While the narratives presented here represent only a portion of the participants' lives, they serve to present the salient facets of the participants' experiences with homelessness and postsecondary education.

### Kevin

I first met Kevin after a talent show put on by youth from various group homes and shelters. During the show, he performed *krumping*, a style of dance that originated in South Los Angeles where he was born. Krumping is traditionally expressed by energetically flailing the arms and chest to hip-hop music. Kevin's style of krump dancing incorporates gymnastic flips between chaotic upper body gyrations. These spastic gyrations of krump dancing seem to mimic the chaotic events of Kevin's life.

Kevin's mother was killed by her boyfriend in a domestic dispute when he was 4 years old. After her death, he went to live with his grandmother but was soon bounced around among his grandmother, aunt, and a stepmother (one of his father's former wives) until middle school. Each time Kevin changed homes, it was for a similar reason: "I was, you know, not obeying rules and acting up and stuff."

Kevin's grandmother, aunt, and stepmother all lived in the South Los Angeles area. By the time he was in middle school, Kevin was kicked out of all three family homes within a 6-week span for not following rules. The three women decided they could not deal with him. They were concerned that as he grew and became larger and stronger, he might become physically aggressive with them. Having exhausted his housing options, Kevin was sent to Storm Haven, a group home in South Los Angeles. He stayed there 4 years until the group home closed due to lack of funds. After Storm Haven closed, Kevin was moved to SCYN.

Kevin has been a resident in one of SCYN's shelters for over a year. He started at the emergency shelter and then moved up to a more stable group home. When Kevin moved to SCYN, he transferred to a nearby high school, which he claimed went well.

Kevin was on track to graduate, but he did not participate in the graduation ceremony. He said he did not attend graduation because

I was suppose to graduate and walk and all that stuff, but then the school said I couldn't walk at graduation 'cause I didn't pass Government and I don't have the credits. It's cool though. I just take it in the summer and then go on to Santa Monica Community College (SMC).

During his senior year, Kevin applied to Clark Atlanta University, but was turned down because he did not meet the academic standards. Kevin said one of caseworkers at SCYN encouraged him to look into Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs); "Ed (an African American caseworker) told me about them. It sounded kinda cool, so I applied. I mean it might be good to, you know, be around just Black people in college, but they rejected me."

When Kevin started at SMC, it would take him over an hour by bus to get to campus. Despite the distance, he chose SMC because it is one of the better schools for transferring to a 4-year institution. That was a goal for Kevin who admitted that his first semester was a little rough. In assessing his first semester, Kevin stated, "Well I mean it started out bad, then went good. I mean, I just messed up on some early assignments and not going to class all the time, but it worked out." Kevin mentioned that he needed to find someone on campus to help him to transfer, but was not sure where to go. Kevin mostly relied on the SCYN staff and his tutor for educational advice and information: "Right now, I just meet with my tutor [a volunteer]. We go over my homework and she encourages me to work hard." Kevin's tutor is a volunteer from a nonprofit organization that pairs homeless students with an adult capable of, or at least interested in, providing educational support. The organization has partnered with SCYN to provide tutors to many of its residents. While Kevin's tutor was a college graduate, she admittedly had no knowledge of the transfer process or whom he should talk to at SMC about transferring or receiving additional academic support.

Given his hazy academic future, I asked Kevin why he was pursuing a college degree; "Well . . . it's like what you do after high school. You go to college; you get a job." When I asked if he would rather be working full-time, Kevin replied that he liked the freedom of being a student. When he had a job, he described his life thus: "It was like I would go to school and then straight to work. No time for fun." Kevin understands that if he moves into the SCYN independent living program (a program designed to help residents learn to live on their own, without SCYN staff support) he will need to find at least a part-time job to support himself (this is an SCYN program requirement). When I talked with Kevin about his future plans, he said,

I want to go to University of Southern California (USC) and study film and acting. I could go to University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). I've got a cousin who goes there, but I like USC more. I mean, I might also go to a Black college you know.

Kevin's interest in Black colleges has grown over the years. In November, he went on a weeklong tour of HBCUs; a local group organized the trip and Kevin's travel was paid for by the Department of Child and Family Services.

I saw Grambling, Spellman, Bethune Cookman, Florida A&M, Alabama A&M, Morehouse, Tuskegee . . . and Southern. It was cool. I got to hear about some of the history of the schools. I got to check out a battle of the bands with Bethune Cookman and Florida A&M. That was crazy. The like lead band people were all getting into it and the bands was playing all these like hip hop songs and stuff. They didn't do that at Sunset [High School]. I mean, Florida A&M would be my first choice. I might apply there, and Bethune Cookman would be my second. I might apply to both of those and see what happens, you know. They took us by where Hurricane Katrina hit. It stank there, so I don't want to go to New Orleans.

After discussing his trip, Kevin identified that next semester he will take an English class, a class on ballet, and an acting class at night. He admits that ballet and acting classes may not help him to transfer. Kevin wants to be an actor or writer, and he thinks his courses will be good preparation. When I asked him why he was taking ballet, his response and motivation were simple, "there are girls there." Perhaps Kevin's new dance interest in the smoother, controlled movements of ballet rather than the volatile movements of krumping will be a more positive reflection of his future.

## *Sequoia*

When Sequoia started at SCYN, she was in and out of their emergency shelter facility.

I've never been in a place like that before. People were crazy, for real. I was just shocked at like the different types of kids and what they'd been through. If something happened at the shelter, I would just go to friend's house 'til it cooled down.

Aside from the times she left on her own, Sequoia was kicked out of SCYN twice, and she went to stay with her grandmother both times. Once Sequoia settled in, she was able to adjust to life in a shelter and later in a group home.

After 3 months at the SCYN emergency shelter, Sequoia was moved to the Beachfront Group Home, which is traditionally reserved for SCYN residents who are more stable, behave well, and are on track to complete high school. When Sequoia first arrived at Beachfront, she enjoyed the staff and the other residents. "The house was a lot of fun when I first came here. There was, you know more fun people in the house, more trannies. I don't know, but now I hate it here." Of the current residents at Beachfront, she is not the oldest but has been there the longest and thereby giving her the most seniority among the residents. Because she has been at Beachfront for such a long period, most of her friends or acquaintances have left, leaving her to feel more isolated within the house, "I mean yeah, it's lonely here now. I don't really talk to anyone here except some of the staff." When she is not at school or studying, she goes out and walks around Hollywood. During my observations at the group home, Sequoia was seldom present. When she was present, it usually signaled that something had changed in her routine.

Sequoia usually departed by 7:00 in the morning to make it to a life skills class at Santa Monica Community College (SMC). Her commute took anywhere from an hour to 90 minutes. She ends her classes around 4:00 p.m., but she stays at SMC to do

homework or just hang out at the beach. By the time she returns to Beachfront, it is close to 9:00 p.m., which means Sequoia usually misses the dinner that staff or volunteers prepare for the residents at 6:30 p.m. Her time on campus also allows her to miss out on any evening structured activities (generally various forms of group therapy) the staff members may have planned. This schedule reveals her preference for being away from Beachfront most of the day.

Sequoia only completed her sophomore year of high school before dropping out, in part due to her being homeless, and 2 days out of the week she goes to Opportunities For Learning (OFL) to take a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) prep class. OFL is a free public charter school with several locations in southern California that caters to students in Grades 7 to 12 who are academically behind on credits. Multiple SCYN residents have used the program to complete high school or their GED. When not at OFL, Sequoia takes adult life skills classes at SMC. Sequoia wants to move out of the group home and hopes the life skills course will help her be prepared for life on her own. Although she has not completed her GED, Sequoia has an idea of how her pathway to college will unfold. After earning her GED, she plans to go to SMC as a regular student, and then transfer to California State Dominguez Hills or to California State Northridge. She has not identified an academic major, but is thinking about Communication or English. Like Kevin, Sequoia had not met with anyone at SMC with regard to formally enrolling.

Over the course of her interviews, Sequoia reiterated that her primary motivation was escaping living in a group home and all the drama that goes along with it. "I just want to get this GED stuff done so I can move on and get out of here. I'm looking forward to getting an apartment and getting the fuck out of here." She plans to move into the SCYN's transitional living program when she turns 18 years old. For the most part, Sequoia misses the way the house used to be and the fun she had with the other residents. The staff turnover has also affected her feelings toward the group home as she misses some of the staff members, particularly Lauren, who was like an aunt to her. Sequoia also has some difficulty dealing with White staff members. While she does not indicate that they are racist or biased, she simply does not have a good rapport with them. SCYN provided Sequoia a White mentor (not a tutor), only to have this relationship fail. Sequoia said the two never got along, "I just didn't like her. She would tell lies about me. Like she would say that I didn't show up for a meeting and stuff, when I didn't have a meeting scheduled. I just didn't connect with her." Her new mentor, a woman of color, seems to be a better fit. "My new mentor is great. She's really supportive of me, like believing in myself. We just click." With regard to education, Sequoia's mentor encouraged her to work hard, but could not help her navigate any of her educational questions.

Sequoia is a creative person and played the violin as a child. Her mother also made her perform in dance competitions, but she gave up the violin and dance a long time ago. Today she frequently writes poetry, which she performs at the SCYN talent shows. She has also taken up singing, but she has no plans to become an entertainer as she merely views these talents as creative artistic outlets. During our last interview, she indicated that she was considering majoring in music or just trying to become a singer.

When I asked why she was pursuing a postsecondary education, Sequoia said that it was a way of getting away from SCYN. Her interests were not in going to college, but rather escaping what she perceived a toxic environment at her group home.

### *Thomas*

At 17 years old, Thomas left a broken home in Kansas City, Missouri, and moved to Los Angeles. He had some family in southern California, but they could not afford to take him into their home, so he moved into the SCYN emergency shelter before moving into the SCYN Adams Group Home. At 18 years old, Thomas got his own apartment with some of his friends, but unfortunately, the situation did not work out.

I had three other roommates. They were far from responsible. If you're one person that wants to get something done, living with three other people who don't really care; something about you, the way that you're going to be, is going to force you to not care. And I don't know if that's just something that I felt, or something that happened. Like, I still think if you're in a crowd of 99 people and they lean forward, then you're going to lean forward, too. That's my true belief.

At the time, Thomas had started attending Los Angeles Community College (LACC) but realized that his living situation was keeping him from realizing his goals. He dropped out not as a result of the problems he was experiencing at his apartment, but due to family trouble back in Kansas City. Thomas' grandmother, his brother, and his brother's girlfriend had all died in a house fire. Thomas spent a few weeks in Kansas City helping with the funeral arrangements. When he returned to LA, he had missed so much time he decided not to return to LACC. Although Thomas had every intention of returning to college, he once again was caught in a bad roommate situation.

Thomas moved into the SCYN transitional living program where his first roommate was Jenny, who had a drinking problem unbeknownst to him. He spent a lot of time working and covering for Jenny until she was sent to a rehabilitation center and Thomas was able to focus on what he wanted to do in the future.

I just figured out what I wanted to do. I want to get into real estate; just because I feel like by the time I get a bachelor's degree in real estate and actually get my license to sell in the state of California, I feel like it's about four or five years from now. They're trying to build up the real estate market now. Four or five years from now, it'll be easier to get a job. I already have people who want to hire me. I'm just going to keep following the path until I get to where I want to go.

One of Thomas' mentors owns a real estate business and has offered to hire him. As such, Thomas has decided to return to LACC, and then transfer to San Diego State University. Thomas has a plan and seems determined not to let anything deter him from attaining his goal. Thomas plans to attend school full-time and although SCYN wants youth in the independent living program to work during their stay, Thomas has received permission to attend school full-time.

Unlike other participants in the study, Thomas approaches everything as if it is a business deal. He weighs every action as an investment, and then calculates the probable return. If he finds the return to be profitable, then he will take action; if not he will let it go. Thomas comes off as unemotional compared with other participants, yet that would not be a fair assessment. Thomas still works to help take care of his mother although it is not always in his best interest. He tried to help Jenny when she was dealing with alcoholism. Furthermore, Thomas serves on the SCYN youth board, where he tries to represent all the youth in the independent living program. Thomas does not get much of a return for these actions, but he does them out of a sense of loyalty to his family, friends, and the organization that gave him a place to stay when he had none.

## Jenny

Jenny's father died in a car accident when she was 5 years old. The accident occurred at rush hour, which prevented the paramedics from reaching him before he bled to death. After her father's death, Jenny became fixated on obtaining a career in the medical field. Her pathway toward the medical field has been one long arduous journey.

Jenny was 16 years old when she arrived at SCYN and enrolled at Sunset High School and remained there for the next 2 years. Unlike other SCYN residents, Jenny never transferred to a group home, but spent the entire 2 years at the SCYN emergency shelter. Jenny described why she had an extended stay in the emergency shelter: "They told me it was supposed to be for three months at the most. I don't know. It seems like it's been turning into a group home or something." The SCYN staff tried to set up a case plan for Jenny to place her into a long-term group home, but when space became available, "I would just either reject it for whatever reason, and then SCYN said, 'Okay, stay here until you're 18.' It's pretty cool. I stayed there until I was 18."

Jenny took an industrious approach to completing high school. Each morning she just got up and went to school. Also, by going to school Jenny could escape the continuous talking and therapy the SCYN staff does with residents during the day; "I was like, 'see ya later. I've got school, so I can't stay.' All that game therapy stuff gets old after awhile." The routine and stability that high school provided was the perfect escape. School provided a setting where no one asked her what was wrong with her. She left SCYN after she graduated from high school and turned 18 and transferred to an independent living program called Step Up. New problems began, however, when Jenny moved to independent living.

On her own for the first time, Jenny had no idea how to take care of herself. Furthermore, her mother was in a bad relationship leading Jenny to feel she could not return home to live with her mother. During this time, a friend introduced her to alcohol and in time Jenny developed a drinking problem. As Jenny stated, "Drinking is my downfall." When Step Up closed, Jenny went to a rehabilitation facility. When she came out of rehabilitation, Jenny tried living with her mother, but it did not work due to Jenny's feelings about her stepfather.



And then after my stepdad came home, I went to the Covenant House. I can't live there. Man, he's ugly. It's hard to look at him every day. He's just a horrible person. He's just evil. He's not my dad, and that's what pisses me off. I think my mom was with him before my dad died, personally, but it was just too easy for her to get with him after my dad passed away.

After trying to live at home, Jenny went to the Covenant House Transitional Living Program where she stayed for about a year. Jenny heard that SCYN was starting an independent living program that would allow her to stay until the age of 24. As Jenny states, "They (SCYN) were telling us they needed someone to fill this spot before their grant money disappeared, so me and Thomas volunteered to be roommates. That was a disaster. Drinking is my downfall."

Jenny and Thomas moved in together and given that she was now 21, Jenny began to drink once again. "I was drinking nonstop. Like, every day I was passing out on the couch drunk. I was like, fuck it! I'm 21; I got my own apartment. Cool, I can drink!" Thomas kept Jenny's secret and covered for her, but after an inspection by an SCYN staff member the secret was out. Jenny recalls telling the staff member,

I've been drinking every day. I was still sad, so I just pick up a bottle and it makes me so happy. I think it was . . . I hadn't been on my own for quite some time, and even though I had a roommate, I was pretty much on my own. I was responsible for myself. I couldn't go back home. My mom couldn't protect me anymore. I guess it was just scary. I was by myself. And I drank a lot. It fixed things for a while, but that was only a facade, I guess. It wasn't real.

Jenny went to Alcoholics Anonymous, but it did not work out as well as she planned, saying,

They made me start going to meetings, and they made me bring back slips, but I just forged the slips and stayed home to drink. They found out that I really had a problem, so they sent me to rehab.

After her second visit to rehab, Jenny was told she would not be allowed back into the SCYN independent living program for 6 months, but she was allowed to return after only 2 months.

Jenny admits she still drinks, but she does not get drunk. Since coming back to the SCYN independent living program, Jenny has renewed her interest in medicine and is focused on becoming a paramedic. She trains at the local firehouse nearly every day and has plans to enroll at Los Angeles Valley Community College (LAVCC) in the spring, where they offer a program in fire technology. Jenny says the firefighters' give her tips on what courses and instructors to take at LAVCC. Working to be a paramedic has given Jenny a new goal and direction—something she lacked the first few times she lived on her own. For Jenny, postsecondary education was a pathway to a career and a way of having stability. Today, instead of floating through independent living programs, Jenny is focused on becoming a paramedic before she leaves the SCYN program.

## Where They Are Now

I conducted follow-up interviews with each of the participants to see which, if any, had completed a degree and what they were doing in their life. Participants were contacted through social media about their past participation in the study and about the possibility of doing follow-up interview. All participants agreed to take part in a 30-minute interview related to their life and postsecondary education.

### *Jenny*

Jenny enrolled at LAVCC in the spring semester of 2010, but did not complete the semester due to life circumstance. “Oh my God. Dude, my life was so crazy then, it’s like a dream. So, I got engaged like that March, we moved in together, and then got married in October.” The change in relationship status shifted Jenny’s focus from school to her future wedding. She stopped going to the firehouse and lost interest in becoming a paramedic. In 2011, the couple had their first child, a baby girl. Jenny is a stay at home mom and part-time Lyft driver. While her husband is employed full-time, the family qualifies for Section 8 housing assistance. Jenny is back in school taking online classes through Los Angeles Mission College in Family and Consumer Studies. She admits it’s a bit difficult taking care of their daughter and doing school, but she wants a job supporting families and children in foster care.

### *Thomas*

Thomas did not complete any of his general classes at LACC. In a follow-up conversation, he said, “I’m mean I enrolled, but life got crazy as it always does. So, I dropped out again.” Part of the chaos was related to a relationship that went sour after the initial interviews were completed. “So, I’m gay. You never asked directly, so I never said anything about it. At the time some of the staff knew and Jenny knew, maybe a couple other people.” Thomas admitted that his sexual orientation was part of the reason he left home. He also said that at the time of the interviews he was trying to maintain his relationship with his partner and that was a more important than going to school. Thomas did go back to school. In 2013, he enrolled online at Colorado Technical University (a for-profit institution) and received an associates in business administration and marketing. When I asked why he chose a for-profit over a local community college he said, “I just felt like I would get distracted at LACC or somewhere close. Also, why am I going to pay money to go online to go someplace down the street?” It cost him US\$8,000 more to attend the for-profit school than to enroll at LACC. Thomas felt that the degree from the for-profit was the best fit for what he wanted and outweighed the additional cost in tuition. He did take out a loan to complete the degree and admits that the loan repayment is one of his major monthly bills. “I look at it like an investment. It cost more, but I’ll hopefully be able to get a job in management and make a lot more money.” Thomas works as an assistant manager at a Los Angeles convenient store. He hopes to move into store management and then into the corporate side of company.

## *Sequoia*

When the initial interview project was completed, Sequoia had not completed her GED and was taking life skills classes at SMC. Today, Sequoia has completed her GED and an associate's degree from SMC. Shortly after completing the interviews, Sequoia left SCYN and moved to the Santa Monica Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) where she stayed while completing her GED and starting community college. She said the change was good for her, "I just wasn't doing anything there (SCYN). I wasn't motivated. Going to the YWCA was great for me." Sequoia received more support and validation related to education at the YWCA. She said, "they helped understated what I needed to do, and who I needed to talk with like advisers and faculty. I didn't know any of that before." The follow-up interview with Sequoia revealed some of the unique challenges homeless student experience. She said, "People take for granted how much their parents taught them or do for them. I had to learn it on my own. I had to find encouragement and support 'cause my family wasn't there for me." Once a stable support system was in place, Sequoia flourished. Sequoia now works as a peer advocate, providing support to youth awaiting foster care placement in Los Angeles County.

## *Kevin*

Two and a half years after he enrolled at SMC, Kevin transferred to California State University Long Beach where he studied dance and got involved with a dance and theater group on campus. They performed an original choreographed work at the art center. Kevin credits the group experience with helping him see dance as a degree option and provided direction on whom he should talk to about transferring. He said, "It was cool, like many of the students in the group where in the dance class I took and the instructor kept encouraging us to perform. So my interest just sort of grew from that experience." Kevin moved out of the group home and into a transitional living program. While there, he worked with SCYN staff and SMC advisors on a plan to transfer to a 4-year university. In addition to creating a plan, Kevin also did a lot of personal maturing.

I grew up a lot. I stopped acting up and stuff. I think knowing I had to do it on my own was big. I mean as an adult you got to know what to do or where to be on your own.

Kevin used the support he had inside and outside of school to help him transfer and eventually graduate from college. Kevin now works at a performing art center, blending urban and formal forms of dancing.

## **Findings**

What might be learned from the narratives of homeless youth and their experiences in community college? Based on the narratives, I offer three findings related to Research

Question 1. First, homeless students in community college still comprise a largely invisible population. None of the institutions that participants in this study attended tracked the enrollment of homeless students. For many of the participants, invisibility was beneficial; they could attend class and not feel stigmatized because of their living situation. Being able to blend in with other students helped to relieve some of the stressors of homelessness. Invisibility on campus also allowed the participants a space to explore their own identities and interests. Living in a shelter or group home is a life of constant therapy. Staff members at SCYN and social workers are always checking in on the residents. Although these practices are done with the best intentions, residents complained of feeling like someone is trying to figure out what is wrong with them. When on campus, they are free from that questioning. Sequoia, for example, spends additional time on campus to avoid group home life. Other participants, like Kevin, enjoyed the freedom that came with being on campus. He could go to class, hang out with friends, or go to the beach and feel like he was in charge of his own schedule. The downside of invisibility is that when homeless students do need assistance (e.g., usually pertaining to financial aid) they do not have a clear place or person they can contact. While university staff members are knowledgeable, policies related to homeless students are not something all staff members are well versed in.

A second finding from the narratives is that homeless students seek certain types of support in relation to postsecondary education. In all of the narratives, the participants did not seek out institutional resources. While some participants had clear personal or occupational reasons for wanting a postsecondary degree, there seemed to be a reluctance to go ask a college advisor or instructor for help. For example, Jenny had a clear vision of why college is important to her and her future; she sought out individuals who would support her higher education aspirations, but never went to an academic counselor at LAVCC. Furthermore, Kevin, Thomas, and Sequoia also did not seek institutional support. While Kevin and Sequoia are both enrolled in community college, neither was taking courses that would help them should they decide to transfer to a 4-year institution although both state that is their goal. For example, Kevin did not speak with a counselor when selecting courses for the spring. The result was that he ended up taking a ballet course, an acting course, and an English class. When I asked why he made those choices, Kevin said, "I don't know acting just seemed like fun. My mentor made me take English, I like to dance so I took ballet, and there are girls there." The pattern of help seeking in this study suggests that homeless students are either unaware of the support they can receive on campus or do not view the institution as a supportive structure.

The final finding from the narratives is that these students are using postsecondary education to provide a type of stability in their lives. Given that homelessness is the experience of instability in housing and family structures, it is possible that many of the participants attended community college because it was a safe and dependable structure. Community college campuses serve as sources of institutional stability and provide opportunities for homeless students to build resilience. Once on campus, homeless students can build supportive relationships with peers, faculty, and staff and can access institutional resources that might create a more stable future. Finally,

homeless students can engage in curricular and cocurricular opportunities that allow them to further develop their capacity for resilience.

In relation to the second research question, I suggest two areas that community colleges could expand to be more supportive of homeless students. First, create programs designed to support the specific academic, psychosocial, and mental health needs of highly mobile and homeless students. In addition, these programs should also do outreach to local nonprofits that work with homeless individuals. The narratives presented in this study reinforce that the role of institutional and individual support is crucial in promoting resilience in community college. Homeless and highly mobile students are often unfamiliar with or mistrusting of on campus support structures. The information they receive about college is, generally, filtered through a caseworker, mentor, or employee at a group home, so it is important to network into that structure. Homeless students require someone on both ends to help them transition to college, especially as many homeless adolescents are estranged from their families and cannot go to them for any type of support.

Second, beyond creating a student support and outreach program, community colleges should incorporate homeless students into existing institutional-level efforts to improve academic success. The use of summer bridge programs and other student success programs are vital to helping the homeless thrive in their transition to college. It remains, however, to be seen if academic success programs will be inclusive of students from residentially unstable backgrounds. Many of the participants at SCYN were working with Educational Opportunity Programs (EOP) at various institutions. EOP was crucial in helping the homeless youth in this study gain access to college. Summer bridge programs also helped the adjustment to college for participants in this study. Multiple forms of institutional and personal support that helps students foster resilience would be useful in meeting the diverse challenges of community college life.

What do these narratives mean for community college researchers? Theoretically, the narratives direct researchers in higher education to broaden our theoretical toolkit. Resilience theory provided a different interpretation of the data than social or cultural capital theory. Resilience allows the researcher to examine the role of agency in the ways that low-income students respond to difficult situations. This is not to say that all studies of homeless or highly mobile students will or should work from a resilience framework; however, with certain populations, the framework is appropriate. Resilience can be found in each of the narratives and the unique, successful, or unsuccessful attempts to complete a postsecondary degree. Furthermore, there is a need to know more about the ways in which resilience helps students through their postsecondary career. At the individual level, what the participants needed was a means of developing their capacity to not only cope with stress and trauma but also to lead productive emotionally stable lives. In this study, I included the students' experiences with homelessness and postsecondary education to illustrate the various types of agency (reproductive or transformative) they displayed. One surprise from the study was that the transformative agency took place after the initial interviews were completed; thus, future research should consider longitudinal qualitative study of homeless or housing vulnerable students.

This study helps to contextualize the experiences of marginalized students in higher and postsecondary education. As such, this study has the potential to open a broader scholarly conversation regarding homeless students in community college. The conclusions and limitations of this study point to a broad constellation of research that would be of intellectual and practical benefit to the field. First, there is a need for more work on institutional support for homeless youth. A stream of case study research on exemplary practices at various institutions would be of great use to scholars and professionals of practice. Next, there is a need to understand the role of state-level educational policy related to homeless students and higher education. In addition, there is a need for increased conceptual diversity in the study of homeless and highly mobile students. Strengths based frameworks recognize the assets that homeless students have, but future work should incorporate postmodernist frameworks and multiple critical theory frameworks (e.g., critical race theory, intersectionality, and queer theory). Including these conceptual frameworks would help to disrupt systems of privilege and inequity that continue to marginalize homeless students in higher education.

In relation to practice, the narratives suggest that community colleges need to develop systems for identifying and supporting homeless students. Although many of the campuses in this study served as unintentional forms of support and sources of resilience, more needs to be done to create tangible and accessible supportive service for homeless and housing vulnerable students. The creation of a homeless student support and outreach coordinator would go a long way in beginning to build transparent support structures on campus. Next, community colleges should consider faculty and staff trainings on how to incorporate a strength-based perspective into the curriculum and campus culture. Creating a campus climate built around the assets and abilities that students have will help community college campuses become intentional spaces for promoting resilience.

## Conclusion

My intent in this article has not been to answer all the questions related to the ways in which homeless students make meaning out of their higher and postsecondary experience. My goal here has been to open an initial foray into the topic, in the hope of sparking more scholarly research in multiple areas of higher education. It is not by accident that many homeless students enroll in community colleges. Community colleges are more flexible, accessible, and affordable than 4-year or for-profit institutions. Still the question remains, “How do we in higher education best support homeless students if we know little or nothing about their experiences?” Thus, I offer these narratives as just a small part of a broader research agenda on improving access and persistence in higher education for homeless students.

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