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# Preparing Students Experiencing Homelessness for College: Considerations for Counselors and Other Supportive Personnel

Stacey A. Havlik

Villanova University, [stacey.havlik@villanova.edu](mailto:stacey.havlik@villanova.edu)

Carrie Sanders

Virginia Polytechnic Institute, [cbrill@vt.edu](mailto:cbrill@vt.edu)

Emma Wilson

Villanova University, [ewilso22@villanova.edu](mailto:ewilso22@villanova.edu)

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# Preparing Students Experiencing Homelessness for College: Considerations for Counselors and Other Supportive Personnel



Authored by  
Stacey A. Havlik (Villanova University)  
Carrie B. Sanders (Virginia Tech University)  
Emma Wilson (Valley Forge Military Academy)

## ABSTRACT

This article describes the unique college and career preparation challenges faced by students experiencing homelessness (SEH), framed using a Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) lens. The experience of homelessness presents barriers for secondary students, which can impact their college self-efficacy, outcome expectations of attending and succeeding in college, and goal setting towards college. In this conceptual paper, background on homelessness and research related to the college planning process of SEH is provided, as well as implications for school and career counselors, as well as other educators.

**A**cross the United States, during the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school years, 34 states saw increased numbers of students experiencing homelessness (SEH) (National Center for Homeless Education [NCHE], 2016). Moreover, during the 2014-2015 school year, over 1.2 million students who were identified as homeless were enrolled in schools (NCHE, 2016). These numbers included over 300,000 ninth through twelfth grade students experiencing homelessness (NCHE, 2016). The federal definition of “homeless children and youths,” as defined under section 725(2) of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act includes children and youths experiencing homelessness who share housing with others due to a loss of housing, those living in hotels, motels, or

trailer parks (due to a lack of other accommodations), and those individuals living in transitional or emergency shelters or places that are not meant to accommodate human beings (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The vast majority of SEH are reportedly either living in shelters (14%) or doubled-up with other families (76%) (NCHE, 2016).

SEH can face challenges that include malnutrition, insufficient health care, social isolation, and an absence of parental support (Murphy & Tobin, 2011). Youths experiencing homelessness may also exhibit increased levels of depression and anxiety (Aviles & Helfrich, 2004; Baggerly & Borkowski, 2004). Further, they move frequently and lack records necessary to enroll in school, such as birth certificates, immunization records, or proof of residency (Dukes, Lee, & Bowman, 2013; United States Department of Education, 2016). Moreover, SEH may not have reliable transportation, which can force them to drop out of school if they are unable to attend required programming, such as night school to make-up for missing class time (Ausikaitis et al., 2015). Ultimately, the challenges related to homelessness can impact students’ academic achievement, as evidenced by only 24.7% of SEH receiving proficient scores in



## Students Experiencing Homelessness

math and 30% in reading during the 2014-2015 school year (NCHE, 2016).

This, in turn, may lead SEH to face considerable challenges in preparing for and applying to college. Because many SEH are often low-income first-generation college students, applying to college can be a complicated experience (Dukes et al. 2013). Homelessness and related factors may hinder students' understanding of the college planning and admissions process and general college experience, as well as their knowledge of financial aid and support systems (Dukes et al., 2013; United States Department of Education, 2016). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to describe the college and career planning issues related to secondary SEH, framed using a Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) lens, in order to provide timely discourse for counselors and other professionals who work to improve college access for underserved populations like SEH.

### **The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act**

Understanding homelessness and education requires foundational knowledge of the Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program (EHCY). EHCY falls under Title VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. 11431 et seq.) and addresses the issues that pre-K through high school SEH face in "enrolling, attending, and succeeding" in school. According to the McKinney-Vento Act, states are required to have an office that coordinates homeless

education, which includes a state coordinator and local liaison who collect data on SEH and ensure EHCY is being properly implemented. Under McKinney-Vento, there is also grant funding available for programs that support SEH and states are required to have a plan to address the barriers faced by SEH in their education. When the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act was reauthorized in 2015, under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), it included the role of educational agencies in ensuring that SEH are college and career ready (United States Department of Education, 2016). Local liaisons are responsible for verifying the students who identify as homeless and unaccompanied to determine if they qualify for independent student status under the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Moreover, section 722(g)(1)(K) of McKinney-Vento specifically calls upon liaisons, counselors, and school staff to "ensure that all homeless high school students receive information and individualized counseling regarding college readiness, college selection, the application process, financial aid, and the availability of on-campus supports" (United States Department of Education, 2016, p. 50).

### **College and Career Planning for SEH**

The experience of homelessness may impact students' college access and enrollment, as well as their ability to successfully complete school (Emerson, Duffield, Salazar, & Unrau, 2012). Due to the nature of homelessness, students may lack a role model or mentor in their family or peer group who has been

## Students Experiencing Homelessness

successful in college who can guide them through the process (Dukes et al., 2013). Without such support, they may find it challenging to determine a major, or navigate their college and career decision-making. Further, SEH who want to go to college face (a) a lack of information tailored to their needs; (b) challenges completing the FAFSA forms; (c) limited funding for application fees, tuition, and housing deposits, and; (d) college support staff who lack knowledge on homelessness (Emerson et al., 2012). When SEH enter college, they may also struggle to maintain responsibilities because they have to work and/or may lack necessary support systems to attend to their unique needs (National Center for Homeless Education, 2012).

### Social Cognitive Career Theory

SCCT offers a framework for understanding the interaction between individuals and the environment and its influence on an individual's career development (Lent & Brown, 2006; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000). The four constructs of SCCT include: (a) self-efficacy, (b) outcome expectations, (c) goal setting, and (d) contextual supports and barriers (Lent et al., 1994; Lent & Brown, 1996; Lent & Brown, 2006). Self-efficacy is described as the degree to which an individual expects to be successful at performing a task (e.g. Can I be successful in college?) (Bandura, 1986; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Lent et al., 1994). Outcome expectations refer to the predicted outcome of an event or interaction (e.g. If I go to college, I will not graduate.) (Bandura, 1986; Lent et al.,

1994). The third construct, personal goals and goal setting, refers to plans to accomplish certain tasks within a given amount of time (e.g. college and career goals and choices) (Lent et al., 1994). Finally, contextual supports and barriers includes the environment where an individual resides and its influence on them (e.g. educational factors or family influence) (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000).

The central constructs of SCCT offer a framework and provide context to illuminate the purpose of the theory and the direction of this article. The interaction among people, their behavior, and their environment provides a highly dynamic relationship. Performance in educational activities is the result of ability, self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and established goals.

### Social Cognitive Career Theory and SEH

Secondary students experiencing homelessness face challenges across each of the four SCCT constructs in their college and career development. Each element is deconstructed below, with a description of how it might be impacted by the experience of homelessness for secondary students. Beginning with their self-efficacy, the challenges that students experiencing homelessness face may hinder their their career and post-secondary preparation and planning.

**Self-efficacy.** *Self-efficacy* is an individual's belief in their ability to perform a task in a certain situation (Eccles and Wigfield, 2002). Self-efficacy is the first of the four constructs

## Students Experiencing Homelessness

that was conceptualized by Bandura (1986, 1997). The ongoing interaction among a person, the individual's behavior, and the environment indicates that self-efficacy impacts the other constructs of SCCT. Self-efficacy can be related to college and career planning and outcomes. For instance, Wright, Jenkins-Guarnieri, and Murdock (2012) found that in a sample of 401 undergraduate students, those with higher levels of college self-efficacy were more likely to persist. Moreover, self-efficacy has been found to have a positive relationship with academic expectations and performance for first year college students (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001). Further, Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli (2001) found that socioeconomic status (SES) is linked to self-efficacy, with parents from higher SES backgrounds tending to have higher aspirations for their children, which in turn, indirectly influences the type of careers in which children express interest.

Although the research on self-efficacy and SEH is sparse (Maccio & Schuler, 2012), and virtually non-existent related to college development, there is indication that higher levels of self-efficacy may positively impact SEH. For instance, Bender, Ferguson, Thompson, and Komlo (2010), found a relationship between SEH with higher levels of self-efficacy and lower instances of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In adults experiencing homelessness, higher levels of self-efficacy were related to shortened stays in the shelter and increased searching for new housing (Epel, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 1999).

Moreover, in another study investigating young women experiencing homelessness, those with higher levels of self-efficacy perceived themselves as more successful in comparison to those with lower levels (Christian & Clapham, 2010). Additionally, higher levels of self-esteem, a factor that correlates with self-efficacy (Maccio & Schuler, 2012), may offset the sense of loneliness experienced by SEH (Kidd & Shahar, 2008).

Thus, self-efficacy may be an important factor that could influence the post-secondary trajectory of SEH. Because of the barriers faced by SEH, it may be more challenging to view themselves as capable of success. Perhaps, SEH who are able to visualize themselves overcoming their barriers and succeeding in school may be more apt to do so.

**Outcome expectations.** The second construct, *outcome expectations*, is described as the way individuals believe or expect a certain circumstance will turn out for them (Lent et al., 2000). These individual expectations may have a direct effect on the way individuals perceive their personal goals. Thus, those who feel that they can make contributions to bring about desired change and see a stronger connection between their actions and future consequences show stronger commitments to the pursuit of their desired futures (Bandura, 1997; Epel et al., 1999). For students planning for college, if they can envision the outcome that they will be successful, then perhaps,

## Students Experiencing Homelessness

they will be more committed to attending and succeeding in college.

SEH may have lower outcome expectations than their peers with consistent housing because of the barriers they face in achieving post-secondary success. For example, since many SEH are first-generation college goers and, therefore, may not be exposed to others who have graduated from college, it may be difficult for them to picture their own outcomes of attending or succeeding at a university (Dukes et al., 2013). First-generation students may have faulty expectations for their career and college outcomes and have trouble envisioning what their future experiences may look like without having seen or heard from others about the experience (Olsen, 2014). For some first-generation students from lower income backgrounds, their socioeconomic status may be seen as potentially leading them to negative outcomes (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004).

In this regard, educational and occupational aspirations may be lower for SEH, as indicated by Rafferty, Shinn, and Weitzman (2004) who found that 85% adolescents who were formerly homeless compared to 96% of students who never experienced homelessness planned to pursue educational training beyond high school. Moreover, outcome expectations may be greatly affected by a time perspective, which is the individual's construction of personal experiences into a past, present, or future orientation (Epel et al., 1999). Having a future

orientation, where one is looking ahead to future outcomes, is related to high academic achievement, career decision-making, and higher socioeconomic status (Epel et al., 1999). Conversely, having a present orientation, which is necessary in acute crisis, to focus on meeting basic needs, is related to juvenile delinquency and lower SES (Epel et al., 1999). For SEH, they may be focused primarily on the present and meeting their basic needs, such as food, clothing, and shelter, and less inclined to envision their future career outcomes.

SEH may, therefore, have trouble seeing themselves as capable of attending and completing college. Early on in their academic career, they may not see college as an end outcome because it is difficult for them to picture and understand what that might look like. They may also be too focused on getting their basic needs met in the present to plan for college in their future.

**Goal-setting.** *Goal setting* is establishing a desired outcome within the context of time. Individuals aim to complete various identified goals within an hour, day, week, month, etc. Social Cognitive Theory suggests that goals, with conditional requirements, enhance motivation (Bandura, 1986). When individuals participate in and are informed of their progress toward a goal, they experience momentum and some will be motivated to develop personal goals spontaneously (Bandura, 1986). When an individual identifies a personal, social, academic, or career goal, they may consider both short term and longer term goals. Research

## Students Experiencing Homelessness

indicates that setting social and academic achievement goals positively impacts student outcomes in secondary settings (Liem, 2016). Setting goals during college has been shown to enhance academic performance for undergraduate students (Morisano et al., 2010). Developing clear goals enhances enthusiasm toward achievement, persistence in the direction of the goal, and performance on tasks related to the goal (Morisano, Hirsh, Peterson, Pihl, & Shore, 2010). Further, having increased self-efficacy enhances individuals' commitment to their goals (Locke & Latham, 2002). For those individuals experiencing homelessness, their self-efficacy may be hindered by their housing status (Christian & Clapham, 2010) and therefore, their commitment to their goals could be limited.

Oliveira and Burke (2009) found that homeless youths set unrealistic goals for their career plans that are more aligned with their peers with consistent housing, who may not face similar barriers. SEH may face barriers in setting meaningful goals related to their college and career planning because they are forced to focus on meeting their basic needs first (Havlik et al., 2014). Therefore, they may spend limited time considering their higher-level educational goals, as this is not a priority. Setting goals during college has been shown to enhance academic performance for undergraduate students (Morisano et al., 2010), but when goals are too broad or general, students may find it more difficult to focus on achieving them (Mott, 2015).

Perhaps, if students express the desire to escape a homeless situation, or want to go to college and have a successful career, but have little or no additional support or specific direction to get there, it may be more difficult to reach their goals. Further, since goal setting may impact development, learning to set goals at the secondary level may be particularly important. Teaching SEH to set realistic and timely goals may set them up for increased success.

**Contextual supports and barriers.** The final construct, *contextual supports and barriers*, impacts an individual's self-efficacy and enhances or restrains personal agency. Contextual supports and barriers can be objective or perceived in relation to making and implementing career choices. Lent, Brown, & Hackett (2000) suggest that while using a SCCT lens, it is advantageous to differentiate between the contextual and the intrapersonal factors that impact self-efficacy. Specifically, according to SCCT, the environment where an individual resides influences their career development (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000). Thus, individuals can face contextual barriers that are environmental (e.g. housing loss) or intrapersonal (e.g. self-concept), which have the potential to positively or negatively impact a student's trajectory and ultimate outcomes (Lent et al., 2000).

The clearest environmental barrier faced by SEH is their loss of housing. Because SEH are often transitioning between various places of residence (Hicks-Coolick, Burnside-Eaton, &

## Students Experiencing Homelessness

Peters, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2004), they are more likely to miss school than students from low-income families (Rafferty et al., 2004). This lack of stability impedes SEH from developing supportive relationships with their peers and adults (Baggerly & Borkowski, 2004), a protective factor that promotes academic resilience (Masten, Cutuli, Herbers, & Reed, 2009). Further, SEH, particularly those who are unaccompanied, may have to take on jobs to support themselves and struggle with balancing their work, while trying to meet their own basic needs without parental or adult guidance supporting them (Ausikaitis et al., 2015; NCHE, 2012). All of these challenges may lead SEH to struggle in the educational environment.

There is also evidence that higher levels of social capital (i.e. increased family resources, higher levels of college attainment, parents with higher expectations of their children attending college, etc.) is positively related to four year college attendance for high school students (Sandefur, Meier, & Campbell, 2006). For SEH whose family systems often lack this support, they may be disadvantaged compared to their peers when it comes to college planning. SEH often lack adults who can model how to attend and succeed in college and careers, making the experience foreign and intimidating to them (NCHE, 2015). Applying for college can present a barrier in itself. SEH may have difficulty understanding and completing financial aid forms, face barriers accessing programs that enhance college admission, and have trouble

locating full-time housing on campus over breaks (Duffield, Heybach, & Julianelle, 2009; NCHE, 2012).

With all of the above environmental barriers, SEH may internally feel they are not ready to go to college and may not see themselves as successful. If SEH have increased support within their home and school environments, they may feel more inclined to apply for and enter college. However, those who are faced with additional challenges that make it difficult for them to be successful in high school, may not be as inclined to consider college as an option.

### Discussion

SEH are impacted in their college and career planning across all four constructs of SCCT: (a) self-efficacy, (b) outcome expectations, (c) goal setting, and (d) contextual supports and barriers (Lent et al., 1994; Lent & Brown, 1996; Lent & Brown, 2006). In their self-efficacy, or their expectations of how well they will perform on a task (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002), SEH may not see college as attainable if school has not been a priority, they have had limited exposure to college, or they have previously struggled academically. In terms of their outcomes expectations, or the predicted results of an event (Lent et al., 1994), SEH may not picture themselves graduating from high school or college because of tangible barriers such as financial aid or lack of mentors. Personal goals and goal setting, or plans to accomplish a task (Bandura, 1986) may also be hindered by the experience of homelessness. It may be

## Students Experiencing Homelessness

difficult for SEH to set future-focused personal goals, when basic needs, such as food, clothing, and shelter often take precedence. Lastly, SEH, face clear contextual barriers, such as a lack of housing, absence of role models who have attended college, and limited exposure to college. All of these factors can contribute to the postsecondary planning of SEH.

Educators and school counselors can nurture self-efficacy and outcomes expectations for SEH, as well as promote efforts to remove the barriers students face to set goals and ensure they are prepared for success after high school. In terms of self-efficacy, high school counselors can send the message to all students, but particularly those experiencing homelessness, that they are capable of going to college. By exposing students to college, through bringing them on college visits, requiring them to visit with college representatives at the school, and providing college information at shelters or community organizations where families who are homeless reside, this can help students and parents view college as an option (Dukes et al., 2013). Since research has indicated that parental beliefs about their child's efficacy can influence children's achievement and ultimately their career plans (Bandura et al., 2001), it is critical that when preparing SEH to go to college, that counselors and other educators work directly with parents to help them understand college planning and attendance (Bryan, Griffin, & Henry, 2013). To further enhance outcomes expectations, it is critical that SEH are exposed to a "college-

going culture" which includes providing consistent messages encouraging college-going, having the expectation that all students at the school will attend college and can be successful there, and providing resources (e.g. scholarship information, information about fee waivers, study preparation materials, etc.) to all students that focus on college and career readiness (Jones, Bensimon, McNair, & Dowd, 2011; Hatch, 2013). A college-going culture will influence the self-efficacy and outcome expectations for SEH because they will see college as accessible and a realistic option. This culture can be cultivated by forming university and school partnerships where students learn more about a local university and can interact with undergraduate or graduate students in a variety of forms (Popp, 2000). When appropriate, schools can also expose SEH to post-secondary options beyond four-year institutions, including community colleges, military options, or professional training programs.

In order to ensure that SEH graduate high school with realistic options where they can be successful and overcome their current circumstances, students' perceived and objective contextual barriers must be addressed. For SEH who are first-generation, they face additional challenges related to the SCCT constructs. First-generation students may have no one else in their family to support them in seeing college as a viable option (Olsen, 2014). They may also not understand financial aid processes and therefore dismiss college as accessible to them

## Students Experiencing Homelessness

(Dukes et al., 2013). One way to provide this information is to have material specific to SEH on school websites. Unfortunately, research indicates that many school counseling websites, which are often key places for parents and students to access information about college are lacking information specific to students who are homeless, such as fee waivers for college applications or for ACT or SAT tests, with very few having information posted about accessing food or clothing (Kennedy & Baker, 2015). By including this type of information, families and students can discreetly gain knowledge on how to overcome some of the contextual barriers they face and gain increased self-efficacy through a deeper understanding of what is available to them. Beyond the websites, counselors should educate parents and students experiencing homelessness on the availability of fee waivers and encourage students to apply (Dukes et al., 2013).

School and career counselors must also help SEH to set goals, select challenging courses, develop four-year academic plans that integrate college planning, and engage with other support systems, such as community-based organizations (Brown, 2013). Additionally, because tutoring programs have been shown to be effective with SEH (Grothaus, Lorelle, Anderson, & Knight, 2011), schools should encourage students to participate in them in effort to address any gaps in achievement they may face. They can also engage students in activities that can

positively impact their outcomes expectations, such as summer enrichment programs (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). Increasing self-efficacy of individuals experiencing homelessness while teaching cognitive skills related to a future orientation, including flexible short-term goal setting, may promote a more future oriented outlook (Epel et al., 1999). Further, SEH can be connected to federally funded TRiO programs to support the transition for middle and high school students to college (Duffield et al., 2009).

To ensure that SEH get the supportive services they need to enhance their college outcomes and guarantee that they have the supports necessary under McKinney-Vento (e.g. transportation), it is critical that they are identified early (Havlik, 2017). This begins by educating all staff members in a school on the various definitions of homelessness by hanging up flyers, sending out email to staff and teachers, and providing trainings (NCHE, 2012). Students who are identified as homeless and unaccompanied may qualify for independent student status on the FAFSA form. This means that they may have access to better financial aid packages, which could include grants or low interest loans (Duffield et al., 2009; NCHE, 2012). School counselors should also regularly review the McKinney-Vento guidelines by following updates through the National Center for Homeless Education (<https://nche.ed.gov/>) so that they keep abreast on policies related to homelessness and education.

## Students Experiencing Homelessness

Although this article focuses on the college and career preparation for SEH, school counselors and other support personnel tend to focus more on supporting the basic needs for SEH because they often take precedence over other needs (Havlik, Neason, Puckett, Rowley, & Wilson, 2017). To address this concern, it is important for schools to define the roles of school personnel who support SEH. For instance, school social workers and homeless liaisons may be the most adept to support the basic needs of SEH, leaving school and career counselors more time to support other needs such as emotional/social or college and career development.

Colleges also have a major role in ensuring that students experiencing homelessness transition smoothly to college and are retained through graduation. Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, and Hernandez (2017) recommend that colleges prepare for students who may continue to face homelessness or hunger when they arrive at the university. They suggest that universities identify a community leader who can assess how to address students' basic needs in the area and that they provide a point of contact at the university for students who are housing or food insecure who they can turn to for support. Additionally, Goldrick-Rab et al. (2017) recommends that universities have accessible housing for students in low or moderate-income brackets and have programs available such as on-campus food pantries.

Ensuring that SEH are supported in their college and career planning, development, and transition is an important role of educational professionals serving this vulnerable population. With targeted support and being attuned to SEH's needs, they can increase their self-efficacy and realize positive post-secondary outcomes. School and college counselors, as well as teachers and administrators play critical roles in providing supportive services, and forming partnerships to help remove the contextual barriers SEH face. Table 1 (see page 16) provides an overview of suggested actions for school personnel supporting the college preparation for students experiencing homelessness.

### Conclusion and Future Research

Students experiencing homelessness face challenges in their college and career preparation and development. These challenges impede students from having equitable access to the same college and career information and resources as their peers. Based on the constructs of Social Cognitive Career Theory, homelessness and the contextual barriers students face, impact their self-efficacy beliefs, which, in turn, influences their outcome expectations and personal goal setting. School personnel can support the unique college and career preparation needs of SEH by engaging them in college and career counseling, helping them to set and assess personal college and career planning goals, providing information for students and their families, and developing a college-going culture in the school. This all begins by building

## Students Experiencing Homelessness

relationships with students. By developing meaningful relationships and helping students to identify and utilize their personal strengths, school personnel can offer support and encouragement to students. There may be challenges for school personnel to ensure that SEH are equipped with the information and resources they and their families need.

However, through having awareness of the needs of SEH and by offering on-going assistance and support, school personnel have the potential to discuss feasible post-secondary options with SEH. Once equipped with information, students have the potential to utilize their knowledge and supportive mentors to positively impact their college and career trajectory. Although basic needs often tend to be pressing, it is critical that school personnel take a future orientation when working with SEH and engage in interventions that will support their success after they graduate.

Since this is a topic that has been relatively unexplored, there are a plethora of directions for future research. First, research could focus on how school counselors are meeting the new McKinney-Vento requirements related to college and career planning for SEH. Studies are also needed that explore the experiences of the students themselves and their college preparation and transition. Lastly, studies on the impact of college readiness programs on SEH are necessary to determine their effectiveness. 

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## Students Experiencing Homelessness

Table 1  
College Preparation for Students Experiencing Homelessness

Overview of Suggested Actions	
Collaborative Approaches	Provide a system of support. School psychologists, social workers, counselors, teachers, etc. can all have a role in providing college preparation support for students experiencing homelessness. Clearly define each role at the onset of every school year.
College Information	Provide college information in accessible locations for all parents. For examples, go to shelters to provide college workshops or provide college information nights in community centers that are accessible to families.
College-Going Culture	Expose students to college. Bring in representatives from a wide range of universities. Provide students with questions to ask the representatives. Have students visit university settings and speak to current students. Assume all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status are capable of going to college.
Financial Aid Advisement	<p>Provide information on financial aid for low-income and students experiencing homelessness on the school website (e.g. fee waivers, FAFSA, etc.). Identify students who are homeless and unaccompanied so they can qualify for independent student status on the FAFSA.</p> <p>Educate students about the options of fee waivers. Form relationships with admissions representatives to request fee waivers when needed.</p>
Goal-Setting	Teach students how to set realistic goals related to college. Review and update these goals regularly.
Mentorship	Coordinate college mentorship programs for students, particularly for first-generation students who have not been widely exposed to other college goers.
Tailored Career and College Counseling	When advising students, identify universities with break housing and accessible food. Discuss the college transition process and what to expect. Provide tailored post-secondary advisement that includes community college, military options, and professional training programs when it fits students' interests.

## Students Experiencing Homelessness

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