On move in day, many students come to college excited to be leaving their parents for the school year after a summer at home. However, a select group of students move in and feel relieved to have a permanent bed for the next ten months. These are feelings had by students who are experiencing homelessness. Students who are homeless might have spent the summer sleeping on friends’ couches or bouncing to and from relatives’ houses due to the lack of a permanent place to stay during the summer months (Field, 2017). On some campuses, they might also worry about where to go during fall, winter, and spring breaks because their university closes all residence halls, or the break housing offered is not affordable and/or is not covered by their financial aid (Field, 2015). Keeping residence halls open over breaks is a financial burden for some campuses due to the increase in resources expended, but students who are homeless may have no other alternative place to go (Hallett, 2010). Financially, students experiencing homelessness “often struggle to get the full amount of financial aid needed to cover the entire postsecondary experience, such as textbooks and living expenses,” making break housing an unwelcome burden on homeless students’ already tight budgets (Klitzman, 2018). Affordable and available break housing is an issue in student affairs, particularly in residential life, due to the conflict between the financial burden placed on residence life departments and the need for break housing for students experiencing homelessness.

Students who are homeless often have no other options to turn to during campus breaks, particularly summer (Mehrotra, 2014). Homeless students are an “invisible population on many campuses,” and many suffer from “feelings of self-doubt and imposter-syndrome” during their time in college (Field, 2017, p.1). This can often cause their academic performance to suffer as a result of anxiety and lack of a permanent housing solution (Field, 2017). Having access to break housing will alleviate these feelings for many homeless students and give them the freedom to focus on other topics, such as their classwork and extracurricular activities (Mehrotra, 2014). For students who are dealing with homelessness, “it can be exceedingly difficult to stay in school and thus break the cycle of poverty,” which could lead to a homeless student not living up to their academic potential in college or dropping out of school all together (Harris, 2017, p.1).

According to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, one of the most basic humans needs for survival is shelter, with the need for safety coming soon afterwards (Maslow, 1943). In order to move up in Maslow’s Hierarchy to higher stages that include needs like emotional support, friendship, and self-esteem, basic physiological needs like shelter and safety must be met first (Maslow, 1943). Housing is a necessity; students cannot take the time to worry about academics and their development in college.
if their basic need for shelter is not being met, or if they have to constantly worry about where they will live during break periods (Field, 2017). The mental and emotional toll that housing insecurity takes on a student can detract from their educational experience during college, and can lead to lower grades, low self-esteem, and depression (Field, 2017). Residence life departments can combat the toll created by housing insecurity by providing affordable housing options to students in need over breaks.

While most residence life departments might like to provide break housing for students experiencing homelessness, it is not financially viable on many campuses (Hallett, 2010). Resources might already be limited and keeping residence halls open during breaks is an expensive endeavor; maintenance staff, resident assistants, and housing staff can be costly and add up quickly (Hallett, 2010). Additionally, many college administrators do not realize that homelessness is even an issue on campus (Field, 2015). Some students who are homeless may hide their status out of fear or shame due to the negative societal stigma surrounding homelessness, and unless students disclose their status as homeless to a campus professional there is no concrete way to find out how many homeless students exist on campuses (Field, 2015). There is a “lingering misinterpretation that a homeless person is someone who lives on the side of the road, not someone who ‘couch surfs’ during breaks” (Field, 2015, p.1). There is also a concern on the part of financial aid officials that students will try to “work the system” in order to gain more financial aid or access to certain amenities, such as break housing (Field, 2015, p.1). All of this can create doubt for university staff members that keeping residence halls open during breaks is not worth the effort and cost it would take.

Several colleges and universities have transitioned into providing break housing for students with mixed results. In 2017, Indiana University-Bloomington decided to make a drastic change and provide free housing for all students currently living on campus over break periods in the academic year and absorbed the costs associated with this change (Isaacman, 2018). Other institutions, like Carleton College, try to offset the costs associated with break housing by charging students $10 per day to continue to live in their designated room (“Spring break housing,” n.d.). Similarly, the University of Illinois charges $40 for each day a student registers to stay at school over break (“Spring break housing information,” n.d.). While this solution may be better than completely evicting students, students experiencing homelessness may not have the funds to pay for multiple days and may end up in the same situation they would be in if paying to stay was not an option. An option that falls in between these two comes from Temple University, which lets students apply to stay in their rooms on campus during breaks and grants permission to stay for students with extenuating circumstances (“Spring break closing,” n.d.). Every university’s residence life department is structured differently, and internal funding to keep residence halls open may have to come from elsewhere on campus such as the Dean of Students or other student affairs departments on campus. This may require a significant change to a residence life department or university budget, and what works for one institution may not work for others.

While financial concerns from residential life departments on campus may inhibit some aspects of break housing, it is essential that institutions create affordable
break housing options for homeless students in order to meet their basic needs and allow them to focus on their education. The housing anxiety that homeless students experience is detrimental to their academic performance and mental health, and can perpetuate the cycle of poverty (Harris, 2017; Mehrotra, 2014). This is ample cause to reevaluate budget decisions and prioritize the implementation of break housing.

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