How Do I Do This? How Universities Support Students Experiencing Grief

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Eastern Illinois University

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How Do I Do This? How Universities Support Students Experiencing Grief

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ABSTRACT

Grief prompts college students to ask, “how do I do this?” in many ways. This phenomenological study examined the ways in which student affairs professionals supported grieving students from four universities across the United States. It was found that grieving college students faced many challenges and barriers, including academic, emotional, financial and legal, and cultural issues. Grief is an individualized process that manifests differently in each student. To ensure student success, it was found that resource referral was vital for students, and that connections between departments were imperative to make those referrals happen. This study notes that the COVID-19 pandemic had unexpected effects on grieving students’ ability to receive the help and support needed. Importance of student affairs professionals’ self-care when working with grieving students is also noted. For student affairs professionals to improve, this study calls for student affairs professionals to seek out additional trainings specific to grief. Additionally, it is recommended that universities institute bereavement protocols for their institution. Continued research on the topic is warranted and recommended.
Acknowledgements

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Finally, thank you to my found family members, Sue Anderson and Karma Jessen. You have been some of the largest influences in my life and I am thankful every single day for your love, support, and belief in me. I hope I can one day repay you for all you’ve given me.
Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my late father, Daniel (Dan) Hirn. Your passing shattered my world, changed the trajectory of my collegiate career, and served as the inspiration for this thesis. At only 57, you passed far too soon—definitely ages before your time. Thank you for being my biggest cheerleader, number one fan, and one of the most compassionate people I have ever met. You were an incredible storyteller, an amazing handyman, a proud veteran, and perhaps most importantly, truly a good person. You taught me so many things that I cherish to this day. Among these, you taught me to do my best whatever the circumstances, to always be authentically me, to try to see the good in people, to believe in whatever I set my heart to, and above all else, to be kind. I hope you know that wherever you are, you are missed so dearly every single day. Though you weren’t here for its composition, I hope that this (finally completed) thesis makes you proud.
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CHAPTER I

Introduction

College is a time of continuous change for students. Students are often leaving their homes and living on their own for the first time, choosing their own courses of study, planning their own daily schedules, managing their personal finances, balancing their extracurriculars with their academic goals, discovering their true passions, forming new relationships while maintaining others at home, and transitioning into true independence—all in a delicate balancing act (LaGrand, 1985). After all, students expect college to be the golden years of their lives during which they find their friend group, discover their true selves, and become the person they were meant to be (Balk, 2001). Unfortunately, the loss of a loved one—be it a sudden loss or an expected one—can topple this balancing act and create new challenges for students as they navigate their grieving process. Among its many effects, grief in college students is associated with increased difficulty in graduating on time (Cox et al., 2016), increased prevalence of substance abuse (Cousins et al., 2017), and behavioral changes such as insomnia, lethargy, and nausea (Mughal & Siddiqui, 2019).

The prevalence of loss within the college student population is often underestimated by the general public; nearly one-third of college students experience the death of a loved one within a one-year timeframe at any given time during their collegiate careers (Balk, 2001; Balk, 2008; Balk et al., 2010; Cupit et al., 2016), while approximately half of all college students are expected to suffer a similar loss at one point during their college tenures (Balk, 2001; Balk, 2008; Cox et al., 2016). Therefore, it is imperative that universities understand students’ grief experiences to better serve the students they are meant to educate and ensure that students can perform to their full potentials.
Personal Statement

As the researcher, I would like to provide some context as to the personal importance I attach to this study as well as my experiences that led me to have an interest in this topic. I began my undergraduate career as an aspiring future medical professional. Midway through my second semester of college, I returned to my hometown for spring break and found that my father—my single parent and biggest cheerleader—had passed away in our home at the time. This sudden, unexpected loss completely changed the trajectory of my life and as a result, my collegiate career. The chance to have a stereotypically “normal” college experience was stripped away as I suddenly found myself as the only next of kin. My issues at hand shifted from studying for exams and enjoying the college experience to juggling legal issues, arranging funeral and crematorium preparations, managing the estate, contacting extended family to explain the loss, keeping up with social media and the overwhelming amounts of condolences sent my way, and trying to coordinate transitioning out of the house among other newfound tasks. Even though I had assistance (which I will be forever grateful for), I hardly had a chance to breathe and process my grief, let alone attempt to complete the rest of the semester I left behind. It felt as if I was terribly alone and drowning.

Nevertheless, like many grieving students do, I tried to salvage what I could out of that semester despite what had happened. Out of the six courses I was enrolled in, I did manage to complete one. I worked with university housing to balance my time between staying there and going to my hometown, worked with my academic advisor and the dean of my college to late-drop and withdraw from courses, and eventually, I did seek out counseling to try to process what exactly I had been trying to shoulder. The resources my college had available and the people I had in my corner made a difference in trying to navigate this irreversible change in my life.
I tell this story because I understand the challenges that a grieving student may face. To any grieving student reading this, it can be unbelievably hard, and the topic of grief can have a negative stigma surrounding, such it that it can be extremely difficult to find anyone to talk to and find comfort in. I understand. It does not necessarily get better, but it does become easier with time. Know that I see and hear you and that you are not alone. Now, as a student affairs professional myself, I want to change that narrative. I hope that embarking on this research journey will help shed some light on the value that other student affairs professionals share to help and support the students they serve as well as highlight the importance of that care. Additionally, I hope that other grieving students feel encouraged to seek out and use those resources to aid in their grief journeys.

**Purpose of the Study**

This qualitative, phenomenological study aimed to holistically understand how students’ grief experiences affect their college experience both inside and outside of academic settings, as well as to provide an understanding of how colleges and universities can support their grieving students. The intent of this study was to examine what common themes student affairs professionals report observing in students’ experiences with grief. Additionally, this study sought to understand what kinds of support systems and resources are utilized by students during their time of mourning. From what is observed in current literature, it was expected that grieving students may express decreased academic performance, experience mental health issues, a decreased sense of purpose in school, and increased feelings of loneliness and isolation in their college campuses to these higher education professionals.
Research Questions

This study was guided by one, broad question: how do college faculty and staff support students who are grieving? In this study, this question was be examined through two, more specific research questions:

RQ1: What challenges/barriers do students who are experiencing grief, bereavement, and mourning report to student affairs professionals?

RQ2: In what ways do student affairs professionals/universities support students experiencing grief, mourning, and bereavement?

Significance of the Study

Though the circumstances of death may vary, the loss of a loved one is a permanent change in the fabric of one's life. Grief is often perceived as a taboo topic to bring attention to, yet almost one-third of college students experience the loss of a loved one within a one-year timeframe (Balk, 2008; Balk et al., 2010; Cupit et al., 2016), and at least half of undergraduates experience grief at some point during their collegiate career (Balk, 2008; Cox et al., 2016). Grief has multitudes of varying effects on students that affect their ability to succeed in a university setting, including emotional distress, difficulty concentrating, sleep disturbances, and lethargy among others (Mughal & Siddiqui, 2019). Understanding grief and effects associated with grief can destigmatize the topic so student affairs professionals can better support students during their time of need. Additionally, the information gathered directly from the student affairs professionals who work with these students will provide examples of common areas that students struggle with and recommendations of resources and support that universities, university staff, and faculty can provide bereaved students.
Definition of Terms

Bereavement: a “broad term that encompasses the entire experience of family members and friends in the anticipation, death, and subsequent adjustment to living following the death of a loved one,” (Christ et al., 2003, p. 554).

Counselor: for the purposes of this study, a clinically trained professional who provides counseling services that are accessible to college students in a mental health clinic on or near a college campus.

Grief: the normal and ongoing process of reacting to loss, that “refers to the more specific, complex set of cognitive, emotional, and social difficulties that follow the death of a loved one,” (Christ et al., 2003, p. 555).

Loved one: for the purposes of this study, a broad term that refers to someone one cares deeply about including parents, grandparents, caretakers, friends, siblings, or close family members.

Loss: for the purposes of this study, the event of the death a loved one.

Mourning: defined as “either the individual’s internal process of adaptation to the loss of a loved one or as the socially prescribed modes of responding to loss, including its external expression in behaviors such as rituals and memorials,” (Christ et al., 2003, p. 555).

Senior student affairs officer (SSAO): the most senior student affairs professional on campus, sometimes known as the chief student personnel administrator (CSPA) or chief student affairs administrator (CSAA), that typically reports to and serves as an advisor for the president of the university (Houdyshell, 2007, p. 45-46).
**Student affairs professional(s):** a university employee whose primary function is to provide services for students, regardless of whether they directly contact students or not (Long, 2012, p. 8).

**Limitations and Delimitations of the Study**

**Limitations**

There were a few limitations in terms of the breadth and generalizability of this study. First, this study was a rather small study that included only four participating institutions, most of which were in the Midwest. Additionally, all of the representative universities were public schools, which may impact the generalizability of this study for private schools. None of the participating institutions had fewer than 7,500 students enrolled, so this study does not account for the student to staff dynamics at smaller institutions. Small colleges and universities may experience different relationships between grieving students and staff with different staff to student ratios, class sizes, and community sizes.

A main limitation of this study was the difficulty the researcher faced while recruiting participants. Over 80 universities’ SSAOs were contacted, yet only eight responded in any fashion. Of those eight potential participants, six declined to participate and only two were successfully recruited. In order to gather a sufficient number of institutions to participate, alternative points of contact were sought out. One institution’s director of housing was the main point of contact and another institution’s director of health and counseling services served as the primary point of contact. This variation from the initial study design of exclusively contacting SSAOs may have impacted what the composition of the focus groups would have been if the SSAO had been the direct point of contact for referrals. However, the necessity of these
alternative points of contact may reflect the potential difficulty that a grieving student would face when trying to receive help, support, and referrals in their time of need.

Another limitation of this study was that this study was limited to student affairs professionals recounting their experiences supporting students. This meant that all data collected excluded students’ voices directly. Though specific roles were requested, the researcher could not control which participants specifically the university’s SSAO or additional points of contact redirected them to. Each institution’s organizational chart was different, and one institution was considerably larger than the rest of the participants. This resulted in varied years of experience between these staff members, varied amounts of interactions with grieving students, and variances in the precise role that the professional fulfilled. In this study specifically, the SSAO at one institution thought that the best representative to speak about academic affairs was a case manager while another thought that an assistant dean of students best represented this area. Though both positions provided valuable insight for the purposes of this study, the positions’ job duties were not precisely the same. Unfortunately, Institution D’s counseling representative was unable to attend the interview for their institution, however, two additional representatives were present to help provide additional insights into the struggles and support that students have.

Additionally, a limitation was that the video call format of the interviews posed some challenges, including technical difficulties and a lack of full non-verbal communication. In two interviews, technical difficulties arose from computer/device issues or internet access going down. Both resulted in lag, distortion, and the temporary loss of a participant from their respective interviews which caused brief interruptions while waiting for them to reconnect. Video conferencing prevented both the interviewees and the researcher from reading body language. Though tone of voice was heard, other indicators of body language (such as hand
gestures, clarity of facial expressions, and a participant’s shift in weight on a chair), were hidden from the researcher and others during the interview. However, research has shown that the benefits of video conferencing data collection should not be undermined. Its strengths, including accessibility (or, the ability to use a phone, tablet, laptop, computer, or other device), cost-efficacy and travel considerations, an enhanced personal interface (allowing a participant a chance to keep their face off display or anonymity purposes), and the ability to take the interview in a space that is comfortable and convenient for the participant all are reported as a strength of video interviews (Gray et al., 2020). These boons outweighed the cons and still allowed quality data to be collected from this study’s participants, even amidst the technical difficulties and lack of full body language.

Finally, this study occurred in the middle of a global pandemic, which several participants noted had both increased some instances of grieving students related to COVID-19 and drained resources otherwise afforded to grieving students.

**Delimitations**

The main delimitation of this study was that grieving students were not the main subjects from which information was gathered; information was gathered from the student affairs professionals who worked with students, which may have left out student experiences not reported to any of these professionals. For example, using only counselors as a conduit would have left out populations of students who were grieving, yet did not choose to go to counseling to process this loss. These grieving students may not have believed that their grief experiences constituted as a mental concern that would require counseling for them to overcome. Furthering this example, the counselors alone may not have been able to provide an in-depth, all-encompassing assessment of all that a grieving student experiences due to the limited time
counselors spend with each of their clients. The students who did seek out counseling may not have divulged all the ongoing struggles that they work through on a day-to-day basis to their counselors. However, counselors still provide valuable insight into the challenges students face while grieving and still were included in the focus groups.

To prevent a one-dimensional array of data, this study included a variety of other student affairs professionals. This specifically included representatives from the institutions’ housing departments, representatives from academia (including an assistant dean, a case manager, and an assistant to the vice president of student affairs), a representative from one institution’s student conduct office, and two representatives from a university’s CARE Team (a group of professionals that handle cases involving students of concern) to provide additional insights into the services and support needed by students. However, these other student affairs professionals inevitably excluded some voices of populations of grieving students. Though a representative from each institution’s university housing system was included in the study, not all students who grieve live in university housing. Similarly, though an academic advisor or academic representative was included, not all students who grieve speak to their faculty or advisors about the loss they may have experienced.

Of course, these professionals were not an exhaustive list of support services students could access. Additional student populations might include students who may not have known certain services existed, students who did not seek out assistance in their time of grief and loss, or students who utilized services from campus resources not included in the study or those who utilized off-campus services. Consequentially, the information gathered from this study may represent a smaller subset of students and student experiences than directly speaking with grieving students on campus could have provided. Understanding this, the initial point of contact...
for each participating university was encouraged to refer the researcher to any additional staff that they would refer a grieving student to find support in addition to the study’s three required representatives. This allowed a freedom to include additional voices to more accurately describe the supports a student is guided toward as well as the struggles that these students face.

Summary

College presents a time of change for students (LaGrand, 1985), and the loss of a loved one can have negative impacts on college students’ success (Cousins et al., 2017; Cox et al., 2016; Mughal & Siddiqui, 2019). This study was meant to examine what challenges grieving students face as well as how these students receive support from their university’s student affairs staff. This chapter contained the personal significance of the study to the researcher, a detailed introduction to the purpose of this study, the definition of key terms, and the limitations and delimitations of the study. This study is significant because grief is a societally taboo topic to talk about, yet it is more prevalent in college than one may expect (Balk, 2001; Balk, 2008; Balk et al., 2010; Cox et al., 2016; Cupit et al., 2016). Chapter II provides a review of the literature surrounding student grief and grief experiences and Chapter III presents the methods used to complete this study. Chapter IV discusses the results of data collection and Chapter V contains a discussion, provides recommendations, and concludes this thesis.
CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

Grief is a phenomenon that can affect one’s entire life trajectory (Pollock, 1978). Those who have experienced a loss of a loved one may recall their journey to find new ways to experience the world they now live in. College is often described as the best years of one’s life and the last experience that a student may have before entering the working world. However, this experience can be dramatically altered when news of a loved one’s passing reaches the student, turning their entire world upside-down.

The purpose of this literature review is to illustrate several ideologies that describe the phenomena that stem from grief in the college student population. Also detailed are the prevalence of grief, the effects of grief in general, the effects of grief in college students, and variances in how grief manifests. The idea that grief may have an association with decreased academic performance, increased mental health detriments, and substance abuse are examined to see if and how they affect college students’ performance and well-being. Additionally, grief interventions already in practice and the role of student affairs professionals within student grief are described. Finally, this literature review sought to explore the impacts that differing cultural backgrounds affect students’ perceptions and reactions to grief.

Grief

As recited in LaGrand (1985) an old Chinese proverb states “you cannot prevent the birds of sorrow from flying over your head, but you can prevent them from building nests in your hair.” Grief is a terrible, yet inevitable phenomenon that will happen to everyone over the course of a lifetime, regardless of the stage of life one is in (Jacob, 1993). Though the idea of grief is universally understood, it is paradoxically also an individualized process unique to each person’s
own experience including potential psychological, emotional, and physical distressors (Jacob, 1993). Grief and loss can cause students’ lives to change dramatically in an instant, having a resulting impact on their student life, academic success, and overall college experience (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015). Stroebe et al., (2017) noted that students not only work through the immediate loss of a loved one, but also face many subsequent secondary challenges—such as a newfound responsibility to complete their own financial affairs, plan their own doctor’s appointments, or perhaps find a completely new support network. As these stressors continue to present themselves, an understanding of grief theory is essential in order to understand how students navigate the many manifestations of grief.

**Theoretical/Conceptual Framework**

**Grief and Attachment Theory**

Freud (1917) was the first to examine grief theory—he proposed that grief was broken down into two main parts: mourning, the grieving of a loved object in one’s conscious mind and melancholia, the process of grieving an unidentifiable loss in the depths of the unconscious mind. Since then, others have continued to develop ways to explain methods of grieving and coping. Bowlby (1961) expanded upon Freud’s work with his attachment theory, which described grief in four stages; shock and numbness, yearning and searching, despair and disorganization, and finally reorganization and recovery. These are often seen as a segmented pathway which one traverses along the grieving process from the denial that a loss has occurred, the search to make up for this newfound emotional void, the understanding that life henceforth will be a different experience, to finally the understanding that a positive outlook on life is possible. Kübler-Ross (1969) further expanded Bowlby’s concept of these grief stages, renaming his stages and adding a fifth stage. The commonplace five stages of grief that are often spoken
about generally refer to this model’s ideologies—including denial (when one is in shock post-loss), anger (when one may lash out and question the justice of the universe), bargaining (when one may plead with God or another greater being for closure), depression (when one falls into a deep sadness and resignation), and acceptance (when one is able to move on after the death).

**Stroebe and Schutt’s (1999) Dual-Process Model of Coping**

There has been criticism of the previously mentioned stage models. Larson (2013) and Corr (1993, 2015) asserted that while Kübler-Ross (1969) humanized grief, identified ideas about processing grief, and was a driving factor to bring grief to the forefront of conversations, there were fundamental flaws in Kübler-Ross’ five stages. They argued that grief could not be confined to precise stages, nor does a person experience all these reactions sequentially, if at all. Another popular contemporary grief model proposed by Stroebe and Schut (1999) is the dual-process model of coping with bereavement. This model referred to grief as less of a set stage model and more of an oscillatory process in which one could be participating in one of two types of behavior. A *restoration-oriented stressor* is any activity that allows one to continue with everyday life (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). This can include things such as engaging in a new hobby, spending time with friends, or cleaning the house. Often, these restoration-oriented stressors conjure positive emotions of joy, control, and achievement. Conversely, a *loss-oriented stressor* is described as anything that reminds the grieving of their deceased loved one (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Hearing a favorite song of the deceased, looking through old photographs, or smelling a particular odor can all lead to a loss-oriented emotional reaction. These experiences may bring up emotions of anger, despair, or loneliness. The key aspect of this model is the *oscillation*, or the moving back and forth between these two stressors. Stroebe and Schut (1999) argue that it is normal and ideal to oscillate between these stressors, feeling the sorrow of loss at one moment,
then taking time to engage in something unrelated (possibly a hobby or interest), and again revert to the negative emotions from before as a healthy method of gradually processing the strong emotions resulting from loss.

**Balk’s (2008) Bereavement Impact Model**

The holistic impact of bereavement model proposed six facets of life impacted by grief: physical, cognitive, behavioral, interpersonal, emotional, and spiritual (Balk, 2008). Balk (2008) reviewed existing literature and provides examples of how these facets manifested in college students. Physical effects commonly included sleep disturbances, cognitive effects included difficulty concentrating and learning, behavioral effects included increased or decreased interest in religion, interpersonal effects included loss of friends, emotional effects included sudden outbursts of tears, and spiritual effects included an increased questioning of the meaning of existence (Balk, 2008). Cox et al. (2015) examined a study of 117 students performed at a university in the Southeast that examined effects of grief on college students. These effects mirror several areas of Balk’s (2008) bereavement model, including academic, social, physical, and psychological effects (Cox et al., 2015).

**Prevalence of Grief in College Students**

LaGrand (1985) described young, college-aged adults as “the forgotten grievers,” (p. 15). Balk (2001) examined a case study of one college student who had lost their father due to a lengthy battle with colon cancer. Balk (2001) described that this college student’s expectations of college were to be the golden years of their lives during which they would find their friend group, discover their true selves, and become the person they were meant to be. Yet, when interviewing students who had experienced the loss of a loved one, the student reported that they had believed that they were the only one experiencing grief (Balk, 2001). On the contrary, loss is
quite common among college-aged students. In Fall 2020, approximately 25% of college students reported experiencing the loss of a friend, family member, or someone close to them (American College Health Association, 2020). Nearly one-third of undergraduate college students report the loss of a loved one within the previous 12 months (Balk, 2008; Balk et al., 2010; Cox et al., 2015; Cupit et al., 2016). According to Cox et al. (2016), nearly half of college students experience the loss of a loved one during their college experience. Cox et al. (2015) examined data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen (NLSF) regarding the prevalence of death within college students stratified by year. Of the nearly 2,500 seniors, almost 60% reported that they had lost a close friend or family member since the end of their first year in college; roughly one in four of these seniors reported more than one instance of these losses during that time (Cox et al., 2015). Approximately 35-48% of students are likely to have lost a loved one within the past two years (Balk, 2001). Balk (2008), however, asserted that nearly four out of every five students would experience the loss of a family member or friend during their collegiate career. Similarly, over a quarter of graduate students report the loss of a loved one within the past two years (Varga, 2015).

**Effects of Grief**

Grief often has negative, depressive effects that vary from person to person. Mughal and Siddiqui (2019) described grief as a process in which one can experience changes in feelings, thoughts, physical well-being, and behaviors. Effects such as difficulty sleeping, loss of interest in activities, feelings of helplessness, nausea, inability to concentrate, and lethargy are a sample of the multitudes of ways that grief can manifest (Mughal & Siddiqui, 2019). These reactions, though wildly variable, are normal. Liu et al. (2019) examined the impact that death had on the survivors of the deceased, specifically examining results of a large, longitudinal study of the
intersections of grief and health-related outcomes that included 9,586 respondents. This study mentioned that women have been noted to experience greater adverse effects to grief for longer periods of time than their male counterparts, including deterioration in physical vitality, mental health, and emotional well-being (Liu et al., 2019). For some, these symptoms of grief may last upwards of four years post-death (Liu et al., 2019).

**Effects of Grief on the College Student**

With the unique set of circumstances a college student experiences on a day-to-day basis, college students can be treated as a separate subgroup of grievers. Cupit et al., (2016) examined 950 students’ grief experiences from two different types of institutions in the Midwest; one institution was a regional comprehensive university while the other was a primarily research-heavy institution. Depending on the type of institution one attended, the aftereffects of grief showed differences in college motivation, resulting in some gaining purpose in their studies while others lost purpose in their studies (Cupit et al., 2016). Approximately 33% of those at the regional comprehensive university reported that the loss promoted an increased meaning in their studies whereas nearly 50% of respondents from the research institution reported a loss of meaning in their studies (Cupit et al., 2016). From interviews conducted with bereaved students, Balk (2011) noted that students often felt alone, abandoned, and isolated from their peers as a result of their loss, such that the student felt as if they were the only one experiencing this phenomenon.

Furthermore, according to a quantitative study examining college students’ major-life events outside of college, death has been seen as an indirect predictor of student success; often death’s subsequent aftereffects (ex., consequential financial distress) interfere with a student’s ability to succeed and graduate on time (Cox et al., 2016). LaGrand (1985) examined multiple
loss reactions of 901 male and female college students. Physical reactions have been consistently reported, more often in female students, that include crying, insomnia, headaches, and fatigue (LaGrand, 1985). Over 50% of these students reported emotional difficulties as well, including depression, shock, emptiness, and disbelief (LaGrand, 1985). These increased difficulties are problematic not only to the students’ own lives and successes during their college careers, but also the success of the universities they attend—if students are unable to perform well or remain in their course of study, the university is also at a loss.

**Academic Success**

According to the American College Health Association’s 2020 National College Health Assessment, 39.4% of students who suffered a death loss reported that the loss negatively impacted their academic performance. In the book *Helping Bereaved Students*, the author recounts many interviews with grieving students and found that bereaved students often report difficulty concentrating or studying (Balk, 2011). This struggle to study impacts a student’s academic success. In a quantitative study matching 227 grieving and non-grieving students, the grieving students are seen to have significantly lower GPAs than their non-grieving classmates during the semester of death loss (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). Cox et al., (2016) noted that grief is associated with an increased difficulty to graduate on time. Bereaved students are less likely to be recognized with academic honors, more likely to be in poor standing or on academic probation, and potentially withdraw from school (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). Roberts (2016) also found that students were more likely to miss classes and consider withdrawing from the university they attend as a result of their grief. Those attending a large, primarily research-based, institution tended to lose motivation to succeed in college as compared to their smaller, ‘comprehensive,’ college counterparts (Cupit et al., 2016).
Social Support

Adverse effects due to grief have negatively impacted students’ social support systems. As seen in Balk’s (2008) bereavement impact model, grief reactions manifesting in interpersonal, emotional, spiritual, and behavioral effects. When interviewing a sample of 18 students, many students report that often when they bring up their grief, their peers may become anxious towards them (Balk, 1997), or may even “cut out” the bereaved from their lives. As a result, students may have increased challenges at forming long-lasting, intimate relationships (Neimeyer et al., 2013). However, bereaved students report that they have found that talking about grief and social support from others is helpful (Balk, 1997). Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum (2015) collected the narratives of 33 grieving students in their book *We Get It: Voices of Grieving College Students and Young Adults*, and three of these narratives highlight the importance of connecting with peers. One such interviewed student, Margaret, describes the importance of peer connection:

I felt as if people understood what I was saying and what I had gone through. I knew everyone’s situation was very different but having a shared experience can go a long way to just not feeling so alone. The most effective talks I have had have been with friends who have gone through similar experiences. People came out of the woodwork to tell me about what they had been through and how they had made it through it. It was comforting to know I was not the only one this was happening to. This helps keep the angry feelings down; I know that it has not just happened to me (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015).

Another student, Alex, describes the importance of social support after the loss of her father:

One of the most positive things I learned was to surround myself with friends who could keep an eye on me; not necessarily as babysitters, but people who were always there for
me. Being in college is tough not having any immediate family nearby, so creating a family of my own was the next best thing I could do (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015).

**Effects on Mental Health**

As one may assume, the loss of a loved one can have many negative effects on one’s mental health. The American College Health Association’s 2020 National College Health Assessment reported that 75.3% of students reported that loss caused moderate or high levels of distress if they had lost a friend, family member, or someone close to them in the past 12 months. Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum (2015) recorded grieving students’ narratives and multiple students among them reported mental health concerns, including sadness, shock, anger, guilt. Furthering this, students in the grieving process often cite depression, feelings of emptiness, shock, and numbness as a result of their loss (LaGrand, 1985).

**Prolonged Grief Disorder**

Some students experience symptoms of prolonged grief disorder (PGD), (Glickman 2021; Varga, 2015). PGD is identifiable by persistent symptoms of grief lasting longer than six months (Glickman, 2021). Additional symptoms include immediate grief reactions persisting longer than six months, a general loss of everyday function, inability to emotionally process the death of a loved one, and intense feelings of the loss of oneself (Glickman, 2021; Varga, 2015). PGD can lead to an increase in bitterness, anger, resentment, an inability to trust others, and increased difficulties in reengaging with life after loss (Lee, 2015). Glickman (2021) sampled 899 bereaved students and found that 13.4% met the criteria for PGD, additionally reporting higher incidences for students of color.
Substance Abuse

Cousins et al. (2017) found that students who were lacking in psychosocial development may be prone to an increased prevalence of substance abuse and other risky behaviors after the loss of a loved one. A common method of substance abuse in college students involves alcohol consumption. Palmer et al. (2016) described that it was normal (although perhaps worrisome to these students’ guardians) for many college students between the ages of 19 and 22 to experiment with alcohol, unsafe sexual encounters, intimate relationships, and perhaps drugs for the first time in their lives. This experimentation became exacerbated and problematic when combined with feelings of loss in an attempt to find new coping methods, especially when caution is completely lacking (Palmer et al., 2016). Those with grief-induced insomnia may use alcohol as a mean of self-medication (Hardison et al., 2005).

A sample of 659 students from two universities self-reported measures relating to alcohol use, grief, and mental health measures; students who were suddenly bereaved (especially in cases of a violent death) reported a higher alcohol intake than those who experienced a natural loss or no loss at all (Eddinger et al., 2018). Increased depressive symptoms were found among bereaved students who reported drinking as a coping mechanism (Eddinger et al., 2018). Rosseau et al. (2011) found similar tendencies in a lab setting; students who consumed alcohol while in a depressive mood displayed increased negative emotions compared to the students in a neutral mood. Students who habitually drank as a form of escape coping, a maladaptive coping mechanism in which one attempts to avoid a stressor through outside means, continually increased negative emotional reactions (Park et al., 2004). As a result, students who repeatedly used alcohol as an escape experienced an increase in negative affect, which in turn increased their levels of drinking. These studies indicate that students may believe that alcohol can be used
as a method to numb emotional pain and to cope with negative emotion and loss. However, heavy drinking has been associated with increased incidences of risky sexual behavior, injury, and decreased academic performance and retention (Doumas et al., 2007; Sullivan & Risler, 2002). As such, an acknowledgement of the potential links between the negative effects of grief and substance abuse is warranted.

**Cultural Variances of Grief**

In the context of today’s college environment, an awareness of cultural differences is imperative as the facets of well-being most impacted by grief vary cross-culturally (Eisenberg et al., 2013; Gire, 2014). To broaden this understanding of grief to include today’s ever-diversifying student populations, it is important to study examples of cultural variations of how grief and death are perceived, what makes a good life, what kinds of rituals are associated with loss, and what subsequent reactions to a loss entail outside of Western themes as facets of well-being impacted by grief vary cross-culturally (Eisenberg et al., 2013; Gire, 2014). These cultural and religious factors, especially in the case of international students, must be taken into account to properly understand the grief reactions and needs of a particular individual navigating the grieving process (Liew & Servaty-Seib, 2018).

**African-American Grief Experiences**

In America, those of differing ethnic and racial backgrounds show some variances in how they process and navigate grief. For example, African-American individuals tend to place an increased value on religion, faith, and prayer as compared to their white counterparts (Robinson, 1997). It is believed that this difference is due to the historical impact of slavery on African-American people (Yokley, 1981). Slaves, as well as ex-slaves and fugitive slaves utilized spirituals, gospel, and preachers as a source of hope and inspiration as well as a method for
processing emotional trauma from the unique experience of being a slave (Yokley, 1981). This usage of religion as a source of salvation as well as outlet for emotional catharsis then melded into African-American culture and is still prevalent to this day. It is worth noting, however, the within-group variances among African-Americans. Chatters et al. (2002) and Taylor et al. (1999) described that women were more likely to attend religious services and noted a direct, positive relationship between higher levels of education and religious service attendance regardless of gender. Meanwhile, a decreased value of church and religion has been identified within African-American men (Mattis et al., 2004). Therefore, the differing effects that religion and spirituality may have between white and African-American populations should not be assumed for the entirety of African-American individuals.

However, this emphasis on religion impacts the methods of coping among many African-American individuals (Moore, 2020). For example, African-American women often cite prayer and religion as a method for coping not only with death, but also other emotional and social problems they face (Broman, 1996). This has been speculated to be a primary reason that many African-Americans opt to avoid counseling for varying mental health concerns (Constantine et al., 2000). Often, African-Americans do not share their beliefs and issues regarding death and dying to counselors, healthcare providers, or family members (Johnson, Hayden, True, Simkin, Colbert, Thompson, Stewart, & Martin, 2016; Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008). Additionally, Laurie and Neimeyer (2008) asserted that African-American college students often exhibit higher levels of grief symptoms than their white counterparts. African-Americans also display a higher prevalence of PGD (Goldsmith et al., 2008). Yet, an increased general hostility and dislike of counselors is somewhat common in the Black community, particularly towards non-Black counselors, and this distrust hinders the ability of many Black clients to receive treatment for
these conditions (Vontress & Epp, 1997). The combination of these differences could indicate that grief impacts African-Americans in a more extreme, negative way.

**Middle Eastern Muslim Grief Experiences**

When comparing American and Arab students, the incidence of loss remained the same, however, Arab students primarily reported adverse effects on sleep patterns while American students primarily reported adverse effects on academics, religion, and relationships (Varga, et al., 2015). In the Pakistani-Muslim population, grievers had an increased focus on religion, ceremony, and strong cultural traditions preceding (Suhail et al., 2011). Following the death of a loved one, including an increased awareness and premonition that death was approaching, diligent washing and preparing of the body for burial services, and reading verses of the Holy Quran for several days after death to ensure that the deceased’s soul entered heaven (Suhail et al., 2011). While acceptance of death occurred quickly (attributed to the strong Muslim faith and the deceased’s return to Allah), resulting psychological effects post-death in this population frequently increased suicidal ideations, shock, an inability to cope and continue with daily life, and intense feelings of fear and anxiety—sometimes lasting upwards of five-years post-death (Suhail et al., 2011). These extreme, persistent reactions were most commonly seen in women; as an example, men who had lost a spouse reported feelings of remorse for their former spouse yet were prepared to remarry earlier than their widow counterparts (Suhail et al., 2011). Furthermore, relationships between family members changed. A widow’s in-laws and paternal figures often stopped supporting them with household duties, close familial ties—some even referring to the widows as “tramps” now that their late husband had passed (Suhail et al., 2011). Moving forward, however, Pakistani Muslims honored their loved ones by performing charitable actions, extending prayers for their remembrance, and finding purpose in living their life based
upon the advice of their loved ones (Suhail et al., 2011). While coping mechanisms varied across the population, the common driving force in these Middle Eastern people’s reactions is the strong association with their Muslim faith and surrounding culture.

Native American Grief Experiences

Many Indigenous populations have higher death rates, higher accidental death rates, and lower life expectancy when compared to white populations (Moore et al., 2020; Yellow Horse Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998). Native American students also may process grief differently than their white counterparts. Differing tribes utilize specific grief ceremonies, and each of these ceremonies assist in the emotional and spiritual processing of a loved one’s death (Yellow Horse Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998). For some tribes, such as with the Navajo people, grief mourning patterns are limited to four days, after which no further expression of grief or emotion is socially acceptable, and one is expected to return to their usual routine (Nagel, 1988). However, in some instances, such as with the Lakota people, these ceremonies and traditions require that family members mourn for an entire year post-loss before releasing their loved one’s spirit into the Spirit World, with the final grief resolution being the wiping of the mourner’s tears (Yellow Horse Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998). Even among these two examples, the vast differences between the grief processes suggest that our Native American students cannot be lumped into one broad category and specific attention to the student’s cultural background must be accounted for.

African Grief Experiences

In English-speaking societies, grief and bereavement are often seen as an individualized process—essentially, it is seen as a personal loss that simply happens to someone (McCarthy et al., 2018). However, loss of someone does not exclusively impact one single person. In some
African cultures, death is often seen as a communal, family-centered event in which the preservation of the family unit is of utmost importance; a significant degree of support comes from the idea of families (whether related by blood or not) banding together in solidarity to focus on the legacy and future success of the family moving forward after death (Ikwuemesi & Onwuegbuna, 2017; McCarthy et al., 2018). Subsequently, when losses occur, rifts are torn in the tight-knit fabric of the community as vital pieces leave voids where loved ones once were. These losses often result in a lack of material support for families, guidance and advice, and prolonged support acknowledging the continual impact of the deceased’s absence all while families are still expected to move on rather than display grieving emotions (McCarthy et al., 2018).

**Clinical Grief Interventions**

There is a diverse array of grief interventions that currently are put into practice. Pharmacotherapy has been used to treat the depression and sleep disruptions associated with grief using a variety of antidepressants with some efficacy (Forte et. al., 2004). Support groups, traditional counseling led by trained professionals, and psychotherapy have also been used (Forte et. al., 2004). In a sample of 842 college students, those participating in individual counseling showed statistically significant reductions in holistic grief effects including emotional, physical, cognitive, behavioral, spiritual, and interpersonal holistic grief effects (Varga et al., 2021). Those participating in face-to-face support groups showed statistically significant benefits in physical, cognitive, behavioral, and interpersonal holistic grief effects (Varga et al., 2021). Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and short-term psychotherapy (including hypnotherapy, trauma desensitization, and psychodynamic therapy) have shown mixed results treating bereavement reactions (Forte et. al., 2004).
Student Affairs

Fajgenbaum (2007) found that institutions often offer support to their grieving students most commonly by including counseling centers, campus ministries, dean of students’ offices, residence life, and student affairs. In order to assist students appropriately, it is imperative that student affairs professionals are able to identify grief effects (Varga et al., 2021) and understand how students cope with loss according to the student’s unique needs (Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008). For example, Balk (1997) interviewed 18 students in-depth about their experiences with the loss of a loved one. Four of the five students who had sought out professional help reported feeling disappointed with the help they received (Balk, 1997). This furthers the importance of professionals needing a broadened understanding of the issues grieving students face and the necessary resources and referrals that should be made to these students.

Academic Affairs

One study examining the academic performance of 227 grieving vs 227 non-grieving students found that students in differing academic areas may seek out support resources. The difference may be a result of varying academic units’ lack of knowledge on available support services for students (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). Hedman (2012) surveyed 371 undergraduate students regarding their comfort levels discussing death with, views on receiving help from, and perceptions of feeling empathy from academic professionals. They found that approximately 30% of students feel that they would be comfortable discussing the death of a loved one with a professor and 37% of students were comfortable speaking with an academic advisor, with about 40% of students reporting that they felt professors were empathetic (Hedman, 2012). Furthermore, this study called for faculty to learn about potential effects of
grief on the college student to assist in the quality of support students are able to receive (Hedman, 2012).

**Residence Life**

Residence life professionals are able to connect with students where they live and provide support to students to help them succeed in college (Johnson, Flynn, & Monroe, 2016). Flatt (2015) interviewed 12 fulltime residence life professionals and presented hypothetical scenarios regarding a student death to evaluate the attitudes and beliefs these professionals harbored when responding to student grief. Of the 12 they interviewed, ten reported having worked with grieving students after a student death and three reported supporting a bereaved community within the past six months (Flatt, 2015). All interviewees reported resource referral as a primary way of supporting a surviving student and five interviewees specifically stated they would intentionally access resources for international students (Flatt, 2015). Due to the fact that they work where they live, residence life staff (namely resident advisors [RA’s]), have substantial contact with students and as a result, are rather likely to be among the first to know that a student has lost a loved one (Servaty-Seib and Hamilton, 2006).

**Counseling**

Currently, there are grief interventions that have been utilized in a college setting to help people process grief. For example, in addition to traditional counseling treatments, support groups in particular have been shown to be an effective form of grief therapy in college students (Battle et al., 2013; Newton & Ohrt, 2018). One grief counseling group (led by doctoral clinical psychology students and overseen by a licensed practitioner) allowed grieving students to have a space to process their grief in a structured manner with trained facilitators who had an understanding of grief counseling and education (Janowiak et al., 1995). Participants in this
SUPPORTING GRIEVING STUDENTS

Group were quick to establish supportive and caring bonds and eventually even felt comfortable sharing unpleasant emotions, such as guilt, selfishness, anger, and shame to each other and the facilitators (Janowiak et al., 1995). Based upon their literature review, this type of social support has been reported to be among the most helpful forms of support for students navigating grief (Thai & Moore, 2018). According to feedback taken after a four-year long facilitated grief support group, students identified that these support groups allowed them to feel validated, to have an outlet to express their grief to those that understand them, were not afraid to hear about loss, and to schedule a designated time to process their grief (Battle et al., 2013). Some support groups have added mindfulness practices into their support groups (Newton & Ort, 2018). As a result, they have seen additional benefit from these practices such as bereaved students learning skills to assist with academic studies and concentration, expressing gratitude, broadening their range of emotions, and reducing their overall stress (Newton & Ohrt, 2018).

College and Universities’ Role with Student Grief

Research asserts that it is vital that colleges and universities assist and intervene on behalf of grieving students (Balk, 1997; Balk, 2001; Cox et al., 2015; Neimeyer et al., 2008; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). Part of this assistance should include resource referral. Examples of this assistance could be meeting with university housing staff (as this staff often makes first contact with a grieving student), connecting grieving students with the dean of students’ office or academic advisors, and assisting students to find services from their university’s counseling center (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). Universities can help support grieving students by establishing bereavement policies for students that are designed to acknowledge varying cultural differences in mourning practices (Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008). Additionally, student affairs professionals specifically can support bereaved students by seeking out and providing
Specialized bereavement and loss training to resident assistants within university housing, academic advisors (and other academic professionals), and counseling center staff (Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008).

**Summary**

The literature describes the prevalence of grief in college students as well as differences in outcomes of students who are grieving compared to the traditional student. Students in particular are already embarking on a new journey rife with life changes going into college—the oscillatory model developed by Stroebe and Schut (1999) and the depth of effects proposed by Balk (2008) appear thus far to exemplify the turbulent lives of today’s students. These differences include changes in academic purpose, hindered success, and physical and emotional health changes that can vary across cultural backgrounds. These differing cultural backgrounds frame grief and expected reactions to loss differently from the commonly examined Anglophone ideologies. Grieving students experience numerous effects, such as effects on mental health, decreased academic performance, and a paradoxical need for social support while their social supports may decrease. Grieving students may be at an increased risk of substance abuse, which can amplify negative emotions and behaviors as a result. Some grief interventions currently exist, and there is a growing call for student affairs professionals to have a more active role in students’ grief journeys. To categorize grief as a static pathway seems to devalue the fluid experiences that are observed in the world. Utilizing these ideas, college administration can better identify the needs, adjust and accommodate to these needs, and notice the red flags of this vulnerable student population to promote their success and overall well-being.
CHAPTER III

Methods

This chapter describes the methods that were used to conduct this study. The overarching purpose of this study was to examine how universities’ staffs support their students navigating their college experience while undergoing grief holistically, including experiences both inside the classroom and outside in the world at large. Additionally, this study investigated common themes that grieving students share with these professionals by interviewing focus groups from three mid-sized universities and one large university. Members of these focus groups included licensed counselors from university counseling centers, university housing representatives, and representatives able to speak about academic affairs from the institutions in question.

Additionally, some focus groups included additional professionals identified by the institution’s senior student affairs officer (SSAO) as a referral source for grieving students, including a member of one university’s student conduct office and members of case management teams. This study recounts their experiences working with grieving students. The methods of data collection and analysis are detailed as well as the justifications for utilizing these techniques. Finally, this chapter explains the treatment of data after the study concluded.

Research Questions

This study was guided by one, broad question: how do universities support students who are grieving? In this study, this question was examined through two more specific research questions:

RQ1: What challenges/barriers do students who are experiencing grief, bereavement, and mourning report to student affairs professionals?
RQ2: In what ways do student affairs professionals/universities support students experiencing grief, mourning, and bereavement?

**Design of Study**

This qualitative, phenomenological study gathered data through four focus group interviews of student affairs professionals within the college setting who worked with students experiencing grief and were easily accessible to these students. Phenomenological research is a form of qualitative research that centers on the essence of a phenomenon that occurs and the reality in which it is experienced by those experiencing it (Groenewald, 2004). This study recruited three mid-size universities and one large university. One focus group per university of three to four student affairs professionals who served college students working through grief were interviewed. The participants represented at minimum three facets of student affairs: university housing, student mental health services, and academic affairs. These three facets of student affairs were particular areas of interest and support from the researcher’s background navigating college as a grieving student.

The semi-structured focus group interviews consisted of questions regarding the professionals’ roles on campus (e.g., Can you tell me a little bit about what you do on campus? How do you interact with one another?), questions regarding the experiences students reported to these professionals (e.g., Can you recall a time that you [or your department] interacted with a student who has had a loved one pass away while in college? Can you tell me what happened and how you worked with the student?), and both open- and closed-ended questions regarding the frequency and efficacy of these professionals’ work with student grief (e.g., Have you dealt with more than one student in this capacity? How would you rate the support provided to students who are grieving the death of a close friend or family member?).
Interviewing these departmental representatives in a small group setting was meant to encourage the other participants in the room to add to discussions and build off each other's statements; there were occasions where one experience one participant mentioned would jog another participant’s memory about something they had experienced with a student. This phenomenon of generating new ideas and building upon thoughts in focus groups has been noted in research regarding the efficacy of focus groups (Breen, 2006; Kidd & Parshall, 2000) and was particularly appropriate in this case to gain the broadest insights into what students needed from the different student affairs areas as relating to their grief experiences. This study utilized a phenomenological approach, which sought to explain common themes among the stories student affairs professionals reported that grieving students must navigate to receive support during their time of grief.

Participants

Participants were selected via purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is a technique in which individuals or groups are specifically sought out and selected due to their ample knowledge of the phenomenon in question (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2009). The participants for this study were selected by first identifying each university’s senior student affairs officer (SSAO). Over 80 midsized institutions’ SSAO’s were contacted via email and asked to provide the contact information of one representative from university housing, one from university counseling services, and one from academic affairs (see Appendix A). Two universities’ (Institution B and Institution C) SSAO’s identified participants for these focus groups. One additional university’s (Institution A) representative participants were identified by sending the same recruitment email to the university’s director of health and counseling services, who then forwarded the recruitment email to participants. The final university’s (Institution D)
representative participants were identified by sending the same recruitment email to the university’s director of housing, who then forwarded it to other participants. The variances in participant recruitment resulted from the lack of responses from the initial list of institution’s SSAO’s, which resulted in the need to find these professionals through alternative points of contact. The SSAO’s (and alternative points of contact) were allowed to identify any other professional(s) representing other offices they deemed appropriate to fully encompass the pathways through which students would be referred with concerns of grief—so long as academic, housing, and counseling representatives were included. These professionals had to work within the college setting and must have been easily accessible to the students they would be serving.

**Representative Participant Titles and Roles**

The precise definitions of representatives needed were left intentionally somewhat ambiguous. The researcher wanted to navigate the process as a grieving student would to receive assistance. The specific roles and titles of representatives from each university are detailed below:

**Institution A.** this study was limited to student affairs professionals recounting their experiences supporting students. This meant that all data collected excluded students’ voices directly. Participants from Institution A were identified by the Director of Health and Counseling Services. The housing representative from Institution A was the Senior Associate Director for University Housing and Dining Services and had served in the position for about 20 years. The counseling representative recommended was the Interim Assistant Director of Counseling on Institution A’s campus, a licensed clinical professional counselor who served in both administrative and clinical roles. The academic representative was the Special Assistant to the
Vice President of Student Affairs. Her role included assisting students struggling for a variety of reasons and serving as an advocate for students to connect them with campus resources, to reach out to faculty on behalf of the student, and to serve as a central point of contact for a student in distress so the student need not contact multiple offices on their own for the same issue.

**Institution B.** Participants from Institution B were identified by the institution’s SSAO. The housing representative was a residential case manager, with five years of professional experience, they most commonly worked with students of concern in the residence halls identified by an RA, professional housing staff, faculty member, or a concerned friend or peer. The counseling representative was the Director of Student Counseling Services, a licensed clinical professional counselor, who had served in their role for 20 years. She practiced at Institution B’s campus, and commonly saw students for concerns of anxiety, depression, and relationship issues. The academic representative was the Associate Dean of Students who had been at the institution for 27 years and in the associate dean role for 16. Students’ most requested services included absence from courses for any number of concerns, clarifications of campus policy or procedures, and assistance when feeling overwhelmed with academic or personal concerns. Additionally, the Associate Dean also served on an emergency on-call rotation to assist students in need outside of business hours.

**Institution C.** Participants from Institution C were also identified by the institution’s SSAO, the Director of the Office of Case Management, who had been at the university a total of nine years and had served in the director role for two and a half years. They identified themself as the best representative for academics. Their role’s most common functions included serving students needing assistance and support with mental health crises, suicide prevention and intervention, risk assessment, referrals to on- and off-campus resources, and resources related to
basic insecurity needs (ex., food, housing, financial). Additionally, they served as a liaison between students and faculty when a student needed excused absences from classes in a time of distress. The counseling representative identified was the Director of Counseling, a licensed clinical professional counselor, at the institution who had served in the role for three years and had been at the institution for 12. She cited that students sought services for issues related to anxiety, depression, relationship concerns, trauma, grief and loss, substance use, and academic difficulties. The housing representative from the institution was the Director of Residential Life who had served in the role for three years and had been at the institution for 14 total years. Students most commonly sought help from the Director of Residence Life for questions and concerns related to housing and residence life, support with conflict, information about activities on campus, and finding other resources on campus.

**Institution D.** Participants from Institution D were identified by the institution’s Director of Residential Programs and Services who additionally served as an Assistant Dean of Students on campus. She also identified herself as the best representative for housing. She had been at the institution for over 20 years and mostly assisted students by overseeing residence life, managing the residential curriculum, and interacting with students of concern. The academic representative was the Director of the Student Advocates Office, whose role oversees 15 volunteer advocates of retired faculty and staff. These advocates manage approximately 2,600 student cases a year and communicate with faculty on students’ behalf as well as provide resources and regarding academic and conduct issues to students who are struggling. The Director of Residential Programs and Services also identified two additional participants who had interacted and supported grieving students. The CARE coordinator’s role serves as a student advocate on the CARE Team—part of an extension of the Student Affairs office that works with
students of concern who had been reported to them. They complete the general intake for all student cases sent to the CARE Team, perform the initial outreach to each student, and triage the case as best as possible while providing appropriate referrals and resources. The Associate Director for Residence Life in Student Conduct also participated in Institution D’s focus group. Their primary job function examined conduct cases that occurred within the on-campus student population and facilitate educational conversations focused on restorative justice with students who had violated the Student Code of Conduct. All participants from Institution D served on the university’s CARE Team: a task force of student affairs professionals focused on serving at-risk students and students of concern. The counseling representative was unable to attend the focus group interview; however, all the representatives interviewed served on the CARE Team, often working with grieving students.

**Recruitment Schedule**

Student affairs professionals recommended for the study were sent a recruitment email (Appendix B) with an informed consent form attached. Respondents were asked to complete a brief questionnaire (Appendix C) detailing their role and experience at their respective university. Once all representatives from an institution completed this questionnaire, the aforementioned professionals were invited to participate in their institution’s focus group. In order to be eligible to participate in this study, professionals needed to currently be working in an on-campus or university-affiliated center, facility, or office that students could easily access. Prospective participants were also required to have experience working with college students who had experienced grief. Student staff members (including but not limited to resident advisors, counseling students, or academic advising interns) were excluded from the pool. All participants were referred to by title and position to preserve their anonymity.
Research Site

The research site for this study was split between four universities across the continental United States. Institution A was a Midwestern, rural university with approximately 7,500 students enrolled. Institution B was a Midwestern, suburban university with approximately 20,000 students enrolled. Institution C was a rural university located in the Pacific Northwest with approximately 11,500 students enrolled. Institution D was a Midwestern, suburban university with approximately 41,000 students enrolled. Interviews were conducted via Zoom video conferencing. This allowed the participants and researcher to complete the interview in a comfortable, private location. This interview format was particularly appropriate due to the COVID-19 restrictions at the time of this study as well as for the ability to remove geographical barriers to participation.

Instruments/Protocol

Researcher

As a function of qualitative research, the researcher is among the most valuable and exposed instruments that directs the study from start to finish. I, as the researcher, am someone who has experienced significant grief and loss during my collegiate career that consequentially dramatically altered the current state of my life. This required me to previously navigate the processes I sought to discover in this study. This allowed me to utilize some of my past experiences to prepare an interview protocol, script, and follow-up questions that would unearth the precise information I sought.

However, knowing this, I, as the researcher, was fully aware that my own experiences and subsequential biases might have affected how the collected data was analyzed. In order to help reduce these personal biases, understanding the concept of *bridling* in research was vital.
Bridling integrates the ideals from *bracketing* (restricting existing beliefs and assumptions regarding the topics) and combines this restriction with the understanding that one’s past experiences cannot be fully separated and discarded (Dahlberg & Dalhberg, 2019). However, bridling these memories, feelings, and expectations allowed the researcher to critically evaluate what information they were holistically observing without the completely restrictive grip of their own personal reality (Dahlberg & Dalhberg, 2019). Being mindful and aware of my own biases allowed for smoother data collection, interview protocol, and effective data analysis.

**Focus Group Interviews**

An interview protocol serves a vital function to create a successful focus group. The interview schedule for this study (Appendix D) was adapted from Breen’s (2006) guide which recommends a welcome, incorporating a topic overview, an establishment of ground rules and confidentiality within the group, followed by the formal interview questions. Questions asked included, “Can you recall a time that you (or your department) interacted with a student who has had a family member pass away while in college?,” “What do you see students seeking support for?,” “What supports do you perceive the students may additionally need?,” and “What are the most effective grief-coping strategies you promote with your students?,” (for full interview questions, see Appendix E).

**Data Collection**

Prior to participating, the focus group participants were sent an electronic informed consent document attached to their recruitment email verifying that they understood that the focus group would be documented utilizing audio and video recording. At the beginning of the session, the focus group participants were verbally reminded of the consent form’s content and were asked to again confirm their understanding prior to any recording had begun. The focus
groups lasted approximately 60-80 minutes, which allowed ample time for the participants to interact with one another and expand on themes that emerged through their discussion. As at the time of this study, the COVID-19 pandemic discouraged meetings in-person. Remaining mindful of the participants’ and researcher’s health was vital. Therefore, focus groups were hosted via Zoom video conferencing allowing a convenient, safe, and secure location, preventing sensitive information from spreading. In addition to audio and video recording, the researcher observed and noted participants’ body language and interpersonal interactions.

**Qualitative Data Analysis**

Once focus group interviews concluded, the audio was transcribed and compared with the audio/video recording to ensure accuracy. The transcripts were then reviewed again, the dialogue was appropriately tagged (coded), sorted, and analyzed to identify core themes across the interviews. According to Nowell et al., (2017), establishing and refining the core themes is among the more challenging aspects of qualitative data analysis. However, they asserted that utilizing a larger data set, returning to the raw data to consolidate themes and subthemes if needed, and having continued, consistent meetings with the rest of their team provided the most helpful ways to review, define, refine, and produce their themes and final report (Nowell et al., 2017). In an analogous fashion, the researcher planned similar meetings to both gain guidance and insight into themes found in the data collected, as well as used these meetings to cross-reference their own interpretation of the data.

When reporting these themes, existing literature was used as a comparison to evaluate how this study’s findings aligned with current knowledge. Additionally, this literature was used as a tool to support the credibility of the results. Regardless of whether the findings contradicted current literature, supported existing literature, or added novel information to the existing
knowledge pool, all the themes, subthemes, and striking quotes were briefly elaborated upon to provide the most complete, holistic understanding of the essence of what this study accomplished and where potential next steps in this topic area lie.

**Treatment of Data**

All data obtained was be stored, handled, and will be eventually destroyed as per the Institutional Review Board’s (IRB’s) guidelines. Participants were referred to only by their role at the institution (ex., housing representative or director of counseling services), and institutions were assigned pseudonyms based upon the order in which they were interviewed (ex., Institution A) to maintain confidentiality. The original interview audio recordings and video recordings were recorded via the recording feature of Zoom, then transferred to the researcher’s personal computer hard drive. All data, including video recordings, audio recordings, and transcriptions, were transferred and stored on an additional personal hard drive as a reliable backup and will be kept there for three years following this study. After three years, all data stored this way will be destroyed.

**Summary**

This qualitative study examined students’ grief experiences utilizing focus groups of student affairs professionals as a data source. The study utilized a phenomenological lens. Participants were selected from three mid-size institutions and one large institution. Institution’s senior student affairs official (SSAO)’s were asked for their recommendations of other professional staff members they would refer a grieving student to for support. These recommendations were contacted and invited to complete a brief demographics questionnaire, then were invited to participate in a 60–80-minute focus group interview. As interviews were being conducted, they were transcribed, and a constant comparative data analysis method was
utilized to identify core themes. These themes were identified by coding transcripts in accordance with qualitative research to develop an explanation of the phenomenon in which students navigate grief and receive support for grief within a college setting. Finally, the data collected will be stored and destroyed as per IRB guidelines three years after the conclusion of the study.
CHAPTER IV

Analysis

The purpose of this study was to holistically examine the challenges and barriers grieving students report to student affairs professionals, as well as discover the types of supports student affairs professionals provide to their grieving students. This chapter serves to provide insight into these barriers faced and supports offered. This chapter discusses emergent themes discovered from four focus group interviews of student affairs professionals conducted at four separate institutions. During these focus group interviews, participants were asked a structured series of questions (Appendix E) to explore two research questions: “what challenges/barriers do students who are experiencing grief, bereavement, and mourning report to student affairs professionals?,” and “in what ways do student affairs professionals/universities support students experiencing grief, mourning, and bereavement?” These themes are presented with respect to each research question.

Research Question #1: What challenges/barriers do students who are experiencing grief, bereavement, and mourning report to student affairs professionals?

The participants reported numerous challenges and barriers that they had observed in students throughout their professional careers. Often, these challenges compounded with one another. The academic representative from Institution D said, “challenges that students are going through when they're grieving are basically as many as there are available in the universe to hit them; that's what it feels like.” Most participants highlighted these challenges by recounting stories of students they had interacted with over the duration of their careers. Key themes that emerged included students’ academic struggles, emotional struggles, and financial and legal struggles. Additionally, the participants discussed several challenges regarding cultural variances
in grieving and challenges associated with the US culture of working through and moving on from grief.

Academic Challenges

Participants noted that a common challenge experienced by grieving students was struggles with academics. Institution C’s counseling representative shared that students commonly are “pretty unable to function for a time and yet have lots of demands that were still placed on them.” They also have, “uncertainty about how to communicate appropriately with faculty or supervisors about their need for some time and then sort of the question of what is enough time or appropriate time, and then how to navigate that.” Institution C’s academic representative shared that she had had students tell professors that they would have to miss class because of a funeral just to have professors respond saying, “you're going to take a hit of 20% of your grade,” which in turn caused students to panic further about academics. The CARE coordinator from Institution D also mentioned that similarly, she had seen students who were unable to get excused absences from courses in the event of the death of a loved one. This was due to some professors saying that, for example, their syllabi allowed for two blanket excused absences regardless of cause. However, if the student required more days off for any reason, they would start having their grades negatively impacted. The CARE coordinator from Institution D expressed a dislike for this, describing the policy as “a little bit rigid.”

Several participants reported that some students exhibited an overconfidence or overambition when it came to their ability to complete courses while processing their grief. Institution C’s academic representative shared that,
Something I've heard on a recurrent basis has been students saying, I just want to keep going to class, keep working like they don't want to change anything, because if they stay busy they don't have to think about it [the loss they experienced]. Institution B’s academic representative said, “students experience, I would say, they exhibit overconfidence like ‘no I only, I only need one day, I only need to be gone for one day,’ and then we’re almost begging them to take more.” She further shared that she saw students who often asked, “how do I keep up with school,” especially during exam season. In her experience, she described observing the effects of grief lead to students saying, “I’m struggling with academics.” For example, some students struggled to focus on courses after the loss of a loved one. The housing representative from Institution B recounted a story of a student whose brother had been killed and her struggle with overconfidence combined with her academic course load.

I can think really specifically about a first-generation student who didn't know how to use the university system, and was struggling academically, in part, her brother had been killed. I'm not sure what type of violence that caused it, but I think he'd been shot and had died. And she didn't ask for help. Originally, she was like, “I'm going to make it and I'm going to graduate; I'm going to do these things.” It was fall semester that this happened, maybe close to fall break. When it came to spring semester, she'd been on academic probation she's now, she got flagged to my radar because she wasn't doing well in her classes. She was failing I think most of them, at this point, for the second semester now. This participant further shared that she had to eventually help the student to withdraw for the semester as a result of her grief, stating “at the time I was talking with her, she needed to withdraw for her GPA.” Institution C’s academic representative shared that at the end of the
quarter, many students needed “some additional assistance to figure out how to withdraw versus ask for an incomplete, because they thought they could do it, and turns out they can't.”

The CARE coordinator from Institution D shared that she often finds students who “just can’t focus on classes right now” because of their struggles with grief. Institution D’s academic representative shared that she had to help students “withdraw from all subjects because they had a semester where they lost someone and their grades plummeted, they weren't able to keep up and they fell into a depression.” She further said that the grief can affect academics even “if it’s been a year later and their grades tanked,” resulting in students not understanding why “they didn’t get the grade that they wanted” and sometimes asking for assistance in withdrawing from the university. Institution C’s counseling representative had a similar sentiment, sharing it was important “that [students have] some flexibility with coursework without feeling like they have to give it up. I think that's something that students really struggle with,” especially because “sometimes people are like, ‘well just withdraw.’” She elaborated that, school is something that's stable for them in a very chaotic period and so having that routine, but being able to have enough flexibility that they feel like they can still grieve and have a chance at being successful, I think, is something that a lot of students want.

Emotional Challenges

A myriad of varying student emotions and emotional challenges were noted from nearly every participant. The housing representative from Institution D shared that when working with grieving students, there was “just all this complicated emotional stuff going on.” Some of the commonly expressed emotions included feelings of isolation, guilt, regret, pain, and anger.
Isolation. Three participants shared that students often felt alone in their grief. Institution B’s counseling representative shared that she had students tell her that they felt isolated from their peers, saying,

there's a sense of, “nobody's going to understand me, nobody's going to understand, my friends don't understand why I need to keep talking about this, my friends don't want to hear about it, they think I should be over it by now,” that kind of thing.

Institution C’s counseling representative shared a similar sentiment, saying, that students she sees are “often worried that if they talk to their family about it [the death], they'll upset mom or dad or parent or sibling.” She called this phenomenon a part of “the stigma that leads to isolation,” sharing that this stigma against sharing stories of grief with others furthers the feeling of loneliness. She went on to say that students sought out her center’s services for this isolation feeling, saying,

I think a lot of times they want a place to feel understood and like they're not alone in their experience. And they're not finding that out in their sort of day-to-day communities for whatever reason. Maybe because they're not willing to share because it feels too fragile, or because others don't know how to respond in, in helpful ways. And so, it feels weird and awkward, or some combination thereof.

Institution B’s academic representative shared that sometimes these students simply needed someone to be there for them to assist with this loneliness. She stated that students share things such as, “I'm really sad about this and it would be helpful to talk to someone,” or “they're struggling with the words of how to describe what's going on or it spills out like, ‘I've lost three people already this semester.’”
Guilt and Regret. Several participants mentioned that students often felt feelings of guilt or regret during their time of grief. This stemmed from multiple sources. For some students, the regret came from the idea of missed futures. Institution C’s counseling representative stated,

I think, more often maybe guilt comes along at some point for whether or not they stayed, or whether or not they were as connected to the person who died, as they felt they should have been, or wished they were.

Institution A’s counseling representative recalled a client they had worked with who lost their parent. The student had an estranged relationship with the parent and sought counseling for support.

This individual was managing many things, but one thing being all of the emotions that come with grief. A level of guilt for many people can come with grief, but for this student was how the relationship had been prior to the loss, or how it had not been. So, for some of it, the work is going through processing that the guilt of the loss or the guilt that comes with the loss. That was certainly an aspect of our work together.

The academic representative from Institution B shared that some students expressed guilt for not visiting a family member before they had passed, saying, “certainly we see students who experienced a lot of guilt if they didn't go see a family member who they knew was terminal because they were trying to balance school.” The counseling representative from Institution B shared a similar story about one of her former clients who had lost her terminally ill mother.

I do remember one client in particular who lost her mother to cancer, and while she was aware that her mother was very ill, the progression of the illness was a lot more rapid than she had been led to believe it would be. So, her mother's death was a was a surprise, in that sense, in terms of the timing. And there was just a lot of regret around her mother
not living long enough to see her graduate and those kinds of things. I think having students lose a parent, when they're still in college, there's a lot of feelings about the missed futures the not having the parent there for their graduation, not having the parent there whenever they might get married in the future or whenever they might have a child. So, those kinds of issues are really painful.

Institution C’s housing representative reported that some students feel guilt from simply not knowing what they should be feeling,

Many of the students will say things like, “well, how should I be feeling?,” and it's like “why, I don't know how you should be feeling, it's however you want to.” You know, everybody processes that, that differently and then sometimes it's guilt coming from not feeling like they think they should feel.

He further elaborated that in his experience, when working with these students it was important to validate that whatever the student was feeling was an appropriate feeling to feel. He shared that students felt guilty “if they're not crying or sobbing or they're not punching walls, they feel like they should be, and if they're not they're confused, right? And so sometimes that's what we often see with students.”

Similarly, Institution B’s housing representative shared her experience with a student who lost her father in another state and the combination of the idea of missed futures and the feeling of not knowing what to feel, saying

She truly wasn't sure I think how to feel because she wasn't close to her father. There's a reason she was the only next of kin...But some of the stuff she was starting to feel in that moment, were feelings of opportunities lost like, “could I have repaired this relationship? Now we never will, that door closed.”
The housing representative also shared that initially the student seemed fine and task-focused, however,

I checked in with her later, and she was feeling a little bit less shocked and able to articulate some more of that “I've lost this opportunity and I don't know what that means,” and telling her “it was okay to know that or to not know.” Supporting her through the uncertainty and being okay with uncertainty.

**Pain and Anger.** Institution C’s counseling representative shared that students experienced a multitude of emotions when it came to grief, one of which included anger. She said,

I think we see the whole sort of a range of the shock and disbelief that can come with loss, anger. Anger at the person who died. Sometimes anger at others who are perceived to maybe not done enough or prevented the death in some way. Sometimes anger at themselves.

She stated that this anger, when directed at oneself, was often due to the closeness—or lack thereof—with the deceased.

The CARE coordinator from Institution D recounted that she saw students who were angry that others did not share their pain, saying,

They want the world to bend to their pain because for them the world has completely changed, but for everyone around them, it hasn't at all. So that, a lot of time it's pain and anger that no one has noticed that the world has bent. Like, “what do you mean I can't just retake a whole semester for free? I have to withdraw and go in again? Don't you know that this happened to me? Don't you know this?,” and so a lot of pain and anger because, the things haven't, the world hasn't changed around them.
Later, she shared that there were “students who feel that anger towards the situation and loss.” Specifically,

I've seen a little bit of students who feel, which is completely valid and fine, but angry and bitter towards the situation and that that person died and now because they have to, by the nature of the beast, focus on this grief and this thing that happened.

She continued that these students felt, 

So, just, mad like, “I don't want this to be my life. I wanted that to be my life and I can never get that back now.” So, a little bit of bitterness towards the person who died and the obligation and responsibility that's now placed on them as an older member. They're not five anymore so they do have different responsibilities than the younger siblings would.

The academic representative from Institution D shared that in her experience,

They're [the students] are often angry. The grief is processed in a way of being really hurt and impatient, and they don't understand what they don't get an answer. And then you get in there and you realize their husband or their wife or their partner just died.

Similarly, Institution D’s housing representative recalled a time she worked with a student who was struggling to get support from faculty and expressed that she was angry that no one seemed to “give her a break” after her one of her parents committed suicide. The housing professional said that “pain and anger is, is really the root of what the student is probably feeling,” and shared that she had struggled to work with some of these students before when this pain and anger caused them to lash out. She recounted a conversation she had to have with the aforementioned student experiencing this hurt,

I get that you need this help, but you also need to understand that the decisions you're making and the way that you're approaching faculty with the, “this happened to me and
so you have to give me exactly what I want,” that's maybe not the best approach to having a conversation.

She stated that this interaction seriously impacted her professional career and shared that “based on what she was saying, I was like, ‘Okay, I need to keep helping her in this, she is still struggling to process,’” though it was hard to not take the student’s pain and anger as a personal attack when trying to offer help. Institution D’s academic representative mentioned that in her experience, in the case of a recent death, they were “always a little bit more raw,” and that “you can hear them talking about the pain.” She also shared that it was important to hear the story from the student as this pain can cause additional issues for them, saying,

Often, as an advocate we're listening to the story underneath and it really, what you can hear is that a parent died in high school or a month ago or a year ago, and now their behaviors and their actions are plummeting. They're not making good decisions because they're really in pain and grieving.

This pain from grief is multifaceted and complex, and each individual student may respond in their own, unique way, requiring patience and understanding from the people assisting them.

**Financial and Legal Challenges**

Some participants described that students also struggled with financial and legal challenges while grieving. Institution B’s housing representative shared a story of a student whose brother had been killed. She was described as “financially struggling” after the loss and ultimately needed to withdraw for financial reasons as she could no longer afford to remain in college. Institution C’s housing representative shared similar stories, such as,

I've heard students make comments about having to leave school to now go get a job to go support their family because the person who passed was primary breadwinner or
contributed significantly to the family income. And now there's the student now feels a sense of responsibility to take that role, and therefore their answer to that is to drop out of school and go get a job.

Their counseling representative said that financial struggles such as the reworking of financial aid or travel expenses for funerals were often “where things can fall through the cracks for students.” Institution D’s academic representative said that she had seen students who lost parents struggle with finances because “the family ran out of money because that parent paid for college. Now they’re going bankrupt, or they don't have any money.” Institution B’s housing representative shared that sometimes students elected to miss funerals because students felt that “‘if I leave, I can't come back,’ or ‘I can't afford it, it's just really expensive.’” Institution D’s conduct representative said that she had seen students who had lost someone then begin to struggle with finances regarding housing and basic needs. She has asked students things such as, “do you have some place to stay? Who's paying your rent? If your parents, if your parent and financial providers is out of the picture now, what does that look like for you?” Institution D’s CARE coordinator said that one of the first questions students ask her about after academics often included financial struggles. She then expanded on the idea of financial struggles to struggles with students and off-campus jobs. She said that if a student comes into work with a different demeanor after a loss, their boss might say, “‘hey, you don't have a good attitude here, I'm going to let you go.’ Now they have financial concerns.” She also reported that she had seen students who missed college events “because they had to go home and babysit so their single mother could go to work,” due to financial constraints.

Institution A’s academic representative shared a story of a student who lost their single parent, leaving them as the only next of kin to work with property, their remaining younger
siblings’ welfare, and death certificates. She said that when someone passes, “there's all this legal stuff and kids, children 18 and under but [students] don’t—I don't know how to deal with a lot of that stuff if I needed to know it today—[students] don't know that” either. Thankfully, the institution’s student legal services proved helpful for that student, leading the academic representative to say,

we typically wouldn't think of student legal services when it comes to helping students who are grieving, but it was huge in this particular situation to help this student manage some of those logistics that they were tragically having to deal with.

Institution B’s housing representative shared a story of a student who lost her estranged father, leaving her as the only next of kin, and how she had struggled with “adult things,” referring to official paperwork and legal documents, “because she had to go to this county in another state and identify him, I think, technically and like, officially like sign things as an adult.” Institution D’s CARE coordinator described that one of the biggest resources she gives students is information on their campus’ student legal services as some students have legal issues regarding final affairs they had not experienced pre-loss. This was mirrored by this institution's housing representative, who described a student who found themself “in this executor of the estate role” with “all these bills and all these things that are going to have to be paid” after they lost their caretaker. The student was struggling with “limited family resources that they had in terms of family support from non-immediate family members” on top of these legal challenges, and the campus’ legal services office proved immensely helpful for that student. Institution D’s CARE coordinator mentioned that she’d had students experience legal issues, like one student whose “family member was murdered by another family member and so there's a court case involved,
and there's DCS involved, and they just keep getting pulled back into processes that they have no control over.”

Substance Abuse

Three institutions’ participants shared that they observed some students who struggled with substance abuse as a result of their grief. Institution C’s academic representative shared that she had observed students who “cope by drinking or using excessive amounts of substances.” She said that in those moments, she tries to emphasize the importance of self-care while trying not to “lecture” the student, saying,

We're not going to say, “don't do that.” We are going to say, “this is not potentially the best time for you to be coping with substances,” because, “some things are depressants and some things will prevent you from being able to process the normal grief,” whatever that is. And sometimes it's a health and safety issue, so a lot of, “just please be careful with yourselves and if you need help, let us know.”

She further went on to say that she encouraged students to think about creative ways to cope (such as journaling, listening to music, or painting) if what they were currently doing did not seem sufficient. She shared that she guided students away from substances by forming a “partnership with the student” and providing a list of services the student could access as opposed to simply “telling them what not to do.”

The student conduct representative from Institution D shared a story about a freshman young man who had several “belligerent episodes in the residence halls” as a result of mixing Xanax and alcohol. As a result, he had multiple alcohol violations and was nearly eligible for suspension from the school by the time he met with her. When the conduct representative met
with the student, he told her that he had lost his father in high school. During his conduct meeting,

he admitted that he was still experiencing, he hadn't quite gotten over his father’s death and was still experiencing pain from that. And the only time he doesn't think about it was when he was under the influence of a substance—either the alcohol or the Xanax.

The conduct representative additionally shared that tragically, the student passed away a couple of years after their conduct meeting. She shared that,

I don't think it was conclusive as to if it was an overdose, or suicide. But for me, that was one of those stories that just stuck out that, I don't know if this kid ever got over it, if he ever, and not that you can get over the loss of a parent, but I'm not sure that he ever found the resolve that he needed to move on with life. And it's you know it's not conclusive what, what his death was about, but it was definitely untimely.

Institution D’s CARE coordinator recalled the story of a young man who had survived a terrible car accident that had killed several of his friends and his struggle with substance abuse,

But he was there when it happened and survived. So, he had a lot of survivor's guilt and then because he was there, a lot of night terrors from the sounds inside. So, he just couldn't get right up. A lot of it was just heartbreaking and a lot of it comes from self-medicating like what [the conduct representative] said, the only time they didn't feel it was when they were under, the influence of something else. And so, finding coping mechanisms, but not healthy ones and ones that will damage later on.

The academic representative from Institution D shared that she had also seen multiple students abuse substances in reaction to a death, which in turn compounded other issues that she observed the students face.
**Cultural Needs and Barriers**

When speaking about supporting students in their grief, participants noted that it was imperative to understand their students’ varying cultural needs and backgrounds, emphasizing the need to honor these backgrounds and the students’ wishes. When asked about differences in how professionals worked with grieving students, Institution B’s counseling representative shared, “I try to pay attention to their cultural framework and their cultural frame of reference,” because “I do think cultural traditions and family traditions around loss are critically important to understand and helping people figure out how to navigate the grieving process.” She continued, saying that,

for many of our students, this is the first significant loss that they've experienced in their lifetime. They may not even know what those traditions look like or what they might entail so sometimes, giving them some psychoeducation about “What is a viewing?, What is a wake?, What is a funeral?, What is a visitation?.” It won't necessarily cover all the bases because I can't presume to know what that looks like in all the various traditions, but some sometimes it's as simple as giving some basic information about what they can expect that helps them feel more in control when they when they approach those gatherings.

Institution B’s housing representative shared that when she’s talking to “somebody who is more religiously inclined, talking about, ‘What are your traditions like? What are you planning to do? What's important to you?,’” was important to help best understand the student’s needs.

When asked about differing challenges students faced when receiving support, Institution A’s housing representative shared that,
Our role is to find the right resources and when it comes to different people's cultures. I think it's really important during grieving to find someone that also identifies with that same culture, to help that person through the grieving process because they cannot, they're the only ones that can really truly appreciate the culture and an understanding and providing support that that student needs. And I think, whether it's culture or spirituality. And it's ironic because [Institution A’s academic representative] sent this update just yesterday in an email, but that's why we have a partnership with the Association of Campus Ministries. And it's wonderful that we have all sorts of denominations represented within that association. So we, if spirituality is important, we can find a person to come in and identify with that same religion and help that student through the grieving process.

Institution A’s counseling representative agreed with the housing representative, saying “we also examine in counseling students’ belief of the afterlife or what they believe happens after death and how is that impacting their grief. So that's absolutely a part that counseling often processes through.” Regarding the ability to provide documentation for her institution’s bereavement policy, Institution B’s academic representative shared that “for some of our students, their cultural traditions are so different than maybe what the folks who wrote the policy were picturing that they don't have documentation. And so, it is a little tricky for them.” Institution D’s conduct representative mentioned that if students were to be successful, their support needed to be mindful of cultural background as well. For example, she used the week-long practice in Judaism of “sitting Shiva, where there's an extended amount of time where you're actually out that may impact students of Jewish descent, more so than the non-Jewish students who might have a
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memorial service for a weekend and be done.” She later shared that regarding students seeking support for grief,

there's cultural barriers, right? So people who are from marginalized backgrounds may have a healthy distrust for systems and institutions and rightfully so. For whatever experiences they've had in the past, or whatever understanding they have of systemic institutional oppression. And so I think there are lots of barriers—internal barriers, I will say—to students seeking help and coming to the Dean of Students Office, or notifying their professor, advocate office, or disclosing in a conduct meeting that they're really struggling personally.

When asked about differences among working with grieving students, Institution C’s counseling representative shared that,

certainly, there are individual and cultural factors that play into the grief process. And so, depending on the students’ cultural identities and practices that can shape [the work].

Thinking about Native American students or Indigenous students that we've worked with who have specific grief rituals or things that, the ways that they process and honor the person that has passed. That certainly shapes, then, what the therapeutic work looks like or how what we suggest in terms of ritual or things along those lines. And that would be true for a variety of students who are maybe closer to their racial or ethnic identities and cultural practices.

When Institution A’s housing representative was asked what influences differences he observed with grieving students, he shared that,
I also think their spirituality can come into play as well, and how that response is established once you get to know the student a bit and you understand their beliefs and their thoughts, then perhaps our approach changes.

Some participants noted that international students were often impacted with cultural barriers when grieving. Institution A’s academic representative shared that,

the university tragically lost a couple of international students together during the school year. And so, there was a large memorial held to honor those students. And memorials are always student-driven [by] those who are closest to that student.

She continued,

But in that situation, there were some cultural pieces that were unique that were different than probably any of us are used to experiencing at a memorial service. But it was perfect and honoring the cultures of the students who were lost, and the students who were grieving, and so we tried to be very mindful of helping to support that looking like what it needed to look like.

Institution C’s counseling representative shared another story about the loss of an international student on her campus and how the resulting community they left behind were able to come together and honor the student that was lost. After being asked about emotions that grieving students expressed, Institution D’s academic representative shared that,

we have to look at their different cultures and different ways their personalities react to grief and how they process that pain. And so, we see an array from A to Z depending on that. And in this case I'm thinking of international students react different to this for parent loss versus domestic students and down the line.
Institution D’s CARE coordinator shared that the way culture shapes responses to grief varied, saying for example,

some students belong to organizations that have their own culture, or religions that have their own culture, and so when something happens, they don’t really have to worry about food for like, the next two months because everyone’s going to bring food over, and there’s going to be this person who’s going to stay with them this weekend, and this person who stays with them next weekend, or their parents are like you’re coming home because you have to be with family now. And so, they come, and they’re surrounded.

She continued, saying there are other students who “either don't have that [culture] and want it or don't have it and don't want it,” saying that it was not the way the latter students grew up. She said, “and I feel a little bit bad for both sides,” because “people come at grief from different cultures and different perspectives and different needs. And sometimes I think we as people struggle to not enforce our own on to someone else.”

**US Culture of Grief**

Several participants expressed frustration with the US culture of grief and how students were expected to process and move on from their grief in a linear, quick fashion. Institution C’s counseling representative described that “there is also cultural pressure to just be okay and move on and not let it [a loss] impact you.” Students just “think that they just need to kind of soldier forward, despite how they might be feeling or how the grief might be impacting them,” and that “culturally, in the larger sense of that word, that there also just continues to be a pressure from the larger culture to hurry up and get over it.” She described that though US culture has some education on mental health, it does not value education on grief. Regarding grief as a process, she additionally said that there is a lot of variation in,
what that process can look like for folks, so I find to a lot of times students end up
pathologizing themselves for normal reactions, like, “Well, why can't I get out of bed?
Why am I so tired? Why don't I want to eat? What's wrong with me?” and I'm like, “Well
you're grieving. There's nothing wrong with you. This is what it looks like.” I think that
those can be barriers.

Institution C’s housing representative added that regarding their new reality post-loss, culturally
in the US students feel like they are pressured to move on and that,
they have to make a quick decision. So how do you help a student who feels under
pressure to make a quick decision while they're grieving? That doesn't have a time stamp
on it. Oh, after three days you'll be done grieving so then you can make clear decisions?
It doesn't work that way. So how do you balance all of those with the students can be
challenging.

Institution D’s housing representative said,

I was just going to say that my experience of our US culture of grief is that people expect
folks to get over things and get back to work. And again in those moments where I've
been able to develop relationships with students who are going through the grieving
process, the relief that washes over them. The “I'm not alone in this moment” when
they've been able to find faculty members or staff members who can say, “you know, my
gosh, you're dealing with this on top of trying to write my paper about metaphysical
religions or trying to learn what it is that makes up DNA,” and you find that faculty
member that connects because they also had a family member that died of pancreatic
cancer or that understands, or is willing to take the moment to pause and just try to
imagine how horrified they would be if they had lost a brother and a parent in a domestic
violence situation and say, “yeah, let's shift the focus of how we're learning on this and help you manage that.” Those moments are too rare, and too far apart.

Institution D’s CARE coordinator said,

I also think this is a bigger part of the culture of the US. At least, a lot of people know buzzwords like depression and anxiety and grief, but they're not prepared for the reality of it. So, when they have a student who they get an attendance memo for, and they meet with that student, and then the student does start attending again after two weeks, they start doing better, and then they drop off again. They [the instructor] say “we already talked about this, you were doing better.” Like, no, they're [the student] going to be sad again for the rest of their life.

She further described that knowing this, students were not going to feel better overnight and that “understanding someone has depression and understanding that that means they might not answer your email for weeks, and that's ok, or they might behave differently, or they might react to stress with irritability” needed to be paramount to those who are “claiming that role of support.”

Institution D’s academic representative expressed a frustration with struggles that students faced with the US culture of grief and her inability to change the overall society at large to benefit students.

I can't change the other places. American culture, what do we get like, a few days off when someone has left the planet? And we never see them again, we get some time off. The whole thing is so bizarre in this country compared to other countries that would give a little bit more respect to that.
Research Question #2: In what ways do student affairs professionals/universities support students experiencing grief, mourning, and bereavement?

Participants reported numerous supports that were provided to grieving students. These supports were able to be provided to students once the staff learned that a student was struggling with grief. Some support services included academic support, counseling support and support related to housing. Student legal services, coping skills, and empathy are also provided to grieving students needing assistance. Additionally, some universities have bereavement policies, which allow students a number of excused absences from coursework after the event of the loss of a loved one. Finally, the quality of support was discussed in combination with factors that positively and negatively impacted it, such as departmental networking, the staff’s educational background, and additional trainings that staff had received relating to grief.

Identification of Grieving Students

As one may expect, if staff do not know a student has lost a loved one, they have limited ways of knowing that the student needs support. Institution B’s academic representative shared that, “what guides our different approach is usually the methods through which the student contacts us.” Staff reported a wide variety of ways they learned about students grieving. One example from Institution D stood out from the rest as they had learned a student’s parent had passed rather violently via a news article about a former student athlete from Institution D. Their conduct representative said,

but this particular case, the father murdered the mother and then killed himself. And it came up through the news. We brought it to the CARE Team and discovered that the former [Institution D] student actually had a sister who was currently a student. And so,
we had to basically talk as a CARE Team about what support could be offered to that student.

However, this seemed to be an exception to a few key common reporting themes identified in this study. These include faculty and academic staff, housing staff, self-report, and CARE Reports.

**Faculty and Academic Staff.** Some professionals reported that they were made aware of students struggling with grief through faculty and academic staff. The academic representative from Institution B said that a, faculty member, might read something in an essay that the student has written and chat with them about it, or notice that they're crying in class one day, or just notice that something is noticeably different and cares about them and asks about what's going on, which in turn, prompted faculty to reach out to her office. In a similar thought, she said,

> Our office gets a lot of contact from faculty in particular, seeking advice. You know, “the student has shared this with me. How do I best help them? I really care about them, and I want to help them, but I just don't know the best way to do that.”

She further said that some of these grieving students are identified through both CARE Reports that “can be entered by a faculty or staff member by putting it into a web form,” “and then they can be, a Dean of Students’ phone call can also be turned into a report.”

The housing representative from Institution B agreed and further noted that they also received grief calls from academic advisors who maintained a close relationship with their students. The CARE coordinator from Institution D shared that she also gets referrals from advisors. Like Institution B, the academic representative from Institution C also shared that faculty often reach out to her office, though sometimes these interactions may be very basic. She
said that “faculty will sometimes submit a report that says, ‘student emailed to state that family member died, and they won't be here for two days, thought someone should know.’” Institution A’s academic representative stated that numerous academic staff may be the first ones to know about a student’s loss,

Sometimes the first person to know is a professor, sometimes the first person to know is our office [Vice President of Student Affairs], sometimes the first person to know is an advisor. Sometimes the first person to know is an admissions counselor, especially if it's a freshman and that's who they and their family built a relationship with coming into the university. Sometimes it's the Office of the Registrar. They tend to reach out to the person (or the people) who are closest to them. And by closest sometimes that's emotionally closest and sometimes that is physically closest.

**Housing Staff.** Academic staff were not the only ones who were reported to be among the first to know when a student was grieving. Participants commonly shared that housing staff members were another of the potential first responders to students working through grief. Institution A’s academic representative shared that the situation of grief is unique, and when a student is struggling or in this case, grieving, they tend to reach out to the person, or the people who are closest to them. And by closest sometimes that's emotionally closest and sometimes that is physically closest. So sometimes the first person to know, is their RA or someone in housing.

When asked about who students seek out on campus to process grief, the housing representative from Institution B said that in addition to academic staff, “I also think they tell their RA’s and their peers.” She followed this statement with concern for the RA’s, saying, “I know that our RA’s get a lot of secondary trauma from being the person that people go to and being that
caretaker.” She then elaborated that “The RA’s put reports in or will call for support if they need it. And I think it's because they see them [the grieving student], they have that relationship with them [the grieving student].” This housing representative speculated that the RA’s might be a first contact because,

some folks feel like they want to test the waters first, and something that feels a little bit up from “my friend or my roommate” but not quite up to “I want to talk to a counselor or professional staff member of any sort.”

Institution C’s academic representative shared that her office receives referrals from a variety of sources, but,

less frequently we get a residence life staff member’s student or professional staff member who encounter somebody in distress in the hall who is emotionally not doing well and who they can then say like “oh, there are resources and we're going to go ahead and let some folks know.”

**Self-Report.** One way that participants discovered a student was grieving was from the student directly contacting one of their offices. Institution A’s academic representative shared that though students were referred to her a multitude of ways, her office often received calls from grieving students needing assistance, citing a specific example of a student who reached out to her for assistance after losing their parent in critical condition over the weekend. Institution B’s academic representative shared that students had frequently reported a loss “through stop-ins at our office previously, and that afforded our front desk, as well as those of us who can hear our front desk, the ability to discern a student who just wanted some [assistance].” She further described that “we intake them [grieving students] over the phone or in person...and those numbers are staggering. I mean they're huge.” Institution A’s counseling representative shared
that counselors at her counseling clinic meet with the students directly and often find out that “they're coming to counseling because they have lost a loved one, or they're already in counseling and then a loved one passes away.” Institution C’s housing representative shared that students come seeking support, sharing “specifically this student that I can remember informed us that they had a parent who passed, and we provided support to the extent that they wanted support. They were pretty upfront with us.” The conduct representative from Institution D shared that who the student sought out for help depended on their level of trust with staff and university workers but emphasized “that there's an entry point for everyone somewhere.” She shared,

On the other hand, because [Institution D] is so big, there's a connection point somewhere for everyone. So maybe you don't trust [conduct representative]. But maybe you do trust [the director of a first-generation college student] program, right? Maybe you don't trust [the CARE coordinator], but maybe you do trust [the director] in La Casa, right? There's always a space where students can find themselves, even if it's not the official process.

**CARE Reports.** Two institutions, Institution B and Institution D mentioned something called a CARE Report. A CARE Report is essentially a report that any student, staff member, or faculty member could submit to report a student of concern. Three institutions (Institution B, Institution C, and Institution D) described having a CARE Team that investigated these reports for students of concern. Institution C reported having a similar method of reporting to the CARE Reports, and their academic representative shared that CARE “stands for coordinated assessment and resource education.” Institution A’s housing representative described having a similar case management team to these CARE Teams that responds to students of concern and “get together figure out what resources are needed and try to help the student out in any way we can.” The counseling representative from Institution B described their CARE Team as “the formal body
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that reviews CARE Reports and makes early interventions to try to prevent situations from escalating to a crisis point.” These reports were another avenue through which grieving students were identified by student affairs professionals. For example, the housing representative from Institution B shared that various people, be it housing staff, academic staff, or concerned students will “refer the student for the bereavement, and they'll put a CARE Report in,” to notify the CARE Team that there is a student of concern. Similarly, the counseling representative from Institution B said that her office assisted in “managing students of concern or students who have had CARE Reports filed,” with student grief being one of the reasons a CARE Report may be filed. Institution B’s housing representative shared that,

if the students live on-campus and we had a CARE Report or something happens during an RA or professional staff incident, I (myself and my counterpart), are the ones who follow up on those student concerns, and that includes bereavement.

This representative further shared that she saw bereavement notifications from CARE Reports submitted from a variety of sources, saying that “they'll refer the student for the bereavement, and they'll put a CARE Report in. And so then, it'll depend on who gets that report about who does the follow up from the case management teams.” Institution D’s conduct representative shared that “I feel like there's always a student who may appear on our radar through either a CARE Report to the Dean of Students Office or through a residence life report to an RA.”

Supports Provided

The conduct representative from Institution D shared that supporting grieving students was paramount for student success. Regarding grieving students needing support,

right now, as you're grieving, we realize that you need some additional support, and that additional support doesn't mean lowering the bar for success. That means giving you
some stools to stand on, right? Connecting you with counselors or connecting you with a grief group. But ultimately our job as a university is to ensure that academic and holistic student success. And so, we have to think about support mechanisms more heavily when we are working with students who are grieving and in grief and crisis because that standard of success is still going to be there, but there's more university resources, time, and commitment that goes into that individual student.

Grieving students sometimes are unable to tell what kinds of support that they need. The housing representative from Institution B shared that she “had a student whose sibling younger sibling passed away,” but when the student came to her office for support, “he didn't know what he needed.”

However, most commonly students asked staff for help with withdrawing from courses or sought other academic support and assistance, primarily in advocating on behalf of the students to their professors and faculty. Many supports included resource referrals, including referrals to counseling and student legal services. Participants further elaborated on coping mechanisms they promoted with students and the importance of empathy when working with grieving students. Three institutions discussed student bereavement policies as a potential source of support offered to students.

**Academic Support.** Participants noted that students frequently asked for support regarding academics. This commonly included having a staff member advocate for the student or reaching out to professors on their behalf. Institution A’s counseling representative said that she provided multitudes of support options to students, one of them being this advocacy with professors, saying that “we're also trying to coordinate support for that student in a number of ways [for example], reaching out to their professors to make sure that the professor's aware that
the student might be away for a portion of time” so “if a student is needing for us to reach out to their professors for them, we will absolutely do that.” This institution’s academic representative described that sometimes,

there are times their [the student’s] head is just spinning, and they don't know who to talk to or what to say, and they say, “Yes, please. Just reach out to my professors for me. Tell them what happened, and tell them I'll be in communication with them when I'm able.”

She shared a story of a student she had helped who had lost their critically wounded single parent, leaving the student as the only adult family member left as next of kin. On top of trying to settle other affairs at the university, this student had sent a note to their professors letting them know what had occurred and needed assistance contacting the professors who had not responded. Institution A’s academic representative was contacted, stepped in, and was, able to say, “okay you focus on caring for yourself, caring for your family, your siblings, and let us help take care of some of the communication here at the university so that you don't need to worry about that piece.” So, at that point, I worked to help make contact with those professors who hadn't responded.

She further stated that if professors were unresponsive after that, she would reach out to department chairs to attempt to make that contact. Some of the academic support this student specifically received included flexibility with completing courses from a distance and flexibility with course deadlines. Institution A’s academic representative shared that “the student was also thinking that they may not return for the rest of the semester, and they were hoping to be able to complete their classes from a distance.” She also shared that “some of those classes they were able to complete by the normal deadline, some of them they took incompletes in, and the faculty members are working with them over the summer to wrap those up.” Referring to these
accommodations, she stated that it was important for faculty to ensure that they were “doing what they can to help students who have extraordinary circumstances while still being fair to everyone else.” Institution A’s counseling representative shared that one of the things she did in her work to support students academically included “advocating for incompletes for some of the classes that they [a grieving student she worked with] weren’t able to finish at the time at the end of the semester.” Institution A’s housing representative mirrored this sentiment of advocating for students to professors in addition to other avenues of support.

Institution B’s academic representative similarly shared that “when they [grieving students] call and ask for their instructors to be notified because of a loss, or email, that becomes our point in which we can interface with them” to assist and support. Sometimes this support was “transactional, like, ‘I just need my instructors notified,’” while sometimes the students required more support. For example, she said that some students struggled to document why absences were required. She said, “we'll go to bat for [the student] with a faculty member if we have to and explain the situation,” on the student’s behalf.

Regarding academic support, Institution C’s academic representative stated that with some students,

school is something that's stable for them in a very chaotic period and so having that routine but being able to have enough flexibility that they feel like they can still grieve and have a chance at being is something that's a lot of students want.

Institution C’s counseling representative shared that her office,

will provide support letters to faculty, basically saying “yes the student is in counseling and working through grief issues and we appreciate any support that you can provide to
them as they might need a little bit more time to get things done or not be quite as functional as you have known them to be in the past.”

She also shared that she felt this helped the student feel like their experiences were validated while also providing support from faculty. Institution D’s conduct representative stated that it was important for staff to serve as “advisor of some sort that can help that student mediate with their faculty members” as well.

**Counseling.** Nearly every participant described that after the loss of a loved one, students were referred to counseling as a method of processing their grief. Institution A’s academic representative shared that in one specific case of a student who lost his single parent,

I connected them with [Institution A’s counseling representative] and her team. And I think we talked about it. I gave him a heads up that “a counselor will be reaching out to you, and some of the things that they may talk to you about would be the possibility of individual counseling, but they may also talk to you about some group counseling options related to grief.”

Institution A’s housing representative shared that based upon what the individual needs, he determines which office the student needed to be referred to first, including the counseling center as a first choice. Institution A’s counseling representative shared that when a fellow student passes away, she intentionally looks for relationships the student had “so that we can then reach out to those who have been impacted by this loss to make sure that they’re aware of the counseling clinic, resources and any other support options for them.” She further stated that for supporting grieving students as a whole,
If a student is still here on campus and is able and wanting to meet with a counselor, that might be something that we offer. If they’re not here, we’ll absolutely offer that at any point when they’re ready and able and willing.

She also said that in addition to individual counseling and crisis services offered to students, every year her counseling office attempts to offer grief group sessions grieving students are able to join if they so choose, depending,

on if we can get it up and going. But that is something that we do try to get up and going. So that could also be an option for students when or if they become ready for that kind of support.

Institution B’s counseling representative shared that Institution B also tries to offer a grief support group every year, saying “there's a real benefit to being able to meet somebody else who's gone through the same thing who's your age, your peer,” however, also shared that it was difficult to arrange due to scheduling between other students. When asked about grief coping strategies, Institution C’s counseling representative shared that her office provides “both individual and then group support as well,” further sharing that “when we have enough students who are interested, we do grief support group which can be really a powerful place. And we also provide individual counseling” to students who require it. Institution D’s conduct representative shared that she often referred students to a multitude of supports, including counseling, saying she has commonly referred students to their,

Counseling and Psychological Services Center here on campus where they can receive individual care with a counselor. And also, they can opt to be a part of one of the counseling center’s featured counseling support groups, one of which is a grief support group.
Within this grief support group, “there's at least one counselor that facilitates the group for the students that may be a part of it.” The CARE coordinator from Institution D also shared that she referred students to this grieving group as well.

Institution B’s academic representative shared that she felt it was important that grieving students have “some sort of support system, someone to talk to even if they wave us off a counseling referral.” Their housing representative shared that she works “with counseling, a lot, and referring students, walking them over there, connecting them to get signed up for an intake appointment, or getting them connected to a crisis counselor” are all ways that she supports students with counseling supports. She shared an example scenario regarding grieving students and counseling referrals, saying that she found herself,

helping them sit with it [their grief]. Always referring them to counseling is an option, or sometimes even getting them on the phone with a counselor right then depending on if this is hitting a level of “I'm feeling like killing myself or harming myself” or “I have history of this” and I want to be sure that they're physically safe in the moment.

This housing representative continued, saying that even if the student had left campus after a loss, she’d still send “an email and offer of support or referral for counseling” as it occasionally “opens the door to talk about the other things that they're struggling with.” Institution B’s counseling representative shared that her office more often sees students regularly who were anticipating a loss, however, she said that “we have students referred to us when there's an unexpected loss” as well.

Institution C’s housing representative shared that “a positive trend is that we've really tried to make sure students are aware of counseling and that it’s not a bad thing,” and acknowledged that he knew it was something the counseling representative and her team had
been working on for some time. When attempting to help students process grief-related emotions, he shared,

then it's connecting them with the appropriate resources to be able to talk through what that means for them and strategies on how to process. And just acknowledging that the way they're feeling is okay, whatever that feeling is. So that's been my experience over the last several years.

He described that he’s “been, in many ways, pleasantly surprised students are actively asking about ‘well how do I make an appointment or how do I reach out or seek out some of these resources?’” However, he additionally shared that he and his housing staff are, careful to make sure that we're not perceived as counselors, because that can be a somewhat uncomfortable role for us if students begin to see us in that way. So oftentimes it is referring [to the counseling representative and her team].

**Student Legal Services.** Several participants shared that their institution had a student legal services office they referred grieving students to when needed. Institution A’s academic representative recalled a time she worked with a student who had lost their single parent recently. In addition to giving that student referrals to housing and counseling, she referred the student to student legal services to help attend to “the matters that they needed to take care of for their parent.” Reflecting on this student, she said,

one office that that we haven't mentioned yet that also became helpful in the situation was student legal services, because that student after a couple weeks had passed, realized, “oh my goodness, [the student had to deal with] death certificates and property.”
Institution D’s CARE coordinator shared that she would refer students to “student legal services in case they might be in charge of something.” Institution D’s housing representative shared an example,

I really value our Student Legal Services Office and the fact that as a part of the student activity fee, students pay to have access to free lawyers, and that we use our law school students to operate as legal interns. And I remember another instance where [a student] was like suddenly, “I'm in this executor of the estate role and there are all these bills and all these things that are going to have to be paid” and getting the student directed to student legal services, who was then able to help them. Like “we can talk you through this and we can help you file all of this paperwork, and it doesn't have to cost you anything.”

The conduct representative from that institution also shared that legal services available for students to consult, “especially if they're going through a hard time, is just incredible. So, I would say ditto to the same thing [Institution D’s housing representative] just said about legal services.”

**Coping Skills.** Participants reported numerous types of coping skills they shared with their grieving students. Institution A’s counseling representative shared that “we are providing a variety of coping skills helping them to learn how to talk about the death.” She further shared, Because talking about it is important. Avoidance is not going to help, you know? Finding ways to create or maintain a bond with the person that they've lost. So obviously that relationship, that connection is different, but helping the student to find a way to develop a bond, or maintain a bond. And there's just a number of areas that that we work on with grief, specifically in different ways to cope with grieving and that process.
Institution B’s counseling representative similarly shared that narrative sharing was important, saying, “grief work just involves a lot of sharing of stories. Just getting the stories out, having a relationship with the person who's gone be witnessed through the sharing of stories is really important.” She also shared that “encouraging people to participate if there are services or rituals, encouraging them to be a part of that, and not to forgo that because that’s a pretty important and powerful part of the process.” If the student was unable to participate in the celebration of life, she shared that it was important to keep,

encouraging them to develop their own ritual that they can do on their own or with people that are around them that will memorialize the person who's lost. And that can take a lot of different forms. I've had clients who have planted a special garden in memory of somebody who's lost. I've had people do a work of art. It doesn't really matter, whatever is meaningful for them and meaningful to that relationship. But doing something that's active, something that, again, brings the stories forward and brings the feelings forward is really important.

Institution C’s counseling representative shared that similarly to Institution A and Institution B, she emphasized the importance of “normalizing [grief] to encourage people to break the stigma around grief and talk to other people about their experiences.” She continued,

Around grief I think an important coping [mechanism is] encouraging people to develop some sort of ritual around, being able to let the relationship change, and I think that's another thing that we talked a lot about is that the physical relationship has gone but the relationship that you have with the person who died continues just in a new way. So, helping students understand and figure out how they want to symbolize that in their lives.

Encouraging self-care and doing some education.
Institution C’s housing representative mirrored this sentiment and responded that in his case, we keep our kind of strategies pretty broad. For the most part, helping students understand what resources on campus and potentially off campus could be given the situation. Also, just like [Institution C’s counseling representative] said, helping the student identify individuals that they feel comfortable talking with just to talk, not to be diagnosed with anything. It's just a “do you have somebody who can sit with and have a cup of coffee with?” or whatever that might be. Or even, “[do you have somebody that you can] just sit with? And you don't have to say anything. Do you have those support networks that you feel like you're able to access?” And allowing the student to spend some time thinking about that because sometimes I've seen students hadn't really thought about that before that.

He said that if students did not have a support person close to them, it provided “opportunity and an ability to my professional staff and I to potentially be that person as appropriate,” while being sure to not become a pseudo-counselor. Institution C’s academic representative shared that “we do tend to emphasize the importance of self-care,” when sharing coping strategies with grieving students. Like Institution B’s counseling representative, she also shared that,

I think we encourage students to think about creative ways to cope. So, some students who are really touched by music to, you know, create playlists related to how they're feeling and how they want to be feeling. Journaling, painting, taking up a brand-new type of artistic expression they've never tried just to help them process if what they're doing already doesn't feel like it's sufficient.

**Empathy.** While all participants expressed that care for the grieving student was of the utmost importance, a few professionals discussed they felt that staff’s empathy specifically was a
valuable core method of support for bereaved students. Institution D’s conduct representative stated,

Even if I have not had a close personal loss yet, or even if I haven't had to go through the grief of losing a parent, my reservoir of empathy as a professional and as an administrator is something I can lead with when servicing this student. I think that empathy is a value that is recurrent amongst us [the staff]. And that allows us to serve students, specifically dealing with loss, who need a lot of care and attention as they first transition through the immediate loss and move into all the stages of grief. We can provide that kind of buffer of empathy and compassion.

Similarly, the academic representative from Institution D also stated the importance of empathy when working with grieving students, even if the process of assisting grieving students may be flawed.

It doesn't mean our way of dealing with grief is at its best practice. But that's not the point. The point is that when someone is grieving, they feel empathy, and they feel that someone cares enough to give them a safe space to feel that. Really that is the bottom line and I know every one of these people [in the focus group] will do that and I feel that [Institution D] excels at that. And that to me is stunning.

She additionally said that it was important to understand that when providing resources, sometimes the student may not know what they need or how to ask for the things they did need. She shared that empathy could assist in bridging the gap between what students say and what they mean, saying “if I've experienced grief at a deep level, I'm also going to empathize at a level that I'm going to understand perhaps what they're not saying.” The CARE coordinator shared that “Sometimes we get CARE referrals from people who have experienced something similar like
the advisor’s dad died and so when they learned their student’s dad died, they're like, ‘I know they have to be feeling all of these things.’” Institution A’s housing representative shared that he felt that empathy in response to grief was one of the things he valued most in his staff working with grieving students. He also noted that grief sometimes has greater community impacts in residence halls when a student suddenly leaves for home after the loss of a loved one. He stated that students in a residential community often have questions and concerns regarding students who lose loved ones, “especially with someone that's really important to their for community. And so, we have to sometimes expand that empathy or that response to others outside of the people who are directly affected.”

Bereavement Policies. Of the four participating universities, Institution B and Institution C had a formal, university-recognized bereavement leave policy. Institution B’s academic representative said,

we do have a student bereavement policy that allows [students] excused absences from classes, and our office is designated to implement that policy, so that becomes the point of connection where we interface with students. When they call and ask for their instructors to be notified because of a loss or email, that becomes our point in which we can interface with them.

This policy at Institution B states that students can be excused from five consecutive days of courses (excluding holidays and weekends) in the event of the death of a spouse, domestic partner, parent, child, grandparents, grandchild or sibling, uncle, aunt, niece, nephew, first cousin, in-law, or step relative. The academic representative did say that there was still some frustration in the rigidity of the bereavement policy, saying,
Our policy only covers family, and it covers family broadly. I don't care if it's a great uncle, three times removed right? I can find a way that I can justify that in the policy. But it does not cover friend, and it does not cover pet. And we've really had students who are experiencing significant grief symptoms for both of those kinds of scenarios.

She described that it was difficult to have conversations with grieving students who lost people outside of the bereavement policy’s breadth, stating “that's a really hard conversation to have with someone when they’ve just lost their best friend or an elderly person in their community that was like a grandparent to them and to say, ‘that's not covered.’” She did say that she still advocates for students in this situation even if the policy did not formally allot absences to students who had not lost a family member.

Institution C’s academic representative shared that similarly, “we have a student bereavement policy.” This bereavement policy was like Institution B’s. Theirs states that students are also entitled to five consecutive excused days, excluding weekends and holidays, in the event of the death of a spouse, domestic partner, parent, child, grandparent, grandchild or sibling. If a student loses someone not explicitly covered by the policy, students are then required to communicate the circumstances to individual faculty members to see on a case-by-case basis if it could also be covered by the policy. This academic representative shared that regarding the policy, “sometimes the student knows but the faculty don't, so sending a very gentle reminder with a very clear link to what students have the right to when they've experienced a loss can be the best help we can offer.” She continued, saying,

a lot of our faculty don't know about this [the bereavement policy] until we tell them. A student will email their faculty and say, “someone passed away I won't be able to be there next week because I'll be at the funeral” and they're like, “well, you're going to take a hit
of 20% of your grade” and then the student is in distress. And we [the academic representative’s office] find out and we're like, “no, they won't because of this [the bereavement policy].”

Their counseling representative, an Institution C alumnus, expressed her frustration with the limitations of the bereavement policy, saying “I mean what, our bereavement policy is like three days or something. And that hasn't changed since I lost my parents in grad school.”

However, the CARE coordinator at Institution D reflected on her frustration with the support that she was able to give her students without having a bereavement policy, saying,

I’ve had students ask me what [Institution D]’s bereavement policy is, and we don't have one. So, I could send an attendance memo to their professor. Absolutely. But their professor is not obligated to excuse them. If they don't, I might ask [an associate dean] to talk to the professor and I've done that. But the world's made of all kinds of people and not everyone is going to bend. They're not actually obligated to do that.

She continued to express her frustration with the lack of standardized policy, saying,

They're not obligated to excuse them, they're not obligated to give them extensions, they're not obligated to record the lecture for them to watch later—they're not. We don't have a bereavement policy any student has guaranteed, and some professors are kind of in the middle of that and they'll say, “well, I say in the syllabus that you can miss two days without consequences,” but that means for the rest of the semester they can't miss at all, so if they have a doctor's appointment that happens to fall during your class they're going to lose their grade. So, it's just a little bit rigid.
Quality of Support

Participants expressed various factors affecting the quality of support students received. These included the ability of departments to network and work together, the educational background of the staff working with grieving students, and additional trainings these staff members had participated in.

**Departmental Networking.** There were both positives and negatives regarding departmental networking reported by all institutions. When participants shared that they had a solid working relationship with multiple campus departments, the participants noted that they were able to provide better support for their students. For example, Institution A’s counseling representative said that,

> if we learn that a student has experienced a loss of some kind, we are often working together to make sure that that student has been connected with at least one of us, if not all of us, and is aware of the support options or resources that are available to them.

Similarly, the housing representative agreed with these sentiments, adding that he serves on a cross-departmental “student support team that usually meets once a week” and that “when students begin to grieve, what we do is we get together, figure out what resources are needed, and try to help the student out in any way we can.” He described that some of this assistance included reaching out to housing staff to inform them that a student was grieving and reaching out to professors to inform them of students’ absences.

Institution A’s academic representative also shared that a core function of her job was to,

help make sure that the student is connected with all of the resources on campus.

Depending on the situation, and if it’s a situation where a student is unable to speak for themselves, or really needs an extra check-in service for the point person, for the student
or the family, then they maybe don't need to be calling five different offices. I can help coordinate that.

She described that this ability to communicate between offices was paramount to helping the grieving student. Regarding Institution A, she shared about their ability to connect across departments,

But then one of the beautiful things about [Institution A] is, we all work really well together. The three of us, plus, lots of other colleagues across campus. And we know each other, we work well together, and send them out. Or whoever that student goes to first, that person usually knows who to start reaching out to connect a student with what they need.

Institution B shared similar sentiments. Their academic representative said,

we work a lot with both of the other departments represented, referring students to counseling services, getting faculty connected to Student Counseling Services to seek advice on how to help students if they're if they're the ones who have the best relationship, and lots of back and forth with housing. We have separate case managers, but we certainly collaborate a lot, giving each other heads up on students and students of concern. Having talked to either department, and we might either handle it, or work in partnership, or hand it off to the other department.

Institution D’s academic representative shared that her office was connected to the others as well. “I really think we're pretty all connected to the Dean of Students Office directly,” that, “we have a protocol that's a multi-faceted approach” and that,

each student needs networking and support. They come from all over campus to our office. We do about 2,600 cases a year. At this point, I'm working all the time with these
lovely people [the housing, conduct coordinator, CARE coordinator, and larger, cross-departmental CARE team], and always networking together to get the best support and best understand the barriers and obstacles in the way for that particular student in their case.

However, when the networking was not strong, it was reported that support was often unsuccessful or couldn’t occur at all. The housing representative from Institution C stated that, as an example, if you have one faculty member out there that doesn't say anything but they're the sole holder of the information because that's the person that the student told, then that information doesn't go anywhere and we, the proverbial we, as an institution cannot support that student.

**Educational Background.** When asked how they were prepared to support grieving students, participants shared that many of the skills they used to support grieving students came from their educational backgrounds. All of the counseling representatives shared that they had licensures, grad school experience, and clinicals to practice. Institution A’s counseling representative shared “as a counselor, there's a lot we go through. Life training, master's program and then the licensure process.” Institution B’s counseling representative shared,

I think most mental health counselors get specialized training and dealing with grief and loss. I'd be very surprised if that weren't the case for everyone on our staff. I know I had that training as part of my clinical training and upbringing. I suspected that everybody trained to be a counselor, whether they knew it or not, they were trained to deal with grief and loss. Because in many respects, almost every clinical issue is grief and loss, and shoot, even if it's not about the death of a person. So I'm pretty confident that they have adequate training in that.
Institution C’s counseling representative shared that she had completed five years of graduate school, and “from my office it comes mostly through our professional training and then supervised experiences that are required as licensure prerequisites.” Institution A’s housing representative shared that a lot of his training came from “the classes I took while earning my master's degree,” where he had many professors from the counseling department as faculty, “so much of the classes that I took were really on the counseling side of things.” Both Institution B’s housing representative and their academic representative shared that their degrees were in counseling and they had experience and education from that, though neither clinically practiced. Institution C’s academic representative shared that “in a former life, I was a mental health therapist and I maintain my licensure as a mental health counselor for” the state, and as a result, draws much of her experience working with grieving students from that. She additionally shared that many of her colleagues in her office had similar degrees. One had a social work degree, one was working on a counseling licensure, and another worked in a university counseling center for a time, which allowed all of them opportunities to have the educational background “for helping individuals recover from trauma, which often involves loss to some extent.” Institution D’s academic representative shared that “I have a master's in social work. I studied hospice work. I studied death. I almost went into hospice work so I have a particular focus on grieving.”

**Training.** Sometimes staff members sought out trainings, certifications, and workshops related to grief to allow them to better serve students. Institution A’s counseling representative shared that,

there's a lot of different trainings, I actually just completed grief summit training, so it was like a two-day workshop on grief. So, yeah, I've got a variety of training. But that's
going to look somewhat differently, across the board, within my office for each counselor, as to what specific kind of training they have on grief.

Institution A’s housing representative shared that “professionally there's conferences and webinars that help you deal with grief, especially with suicide prevention.”

The academic representative from Institution C shared that her and her team “are members of a Higher Education Case Management Association.” She also said that “we do get a full week in June every year, where we get to kind of handpick different trainings and workshops that are specific to trends. And the bulk of those that we attend...were specifically around trauma-informed care, grief and loss, support, and social justice.” In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, she said that her and her staff “pursued a number of virtual trainings” that focused on “nonclinical grief, support, and intervention certification.” She also shared that as a component of maintaining her mental health licensure,

we are required to do continuing education for ongoing licensure, and I tried to select training opportunities that are relevant to the work I'm doing now. They often have a clinical bend to them but primarily are focused on trauma-informed care and crisis response.

Regarding how she felt her institution could improve, she shared,

I think, overall, the CARE Team that we're all a part of is working to try and incorporate all the things that we've learned personally and professionally, to help get our university more organized around process so that we can offer regular consistent training and understanding of how we can be better at this [supporting grieving students].

Institution D’s CARE coordinator shared that “we also have more structured trainings” at professional conferences, “and they offer courses on that trauma-informed care for students, how
to build relationships with hospitals to help students, what does it look like when someone's experiencing racial trauma in academic universe, as well as others.” Institution D’s conduct representative shared that at these conferences, she had seen that there were breakout sessions that revolved around grief. Institution D’s conduct representative also shared that in addition to conferences,

I do think there are quite a few transferable skills that student affairs professionals receive in active listening and trauma informed process...specifically in conduct, question-asking and investigation. That really transfers to supporting students that are grieving.

Institution C’s counseling representative shared that “from my office it [training] comes mostly through our professional training and then supervised experiences that are required as licensure prerequisites” and that she and her office “continue to do professional development around how to best support students and therapeutic approaches to various things.”

Some participants shared that a significant amount of their training came from practical, “on-the-job” or “real-life” experience. Institution A’s housing representative shared a story about a time he was working at the institution and a student was murdered near campus. He said that he watched how the then-Vice President of Student Affairs worked through “a real-life case scenario” as tragic as that was a tremendously “impactful moment” for the rest of his career.

Institution A’s academic representative shared that similarly, “I've learned a lot by just watching mentors and how they serve students and families and these situations.” Institution C’s counseling representative shared that in addition to her formal training, she’s “certainly learned a few things over the years, and unfortunately, through some community tragedies and responding to those.” Institution C’s housing representative shared that a majority of his grief-related training was “coming from the experiential learning opportunities—good, bad or indifferent—to
be able to help provide the resources.” Institution B’s housing representative shared that for her, in addition to her degree, “most of it is, I've just had to learn how to manage myself like my own dealing with my own dad's loss.” Institution D’s academic representative shared that similarly, in addition to her degree,

I personally lost both my parents. Died in my twenties. I'm an only child, I have a whole long recovery of a personal life, understanding this issue, and have brought it into my everyday perspective in healthy ways. And the foundational skills about what someone needs. I have a whole career crisis intervention, that was my job before I was at the university. So, I understand that moment enough. Not that it's my specialty and not that I'm saying when expert, but I feel like I am never afraid of it. Let me put it that way, I'm never afraid of someone grieving.

She later shared her experiences at a previous position working with Greek life and recounted a story of a student who had committed suicide inside the sorority house and the resulting, immediate impacts it had on the remaining sorority sisters. She shared that she was unprepared for the scenario and learned how to navigate it as she went, saying,

And we've had deaths in sororities and fraternities, and one of the most dramatic moments I've had with a student grieving on campus, one was 9/11 and the other was, I was not on call but my boss who was on call couldn't make it, so I served in his place. And I was called to the sorority, when a sorority sister had died, she died by suicide, but they didn't know that yet. Her room was blocked off, and we were suddenly dealing with an entire house that was beginning to understand what it happened. So, grief was trickling through over 150 women without a structure at the time in place. And so, I came in [and] we were waiting for counseling. They were too late, they couldn't get there quickly. The
Dean of Students was [the Dean of Students] at the time, there were three of us, plus the police plus the investigators plus the coroner. That process of grief, I have never experienced. I was not trained for this. We came up with systems and what to do and what we realized quickly was that we had a house full of people that were about to understand what happened so grief was going to go like this [the participant gestured up and out with her hands]. We gathered them all together in the basement of the sorority had them get blankets, turn off their phones, because they were going to learn about what had happened from social media. We got them water, we got them blankets, we sat with them, we were not allowed to say what happened till we got the coroner's approval. But when [the Dean of Students] had to announce that the death had happened. I was in a room—we all were in a room with 150 women who were immediately grieving. I've never experienced that in my life.

Institution D’s CARE coordinator shared that she had to develop a method to support large numbers of students at a time in the event of a large shooting. She said she learned as she went, saying that,

when we had the first large gathering shooting. It wasn't one person asking for an attendance memo, it was 130 or 90, something like that. So, did I have a process in place to process 90 attendance memos in a day? No, but we built one and now unfortunately we've had more large gathering shootings, so I have that process in place now and everyone knows who works for me, they know what to do. Like, okay, this has happened, large death has happened, or...a death that affected a lot of people has happened. And we just go right to it, we automatically know what that looks like.
Institution D’s CARE coordinator further shared that she believed that 20 years from now, they would have even more procedures and systems in place to support grieving students, saying that “unfortunately, you get better because you learned through grief.”

Regarding all the talk of what her institution could do to improve the supports grieving students received, Institution D’s housing representative shared that,

talking about what could we be doing to improve and where that hits is training for me. That is something we have focused on, helping to train faculty and staff members from across campus that you don't have to be the expert on this. As the Dining Services supervisor, as the person who helps in the auditorium and has student employees, as chemistry faculty member, as an academic advisor in kinesiology, you don't have to know everything about how to help a student who's grieving or who comes to you with any other kind of traumatic troublesome event. What you need to know is “how do I make the referral to [the counseling center], how do I make the referral to the Dean of Students Office, and then trust us to be the safety net for the student and to catch the student.

**COVID-19 Challenges**

It is worth stating that this study was conducted amidst the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, some findings reflected challenges that had not been experienced in previous times. Institution C’s housing representative shared that there had been a “really significant increase in grief and loss referrals related to COVID.”

Some participants shared that the COVID-19 pandemic stressed the pool of resources available for their disposal. For example, Institution C’s counseling representative shared that “as a university, particularly now that we're in COVID times and have drained a lot of resources that
we might otherwise have. It's harder to provide that support” that students in grief need.

Institution C’s academic representative shared a pre-COVID story of a former ROTC student for whom she was able to provide some financial support to after his roommates were killed and parts of his house destroyed, making it uninhabitable. “We were able to secure some resources, this is pre-COVID before all our finances were tapped or sucked out. We had an opportunity to use some funds to help replace some household belongings and help him relocate.” She further shared that now,

more recently with COVID related impacts, we've been doing a lot more COVID-specific support including assistance with basic needs. I'm the lead on an emergency funds team and he's [Institution C’s housing representative] also part of that. It's currently the American Rescue Plan, previously that CARES Act or the cursor grants. We’re frequently reviewing applications from students reporting pretty significant, complicated, distressing situations.

Both her and the housing representative from Institution C described that their ability to help support students was diminished from what they were able to do pre-COVID because of this resource depletion and increased need.

Institution D’s academic representative shared that she had seen a significant increase in the grief-related needs from students due to COVID-19 and how that had impacted her job,

I'd also say that in COVID, it shifted a little different, so we are, I don't want to say used to it because we're never used to this, but it's part of our work to support students who are grieving. That's what we do in these jobs, and we're used to it in that way. COVID was a different animal. It’s pretty raw when we as people are experiencing this pandemic, people are suffering at different levels, and you're receiving 10,000 requests for
emergency funding in two weeks at the same time you're getting cases where parents have just died from this very thing, or a mentor/parent figure. Sometimes it's the grandparent, or an uncle, or aunt, and you know at that point the title doesn't matter.

There’s a lot to unpack.

She followed shortly after with “you name it, it's there, it's a huge part of what we do in our office and everybody's office.” This institution’s housing representative shared that she agreed, “losing a parent or losing family members to COVID” was a new and difficult aspect of the past year. She also said that experiences were lost for students this year, who were “just grieving that COVID it sucks right for, for your first year at college.” For example,

you can't have more than three people in your room. It's just says that you don't get the traditional college experience, so it's compounded grief. You know that it's the initial loss, and then it's the residual and ongoing grief.

Institution D’s academic representative followed by saying,

It's almost like this past year has been, it could be just labeled a year of grief. It's just been unbelievable so everybody calling [her office] had some layer of grieving. That was very raw and very serious, and the people listening too. So it's like, oh my gosh. Grief is the topic.

Institution B’s academic representative shared that students struggled more receiving validation for their institution’s bereavement policy benefits, saying “our bereavement policy does require some documentation, and particularly amid COVID, a lot of students did not have documentation, because there was no celebration of life, there was no funeral or memorial service.” Institution B’s housing representative shared that she found herself needing to simply sit with grieving students in silence, saying,
I also get this a lot before some things like with an anticipated or an illness an anticipated death like with COVID where people were like “my grandma's really sick my uncle's in the hospital. And I don't know what's going to happen and we can't visit them.”

She also shared that she saw struggles international students had returning home for funerals, saying that “if a death happens, especially with COVID, and especially with the travel restrictions and especially on top of that with some of the political changes to visas and things and concerns about going home and not being able to return,” students were less likely to be able to attend funerals for fear of being unable to return. Similarly, Institution B’s counseling representative shared that she noticed students’ processing of grief change during the pandemic. She described that rituals, such as attending funerals, were an important part of the grieving process in gaining closure with the deceased. However, “if there’s not a formal ceremony because of COVID,” she encouraged students to instead “develop their own ritual that they can do on their own or with people that are around them that that will memorialize the person who's lost.” She further said that while she found that grief support groups were beneficial for those participating in them, she struggled to successfully get a support group together. Looking forward, she said,

Now that might change this fall. I mean, you know, we’ve got a potential influx of folks, experiencing grief and loss from COVID. That, that may, in fact be of a significant volume, to be able to offer something [a grief support group].

Summary

This chapter presented the results of four focus group interviews conducted at four different universities in the continental United States. The study’s two research questions, “what challenges/barriers do students who are experiencing grief, bereavement, and mourning report to
student affairs professionals?,” and “in what ways do student affairs professionals/universities support students experiencing grief, mourning, and bereavement?” were investigated and detailed. Relating to research question one, themes included academic challenges, emotional challenges, financial and legal challenges, substance abuse, cultural needs and barriers, and issues regarding the U.S. culture of grief. Research question two investigated themes of support, including how grieving students were identified, what supports these students were given, and insight into the quality of support they received. Chapter V will discuss the relationship of these findings with respect to current research as well as the limitations of this study. Additionally, Chapter V will illustrate implications for higher education professionals’ practice and will propose suggestions for future research to expand upon this study’s findings.
CHAPTER V

Discussions, Recommendations, and Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to holistically examine the challenges and barriers grieving students report to student affairs professionals and discover the types of supports student affairs professionals provide grieving students. Young, college-aged adults have been described as “the forgotten grievers,” (LaGrand, 1985, p. 15). Grieving students represent a large population of students, with at least half of undergraduate students experiencing grief at some point within their undergraduate career (Balk, 2008; Cox et al., 2016), and grief has multitude of effects that may impact students’ ability to succeed in college (Mughal & Siddiqui, 2019). Participants were asked a structured series of questions (Appendix E) to explore two research questions:

RQ1: What challenges/barriers do students who are experiencing grief, bereavement, and mourning report to student affairs professionals?

RQ2: In what ways do student affairs professionals/universities support students experiencing grief, mourning, and bereavement?

This chapter elaborates on this study’s findings to provide meaningful insight into the implications for this vulnerable student population, utilizing Stroebe and Schut’s (1999) dual-process model of coping with bereavement and Balk’s (2008) bereavement impact model as a lens. Additionally, this chapter provides suggestions for student affairs professionals as well as recommendations for future research.

Discussion

This discussion addresses the research questions with regards to previous literature and present conclusions drawn from participant interviews. As a result of interviewing four focus
groups of student affairs professionals who serve grieving students and represent four institutions, core themes were drawn and presented with respect to each research question. The stories shared by the participants concerning this work with grieving students varied. Participants detailed a multitude of challenges and barriers students faced while grieving. These challenges impacted students’ ability to succeed in collegiate academics and stay in school, impacted their mental health and wellbeing, and impacted their school-life balance. The supports these students received also varied. The types of supports included academic support, counseling, student legal services, coping skills, empathy for the grieving students, and bereavement policies. Various factors affected the quality of support student received, such as departmental networking, educational backgrounds, and training. Finally, the impact of and challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic on grieving students are discussed.

**Challenges Faced by Grieving Students**

Stroebe and Schut (1999) described that students oscillate between reacting to two forms of stressors when managing grief and loss. These stressors included loss-oriented stressors (i.e., things that reminded them of the deceased) and restoration-oriented stressors (i.e., things that helped them cope and move on from their grief). Balk (2008) described that bereavement has a multitude of effects on college students, often impacting six facets of life. These facets include physical, cognitive, behavioral, interpersonal, emotional, and spiritual facets (Balk, 2008). During this study, student affairs professionals reported assisting students who struggled with many of these facets during their time of grief. Notable challenges included academic struggles, emotional challenges, financial and legal challenges, issues with substance abuse, cultural needs and barriers, and issues with the US culture of grief.
Academic Challenges. Participants noted that grieving students faced several challenges with academics while they were grieving. These challenges included the inability to attend courses due to end-of-life obligations, fear of receiving a lower grade for missing class, poorer academic performance, and a struggle to focus on coursework after the loss of a loved one. The housing representative from Institution B shared that she had worked with a student who, as a result of her grief, was failing most of her classes. These struggles align with the current literature. According to the American College Health Association’s 2020 National College Health Assessment, nearly 40% of students who lost a loved one reported that the loss negatively impacted their academic performance. Institution D’s CARE coordinator and Institution D’s counseling representative shared that they commonly interface with students who tell them that they could not focus on coursework due to their grief. These sentiments regarding an inability to focus on classes align with Balk’s (2011) research that reported bereaved students often struggle to focus on studying. Participants additionally noted that policies in syllabi regarding making up coursework or missing classes to attend funerals were often “a bit rigid” in the accommodations afforded to students.

Several participants shared that they needed to assist grieving students in withdrawing from the university. Institution B’s housing representative shared that she had helped a grieving student who lost her brother withdraw for the semester due to low GPA. Servaty-Seib & Hamilton (2006) reported that grieving students had significantly lower GPAs than their non-grieving counterparts. Roberts (2016) found that students were more likely to consider withdrawing from the university as a result of their grief. Institution C’s academic representative shared that at the end of the academic term, she found many students who needed assistance
withdrawing from the university over taking incompletes, saying that they initially believed they could complete courses but shortly thereafter found they could not.

**Emotional Challenges.** During this study, emotional challenges grieving students experienced were noted. LaGrand (1985) found that over 50% of grieving students reported having emotional difficulties, such as depression, shock, emptiness, and disbelief. Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum (2015) recorded grieving students’ narratives and multiple students among them reported mental health concerns, including sadness, shock, anger, guilt. Institution C’s counseling representative shared that grief may cause students to feel fragile, and that specific care needed to be shown to these students to help them succeed.

Balk (2011) reported that students often felt alone and isolated from their peers in their grief. This study also found that students often felt alone while they were grieving, such that there was a sense that no one else would understand them or their feelings of grief. Two participants shared that students felt alone when grieving. To help combat this, they identified that it is important to assure students that they are not alone. Institution B’s academic representative shared that sometimes these students simply needed someone to be there for them to assist with this loneliness. Even simply being with the student can allow the student to feel less alone while providing them a safe space to express themselves if they needed to.

Some participants noted that guilt and regret were expressed by students for a multitude of reasons. Some felt guilty due to the idea of missed futures. Others felt guilty for not knowing what to feel or feeling that they were not feeling what they should be feeling at any given time. Some regretted the fact that they did not visit a terminally ill family member prior to them passing. Several participants noted that pain and anger were common emotions expressed by students. Institution D’s academic representative shared that she felt it was important to be able
to be there for these students when they felt these emotions and remain patient while allowing
the students to express what they needed to express.

Participants noted that it was important to validate what students were feeling at any
given time, be that loneliness, guilt, anger, or pain. Balk (1997) found that students felt their
peers became anxious towards them when they mentioned their struggles with grief. Balk (1997)
also reported that bereaved students report that they have found that talking about grief and
receiving social support from others is helpful. These participants acknowledged that each
person grieves differently, and that there is no one right way to grieve. Student affairs
professionals can offer that initial support to a student when they are feeling emotional effects of
grief, even if it is just being a listening ear for them. Several participants shared that an important
part of grief work is allowing students a place to share stories of those lost. One participant noted
that simply providing a space where the student felt comfortable to exist was also beneficial.
Students may feel as if they have no one in their corner to listen to them, and if the student trusts
the student affairs professional enough to share, it is important for that professional to allow the
student the space to express what they need to express.

**Financial and Legal Challenges.** Another common theme noted by participants was
grieving students’ financial and legal challenges. Cox et al. (2016) noted that death was an
indirect predictor of student success, saying that ripple-effects post-loss (such as subsequent
financial stressors) negatively impact a student’s ability to succeed in college and graduate on
time. This study similarly found that grieving students whose struggles to graduate on time and
stay in school after the loss of a loved one may be attributed to financial concerns, especially if
the loss is a parent or guardian figure. University tuition, fees, and costs are already high. Many
students struggle to pay for college even with jobs, when taking out loans, and (some) receiving
support from home. When a student loses a primary financial support, their ability to pay for college becomes an even higher barrier preventing them from continuing to attend college for the semester or remain enrolled altogether.

Multiple participants noted that legal services offered to grieving students proved to be invaluable. Grieving students are navigating not only the loss they have suffered, but also the challenges that those who have passed leave behind. Not all students find themselves as next of kin or as sole survivors, but those that do are presented a unique set of challenges that other students would not need to face. This study noted that some of these challenges for students include figuring out how to financially support their remaining family, learning what being next of kin means, figuring out how to manage an estate, learning how to file appropriate end-of-life paperwork, learning how to navigate the court system, navigating how to pay debts and remaining bills—all these adult things, as the housing representative from Institution B called them. Grieving students may not be prepared to work through these types of challenges on their own. In this regard, it is important for student affairs professionals to remain aware of campus resources to refer students to receive adequate financial and legal support.

**Substance Abuse.** Some participants detailed grieving students’ issues with substance abuse. Palmer et al. (2016) noted that it was common for college-aged students to experiment with drugs and alcohol for the first time in their lives. Palmer et al. (2016) further noted that this experimentation became problematic when it was combined with feelings of loss. Institution D’s conduct representative shared a story of a young man who used alcohol and Xanax to cope with the pain associated with his father’s loss. The substances the student used were the only things the student had found that numbed the pain he was feeling from the loss. Institution D’s CARE coordinator shared that she had seen a student be the only survivor of a terrible car crash that
killed several of his friends. She shared that this student had multiple night terrors and pain as a result of the event and similarly to the conduct representative’s story, the student used substances to cope as well. Eddinger et al. (2018) reported that students who were suddenly bereaved, especially in the event of a violent death, reported a higher alcohol intake than students who were not. Hardison et al. (2005) further noted that those with grief-induced insomnia may resort to alcohol as a method of self-medication. Institution D’s academic representative shared that she, too, had seen numerous students abuse substances after a death and that this use often compounded other issues the students had. This aligns with findings from Park et al., (2004) and Rosseau et al., (2011); students who utilized alcohol while already in a state of negative affect often experienced further negative emotional reactions as a result.

Stories such as these illustrate that serious negative results can happen if substance abuse goes unchecked. Balk’s (2008) bereavement impact model states that grief can affect students in a multitude of different facets. Among these facets are emotional disturbances, sleep disturbances, and behavioral impacts or changes. Grieving college students may believe that substance use may lessen negative emotions or impacts felt with their grief. Leaning on Stroebe and Schut’s (1999) dual-process model of coping, explaining such risks to students and providing alternative coping mechanisms to combat negative affect (in other words, promoting healthy restoration-oriented stressors to combat loss-oriented stressors) would be beneficial. It is important, and potentially lifesaving, to address concerns of substance abuse as a coping mechanism early in the grieving process to prevent unnecessary damage to the student.

**Cultural Needs and Barriers.** When working with grieving students, participants said that it was important to be mindful of cultural variances that occur while students are grieving. Participants shared that cultural variances between students impacted the ways in which they
were able to grieve. These included students feeling different impacts of grief, needing additional accommodations, processing grief in different ways, and may even affect the help-seeking behaviors of students. There are grieving practices that require different amounts of time to grieve. For example, the Jewish tradition of sitting Shiva requires that family members mourn for a week after the loss of someone. Some Native American grieving practices require longer periods of mourning, such as Lakota practices (Yellow Horse Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998). International students may face additional challenges when grieving due to variances in death-related rituals (Liew & Servaty-Seib, 2018). As such, remaining mindful that not all grief practices fit neatly under the umbrella of a bereavement policy (if one even exists at an institution) is important. Student affairs professionals cannot treat grief and grieving practices as a one-size-fits-all occurrence. With today’s ever-diversifying population of students, an awareness of cultural differences is imperative as the facets of well-being most impacted by grief vary cross-culturally (Eisenberg et al., 2013; Gire, 2014), and the needs of each individual student will vary as well.

Several participants shared that the US culture of grief did not mesh well with many cultural needs students have, nor did it afford students much time to mourn or process their grief. This hurry up and get over it mentality can make students pathologize themselves when they are unable to move through their grief in the short amount of time that society pressures them to. This message results in students feeling alone in their grief and leads students to believe that they themselves are flawed by still feeling grief’s effects. Student affairs professionals must be aware that grief does not have a set end date, nor is there a standardized timeframe when students will be done grieving. There is a need for student affairs professionals to understand that the
overarching societal norms of just getting over grief have negative impacts on students and as such, should be willing and able to speak on students’ behalf against these norms.

**Identification of Grieving Students**

Student affairs professionals cannot help a grieving student if they do not know that the student is grieving. After all, if no one knows something is broken, it is nearly impossible to get it fixed. Participants noted that once grieving students let them know that they need resources and support, there is often a wealth of resources available to them. However, all supports a student may need cannot be provided if other professionals do not know that they are needed. As Institution C’s housing representative shared, “if you have one faculty member out there that doesn't say anything but they're the sole holder of the information because that's the person that the student told, then that information doesn't go anywhere” As such, it is important that avenues are established and advertised where grieving students may seek help. Varga et al. (2021) asserted that it was vital that student affairs professionals were able to identify grief effects in students in order to provide them with adequate support. This understanding helps student affairs professionals to identify grieving students when they may be grieving before they fall through the cracks. Only after a student has found one of these entry points can they receive the help and attention they deserve. One avenue for identifying students could be something like the CARE reports such as the ones that three participants used. These reports can be submitted by anyone to report a student of concern and may provide an early identifier on a student who otherwise might have gone unnoticed.

**Supports Given and Quality of Support**

Research asserts that it is vital that colleges and universities assist and intervene on behalf of grieving students (Balk, 1997; Balk, 2001; Cox et al., 2015; Neimeyer et al., 2008; Servaty-
Seib & Hamilton, 2006). This study found that resource referral was a core component of helping students receive support they needed. Participants referred students to academic resources and support, counseling, and student legal services. Participants also promoted several forms of coping skills with their students and shared that empathy was a vital component of the work.

Participants shared various factors that impacted the quality of support they provide their grieving students. Several participants shared that departmental networking was imperative to provide adequate support to students. In instances of good departmental networking, once a professional knew that a student required assistance, they were able to connect the student to individuals who could also help the student in other ways. Several participants shared that their departments were consistently trying to work better together to provide students support. Servaty-Seib and Hamilton (2016) noted that this kind of resource referral and connectedness between departments should be present in order to best support grieving students.

Educational backgrounds, trainings, and professional development opportunities improved the quality of support provided by professionals. Participants at each institution identified several specific training opportunities intended to provide greater support to the students in these types of situations. Taub and Servaty-Seib (2008) noted that these types of trainings for student affairs professionals can benefit the supports and quality of support that grieving students receive.

COVID-19 Challenges

COVID-19 impacted the globe in numerous ways and these effects were felt at the university level. Institution C’s housing representative shared that there had been a significant increase in grief and loss referrals related to COVID-19, and this sentiment was mirrored by
Institution D’s academic representative. Participants reported that COVID-19 limited the resources available for grieving students in ways they had not anticipated. Participants also noted that the COVID-19 pandemic increased the need for these kinds of resources. This meant that participants had to get creative with how resources were allocated and how policies were implemented and followed. The researcher hopes that in the future, these negative impacts of COVID-19 fully resolve, allowing the full amount of resources ordinarily available pre-COVID to be accessible again to grieving students. The researcher also believes that this pandemic will more than likely shape how grief support is approached in the future—the loss COVID-19 caused around the world forced the concept of grief into the forefront of people’s minds. Hopefully, this shared experience will impact university systems for the better moving forward. For example, bereavement policies can become more mainstream with more universities implementing them. Finally, this pandemic may affect student affairs professionals’ understanding of empathy and comfort levels of speaking about grief. Ideally, the visibility of this worldwide grief would help more professionals become comfortable discussing grief and building a sense of camaraderie with students, emphasizing that students are not alone in their feelings when feeling grief.

**Recommendations for Student Affairs Professionals**

The student affairs professionals participating in this study offered several recommendations for practice to support grieving students better. Among those are an awareness and deliberate effort to promote trust from the students that student affairs professionals serve. With that, an emphasis on empathy and compassion are noted. The importance of departmental networking and resource referral is described. Attention was brought to the potential secondary
trauma and compassion fatigue that student affairs professionals working with grieving students may face. Recommendations for additional resources and staff support are noted.

**Fostering Student Trust and Promoting Compassion**

Student affairs professionals must be aware that ensuring a level of trust and rapport is built with their students to make sure that students feel comfortable seeking support in their time of need. Empathy was a theme discovered during this study that was noted by several student affairs professionals to be particularly helpful when working with grieving students. This is especially important as several participants shared that some students they interacted with expressed a distrust of university systems from poor experiences they had had in the past. Several participants noted that this kind of empathy and compassion helped forge a connection with the students they were supporting. The researcher suggests that student affairs professionals should approach their students from a person-first viewpoint. Meaning, student affairs professionals should be mindful that not every student has shared the same experiences as another, while still showing interest in the student as an individual. This understanding and interest may lead to an improved connection between the student affairs professional and the student, promoting the trust a student needs to share their grief experiences.

Vulnerability, such as one may experience when sharing grief experiences, can be an uncomfortable feeling for anyone to experience, and may prevent a student from opening up to a student affairs professional. However, by showing empathy and compassion to students, they may be more likely to trust those assisting them. One participant shared a story of some positive feedback her and her team had received regarding a student memorial after an unspecified large death event because the staff had “showed up” for the students and attended the memorial. When this type of student-to-staff relationship of trust and compassion is created, students are more
likely to be comfortable being vulnerable and sharing personal struggles with staff, such as grief, and are more likely to be willing to ask for help when needed. The researcher recommends that when working with grieving students, student affairs professionals must be willing and able to foster those kinds of empathetic bonds with students to provide the best possible support to those they serve. This means that professionals must be present for their students and follow through with promises that are made while remaining authentic to themselves to promote a real, genuine connection.

**Resource Referral and Departmental Networking**

Two things that participants noted were the most helpful in their ability to support students included resource referral and departmental networking. As noted in Servaty-Seib and Hamilton (2006), student affairs professionals should make sure they are helping connect grieving students to supportive resources, including academic resources, counseling services, and fostering residence life connections. When departmental communication and networking is lackluster, students run the risk of falling through the cracks.

To prevent students from being overlooked, the researcher recommends that student affairs professionals place an emphasis on building relationships with others at the institution and networking with other departments and offices across campus. Additionally, student affairs professionals should have an increased awareness of campus resources and supports that different offices provide. It is necessary that those serving students are knowledgeable of the various resources available to students, and therefore the researcher asserts that it is necessary for student-serving professionals to research what various resources exist. Without a comprehensive base knowledge of what resources are out there, student affairs professionals are unable to assist students fully when they are grieving; a lack of knowledge could very easily mean a lack of
connection for the student. Ensuring that staff members are aware of what resources exist will increase student affair professionals’ ability to recommend supports and services grieving students (as well as all students) may be able to benefit from.

**Emphasis of Student Affairs Professionals’ Self-Care**

The academic representative from Institution D perhaps said it best: “grief hits students in a lot of different ways, and it's going to hit people serving them at the same time.” Sometimes the stories that grieving students share may be jarring, and several participants noted that student affairs professionals may experience secondary trauma from hearing about the struggles of grieving students. As a student affairs professional, the researcher understands firsthand that student affairs is, at its core, a helping profession. The researcher urges those in these types of helping professional roles to ensure that they take care of themselves as well as the grieving students that they are serving. As seen in this study, grief is a phenomenon associated with strong emotional reactions, complicated and potentially triggering situations, and various types of traumas. The ability for student affairs professionals to engage in self-care practices for their own well-being is paramount for their ability to successfully support students in a healthy, effective way. As the saying goes, one cannot pour from an empty cup. As such, the researcher advises that student affairs professionals refer out as needed if they are becoming overwhelmed and to seek out additional support resources that they may need to support themselves. The researcher also encourages universities to have resources available to their staff to utilize to process secondhand trauma and work-related stress to ensure that they can continue to perform to the best of their ability in the future.
Recommendations for Higher Education

The researcher has several recommendations for future practice in higher education as a whole that were drawn from the findings of this study. A suggested bereavement protocol is provided. Bereavement policies are examined in depth and scope regarding while paying mind to the diverse population of student grieving students represent. Recommendations for their improvement are detailed. Finally, training suggestions and professional development plans for staff assisting grieving students and examples of such are described.

Bereavement Protocol

Bereavement Team. One component of this protocol would be a bereavement team of professionals who organize a response to students’ loss. This centralized team must consist of mid-level professionals who have experiences working with grieving college students, and must be well-advertised across campus to students, faculty, and staff. This team would consist of campus professionals who have an authority on campus and exist in an office whose primary function is to support students, such as the Vice President of Student Affairs’ office or a Student Advocates’ office. Among these professionals, an academic representative (such as an assistant dean) to interface with faculty, a counseling representative (such as the director of the counseling center) to provide support, a legal/financial representative (such as a student legal office or a financial aid employee) to provide legal and financial guidance, a housing representative (such as an associate director of housing) to provide housing support, and other supporting student affairs professionals depending on institutions’ organizational composition must be present at the table and have a good working relationship with one another. This team would meet on a regular, annual basis to reevaluate protocol and assess and evaluate the quality of support, perhaps by following up with students who they have assisted and asking how they were doing after
receiving support from the team. One professional, ideally a bereavement coordinator (whose job would be to manage cases pertaining to supporting grieving students), would be the point person and known as the point of contact for the team.

**Bereavement Protocol.** Once a bereavement team is assembled, it would then follow a standardized bereavement protocol. As any faculty or staff member may be the first to know about a student’s grief, this protocol would be known by all campus faculty and staff from training during onboarding and reviewed annually, perhaps via a brief online training module. For entry-level staff and faculty, its core component would be the emphasis on student referral to the point person for the bereavement team. Once referred to the bereavement team’s point person, this professional would reach out to the student and bereavement team to refer the student to the members of the rest of the bereavement team. The student would be told that the members of this team would be reaching out to them to ensure that they receive all the support they may need to navigate college while grieving. If the first person to know a student is grieving is a confidential support, such as a counselor, this individual would then explain the purpose of and offer the services of the bereavement team, giving the student the opportunity to receive help while still maintaining confidentiality.

**Bereavement Policies.** Several participants mentioned that their institution’s bereavement policies were beneficial to grieving students. These policies allow students some excused absences from courses. Institution B and Institution C both had bereavement policies that benefitted their students, allowing them five excused days of courses apiece after the loss of an immediate family member. However, as Institution B’s academic representative shared, these policies are not perfect. Between the types of deaths covered, the duration of time allotted, and the willingness of faculty to respect and acknowledge these policies, there are many
imperfections in how bereavement policies have been instituted. Universities need to seriously consider implementing a bereavement policy for students that encompasses a wide breadth of familial and non-familial deaths. Universities can help support grieving students by establishing bereavement policies for students that are designed to acknowledge varying cultural differences in mourning practices (Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008). These policies should be flexible and accommodating of what each individual student requires to properly grieve by being mindful of cultural variances in grief. For example, being mindful of differing durations of grieving time than just the assumed Christian-based practices, such as the extended time needed for some Native American grieving practices (Yellow Horse Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998). Or, as the conduct representative from Institution D referenced, the extended time required for the Jewish practice of sitting Shiva. One participant shared that often faculty and staff do not know that a bereavement policy exists until their office explicitly tells them. These policies should be well-known and understood by faculty and student affairs professionals alike to prevent undue stress upon grieving students who may otherwise struggle to have professors acknowledge policy, as referenced by Institution C’s academic representative during her work.

*Training for Staff and Faculty*

Referenced several times was the need for training for faculty and staff across the university specific to grief and loss and trauma-informed care. Most participants reported that a majority of their training to work with students occurred on-the-job, through practical experience and observing mentors, and from their time in graduate school obtaining (most commonly) a counseling, student affairs, or social work degree. However, very few faculty members across an entire university are likely to have one of these degrees and ergo, would not have the benefits of this preparatory work. As recommended in Taub and Servaty-Seib (2008), student affairs
professionals can support students more effectively by both providing and seeking out opportunities for specialized bereavement and loss training to university housing staff, academic advisors (and other academic professionals), and counseling center staff. As this study shows, there is no one clear avenue that students traverse to seek support, and any student-serving professional may be the first one to know that a student has suffered a loss. A couple participants shared that staffs could benefit from additional trainings that share knowledge of existing resources on campus. As such, the researcher recommends that a training session (or, perhaps training sessions) revolving around campus resources and how they relate to student grief and loss be shared during introductory onboarding processes for all faculty and staff.

Some participants reported that counseling staff and those that served in case management roles benefitted from additional professional development conference sessions, webinars, and membership in different professional organizations. These trainings focused on trauma-informed care and grief and loss. Universities should allocate resources for professional development opportunities such as these conference sessions and webinars for staff and faculty to attend to increase their understanding of trauma, grief, and loss. Finally, professionals must reflect upon their on-the-job experiences with grieving college students to better their future responses with students, or seek out a mentor to help guide them through the process.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study aimed to add to the field of grief research by illustrating what challenges college students faced while grieving and the supports they received to combat these challenges. It was a small, qualitative study with four participating institutions and cannot claim to generalize all challenges grieving students face or all supports they receive. Moving forward from this study, several other studies can be conducted to expand upon these findings. A future
study could replicate this one and limit the participating institutions to a single size institution (ex., small, mid-sized, or large) to examine if variances in institution size affect the types of supports offered or ability for student affairs professionals to support grieving students. Similarly, this study could be replicated at a set of private institutions to examine if funding and resources available to student affairs professionals have an impact on supports offered for grieving students. The interview protocol for this study could also be utilized at an individual institution to conduct an internal review of their bereavement practices.

As this study interviewed student affairs professionals to speak on their experiences working with grieving students, it would be worthwhile to examine these research questions through the eyes of grieving students themselves. It would be beneficial to ask grieving students where they have gone for support during their time of grief and what supports they received as a result. As many participants noted, increased difficulties with grief during the COVID-19 pandemic suggests a future study could specifically examine how this pandemic impacted grieving students. Finally, additional avenues for further research could include a follow-up study investigating the impact of the support students received.

Conclusion

This study examined the ways that student affairs professionals supported grieving students and the multiple challenges and barriers grieving students face while navigating college and grief simultaneously. This study sought to provide insight into what grieving students requested assistance with and how student affairs professionals successfully support such students. This study found that resource referral was vital, as was an understanding of what resources existed and how they were able to assist students. Participants noted the individuality of each student and each case was something to remain mindful of—because each experience
will be different. It is important to remember to treat each loss as unique and provide individualized support to students that is appropriate for their situation. It was clear that all participants shared a passion for the work that they do and their ability to help students as much as they could. They all strived to continue to improve the support available for students. To this end, seeking additional training and professional development related to grief was cited as being beneficial.

Grief prompts students to ask, “how do I do this?” for many different scenarios. These scenarios include logistical challenges such as issues completing courses, trouble communicating with faculty and staff, hardships staying at university, financial and legal challenges, and conflict between cultural grieving needs and university policies. These scenarios also include personal challenges such as social support issues, feelings of strong emotions, complications with family and personal life, and questions and frustrations with why students cannot simply just get over it and move on. All of these reactions are normal and valid. Grief can cause students to feel as if they are painfully alone. If student affairs professionals want to best support their grieving students, they must meet students wherever they are and help guide students to where they need to go to get the help they require. Sometimes that may begin by sharing knowledge, advocating on the student’s behalf, directing and connecting students to other professionals who can better assist them, or simply by being an empathetic listening ear. Unfortunately, grief will never go away—students will continue to experience loss no matter what. However, it is possible for student affairs professionals to help this vulnerable population through some of perhaps the worst moments of their lives. As long as there are still grieving students in higher education, it will remain imperative that there will be student affairs professionals ready to help catch them when students need them the most.
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SUPPORTING GRIEVING STUDENTS


Dear [Name):

My name is Jackie Hirn from Eastern Illinois University’s College Student Affairs program.

Under the supervision of Dr. Eric S. Davidson, I am conducting a research study on how universities support their students experiencing grief during their time at college. This qualitative, phenomenological study aims to holistically understand how students’ grief experiences affect their college experience both inside and outside of academic settings. The intent of this study is to examine what common themes student affairs professionals report observing in students’ experiences with grief. Additionally, this study seeks to understand what kinds of support systems and resources these students look for and utilize during their time of mourning.

I am reaching out to you as you are your institution’s Senior Student Affairs Officer. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Attached to this email is the informed consent form for this study.

If you choose for your institution to participate, please reply to this email with the names and contact information of professionals you would refer a student who needs support due to the loss of a family member, friend, or loved one. Within these professionals, I kindly ask that you list at least representative from university housing, one representative from academic affairs, and one representative from your university’s counseling center. Feel free to include any additional staff you feel that a grieving student may need support from that is not included as well. By
choosing to provide this information, you agree that you understand your research rights as
listed in the informed consent form attached to this email.

There is no compensation for your institution or employees’ participation and no known
risks involved in your participation in this research.

If you have any questions, please let me know. My contact information is listed below.

Thank you for your time.

Best,

Jackie Hirn

[contact information]
Dear [Name]:

My name is Jackie Hirn from Eastern Illinois University’s College Student Affairs program. Under the supervision of Dr. Eric S. Davidson, I am conducting a research study on how universities support their students experiencing grief during their time at college. This qualitative, phenomenological study aims to holistically understand how students’ grief experiences affect their college experience both inside and outside of academic settings. The intent of this study is to examine what common themes student affairs professionals report observing in students’ experiences with grief. Additionally, this study seeks to understand what kinds of support systems and resources these students look for and utilize during their time of mourning.

I am currently recruiting participants for a focus group interview from your institution. You have been asked to participate in this study because you are an administrative professional in either university housing, university counseling services, academic affairs, or have been otherwise identified by your university’s Senior Student Affairs Officer (SSAO). Your unique experiences and interactions with students who may have experienced grief are valuable in understanding how universities support their bereaved students. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Attached to this email is the informed consent form for this study.

If you choose to participate, I ask that you complete this brief questionnaire. By continuing to the questionnaire, you confirm that you agree that you understand your research rights as listed in the informed consent form attached to this email. [link the questionnaire here].
Again, your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and appreciated. There are no known risks for participation in this research and no additional compensation for your participation. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding whether or not to participate. Thank you for your time.

Best,

Jackie Hirn

[contact information]
APPENDIX C

Pre-Focus Group Participant Questionnaire

“Thank you for your participation in this study. This brief questionnaire is meant to serve as a precursor to the actual focus group interview and to collect some basic demographic information. Additionally, I would like you to remind you of your rights as a participant in this study. By choosing to continue with to the questionnaire, you agree that you understand the informed consent information sent to you along with this questionnaire.”

“Would you like to continue?” (Y/N)

-End Page One-

If the participant does not wish to continue, have Qualtrics take them to the end of the questionnaire.

1. What is your name? (text)

2. What is your primary role at this institution? (text)

3. How long have you been serving in your position? (insert number)
   a. How long at this institution? (insert number)

4. What would you say are some of the most common reasons that students seek your services? (Fill in the blank, brief text)

5. Have you worked with students who have lost a family member or who have been struggling with the grieving process? (Y/N)

End Survey Page: “Thank you again for your participation. It is greatly appreciated. An invitation to schedule an interview will be sent out via email once all potential participants from your institution have completed this questionnaire. If you have any additional questions, please feel free to reach out to the researcher at [researcher contact information].”
APPENDIX D

Student Affairs Professional Focus Group Interview Protocol

Prior to the interview, ensure that the technology arrangements are set up properly within Zoom, including the things such as the recording function, the live captions function, and a working link to the interview. Plan to start the Zoom meeting 10-15 minutes before the slated start time to achieve this. When Interviewees arrive, thank them for their willingness to participate in this study and share their time for this interview. Ensure that all Interviewees who are able can turn on their camera to simulate a face-to-face meeting as best as possible. Describe the purpose and significance of the study. Inform them that the interview should last between 75-90 minutes. Remind each Interviewee of the informed consent form they received and confirm that they offer their consent to participate. Inform all participants that the interview will be recorded utilizing both the audio and video mediums via Zoom and confirm that all participants consent to this recording. Remind Interviewees that they are under no obligation to engage in this focus group and that there are no repercussions should any Interviewee choose to leave the interview or revoke consent at any time. Inform participants that the researcher will choose a pseudonym to represent them in the transcription and data analysis stages to ensure their confidentiality. Test each participant’s audio clarity, video functionality, and internet connection by asking that they simply introduce themselves to the group. Offer time for Interviewees to ask the researcher any questions. Once these questions are answered, begin recording audio and video. Then, proceed with interview questions.
APPENDIX E

Focus Group Script/Questions

For researcher’s information only: This study is guided by one, broad question: how do universities support students who are grieving? In this study, this question will be examined through two, more specific research questions:

RQ1: What challenges/barriers do students who are experiencing grief, bereavement, and mourning report to student affairs professionals?

RQ2: In what ways do student affairs professionals/universities support students experiencing grief, mourning, and bereavement?

Pre-Interview Script:

“Thank you again for volunteering to participate in this focus group. I truly appreciate your time and willingness to participate amidst the stressors of your busy schedules. I am conducting this focus group as a component of my Master’s thesis. As mentioned in the pre-interview questionnaire, this focus group discussion is centered around your roles and experiences helping students who have experienced grief. The discussion should last approximately 75-90 minutes and will be recorded. All of you received an Informed Consent form in the initial recruitment email. None of your names or institutional affiliations will be utilized—the final findings will only use pseudonyms and generalized roles as identifiers. Knowing this, for the record, I want to confirm again that everyone consents to having both audio and video recorded.

Before we begin, I have a few guidelines I would like to establish to facilitate this discussion.
a. I want you all to feel free to share and do a majority of the talking. If I haven’t heard from you in a while, I may call on you to ensure your thoughts are being heard.
b. There are no correct or incorrect things to say. All your experiences are important to me and I believe you all provide a unique viewpoint to this topic.
c. What is shared in this discussion should stay here. Please feel free to share sensitive experiences without worry.
d. Unless you are serving in an on-call, emergency capacity at the moment, I kindly ask that you silence your cell phones.
e. If there is ever a point that you feel uncomfortable, know that you can revoke your consent and end your participation in this focus group at any time.
f. Finally, as best as possible (technology not withstanding) try to have one speaker at a time. I want to ensure that your responses are documented accurately.

Does anyone have any questions, comments, or concerns? If not, then let’s begin. First off...[see focus group questions below]

1. (~5-10 mins) Can you tell me a little bit about what you do on campus? How do you interact with one another? (Rapport/RQ2)
   a. What do you find initiates a student to contact you? (Rapport/RQ2)
   b. What do your day to day job responsibilities look like? (Rapport/RQ2)

2. (~45-50 mins) Can you recall a time that you (or your department) interacted with a student who has had a loved one pass away while in college? Can you tell me what happened and how you worked with the student? (RQ1/RQ2)
a. What were some of the emotions and/or reactions the student(s) expressed regarding the loss? How did you help them work through those? (RQ1/RQ2)

b. What other challenges, if any, do you observe in your students who are going through these life events? Emotionally? Academically? Financially? Physically? Culturally? (RQ2)

c. What do you see students seeking support for? What supports do you perceive the students may additionally need? (RQ2)

d. What grief-coping strategies (if any) do you provide your students? (RQ2)

e. What would you do differently? (RQ2)

f. Who else do students seek out on your campus to process grief in this way? Why? (RQ2)

3. (~10 mins) Have you dealt with more than one student in this capacity? (RQ1)

   a. Are there differences in the way that you interacted with each student?

   b. What influenced these differences?

4. (~10 mins) How would you rate the support provided to students who are grieving the death of a close friend or family member? (RQ1/RQ2)

   a. What influences your rating? (RQ2)

   b. What would you do to influence this in a different direction? (RQ2)

   c. What control do you have to influence these situations with students? (RQ2)

   d. How are you prepared/trained to serve in this capacity (if at all)? (RQ2)