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Supporting Students Through Loss: An Empathic Programmatic Intervention

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Supporting Students Through Loss: An Empathic Programmatic Intervention

Jack Horne

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Degree of
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By
Jack Horne
May 2020
Dedication

For my mom. I love you and miss you every single day.
Acknowledgements

Writing this thesis during a global pandemic was a herculean task and I have so many loved ones to thank for getting to this point.

First, I would like to thank my dear friend Matheeha, who has been such an inspiration to me for her bravery, strength, and positive attitude. You’re the best! Unfortunately, I lack the space to list my entire cohort by name, but all of you have impacted my life in amazing ways, and I’m so thankful I got to spend the last two years with such wonderful people.

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Abstract

In this thesis, I examine the detrimental effects of bereavement on college students between the ages of 18-22, and propose an intervention that emphasizes empathy and compassion as students process their grief. College students are positioned in a sensitive time of development and learning, and as such, require increased support when engaging in the process of grief. To address this concern, I utilize Dr. Nancy K. Schlossberg’s theories of Mattering and Marginality (1989), and Transition Theory (1995). My intervention aims to utilize components of the existing campus structure to incorporate better policy and support systems for bereaved students.

*Keywords: student bereavement, college student development, counseling services, policies*
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Chapter 1: Introduction & Positionality

My Way to My Concern

As I was growing up in the suburbs of Northeastern Pennsylvania, a common question that adults would ask me was, “Are you going to be a podiatrist like your parents when you grow up?” Wholly disinterested in feet (weird, right?), my standard response was “Ew, no!” Although I knew I wasn’t interested in going into podiatry, having two podiatrists as parents shaped my upbringing in many ways. First and foremost, college was always an expectation of me, never just an option. I knew that one day, I would go to college and obtain a degree in some kind of major. As the oldest of four kids in a blended family, I felt a lot of pressure to be a good role model for my younger siblings. Second, I benefited from the privilege of having an awesome and financially-stable mother who I knew could support my endeavors. My mom always emphasized the importance of education and did everything she could to ensure my brother and I could access a college degree. She started a college fund for us, cheered us on from preschool to twelfth grade, and when it came time for me to tour college campuses, it was my mom who drove me to each campus I was interested in. As a single parent, this was no small feat to accomplish. Soon, I had applied to a handful of colleges, and made my decision to attend West Chester University of PA (WCUPA).

I really didn’t have a clue about what college was going to be like. Sure, my parents both had degrees and ran their own podiatry practices. But matriculating into a university in 2014 was vastly different than their experiences had been in the 1980s. My mom, like many parents of college students across the nation, had little understanding of the inner workings of a college campus. We laughed about how she was never able to properly pronounce the word “bursar”
Summer orientation came and went, and soon I entered WCUPA as a brand new Golden Ram, the school mascot.

My first few weeks of school were incredible. I was thriving on campus. I would walk around the grounds to and from classes and smile to myself, thinking of how beautiful the campus was and how much I was enjoying my courses. Everybody had made college out to be a difficult transition, but I was thoroughly enjoying the change of scenery and the increased engagement in my courses. I joined some clubs, met my classmates and roommates for events and meals together in the dining hall, and overall felt content with my decision to attend WCUPA.

My Experience of Loss

All too soon these happy honeymoon feelings were squashed. In early October 2014, I received sobering news. My mom, who had been battling varying types of cancer since 2005, was diagnosed with Stage 4 brain cancer. Suddenly, I found myself in a difficult situation. My mom had to cancel all of her appointments and leave her practice, which she had operated herself for over 14 years. As soon as I found out about my mom’s declining health, I reached out to my professors to inform them about what was going on. My professors were mostly empathetic of my unique situation, but I found some of their responses to be dismissive and insensitive. In fact, these types of reactions are a typical problem that students who are dealing with family medical concerns must face and deal with too often.

Over the next few weeks, my mom became increasingly unable to perform simple tasks. She became bedridden and needed help with walking, eating, bathing, and even using her cell phone. It was very emotionally traumatizing to see her mind and body degrading so rapidly, and
taking on a caretaking role with my own mother was extremely difficult. Because my hometown was a two-hour drive away from campus, I was spending a lot of time on the road back and forth to spend time with my mom and help my family make difficult decisions regarding her care. Four weeks and three days after I was told about the initial diagnosis, my mom passed away in hospice care at the age of fifty-six.

The emotional trauma of caring for my dying mother sent my life into a downward spiral. This was a devastating loss on its own because I was very close with my mom, but many other factors contributed to the difficulty of the situation. My mom handled all the financial matters, so I had no idea how I would continue to pay for school. I personally needed to take over moving out of and selling my childhood home where I had lived my whole life, which forced me to make difficult decisions regarding my future housing situation. As expected in the face of such a loss, the quality of my schoolwork took a big hit.

Addressing all these factors as a nineteen year old left me grasping wildly for any support I could get. Since I lived on campus, I was hours away from home, so I was lucky to have good sources of support at school. First, my Resident Assistant (RA) was able to provide a listening ear and support. She frequently left notes on my door to let me know she was looking out for me and would check in often to see if she could help me navigate conversations with my professors. My RA became a huge source of comfort and stability in contrast to the chaos I was experiencing at home. Another source of support for me was Professor Watkins*, one of my professors. In the weeks leading up to my mom’s death, this professor went out of her way to meet with me and make an academic plan that allowed me to finish as much work as possible while not sacrificing the time I had to spend with my family. Professor Watkins listened to me and clearly understood the hardships I was facing and made me understand that it was okay to
not be okay. In her class, I felt comfortable taking the time I needed to handle my personal affairs while still participating as much as I could in the lessons. Her generosity, empathy, and accommodating attitude made me feel hopeful in a hopeless situation.

Unfortunately, the support on campus diminished after that point. When I explored my options with my RA, I learned that university policy would allow for a course withdrawal, in which my grades would be expunged and I would effectively be starting over from square one. I considered this option briefly because I was afraid of what my grades would be after missing classes and returning assignments late in my courses. However, I learned the university would not be able to refund any of the tuition I had already paid for the semester. Not wanting to waste all the time and money I had already put forward, I decided to continue and finish my work to the best of my ability. When explaining my situation to my professors, they seemed to not know what to say or what to do. One professor refused to make an exception to her attendance policy, and further, wouldn’t allow me to turn in any of my work at a later date. Because of my professor’s restrictive policies, I received a D for the course. My overall GPA for the semester was a 2.99, the lowest I had ever received in undergrad.

When I didn’t find adequate support from my professors, I turned to the on-campus counseling center. I thought that, if I had to continue to struggle with my grief and finish my classes, I could at least try to talk to a professional for help to process my loss. When I went to the counseling center on campus, I was turned away as it was “too late in the semester” to start seeing an on-campus counselor, even for only one visit. I was able to meet with a case manager who referred me to counselors off campus. This “solution” was more expensive and time-consuming to attain, even though I had the benefit of having my car on campus.
As I continued to attend classes and try to return to some sense of normalcy on campus, I tried to turn to my roommates for companionship and empathy to balance the shock and despair I was experiencing. Alas, as they were also growing in their own spaces as developing college students, they didn’t have the capacity to help me in the way that I needed. They began to go to events and activities without inviting me, and stopped communicating with me in general. I felt extremely isolated and not having close friends on campus made me even more anxious and depressed than I already did. Home life was already unbearably sad and very few people went out of their way to make school life less hard to handle.

**Impact of Loss on College Students**

I wish I could say that the difficulty I faced in finding support on campus is rare. However, further research into bereavement policies and practices on college campuses has shown that my experiences were not unique or isolated. Further, the number of college students who experience bereavement at any given time is more than one might think. The most recent data shows that between 22 to 30 percent of undergraduate college students are in the first twelve months of grieving the death of a family member or friend (Balk, 2008). While this figure has been debated over the years, Balk supports this estimate with numerous empirical sources and personal anecdotes of student affairs professionals.

As I witnessed firsthand, there are a wide variety of negative effects faced by young people experiencing loss. Wrenn (2002) outlines some of these effects. For example, a student may not know how to communicate with a skeptical professor that they need extra time on assignments, and this may lead to conflict between the student and professor. Students returning from a prolonged absence due to bereavement “often find it difficult to explain to peers and
faculty why they have been absent,” (Wrenn, 2002, p. 1). A student who is dealing with a loss may feel as though they have to put their own grief aside to comfort others, especially if the death is of a mutual connection to others on campus or within their family. Further, processing grief at the traditional college age can delay developmental milestones, such as “forming autonomous lives, developing a clear sense of direction, and entering into lasting, intimate relationships,” (Balk, 1998, p. 1). More harmful effects of loss include poor or degrading mental health, decline in academic progress, and financial stress (Cupit, Servaty-Seib, Parikh, Walker, & Martin, 2016).

Despite the abundance of harmful effects of loss and grieving listed above, students dealing with loss are largely under-supported by universities. Wrenn (2002) acknowledges that some universities have effective interventions in place for their bereaved students, but elsewhere, many of these students are undersupported due to shortcomings of general policies and deficits within campus counseling centers. If written policies do exist, such policies are often created with a limited understanding of the grieving process as a whole (Wrenn, 2002).

In regards to counseling centers, students may understand that they can access their school’s counseling center for psychological problems, but might not be aware they can talk to someone about death and grieving (Wrenn, 2002). Even if the student was aware of and wanted to access counseling services, the demand for counseling services has increased and as such, counseling centers are increasingly unable to keep up with the high demand (Hardy, Weatherford, Locke, Depalma, & Diuso, 2011). Paired with my experience of being turned away by my campus counseling center, these observations clearly indicate a need for interventions for bereaved students.
Conclusion

The negative effects of grieving are varied and pervasive, and therefore it is crucial that universities support their students while they are moving through processes of grief. I specifically reference the process of grief because this process is not linear, nor is it bound by a timeline. Grief is specific and nuanced for every single person and cannot be quantified by a one-size-fits-all definition. In order to support and foster student success, more options need to be made available to grieving students as they move toward degree completion. In this thesis, I further discuss the interruptions to student development milestones that bereavement can cause. Then, I examine the historical influences that have shaped my concern thus far, followed by a programmatic intervention proposal to address the needs of bereaved students. I turn next to key definitions relevant to my thesis as well as a brief introduction to my conceptual frameworks.
Chapter 2: Thematic Concern, Conceptual Framework, & Definition of Terms

Introduction

This chapter presents my research concern and situates it within a philosophical and theoretical context. First, I present my thematic concern followed by definitions relevant to the thesis. Next, I describe the conceptual framework guiding my research and delineate my research questions. I close by referencing relevant ACPA/NASPA Competencies before transitioning to my literature review in the following chapter.

Thematic Concern Statement

This thesis focuses on supporting students dealing with bereavement. Specifically, there are important developmental impacts on the typical college student who is experiencing (or has experienced) the death of someone close to them. While there are resources for students who have lost someone, such as counseling services, they often lack the specific training and capacity to help students truly cope with bereavement during their academic career. While many colleges and universities have policies in place for faculty and staff experiencing bereavement, I have found that there is an historical lack of similar policies in place for students (Wrenn, 1991). This highlights the importance of considering the needs of bereaved students. If the goal of higher education is to support and foster the growth and development of young adults into well-rounded citizens capable of engaging in a robust, diverse society, then colleges should be very keen to support their vulnerable, bereaved populations.

Terms and Definitions

Throughout this thesis, I use specific terms that hold varied definitions. In this section I state my working definitions for the following terms as they pertain to my thematic concern:
loss/death, process of loss, bereavement, complicated grief/simple grief, significant loss, and bereavement policy. After presenting and referencing these terms, I discuss my conceptual and philosophical framework.

**Loss/Death**

Occasionally throughout this thesis I will use the words “loss” and “death” interchangeably. However, these words do not always reflect a singular event, but represent a process or series of events. This series can include the situations arising before the event of death, including preparing for the death of a loved one and the process of grieving on an individual or social level with other concerned parties.

**Process of Loss**

To me, a loss is not an isolated event. In the technical sense, loss can be described as a singular occurrence where something you once had is gone. Some losses may be able to be found again. In the case of bereavement, the process of loss I’m articulating refers to the permanent loss of a death, but can also include the loss of a person’s consciousness. As an example, one can feel a continuing sense of loss when they receive news that a grandparent has Alzheimer’s disease. The person may still be there physically, but their consciousness is deteriorating or altered. This loss can be as impactful and significant as a death itself.

As I write this thesis while self-isolating in my home, I remain acutely aware of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. During this turbulent time, people around the world are facing a wide range of losses. People are losing their jobs, their housing, their financial stability, their education, and even their lives. Of these losses, the figures we see most widely broadcasted are the number of deaths in any given country. As evidenced by the global sense of grieving, the
universal experience of death transcends the barriers of race, age, sex, gender, religion, and national origin. Now more than ever we must acknowledge and empathize with the difficulties presented by all of these types of loss, especially death. While my main focus is loss in terms of death, it is my hope that this thesis will shed light on the need for empathetic leadership and increased support for those dealing with loss in higher education and beyond.

**Bereavement**

The condition of being bereaved; deprived of a close relation or friend by death.

**Complicated Grief/Simple Grief**

Complicated grief, also referred to as “unresolved grief,” is a condition that arises from a particularly difficult loss. Symptoms of complicated grief disorder can include major depression, sleeplessness, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal thoughts, or even an absence of mourning (Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008). Simple grief, or acute grief, describes the “normal” human responses to loss; for example, crying, shock, emotional numbness, difficulty sleeping, anger, and sadness (Mughal & Siddiqi, 2019). Complicated grief is of particular importance to this thesis as studies (Cox, Dean, & Kowalski 2015) have shown that when paired with the other stressors of college bereaved college students are more likely to develop complicated grief disorder.

**Significant Loss**

The term “significant loss” is often used within this research to begin to explain the process of grief for an individual. I would like to explicitly acknowledge the difficulty that all loss presents while maintaining that the most necessary space for additional support lies in the loss associated with the death of a loved one. To say one loss is a “significant loss” does not
imply that another loss is “insignificant.” This term simply differentiates between any instance of loss and one that holds a direct, specific importance to a particular individual.

**Bereavement Policy**

In general, bereavement policies are official institutional documents outlining the procedure for absences, full or partial term withdrawal, and tuition or fee remission if applicable. For faculty and staff, bereavement policies outline the institution’s procedures regarding eligibility and payment information for a leave of absence from work. Some bereavement policies provide varied levels of benefits depending on the identity and relationship of the deceased to the faculty member, staff member, or student. The scope of bereavement policies varies by institution.

In the next section I introduce and briefly present my conceptual framework. This includes an overview of Schlossberg’s theory of Mattering and Marginality (1989) as well as her Transition Theory (1995). Then, I touch upon the history of bereavement within American culture before summarizing relevant and current research literature. I conclude by exploring other factors relevant to my framework including my field experience with a college resource pantry before finally presenting the research questions that guide this thesis.

**Conceptual Framework**

To address my thematic concern, I utilize theories developed by Dr. Nancy K Schlossberg (1989). The first, “Mattering and Marginality,” observes that students will be more engaged in their college campuses when they are made to feel like they matter, or that their presence on campus is important and valued. Schlossberg articulates that the condition of Marginalization occurs many times through a person’s life. For students, this can manifest as a sense of otherness or feeling “out of things” as they transition from high school to college or join...
a new club or organization, among other examples (1989). For my purposes, experiencing the loss of a loved one is a marginalizing event.

“Mattering,” on the other hand, refers to “the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego-extension...” (Rosenberg and McCullough, 1981, as cited by Schlossberg, 1989, p.8). Institutions that make an effort to focus on mattering will benefit from an increase in motivation for learning, better retention rates, and a better long-term relationship with the student after graduation (Schlossberg, 1989).

Because students facing bereavement often struggle with their academic progress, staying engaged with campus activities, and persisting to graduation, this theory highlights the deficit and the need for increased support for this population of students.

Transition theory, the second approach I use to support my intervention, describes the processes adults move through during times of transition. As Schlossberg writes, transitions can be an event or a non-event that result in some instance of change. These changes can manifest in the form of new relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles (Schlossberg, 1995, p.27). Framing a loss as a transition enables higher education and student affairs professionals to utilize Schlossberg’s “Four S System,” which outlines four factors that influence an individual’s ability to cope with a transition. The Four S’s of transition theory, listed as Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies, offer a lens to assess a student’s position within a transition and support them through the event (in this instance, a loss). This system informs the structure of my intervention, as described in Chapter Four of this paper.

**A Brief Historical Overview**

Historically, there has been little support for bereaved students within the field of Higher Education. A survey conducted in 1989 of 141 members of the Association for Death Education
and Counseling revealed that most schools lacked written bereavement policies and that there was very little training for personnel regarding issues surrounding death (Wrenn, 1991). Over thirty years later, it remains difficult to find resources for bereaved students within higher education despite an overwhelming amount of research that supports the need for more interventions at this level. One possible explanation for the lack of accessible resources today may be the general negative attitude of Americans to death.

In her seminal work *On Death and Dying*, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross wrote that after WWII, Americans had high levels of “optimism and defiance” regarding death. Later, I expand upon this observation and integrate perspectives from the medical field. In many circles, death is not respected as a natural part of life, but as something to be prolonged for as long as possible, despite the consequences. Of course, these attitudes towards death cannot be generalized, as responses to death vary depending on gender, race, socioeconomic status, and other factors. However, despite the varying responses to death and dying, it is evident that bereaved college students are an underserved population in need of more support.

**Research Questions**

Listed here are some of the questions that have guided my research. For the sake of brevity, I have only included the most relevant. In Chapter 5, I will reflect on these questions and their applications for future research.

- Does the university have a written bereavement policy for students?
- What are current practices surrounding bereavement, and how can these practices be expanded or improved?
- How, specifically, does dealing with a death close to the student disrupt their progress within learning development theories?
- How can college counseling centers be restructured to support both short-term and long-term needs of their students? How accessible are counseling services to diverse student populations?
- Who helps the student navigate financial issues when a parent/guardian dies? What if a student is unable to continue paying or does not have a guarantor?
- How does bereavement impact across intersectional identities? Race, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, etc.

**ACPA/NASPA Professional Competencies**

The American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) standards, implemented in 2009, outline professional competencies for those working in the field of Higher Education and Student Affairs. Each of the ten sections provides foundational, intermediate, and advanced outcomes to inform professional practices. Given that the aim of this thesis is to better understand and support bereaved students, I utilize the competencies of “Advising and Supporting” and “Student Learning and Development.”

Advising and Supporting aims to ensure student affairs professionals are equipped with the skills to provide direction, feedback, support and guidance to students moving through their higher education career. The Student Learning and Development competency addresses concepts of student development and learning theory (NASPA & ACPA, 2010). Maintaining an awareness of and practicing the outcomes listed within these competencies allows higher education practitioners to consistently grow as professionals and improve their work.

**Conclusion**
In this chapter I presented my thematic concern. After defining key terminology, I outlined my conceptual framework. This framework included Schlossberg’s theory of Mattering & Marginality as well as Schlossberg’s Transition Theory. Next, I shared a brief historical perspective before naming the ACPA/NASPA competencies relevant to this thesis. In the following chapter I will provide greater context for my concern and the thesis by turning to the research literature.
Chapter 3: Review of the Literature

In this chapter, I articulate my philosophy of higher education, take a deeper look into the history of my concern, examine current trends and list other relevant factors for consideration. This will include an examination of the history of bereavement in American culture, a focus on frameworks of grief, and an analysis of intersectionality. I turn first to my positionality.

Narrative & Positionality

My philosophy of education situates higher education as a means to gain the knowledge required to pursue a career, in addition to promoting the development and personal growth of students so they can engage in a complex and robust society. A narrow perspective on the purpose of higher education may posit that students attending an institution of higher education are solely there to seek degrees for advanced employment opportunities. This limited perspective disregards the many non-academic learning experiences that occur on college campuses. Higher education should provide spaces for holistic development in partnership with academic work.

This holistic approach to higher education echoes ideals found in the seminal work *The Student Personnel Point of View* (SPPV). As dictated in the SPPV, the primary purpose of higher education is “the preservation, transmittal, and enrichment of culture by means of instruction, scholarly work, and scientific research” (Williamson, et.al., 1949, p. 2). Moreso, the SPPV posits that societal growth by way of student development is the “central concern of student personnel work” (p. 2). This articulation of the purpose of higher education places importance on not only instruction, but also experiential learning to promote a more connected society. I believe that the many forms of experiential learning that occur on college campuses forms a developing human
being into a well-rounded person capable of critical thinking, civic engagement, and human connection.

My views on the purpose of education are largely shaped by my positionality as a queer, transgender person. Growing up in a society that marginalizes queer identities led me to hold an appreciation for open-mindedness and human connection across differences. I view education with a lens that prioritizes fostering this sense of acceptance, awareness, and respect for other people. My background in Women and Gender Studies served to put words to these values I’ve held for a long time. Further, the field of Women and Gender Studies opened and unpacked concepts relating to power, privilege, diversity, equity, and inclusion. As such, it is important to me that I include these values as I address my concern.

Unfortunately, bereavement during college often disrupts this learning and stunts components of student development. Managing the social, physical, cognitive, or spiritual responses to grief is extremely difficult, especially during a time when a typical college student is tasked to manage their academics, relationships, and personal growth. Experiencing a loss during this highly transformative and developmental time disrupts students’ efforts in achieving critical developmental milestones, which can lead to feelings of poor self-image and self-confidence (Balk, 2001). Because the college environment contributes to the development of students’ personal and social identities, I believe the university is a necessary space for integrating more support for students dealing with loss.

My own life experience speaks to the relevance of my concern. I am eternally thankful that, aside from my difficulties in navigating the loss of my mother, my educational experience provided me with skills to consider and include identities that are different from my own. I was able to
become involved in campus leadership opportunities that helped me develop into a well-rounded individual with a deepened awareness of what it means to be a global citizen. In the next section, I take a closer look at the history behind bereavement and connect general American attitudes towards death and dying to the theme of bereavement on college campuses.

**History**

**Death and Bereavement in American Culture**

There is a common phrase in the American lexicon that goes along the lines of, “nothing is certain in life besides death and taxes.” This phrase is widely attributed to Ben Franklin, supposedly from a letter he wrote shortly after the creation of the United States Constitution. While he may not have been the first to say it, he is correct. Death is certain. It is consistent, not something new or something that anybody can get away from. What has remained inconsistent, however, are the ways in which Americans have addressed death and grieving as a culture.

To fully unpack and address my thematic concern, it is important to consider both the history of attitudes surrounding death and the history of counseling services in the United States. First of all, death isn’t something that will stop happening. In fact, over the last 3 years in a row, American life expectancy has dropped (Saiidi, 2019). According to Saiidi, this decline is due to increases in drug overdoses, liver disease, and suicide (2019). I believe that something contributing to these three factors is poor mental health caused by being overworked. On average, Americans work more hours and receive less paid time off than employees in several other countries including Germany, Denmark, the United Kingdom, Japan, and Canada, to name a few (Mekouar, 2018). Americans often are made to choose between their own mental wellbeing and going to work all day, every day, just to make ends meet. I believe this “rise and
grind” culture is largely contributing to lower life expectancy rates, and may also be a part of the problem when it comes to learning how to properly address death and dying. How can Americans conceptualize death when most of their waking hours aren’t even spent living?

To better address concepts of death and dying, I turn to experts in the field. Perhaps the most well-known text regarding death, dying, and grief is Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’ 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*, where she outlined her now-famous five-step model for grief. This work is considered to be groundbreaking due to its impact on end-of-life care services, particularly the emergence of hospice centers following the Vietnam War. The book covers many issues surrounding death and people’s responses and reactions to it.

In particular, Kübler-Ross (1969) focused on the history of bereavement. She wrote that the end of the 19th century marked a changing point for the ways in which Americans addressed death and dying. Up until that point, many people died within their own homes among family, and families were expected to personally care for their dead. Death happened more quickly without modern medical interventions to prolong life expectancy. As the years went on, Americans had to contend with the Great Depression and several foreign wars, including WWI, WWII, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. As such, post-WWII Americans had high levels of “optimism and defiance” regarding illness and the dying process. Disease was increasingly seen as a problem to be solved rather than a natural conclusion of life (1969).

Dr. Atul Gawande echoes this sentiment in his 2014 book, *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*. A practicing surgeon in Boston, Massachusetts, Gawande comments that the medicalization of death has damaged Americans’ relationship with the concept of death itself. The topic is avoided and labelled as taboo, and if someone is ill, they are likely to ask for
every medical intervention, even if those interventions wouldn’t definitively cure them. Both Gawande and Kübler-Ross make references which paint a sad picture of dying. Through their interactions with the terminally ill, the two describe these end-of-life situations in a chaotic way. Patients being shuffled from room to room, stuck with needles and subjected to tests, becoming less human and more “thing” with each passing moment. To Gawanda and Kübler-Ross, this medicalization of death has prevented people from coming to terms with it. Americans view death as a failure of the healthcare system, not as something that is a natural part of life. This is evidenced by studies done by Stanford Medical School. In 2013, studies showed that 80% of Americans would prefer to die at home among loved ones. Despite this preference, the study revealed that 60% of Americans died in acute care hospitals, 20% died in nursing homes, and only 20% died within their own homes (“Where do Americans die?” 2013).

The sterility of dying and death within American culture has other factors besides medical. As referenced in Field and Cassel’s “A Profile of Death and Dying,” technology plays a large role in the disconnect Americans have with the process of death and grieving. As Americans have become more spread out around the country, many conversations surrounding death happen via telephone or even text message. Media contributes by focusing television shows and news stories around the sentimentality or violence of death, which in turn, creates a perception of death as an “impersonal event” (Field & Cassel, 1997). Social media websites play into the depersonalization of death as well. Facebook offers a “Memorialize” feature which allows users to preserve their loved ones’ Facebook profiles after death. The avoidance and cognitive disconnect to death and dying can even be heard via common euphemistic references to death, in such phrases as “kicked the bucket,” “bought the farm,” “passed away,” or “so-and-so is in a better place.”
Even further, this fragile handling of death and dying extends to family environments. In particular, children are often kept away from someone dying, with the justification that it might be “too much” for them to handle (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Where at one point in history it might have been common for everybody in the family to gather in the deceased’s house and celebrate their life, the growing trend of American individualism has damaged this tradition and left grieving to be an isolated incident. When death is seen as a failure against the quintessential American “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality, that same sense of failure can extend to feeling stigmatized for seeking counseling services for grieving. In the next section, I discuss the connection between bereavement and counseling practices in higher education/student affairs.

**Counseling Services in Higher Education**

Counseling services in America have transformed greatly since their beginnings. There are still many major stigmas regarding mental health, but the field has come a long way from the cruel performance of lobotomies into a modern age of medicinal psychopharmacology and elective sessions with a licensed therapist. Mental health counseling is relatively new to the American backdrop, but newer still is mental health counseling services on college campuses.

After WWII, there was a need to assist veterans in seeking employment opportunities. Thus, in 1950, the Association of College Counseling Center Directors (AUCCCD) was founded with the goal of providing vocational counseling to those returning from the war (Mack, 2004). Over time, the AUCCCD evolved to encompass mental-health specific counseling on college campuses. While progress has been made, there are widespread problems with university counseling centers. Many don’t have enough counselors on staff to address the needs of all the
students enrolled. For example, at West Chester University of Pennsylvania, there are over 17,000 students enrolled with only ten full-time counselors on staff. Further, some universities, specifically community colleges, have been shutting down their counseling centers as cost-reducing efforts which ultimately harms the students in need of such services (Anderson, 2019).

Over the last several years, there has been a distinct rise in the demand for campus counseling services. Current trends outlined by Michi Fu and Alice Cheng (2017) indicate that not only more students are taking advantage of counseling services on their campuses, but those working in counseling centers are experiencing high rates of burnout. Fu and Cheng (2017) conducted research over a span of five years, and their data shows that students are increasingly seeking mental health services for “depression, generalized anxiety, social anxiety, general distress, self-harm, and suicidality” (p.404). Overall, substance abuse rates have declined, but the high volume of students seeking services has increased dramatically (2017). For bereaved students, the increased demand added to the decreased capacity in counseling centers means that they are less likely to receive the help they need following their loss.

Conclusion

Overall, bereavement at any age is a difficult process. When adding to it the struggles of being a college student within a hyper-capitalist society such as the United States, a general lack of affordable health care, and cutbacks on college counseling, bereavement for this demographic becomes a much more difficult beast to tackle. There is research outlining the negative effects of grief without adding on the burden of student debt and the lack of an adequate system to address the inequity of mental health services. If colleges are not mindful of these problems and actively
working to support students on campuses during such a transformative time of life, they are not giving students the full support they need to be successful in their college careers.

This section focused on the history of bereavement in American culture rather than specifically within the college or university setting. While counseling centers on campus are theoretically able to provide support for grieving students, more research is needed on how to understand bereavement on campus and how to best support grieving students. In the next section, I take a look at the current trends surrounding college student bereavement.

**Current Trends**

**Introduction**

In this section, I address relevant literature and current trends that inform my thesis research. This includes an examination of some popular frameworks created to understand grief, and an evaluation of two bereavement interventions currently being implemented in colleges and universities. In order to fully understand my intervention proposed in chapter 4, understanding the following frameworks of grief and other relevant considerations is necessary. To explore these factors, I first turn to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross.

**Understanding Grief**

This subsection details a number of approaches to understanding grief, beginning with Kübler-Ross. Other approaches are also presented.

**Kübler-Ross’s Framework on Grief**

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1926-2004) was one of the foremost authorities on death studies. Kübler-Ross was a Swiss-American psychiatrist whose work in near death studies drew on her professional work in both Switzerland and America. Her attitude towards death was sensitive,
inclusive, and empathetic as evidenced by the special care and consideration she imparted into her book, *On Death and Dying*. Within this piece, Kübler-Ross shaped her now well-known five-stage framework of grief. The five stages (Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance) serve to not only assist those who are grieving a loss, but also offer a guiding process for those who are about to die themselves.

With no intention of oversimplifying these stages, their applications can be briefly described as follows.

**Denial.** Denial serves to “pace our feelings of grief” (1969). Feeling shock or disbelief following a loss functions to dull the sharpness of the initial realization of grief, and allows us to ease into the sudden barrage of emotions that typically result following a loss.

**Anger.** Anger is a very common reaction to loss. Kübler-Ross states that the anger bereaved people feel may be directed at oneself, the deceased, medical professionals, the situation as a whole, or a higher power (1969). Anger often stems from severe emotional pain and a feeling of helplessness surrounding death.

**Bargaining.** This stage refers to the common behavior of bereaved people to fruitlessly negotiate the terms surrounding the death. Before a loss, this may take shape in pleading with a higher power for more time with the dying person. After a loss, this could take the form of making promises of improvement in order to be reunited with the deceased. Guilt is commonly paired with this stage. If a person believes they could have done something differently regarding the circumstances of the death, they fixate on their guilt and become stuck in loops of “what if” or “if only” thinking.
Depression. Depression is perhaps one of the most obvious stages of grieving. Experiencing sadness, emptiness, or numbness after a loss are all normal components of the grieving process.

Acceptance. According to Kessler (2004), acceptance is often conflated with the idea of completely being “over” the loss. In reality, acceptance is about adjusting to the new reality we find ourselves in after a loss. By accepting new norms, roles, and relationships, we find ourselves in a position that allows forward motion through grief.

Although listing these stages in order implies a linear movement, they are not meant to be linear or exhaustive responses to grief. In On Grief and Grieving, (a book that extends concepts established in On Death and Dying) David Kessler, a co-author with Kübler-Ross, states that these five stages are often misunderstood. They are common responses to loss that many people have to death or loss, but they are not meant to represent the full experience of human grief (2004).

Other Relevant Frameworks

Because death is such a universal human experience, there are of course other frameworks that address grief and loss. Here, I briefly review two frameworks of grief and assess their uses for my approach. It is interesting to present these other approaches because they seek to apply structure and reason to a largely unstructured, chaotic process. The similarities in these approaches legitimize the common responses to grief and offer well-researched methods of coping with loss.

healing by offering moments of self-reflection. The six steps are organized into three phases, which are avoidance, confrontation, and accommodation. “Recognizing” and “Reacting” to the loss allows space for processing one’s emotions directly following the loss. “Recollecting” and “Relinquishing” asks griever to reflect on their relationship to the deceased and release any assumptions they may still hold about the deceased. Finally, “Readjusting” and “Re-investing” promotes forward motion into a new normal without completely neglecting the impact that the deceased had on one’s life (1984).

Another framework created to attempt to understand the process of grief is William Worden’s (2009) Four Tasks of Mourning. Worden phrases his four points as “tasks” instead of “phases” because to him, “phases” implies a sense of passivity instead of taking an active role in the “grief work” (2009). Unlike Rando and Kubler-Ross’ approaches which both seem to place acceptance in an end-goal position, Worden begins with the task of “accepting the reality of the loss” (p. 39). In this task, Worden (2009) places responsibility on the griever to quickly come to terms with their new reality in order to avoid delusioned thinking that can stem from fixating on the initial denial of a loss. The second task is “process the pain of grief” (p. 43). This step emphasizes the importance of recognizing and accepting any range of emotions that result from a loss. The third task, “adjust to a world without the deceased,” (p. 46) promotes developing new routines and making adjustments to one’s environment, one’s personal sense of self, and one’s spiritual beliefs. Without the deceased, roles and responsibilities may change for the griever, so these adjustments are necessary for moving forward after a loss. Worden’s fourth and final task is “to find an enduring connection with the deceased in the midst of embarking on a new life” (p.50). This task aims to position the griever in a place where they can remember and respect
their deceased loved one in their day-to-day lives without invoking a negative psychological response.

Regardless of the framework one uses to understand a loss or the process of grief, it is evident that the effects of bereavement are highly salient and difficult to process. To dig deeper into the varied ways of experiencing a loss, I attempt to utilize an intersectional lens and examine differences in grief responses based on race, gender, and religion in the following section.

**Intersectional Understandings of Grief**

As someone with a background in Women and Gender studies, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge and unpack the variety of responses to grief. It is critical to understand that grief, while a universal human experience, is not experienced the same way by any two people. Attitudes and behaviors surrounding death are largely influenced by a person’s ethnic or cultural background, their gender, their religious beliefs, as well as the means of death. In this section, I briefly explore and highlight these variants and discuss the implications of these factors in creating a comprehensive intervention proposal.

**Race.** Race plays an important role in bereavement. Anna Laurie and Robert Neimeyer (2008) frame grief as a social construct which they use to explain the vast differences in human responses and attitudes towards grief. Often, the “typical” signs of grief, such as crying, depression, anxiety, or other psychological symptoms are “assumed to be universal” (p. 174). However, according to Laurie and Neimeyer (2008), this assumption is based on hegemonic white norms and should not be generalized to apply to all people. Laurie and Neimeyer note that black communities have both a shorter lifespan than their white counterparts and are more prone to experiencing the premature loss of a loved one. Due to these factors, black communities are more likely to engage in intergenerational and inter-familial support as opposed to an
individualistic approach. Further, there is often a stronger connection to death as part of a “continuum of life” (p. 176) and that religious and spiritual faith often provides strong support to the bereaved. Instead of implementing “traditional grief models” which call for “moving on,” the ongoing connection to the deceased via spirituality may provide more support and comfort (2008). Rachel Weiskittle (2015) also explains that grief and bereavement research has largely revolved around the experience of “dominant white culture,” leading to the exclusion of sub-cultural groups.

Religion. Given the deeply personal nature of loss, it is no surprise that religion couples closely with the grieving process. Lord and Gramling (year) describe religion as a part of how people make sense of the world. This search for “meaning” is a large part of navigating loss. Religion may contribute in a positive or negative way during the process of grief. Lord and Gramling go on to reference a method developed by Pargament, Koenig, & Perez (2000) to measure the different ways that religion shows up in bereavement, whether good or bad. RCOPE, as the construct is called, is meant to understand the functions of religion in people’s lives and foster an understanding of how people use religion to move through problem-solving and emotional journeys. The RCOPE is divided into subscales, which separate the positive and negative religious aspects. Some of the positive subscales include “benevolent religious reappraisal,” “forgiveness,” and “seeking support from clergy or other religious members.” The other end includes topics such as “religious discontent,” “punishing God reappraisal,” “and “pleading for direct intercession” (2015). Each item on the RCOPE is meant to examine how much a participant used a given type of religious coping.

Overall, religion can be both helpful and detrimental to the grieving process depending on how the bereaved perceives their experiences. The person’s “assumptive worldviews” tie into
this perception, for example, if someone has a strong sense of self-worth, the “buffering effect” on their grief will be greater (2015). While Lord and Gramling primarily focus on Christianity, those practicing Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, or other religions have equally varied responses and practices surrounding grief, and no generalizations should be made.

**Gender.** While the research regarding bereavement upon gender lines is widely debated, reviewing some implications that the current research suggests remains important. Weiskittle (2015) references literature that suggests grieving styles exist on a continuum, “stretching from ‘instrumental’ (externally problem orientated) to ‘intuitive’ (emotive, help-seeking)” (Martin & Doka, 2000, as cited by Weiskittle, 2015, p., 6). Weiskittle observes that most men tend to lean towards the instrumental end, while women lean toward the intuitive end. As such, men may be more resistant to seeking counseling support for their loss, while women have less qualms doing so. However, other researchers (Murphy, Johnson & Weber, 2002; Versaille & McDowell, 2005; Stillion & Noviello, 2001; Martin & Doka, 2000 as referenced by Weiskittle, 2015) postulate that grieving styles between men and women largely overlap, and that there is no proven dichotomy between the two.

While designing a comprehensive bereavement plan that addresses all intersectional identities is beyond the scope of my thesis, I emphasize that Higher Education professionals should be mindful of their approach to comforting a bereaved student. Some students may lean towards a counselor to help them process their loss and some may turn to their family or community for support. Others might appreciate a religious reference, while others still may become angry at the mention of a higher power they do not connect with. Creating an accessible, inclusive intervention requires an awareness of these different responses and perceptions of
grieving. In the next section, I examine and evaluate two existing interventions for bereaved students before articulating my own proposal in Chapter 4.

**Existing Bereavement Interventions**

As this topic has gained more momentum and dedicated research over the years, student affairs professionals have proposed and developed some interventions for this vulnerable student population. Broadly, these include creating bereavement counseling groups, making changes to current counseling center structures to meet increased demand, and chartering chapters of national grief organizations for the campus. For the sake of brevity, I will only address the specifics of two intervention strategies before offering my own program proposal.

**Support Group Intervention**

One proposed intervention was developed by Alexandra Prior (2015), a social worker at Wellesley College in Massachusetts. After the sudden death of her sister-in-law, Prior noticed the negative impact the loss had on her niece, who was in her first week of college when the death occurred. Like many bereaved students, Prior’s niece did not have the benefit of a specialized grief counselor on her campus. Prior’s course of action was to create and facilitate a support group. Within the group, Prior encouraged “intrapersonal, self-reflective processes” and “interpersonal, communicative processes” to promote healing (Prior, 2015, p. 115). She utilizes three components for her group meetings. The first, “soliloquy,” invites the students to share their personal grief story to whatever degree they find comfortable. At first, these stories are short and difficult to get through as the student attempts to find words for their feelings or forge trust within the support group. The students eventually are able to expand on their stories the
more time they spend in the group, gaining comfort and trust. This process is repeated each semester or as new students enter the group.

Next, the students practice “monologue,” which involves a game dubbed “happy/crappy.” This is a chance for students to share their weekly wellbeing and share their good and bad moments over the course of the week. As colleges are a fast-paced setting, these monologue sessions allow students to find some sense of stability and regularity during times of fluctuation on campus. The “happy/crappy” game encourages self-reflection, and also integrates a further sense of structure so students aren’t pressured to find their own way of communicating their feelings.

Finally, Prior’s support groups end with “dialogue.” This is an opportunity for students to have unscripted back-and-forth conversation with one another and the facilitator. Grief mentoring and companionship are fostered during this segment, with focus on comments made during the monologue session. Prior emphasizes that a sense of emotional safety and trust are vital to these support groups in order for them to function well. Within these groups, it is common for students to become grief mentors. By moving through their emotions, they are able to create solutions that will help themselves and eventually offer those solutions to members who join the group later on.

**Organizational Intervention**

Another example of a bereavement intervention is National Students of Ailing Mothers & Fathers (NSAMF). National Students of AMF was founded in 2006 by a student at Georgetown University in response to the loss of his mother. While the acronym stands for “Ailing Mothers & Fathers,” it includes support for all students moving through the loss of family members or
friends (Fajgenbaum, Chesson, & Lanzi, 2012). The group quickly developed into a non-profit organization, and as of 2012, operates 43 recognized campus chapters. Chapters of NSAMF utilize two main components in their support approach.

First, NSAMF chapter leaders establish and operate a peer-led support group for grieving students to connect with each other and share their experiences. Within support group meetings, students are reminded that it is not a counseling group, but an opportunity to share their experiences and observations among others facing similar circumstances. These group discussions serve to normalize grief talk, help students feel less isolated, and share coping techniques (Fajgenbaum, Chesson, & Lanzi, 2012). The second component that NSAMF chapters utilize is a service group. Within the service group, grieving students gain an opportunity to meaningfully contribute to service opportunities in honor of their deceased loved one. Fajgenbaum, Chesson, & Lanzi (2012) claim that these service opportunities attract students who typically shy away from support groups. These students find participating in service to be a “preferable therapeutic outlet” (p. 100).

The mere existence of these interventions is encouraging, because it means that this population of overlooked griever is starting to be recognized and advocated for. However, I argue that these interventions are insufficient. While Prior’s approach incorporates well-structured counseling techniques and student leadership opportunities by way of grief mentor positions, students may feel put-off at the idea of attending a counseling group (Wrenn, 2002). Further, Prior does not incorporate provisions for students that may be experiencing difficulty communicating and negotiating their needs to their professors or advisors. NSAMF falls short in a similar way. While the incorporation of service and community building are groundbreaking, there again lacks a perspective regarding student-faculty relations, which I further examine in the
next section. Although my approach is structured differently, I would be interested in incorporating Prior’s and Fajgenbaum’s ideas in my future work.

**Conclusion**

In this section on current trends I briefly discussed three frameworks created to understand grief. I also showcased and evaluated two interventions currently in place at colleges and universities, followed by an intersectional examination of grief and loss. However, interventions related to student bereavement often encounter systemic challenges, including lack of policy guidance and implicit power struggles. This is the topic of the next section.

**Systemic Structural Challenges: Policy and Power**

In the wake of COVID-19, thousands of colleges and universities across America decided to close their doors and make a change to remote learning. West Chester University of Pennsylvania was among the first universities to make the decision to close completely for the remainder of the spring semester. Within days, students across the nation were efficiently moved out of their on-campus apartments, and professors were given time to convert their lesson plans to accommodate online learning. One thing that this abrupt change revealed is that millions of students across the country who needed this kind of remote access could have had access to it this whole time. This crisis has uncovered inequities and shined a light on the lack of access that many students face when pursuing higher education. Some schools have even made the decision to alter their grading policies during this global pandemic in order to focus chiefly on learning.

In my case, if I had the option to work remotely or to have my grades count for a pass/fail, I would have felt a lot less stress and anxiety while dealing with my mother’s death. The fact that universities have the capacity to serve their entire student body remotely means that
the small percentage of students who need these accommodations on a normal basis are being
denied a service that can be easily accomplished with some minor adjustments on the
university’s part. By alluding these issues I am highlighting the implicit power discrepancy
between university officials and a grieving student. Students engaging in the process of grief
while managing the many responsibilities of being a college student are placed at the mercy of
their institution when seeking assistance to process their grief. Bereaved students often encounter
systemic challenges, including lack of policy guidance and implicit power struggles, which I
address in the next subsection.

Power and Privilege

Power structures within the university often place administrators in a higher hierarchical
position than students. This hierarchy can lend itself to a sense of inequity in representation
when it comes to student-professor negotiations. One power imbalance of significant relevance
to my concern is present in the interactions between a professor and their students. When my
mom died, I thankfully had professors who were empathetic and flexible. Those professors
understood the struggle I was going through, in part because they shared with me how they had
also experienced loss. However, other professors did not share the same level of sympathy.
When I was denied an extension on a deadline for an assignment, despite informing my
professor in advance that I would be away from campus managing funeral plans, I felt that I was
in no position to challenge this decision.

Professors hold the power to make or break bereaved students’ educational experiences,
which presents a problem for bereaved students who are simply trying to obtain reasonable
accommodations in the classroom. My personal experience reflects research that indicates that a
faculty member’s “empathy, attitude toward grief, and personal history of experiencing death during college were significant predictors of comfort level discussing death and likelihood to provide accommodations” (Hedman, 2012, p. 914). The power that professors hold in the classroom should be recognized, and professors should be encouraged to react with empathy to their bereaved students.

Another example of power imbalances at play is seen in the disparity between bereavement policies for employees and students. A frequent observation made by scholars in this field is that there is a lack of well-structured, written policies for bereaved students (Balk, 2008; Wrenn, 2002). On the other hand, most places of employment across America have a bereavement policy available to their employees. In some cases, these policies are so specific that they outline certain guidelines to follow based on the identity of the deceased, how long the employee has been working with the company, whether or not the employee needs travel assistance, and how long ago the relation passed away. If universities and workplaces recognize the need for their adult employees to have accommodations following a loss, why is this courtesy not extended to students?

Concerns of power and privilege must also be considered in supporting bereaved students. In this section I have shown how this occurred for me in my own experience and briefly noted a power imbalance that exists at the policy level. In my intervention I offer solutions to specifically address issues of power and policy.

**Conclusion**

Death and dying lives in a unique place within American culture. When I was navigating the loss of my own mother as an undergraduate student, it was immensely hard to
manage classwork with unclear guidance and policies, and often unforgiving professors. However, there were people who helped support me and offered resources: my residence life staff. I was inspired, in part, to seek out a career in residence life to help others because of the compassion and empathy that were offered to me by these staff members. Today, my work within residence life and students affairs is informed in this same spirit of compassion and empathy. Bereavement is hard on its own, but made even more complicated and stressful when experiencing it as an undergraduate student. Students are already balancing coursework, relationships, becoming an adult, and likely finding their life’s purpose, and it is imperative that the university, through student affairs, finds a way to support them through their grief.

In this chapter I reviewed topics relevant to my concern. I began with my own narrative and positionality. Then, I summarized the history of bereavement within American culture and the relevance of counseling centers as a component of a university response. I reviewed current trends including summarizing understandings of grief by Kübler-Ross, Therese Rando, and William Worden, and the importance of intersectionality. I closed this chapter by briefly unpacking two pillars of systemic challenges to engaging with bereavement on college campuses: policy and power imbalances between administration/faculty and students. In the next chapter I provide my own response to this concern with my intervention.
Chapter 4: Program Design and Implementation

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I examined the current trends surrounding bereavement in higher education and discussed the importance of timely support for bereaved students. Ensuring that students undergoing the process of grief are adequately supported by university faculty and staff is critical to preserving students’ mental health, personal development, and growth. Having access to support systems mitigates many of the negative effects of bereavement at this stage of life (adolescence, or the “traditional college age” of 18-24). Studies have shown that when interventions for bereaved students occur within the semester the loss occurs, the student is more likely to return to a sense of normalcy and persist in their subsequent semesters (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006).

Students experiencing a loss on campus are at risk for a myriad of negative mental health effects, delayed developmental milestones, and poor academic performance (Balk, 2001). In order to mitigate the negative effects of grief and provide an empathetic response, colleges should have structured policies in place to identify and assist their students through the process of grief.

Before I outline my proposed intervention, I would like to recognize that some colleges do offer well-structured means of support for their bereaved students. Some examples include specialized grief support groups in counseling centers, partnerships with national grief associations, and the creation of specialized for-credit courses surrounding grief and loss. While these approaches are valuable and impactful, I argue they are not sufficient means of support if they are not paired with institutional, structured support for affected students. To me, a “good” intervention must not only address the symptoms of bereavement, but acknowledge and mitigate
the barriers that arise when a loss occurs. In the following section, I detail my proposed intervention.

**Brief Overview of the Interventions**

In this section, I provide a summation of my proposed intervention. My proposal is created within the setting of a medium, public, state institution and is composed of three segments. The first component involves creating a student bereavement policy, if one is not yet in place at the institution. Next, I outline a training session for paraprofessionals working in residence halls, who are often in close proximity to students in crisis. Finally, I propose the creation of a staff position to serve as a liaison for students in need of extended absences or tuition assistance in the event of a loss. This staff position should be located in an office that students would naturally seek support, such as a counseling center, wellness center, student support office, or similar.

The first component of my intervention serves to bring the institution up to date by creating a student bereavement policy. This is an important first step because it addresses a common gap in support for bereaved students. Developing and implementing a comprehensive policy for bereaved students helps those students feel recognized by the university and gives them a stable resource to assist them.

The second component is a training program to prepare paraprofessional students working within residence halls to identify, connect with, and support bereaved students. This workshop, titled “Identifying & Supporting Bereaved Students: A Residence Life Training Workshop,” is an hour-and-a-half long training session that features education about grief and loss, role play scenarios to manage difficult conversations, and a reference sheet of quick facts and contact information for support services. This educational session is targeted towards
Resident Assistants or other residence life paraprofessionals, but can be adapted to work for other paraprofessionals such as Commuter Assistants, Leadership Consultants, Wellness Ambassadors, and more. Further, it can also be adapted to train faculty and staff.

While the residential training program component of my intervention primarily focuses on students between the ages of 18-22 residing on campus in an undergraduate setting, loss obviously affects people outside this demographic. In order to address the needs of any bereaved student, not just those within this age range, services provided by the established Student Support Coordinator will be accessible to every student enrolled at the institution. This Student Support Coordinator will be responsible for assisting students in informing their professors of a loss, coordinating accommodations for student absences, and helping the student navigate their options regarding tuition remission, if desired. Students may reach out directly to the Student Support Coordinator, but the role may also operate with a referral-based structure in which the Student Support Coordinator directly contacts bereaved students identified and reported by RAs or other campus authorities.

Death is an intrinsic part of life. Despite the commonality of loss, it remains a widely-avoided, sensitive topic for many. It is my hope that through these interventions, campus officials will be able to approach the subject of loss comfortably and work together to support bereaved students.

Purpose, Goals, and Outcomes

This section outlines the purpose, goals, and learning outcomes of the proposed intervention. The primary purpose of my intervention is to provide support for students dealing with a loss in order to ensure their continued growth, development, and academic success. In
order to accomplish this purpose, I will need to address a number of barriers that students experiencing loss face. My intervention will provide assistance to students facing barriers that result from experiencing a loss, such as difficulty communicating needs with professors (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006), financial instability after the loss of a parent or guardian, reduced peer support (Cox et al., 2015), or a change in a housing situation or family dynamic. My intervention will serve to establish clear procedures for bereaved students, alleviate the difficulty and anxiety of making arrangements with professors while processing a loss, and preserve developmental progress and milestones during the transformative college experience. This intervention is not designed to replace professional support from trained counselors.

In the following section I present the relevant goals for each of the interventions proposed: establishment of a student bereavement policy, residential bereavement training program, and the Student Support Coordinator position.

**Goals, Objectives, and Outcomes**

There are three main goals for this intervention:

- Provide clearly-defined support procedures for bereaved students.
- Establish a campus culture that is empathetic to the needs of students in crisis.
- Create lines of communication between faculty, staff, and students to enable timely support.

**Program Objectives**

In order to achieve these goals I have outlined specific objectives for each component of the intervention.

*Bereavement Policy*
Outline the responsibilities of the student to invoke the policy.

Contain contact information for relevant campus authorities and campus resources.

Outline procedure to obtain excused/extended absences.

Contain information and references regarding financial aid, tuition remission, housing/meal plan remission, and other relevant elements.

**Residential Training Workshop**

- Create a 90-minute workshop for Resident Assistants to learn the comprehensive nature of loss.
- To teach RA’s basic supporting skills in working with bereaved students

**Student Support Coordinator**

- Develop a job description for this position.
- Identify reporting structure.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

In this section, I briefly describe three frameworks that shape my intervention. These include Schlossberg’s (1989, 1995) Theory of Mattering and Marginality as well as her Transition Theory, and Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’s (1969) 5 Stages of Grief.

**Mattering and Marginality**

Schlossberg’s Theory of Mattering and Marginality (1989) states that when a student experiencing marginality is made to feel as though their presence on campus matters, they are likely to continue engaging in campus activities and move towards degree completion. Ensuring that students have an accessible resource to support them during difficult situations gives
students the impression that there is someone taking them seriously and listening to their concerns to rectify the difficulties they are facing.

**Transition Theory**

Schlossberg’s Transition Theory examines events of life as points of “transition.” These transitions can be any event or non-event that occurs in a significant change of roles, responsibilities, or assumptions (Schlossberg et al., 2011). Loss is a huge transition that undoubtedly alters a student’s way of interacting with the world. Schlossberg articulates that there are four factors that influence a person’s ability to cope with a transitional event. These factors, called the “Four S’s” are Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies. The Four S’s help student affairs professionals assess a student’s positionality and identify opportunities for growth and increased support as the student moves through grief.

**Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’ 5 Stages of Grief**

Perhaps one of the most widely-known authors on the subject, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’ work “On Death and Dying” articulates her theory for the process of grief. The five stages she articulates are Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance (1969). As this is such a well-known theory, I reference these stages in my residential training program to inform participants of the common experiences one may feel when processing a loss, and use these milestones to frame successful movement through the process of grief.

**Program Proposal**

In this section, I offer a detailed guide to executing each of the three components that form my programmatic intervention.
Part One: Creating a campus-wide bereavement policy.

First, if the institution does not already have a bereavement policy for its students, the appropriate campus authorities should work together to create and disseminate one. In this instance, the “appropriate campus authorities” may include a dean, student conduct representatives, faculty, counseling center staff, legal representation, or staff from the university president’s office.

A comprehensive bereavement policy should include the following:

- Instructions to invoke bereavement policy.
- Information regarding extended absences from courses and details for faculty responsibility to adhere to such guidelines.
- Information on withdrawal from individual courses or the semester entirely.
- Tuition and fees refund information, if applicable.
- Contact information for the concerned campus authorities.
- A list of resources available to the bereaved student such as group counseling or at least, the contact information for a counseling center on or near campus.

Once this policy is created, it must move through university governance for approval before dissemination to the campus. To ensure widespread access and knowledge about this policy, and because bereavement is a taboo subject, this intervention will require a comprehensive marketing campaign. This policy should be outlined in course syllabi and should be featured in newsletters, digital signage, websites, student handbook and flyers. Refer to Appendix A for an Example Bereavement Policy.
Part 2: Paraprofessional Training Module

The next component of my program involves training paraprofessional student staff in residence halls to identify and articulate resources for students. During regularly scheduled Resident Assistant (RA) training, I propose a one-and-a-half hour training module that teaches residence hall staff members how to identify and provide support for bereaved students. Those who work in Residence Life are often the first point of contact for students in crisis. This session will enable these “primary responders” to quickly identify bereaved students and give them confidence to approach difficult conversations about death.

Ideally, this training session will be facilitated by a Resident Director or counseling center staff member. As the content of this training module is very basic and is meant to be accessible to any skill level, the facilitator does not necessarily need to be a grief professional or counseling expert. I want to emphasize that resident assistants are not meant to be counselors by the end of this training module. It is only meant to provide them with a basic understanding of grief and the means to refer their students to appropriate levels of support.

The RA training module will begin with a pre-test to gauge prior knowledge and set the expectations for learning for the module. This pre-test serves several purposes. First, it can serve as a benchmark of knowledge so students can reflect and observe their progress in learning a new skill. Next, the pre-test will set the tone of the session, effectively conditioning the students to be ready to discuss grief and loss. Finally, the pre-test will also address common misconceptions surrounding death and dying. Students attending the session can examine their own perceptions of death in order to challenge and reshape their preconceptions to provide support to bereaved students. Ideally, the continued discussion of this sensitive subject matter will de-personalize the concept of death and grieving in the context of the training, so students can go on to comfortably
talk about it with their residents or other students affected by loss. Please see Chapter 5 for a
detailed discussion on assessment measures.

The next step of the RA training module will be an educational workshop. In this
workshop, the students will learn basic information about the process of grief, basic
psychological responses to grief, how typical college aged students react to loss, what happens
when support is nonexistent or falling short, what resources are available on campus, how to
access those resources, and how to talk with students about grief and loss with empathy.

Next, the facilitator will have the attendees separate into groups to conduct role play
scenarios to show them how to navigate difficult conversations. Each group should be composed
of at least three people; two to hold a simulated role play conversation, and one to observe. Each
participant should get the opportunity to act as a bereaved student and as a responding
paraprofessional. In general, death is a difficult topic to address due to its very personal nature.
Moreso, the general negative attitude that many Americans hold towards death makes it a
difficult concept to address. It is difficult for many fully grown adults to talk about death and
dying, let alone young adults in a college environment. To remedy this problem, these role play
scenarios will ensure that the participants are capable of asking difficult questions and enable
them to respond empathetically to a bereaved student. The “solutions” to these scenarios will
include references to top bereavement scholars on how to best help people dealing with grief.

After participating in role play scenarios, the participants will reconvene and discuss as a
large group what was easy or hard to do in the simulated conversations. Students and facilitators
can share their ideas on having these “behind closed doors” conversations with residents. This
discussion will reinforce the learning and make it easier for students to actually envision holding
these kinds of conversations. This component is organized in a way that allows participants to practice what they learn in a low-risk environment that allows for mistakes. Moving forward, the paraprofessionals attending the workshop will benefit from an example to model future conversations surrounding bereavement.

At the end of the workshop, the students will retake the opening pre-test. This test will serve simply to consolidate the session’s key points and acknowledge the participant’s progress. Facilitators should encourage students to retain their pre-test worksheet to reference for future use. After completing the assessment, students will briefly discuss key takeaways, what surprised them or did not surprise them, etc. At the conclusion of the training session, each participant will be given a resource reference sheet that contains information on campus resources, reminders about key points of the module, and further reading of off-campus resources in case the need arises. For copies of the pre-test, training materials, and quick resource reference sheet, please refer to Appendix B.

As a result of participating in this training program, students will be able to:

- Identify three on-campus resources for students facing a loss.
- Articulate two negative effects of bereavement on a traditional college-aged student.
- Demonstrate understanding of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’s 5 Stages of Grief.
- Apply Schlossberg’s Transition Theory and Schlossberg’s Theory of Mattering & Marginality to students in need of assistance.

**Part 3: Student Support Coordinator Position**
The Student Support Coordinator should be a student affairs professional dedicated to student success. This individual will be responsible for advocating on behalf of bereaved students, contacting professors and other concerned parties with appropriate documentation in the event of an extended absence, and providing the student with a single point of contact to discuss their needs as they move through the process of grief. Due to the personal and sensitive nature of loss, this person should have an acute understanding of grief and loss, and should operate with a strong sense of empathy towards students. This position may be a standalone position or its roles may be incorporated into an existing position. Please refer to Appendix C for a proposed job description.

**Implementation**

In this section, I discuss factors regarding the implementation of my proposed program, including budget, marketing, and timeline.

**Funding and Budget**

As with any new initiative, there will be some added expenses. Funding for this initiative can be secured from various sources. The division of student affairs and academic affairs could jointly budget for the student support coordinator and any operating expenses. Additionally, the counseling center might be able to contribute to the salary of the student support coordinator, especially if this person was able to perform additional student support duties. Alumni donors might also be approached to give to a fund to support this initiative.

Depending on the structure of Residence Life and Housing Services on the concerned campus, extra funding might be needed to pay Resident Assistants and facilitators for the residential bereavement training program. As this session is intended to be incorporated as a
segment of an existing resident assistant training schedule, I envision that the funding needed for a one-and-a-half hour long session will minimally impact the established funding methods.

**Timeline**

Ideally, the components of this intervention would launch at the start of the semester. It would behoove the planners to have an entire academic year to develop and prepare for implementation. Policy planning and approval must work through a variety of levels and in order to be implemented in the beginning of the semester, a full year to create and revise the policy would be helpful. The thoughtful development of a training program and hiring of a student support coordinator can also benefit from focused effort over an academic year. Below is a proposed timeline for preparing and implementing this initiative.

**Year 1, Semester 1**

- Organize a committee to develop and prepare bereavement policy, ensuring appropriate stakeholders are involved.
- Identify and train facilitators to lead Residential Bereavement Workshop.
- Create description for Student Support Coordinator role, again ensuring the involvement of appropriate stakeholders.

**Year 1, Semester 2**

- Finalize details for student bereavement policy, prepare for implementation.
- Finalize facilitator selection and training. Prepare facilitators to execute the workshop in the following semester.
- Finalize position description and reporting structure, initiate employment search.
Year 2, Semester 1

- Implementation of Student Bereavement Policy, including widespread marketing measures.
- Incorporate RA Bereavement workshop into regularly-scheduled RA training.
- Student Support Coordinator position begins.

Year 2, Semester 2

- Begin collecting data for assessment and evaluation.

Marketing

Death is often a difficult topic to address. Thus, these interventions must have a comprehensive marketing program to normalize access. It is often difficult for students to seek support following bereavement, (Wrenn, 2002) so every effort must be taken to ensure students feel comfortable seeking this support. Faculty, staff, advisors, and other campus officials who work directly with students should be aware of any bereavement policies and procedures in order to share this information with students. Once established, the bereavement policy should be clearly stated within syllabi for all courses, an example of which can be found in Appendix D. Further, the Student Success Coordinator should be advertised as a resource students can access in the event of a loss or other extenuating circumstance. Information about the bereavement policy and Student Success Coordinator should be made accessible within the student handbook as well as prominently featured on university web pages across pertinent functional areas, such as student conduct, wellness, counseling, advising offices, and academic affairs.

Challenges

The likelihood of institutional buy-in might be low, especially given the discouraging trend of defunding counseling centers. One way to mitigate this issue is to incorporate the
coordinator job responsibilities into another support position such as a student success advisor or residence life professional. In general, I do not foresee many challenges to the implementation of this proposal. One would hope that people, regardless if they have experienced a loss or not, would support enacting policies that would support bereaved students. Although, people do not always want to talk about loss which might prevent seeing some student issues through the lens of loss. As I discussed earlier, loss can take many forms and is experienced individually for each person.

Professors may be resistant or question the reach of the Student Support Coordinator. Although the Student Support Coordinator would not be able to give excused absences, they would be able to inform the professor that the student was experiencing loss that required the absence from class. The Student Support Coordinator can offer the professor resources and help them navigate to the website to learn more about how to support students as they experience loss. Encouraging students, faculty and staff to refer to the policy and use the services of the Student Support Coordinator will reduce the “oldest trick in the book”, invoking the death of a distant relative as an excuse to not attend class or submit work that is due.

Other Considerations

There are additional factors that are important to consider before implementing my proposed intervention. This section highlights widespread policy changes due to COVID-19, offers a brief critique of current intervention trends, and finally, discusses the rightful “place” for bereavement interventions.

A major concern I have in creating this intervention is the willingness of professors to make adjustments for, and remain empathetic to, students in distress. As I processed the loss of
my mother as a first year student, a major problem I encountered was the lack of support I received from a professor. The professor was unwilling to be flexible with my classwork in any regard. This professor did not excuse my absences, refused to push back assignment deadlines, and generally showed no concern for me during such a difficult time in my life. Depending on the policies of the institution and the specific department of study, a professor may need to maintain strict classroom policies in order to abide by the rules of the institution. When formulating or revising a bereavement policy on campus, authorities should consider how much grace they are willing to extend in times of crisis.

In the context of spring 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education is adapting and changing rapidly. For example, I am writing this thesis while practicing social distancing and self-isolation. For the last several weeks, I have been meeting with my classmates, colleagues, and professors digitally over Zoom, a video conferencing software. This unprecedented global event has far-reaching implications for the future of higher education. There is a sense of collective loss for college students, and for most people in general during this difficult time.

With the major accommodations and adjustments occurring in the wake of COVID-19, there is a strong argument that these modifications can be more widely adopted as we move forward to a post-COVID educational setting. For example, more professors may be willing or able to grant a student the ability to complete their course work remotely on a modified time schedule in the event of a loss. Another situation might warrant a video conference between a student and their advisor as the student is away from campus handling family matters. As COVID-19 started to become more widespread and government entities began enacting stay-at-home guidelines, schools across the nation gave their professors and staff a limited amount of
time to convert their lesson plans for remote learning, but with more time and preparation, the possibilities will begin to open up. We, as higher education professionals, would be remiss to forget these major changes and how feasible it is to deliver curriculum in an alternative format.

Conclusion

A final consideration relevant to implementing my proposal would be the relationship between supporting students who are in bereavement and the traditional roles played by organizations on campus that fulfill this place in students’ lives already. Some may believe that the responsibility to provide support for bereavement and the process of grief should be provided by existing resources on campus such as counseling centers. While counseling services absolutely provide support for grieving students, it is not addressing the whole student, only one component of their educational experience. I will expand on this in Chapter 5.

In this chapter, I outlined my proposed intervention to support bereaved students. My goal is to support students dealing with loss to reduce the burden they face when needing to communicate with their professors, Residence Life staff, academic advisors, etc. about a loss they may be dealing with. As someone who was directly impacted by a lack of structured bereavement support within my undergraduate institution, it is important to me that universities take their bereaved student’s needs seriously to avoid marginalizing the student or hindering their developmental and academic success.

As a result of these interventions, I hope that the bereavement process for students will be better articulated and accessible so that students dealing with a loss will feel recognized and supported by their university. Students will know what to do if they deal with a loss during their
college career, and they will not have to experience uncertainty in navigating the university systems during such a stressful time.

Universities would benefit from implementing these interventions because death is an unavoidable part of life. The negative effects of bereavement on young adults is well-documented, and many of those negative effects connect directly to components of education. In the unfortunate event that a student experiences a loss during their college career, students need flexibility, structure, and empathy from their professors and other university officials. In the following chapter, I articulate leadership approaches and detail my proposed methods of evaluating and assessing the effectiveness of my proposed intervention.
Chapter 5: Leadership, Evaluation, & Next Steps

Introduction

It is no secret that bereavement is a difficult topic. It is emotionally sensitive and culturally avoided. It is evident that in order to address the shortcomings of the current trends surrounding bereavement on college campuses, a shift in attitudes and perceptions must occur. In my opinion, this critical shift cannot happen without practicing principles of transformational and emotionally intelligent leadership. In this chapter, I discuss these leadership approaches that should be considered in order to successfully implement my proposed intervention as well as provide some insight to assessment and evaluation of my proposal.

Leadership

Emotionally Intelligent Leadership

Emotions are an intrinsic component of leadership. As such, student affairs leaders should hold a space for emotion in their work, especially when working with sensitive issues such as bereavement. Having an awareness of one’s own emotions and the emotions of other people allows leaders to connect with, empathize with, and inspire the people they work with (Allen, Shankman, & Haber-Curran, 2016). Emotionally intelligent leaders understand how emotions impact work ethic, and can utilize this knowledge to cultivate an empathetic work environment that can contribute to a wider campus culture of empathy and compassion necessary for my intervention.

Transformational Leadership

As Harrison (2011) describes, transformational leadership features two main tenets. Change is the main purpose of leadership, and leadership “transcends one’s position in an organizational hierarchy” (p. 45). At first glance, one might believe that in order to make changes to an organization or structure, one must possess a position of authority. However,
Harrison (2011) argues that those practicing transformational leadership can affect change by engaging in collaborative connections that empower both the leader and the followers. Transformational leadership emphasizes that, to challenge the status quo, leaders should have a firm understanding of the policies and procedures of the system they are challenging, and use their connections to advocate for change. In terms of my thesis, implementing the components of my intervention requires this same understanding of the current structures and collaborative effort between departments is needed.

**Leadership in My Intervention**

There are an abundance of leadership opportunities for students, staff, and faculty within each of the three components of my intervention.

**Students as Leaders**

College is a prime space for students to develop and improve leadership skills. In on-campus leadership positions, students are able to gain skills that will help them prepare for life after graduation. Student leaders play a large role within my intervention in their function as first-responders. Within residence halls, Resident Assistants (RAs)’s are often the first to see or hear about issues their residents are dealing with. As such, they are able to provide a personal level of support to their similarly-aged peers that administrators cannot achieve as easily.

**Faculty and Staff as Leaders**

Writing and implementing a bereavement policy requires leadership from several functional areas within the institution. Policy writing should, at the very least, involve representatives from relevant departments on campus, including student conduct, academic
advising, diversity, equity & inclusion, residence life and housing, and faculty. This process should also include legal representation.

Faculty and staff also play a large leadership role in the implementation of my intervention vis-à-vis the Student Support Coordinator position. The development, candidate search, onboarding, training, and supervision of this role all hold opportunities for leadership.

**My Role as a Leader**

The current climate of COVID-19 leaves the future of higher education practices in a foggy state. I foresee that after this pandemic, there will be an increased need to support students’ mental health and development. My experiences with loss have given me extra sensitivity to students dealing with death, and thus, I anticipate making the implementation of my intervention a top priority in a post-COVID-19 landscape, regardless of what my role may be.

**Assessment/Evaluation**

Comprehensive and ongoing assessment and evaluation will demonstrate the effectiveness of my proposal and provide insight for future changes and improvements. I believe one of the most informative aspects of assessment is collecting data directly from the impacted students. In order to assess the success and reach of my program, I propose the following means of assessment.

**Collecting Data**

Once the program is established, there will be several opportunities for data collection and assessment. First, intake data collected from students invoking the suggested student bereavement policy can provide qualitative data that allows student affairs professionals to
observe what works and what might not be working in the implementation. For example, if a year goes by without a single student accessing the student bereavement policy, it could indicate that marketing efforts are not sufficient.

Within the RA training component, supervisors of these paraprofessionals will be able to follow up with their RAs to determine how often the student referred their residents to bereavement resources on campus. Written documentation of these interactions can provide more context to the situations of students accessing the resources.

**Determining Success**

To determine the success of these interventions, a number of methods can be utilized. Using the data collected through intake of students utilizing the policy, student feedback can be gathered via a follow-up survey sent out by the Student Support Coordinator after a student utilizes the policy or resource. For an example of this survey, please refer to Appendix E. Other informative data may include student grade point average (GPA) and attendance records, preceding and succeeding the event of loss. For example, if a student receiving assistance from the Student Support Coordinator improves their GPA in the semester following the loss, it can be inferred that the support was helpful to the student in some way. This assessment tool may be developed by the university in preparation for implementing these interventions. The success of the RA bereavement training workshop can be evaluated by interviewing resident assistants to gauge how useful they found the training, and how often they used the information they learned to refer their residents to resources for bereavement. For a list of potential assessment interview questions, please refer to Appendix F.

**Limitations & Looking Ahead**
As with any thesis, my thesis has a few limitations. In this section I summarize some areas I am unable to address within this thesis as they are beyond the scope of my thesis.

Grief is a complex process that affects every single person differently. Specifically, as I briefly examined in Chapter 3, a person’s varying identities (such as race, religion, and gender) all contribute to a different experience and perception of loss (Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008; Lord & Gramling, 2012; Weiskittle, 2015). While I am unable to construct a comprehensive bereavement approach that includes all intersectional identities, my intervention attempts to be as universally accessible as possible by incorporating components that are already existing parts of the university system.

Recognizing that my intervention largely targets students between the ages of 18-22, I want to mitigate any potential oversights by ensuring that the Student Support Coordinator is approachable, knowledgeable, resourceful, and helpful to any student in need of assistance. They need to understand the complexity of loss and be willing to advocate on behalf of the student. This person should display kindness and compassion while advocating for kind, compassionate policies and procedures. They need to help change the culture of academia or the campus to one that is compassionate and empathic.

Something I would have liked to incorporate into my intervention is a counseling component. In general, counseling centers seem to be struggling with increased demand and decreased funding. Additionally, bereaved students may be hesitant to access counseling services (Wrenn, 2002). Further development of this work could include hiring at least one licensed grief counselor for the campus to offer specific and direct counseling support. Moving forward, I may conduct more research to assess and improve upon the structure and operation of existing campus counseling centers so that they may be more efficient and effective.
Another limitation to my intervention is that it does not contain specific provisions for religiously affiliated students. As I examined in chapter three, different religious practices impact the way people perceive and experience loss (Lord & Gramling, 2012). Although some research suggests that college students on the whole are moving away from religious affiliations, this obviously does not pertain to all students at all universities. Religiously affiliated universities may benefit from incorporating ministry services for bereaved students.

**Future Goals**

While working on this thesis in the midst of a global pandemic, I feel especially inspired to ensure that my proposed avenues of support are considered by the university where I eventually am employed. As I have mentioned throughout this paper, COVID-19 will present unique challenges for the field of higher education. Given the nature of this problem, I foresee a rapidly approaching need for more empathetic policies and procedures for students dealing with a loss. As I referenced in Chapter 2, a “loss” might not necessarily constitute a death. COVID-19 has presented many forms of loss, so student affairs professionals should keep adaptability, empathy, and compassion at the forefront of their practice. When we are able to return to some sense of normalcy, my next step is to use this document to make a case for increased bereavement support and collaborate with various offices to enact my proposed interventions.

**Conclusion**

College students are placed in an especially transformative time of life. The university is a place where students experience personal growth, interpersonal relationship building, mental development and learning to prepare them for life after college. Experiencing a loss during this transformative time is deeply impactful, and, if not addressed in a timely fashion by the university, can lead to a host of negative effects.
To examine my concern, I used principles from Dr. Nancy K. Schlossberg. Specifically, I utilized her Theory of Mattering and Marginality (1989) to articulate the way bereaved students become marginalized, and how universities can focus on showing students that they matter. I also utilized Schlossberg’s Transition Theory (1995) to frame loss as a transition that changes a student’s roles, responsibilities, or assumptions.

In order to support students facing loss, I outlined an intervention that aims to provide clearly defined support for bereaved students, establish a campus culture of empathy, and create lines of communication between faculty, staff, and students to facilitate timely support. The successful implementation of my proposed interventions requires leaders to operate with principles of transformative and emotionally intelligent leadership. These leadership styles lend themselves to change-making and empathy, which are major elements of my concern.

It is my hope that this thesis and resulting projects raise awareness of this issue and offer some baseline approaches to incorporate this much-needed support for students. I know from personal experience that for students experiencing a loss, having even one person show empathy and compassion makes a significant difference. Loss is ubiquitous and student affairs professionals should take the time to educate themselves to be compassionate sources of support, and keep the impacts of loss in mind as we move forward, hopefully soon, to a post-pandemic society.
References


Appendix A

Sample Bereavement Policy

Students attending College University who experience the death of a loved one have the right to invoke College University’s Student Bereavement Policy. At the earliest convenience, the student must notify the Dean/Student Support Coordinator in writing at DeanEmail@CU.EDU or SSC@CU.EDU. The Dean/Student Support Coordinator is responsible for contacting the student’s professors to inform them of the loss and coordinate communication between the student and professor during this time.

Leave of Absence Procedure

A student experiencing a loss may be granted up to three days excused absence from classes. The student will be responsible for collecting notes and completing work during this time. If there is a test or examination scheduled during this period, the student and professor must make every effort to reschedule in a timely fashion. Professors are expected to work with the student to the best of their ability. Professors should take into consideration the difficulty of loss and work with the student in an empathetic manner.

In the event that a student must travel out of the country for funeral purposes, the Dean/Student Support Coordinator may grant an extension pending a review of a written request by the bereaved student. Out-of-country travel must take place within the allotted absence time and proof of necessity must be shared with the Student Support Coordinator/Dean.

In order to take advantage of this excused absences policy, students must submit a written request via email to the Student Support Coordinator/Dean with the requested dates of absence, at least 24 hours before requested absence dates. Upon approval, Student Support
Coordinator/Dean must relay this information to the student’s professors/advisor/tutor etc.

Subsequent absences will not be considered excused and may impact students’ grades.

**III. Withdrawal Information**

Depending on the student’s academic progress and position, the student may opt to withdraw from a course or courses. Before this option, the student must meet with their academic advisor to discuss the viability of withdrawal.
Appendix B

Identifying & Supporting Bereaved Students: A Residence Life Training Workshop

SLIDE 1 (5 minutes)

Introduction

Facilitator(s) will introduce themselves, their role on campus, and the topic matter to be addressed. A content warning is recommended to inform the participants they will be discussing sensitive subject matter, and they should take the time and space they need to process their emotions during the training.

Facilitator will explain desired learning objectives for the workshop.

As a result of attending this training, students will be able to:

- Identify 3 on-campus resources for students facing a loss.
- Articulate 2 negative effects of bereavement on a traditional college-aged student.
- Display confidence in addressing students regarding bereavement.
- Demonstrate understanding of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’s 5 Stages of Grief.
- Apply Schlossberg’s Transition Theory and Schlossberg’s Theory of Mattering & Marginality to students in need of assistance.

SLIDE 2 (5-10 minutes)

Pre-Assessment.
Participants take a copy of the pre-assessment. Facilitator should ensure that participants know this test isn’t graded, but simply serves to assess participants’ current knowledge and preconceptions of death. Participants will take 5-10 minutes to complete this assessment.

**Pre-Assessment Questions:**

- What are some emotions that come to mind when thinking about death, grieving, or loss in general?
- Do you know anybody who has lost a loved one? Have you? What do you wish people had said or done?
- Have you comforted someone who dealt with a loss? What did you say or do? Would you do anything differently?
- What are some euphemisms you have heard about death? For example, “kicked the bucket.” What do you think about these phrases?
- True or False…
  - In a 12-month period, between 22-30% of college students on average have experienced a loss. [True]
  - The Five Stages of Grief (Denial, Anger, Depression, Bargaining, Acceptance) are linear and time-bound. [False]
  - Grief is unique for every person. [True]
- Rate your comfortability with the following:
  - Approaching a student in distress
    - Completely confident
    - Mostly confident
    - Mostly unconfident
Participants will retain a copy of their pre-assessment to refer to later in the session.

**SLIDE 3 (10 Minutes)**

*What is bereavement? What is the process of grief? What is loss?*

Facilitator will discuss the following.

- **Bereavement** refers to the condition of being bereaved, or having lost a loved one to death.
- **Loss** can be described as a singular occurrence where something you once had is gone; in this context, loss refers to the permanent loss of death. Loss can also be felt leading up to a death as well; for instance, if a person is showing symptoms of Alzheimers, their loved
ones may feel a sense of loss regarding the person’s cognitive decline, even if they are still living.

- **Grieving** is the process by which a person comes to term with a loss. Grieving has many different forms, depending on a person’s racial identity, culture, religion, and gender.
  
  - Symptoms of grief can display in several ways, (Rando, 1984) including but not limited to the following:
    
    - **Physical**: fatigue, crying, sleep problems, appetite changes, numbness.
    - **Emotional**: sadness, guilt, anxiety, fear, anger, depression, loneliness.
    - **Cognitive**: confusion, persistent thoughts of the deceased, lack of control.
    - **Spiritual**: doubt in faith, questioning beliefs, turn to religion for comfort.
    - **Social**: limit or decline in social contact, withdrawal, feelings of isolation.

- Discuss: have you ever spoken with someone who recently lost a loved one? What was the conversation like?

**SLIDE 4 (10 Minutes)**

**Students and Bereavement**

Facilitator will discuss bereavement as it pertains to college students.

- In a 12-month period, 22 to 30% of college undergraduates are experiencing, or have recently experienced the death of a loved one (Balk, 2008). *(This question from the pre-test is true.)* When looking at a longer time frame of 24 months, this statistic increases to 34 to 40% (Balk, 2008).
  
  - Quick quiz: If your floor has 100 residents, how many might be dealing with a loss within the last 12 months? *(On average, anywhere between 22-30.)*
In addition to the effects of grieving discussed on the previous slide, students dealing with bereavement are prone to the following negative effects:

- Reduced likelihood to achieve honors.
- Reduced likelihood to persist to graduation.
- Poor or degrading mental health.
- Withdrawal from relationships and social activities.
- Increase in anxiety and isolation from peers.
  - (Cupit, Servaty-Seib, Parikh, Walker, & Martin, 2016).
- Difficulty or discomfort approaching campus authorities for help.
  - (Wrenn, 2002).

**SLIDE 5 (10 Minutes)**

*Identifying bereaved students*

Facilitator will discuss tactics to identify and connect with students who may be experiencing bereavement.

Students dealing with a loss may display the following behaviors:

- Hesitance or refusal to leave their room.
- Intentional self-distancing from peers.
- Drop in class attendance rates.
- Cannot complete assignments on time.
- May or may not know how to ask for help.
Because RA’s have their own responsibilities to attend to, it’s not feasible to expect them to know everything about every resident at all times. If any uncharacteristic behaviors are observed, Resident Assistants should be comfortable asking questions and approaching difficult conversations surrounding grief. Further, they should practice active, empathetic listening if and when their residents approach them for help. Given the close-knit community nature of residence halls, students may identify their Resident Assistant as a trustworthy source to receive assistance with the sensitive issue of bereavement.

An important consideration to make is that students displaying the above behaviors may not be dealing with a loss, but might be experiencing another form of distress such as anxiety, depression, or stress. Asking questions and maintaining an approachable demeanor will enable RA’s to refer students to appropriate means of support on or off campus.

**SLIDE 6 (10 Minutes)**

*Connecting with bereaved students*

Facilitator will address tactics for connecting and following up with bereaved students to offer them support. To support bereaved students, Resident Assistants can utilize principles of the following theories. For the sake of brevity and ease of retention, these theories have been summarized and condensed.

**Mattering and Marginality (1989)**

This theory examines the dichotomy of mattering and marginalization. In this case, students become a part of the margins when they experience a loss. To mitigate this sense of otherness, students should be made to feel as though they matter. Mattering can instill a sense of value and
self-esteem, which helps the student stay engaged in their campus community (Schlossberg, 1989).

Mattering can be achieved by the following actions:

- **Personal check-ins with the student.**
  - Physically visiting the student, leaving notes to say hello, or emailing the student to see how they’re doing and if they need any guidance. Be sure to respect the student’s wishes for personal time and space.

- **Rcollecting and referencing components of past conversations.**
  - Actively listening, taking notes and referencing past conversations instills a sense of being heard and valued.

- **Displaying interest in the students’ academic or social endeavors.**
  - Asking about classes, self-care habits, or personal hobbies to foster personal connections.

- **Inviting a student to participate in social activities and events.**
  - Receiving a personal invitation to dine with peers, attend a sporting event, go to a social event, or to get some coffee can positively impact a student’s sense of self-worth.

Discuss: Can anybody suggest another way to instill a sense of Mattering? Take one or two responses.

Transition Theory (1995)
Transition theory states that certain events, or “transitions” can affect a student’s sense of the world. An event typically involves a change in roles, responsibilities, or assumptions. Death is one such event. Schlossberg identified four factors that determine a person’s ability to cope with a transition event.

- **Situation**
  - What is the timing of the loss? Was it sudden, or expected? Is a role or responsibility change involved?

- **Self**
  - How does the student personally perceive the event? How does the student’s identity contribute to their perception of the event?

- **Support**
  - Is the student receiving support from family? Friends? Community?

- **Strategies**
  - What can be done to manage the stress of the event?

Thinking about how these factors factor into a student’s experience can aid RA’s in providing support and assistance to their bereaved students.

**5 Stages of Grief**

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969) articulates five main stages of the grieving process. Resident Assistants need not memorize these steps, but they may provide insight to potential responses or behaviors of bereaved students.

**Denial** (or Disbelief): No, this can’t be happening. Not me.
Anger: Why me? Why did this have to happen?

Bargaining: What if I had done something different?

Depression: What’s the point of going on if my loved one isn’t here?

Acceptance: This happened, and this is okay.

The 5 Stages of Grief are not linear, and they may take a long time to move through. Some people may experience each stage. Others may skip stages entirely. Others still may experience each stage, and then go back through them again. Grief is different for every single person.

Facilitators should emphasize that Resident Assistants are not and should not function as counselors or therapists. Their objective is to provide a listening ear, empathy, and referrals to resources on and off campus.

SLIDE 7 (10-20 Minutes, depending on size of group.)

Role Play Scenarios

Facilitator will divide the participants into groups and randomly assign scenarios to practice. Each group should be composed of at least three people; two to hold a simulated role play conversation, and one to observe. Each participant should get the opportunity to act as a bereaved student and as a responding paraprofessional. These role play scenarios offer a low-risk opportunity for participants to practice their supporting skills.

- Role Play Scenario 1
  - Your resident, Rashid, hasn’t been himself. He hasn’t been hanging in the lounge like he usually does, and his roommates have told you he’s been skipping class.
You see Rashid in the laundry room one day and ask how he’s doing. He tells you his father has a terminal illness, and he isn’t sure when, but the doctors say his dad will die soon. What do you do?

- **Role Play Scenario 2**
  
  A girl on your floor, Penelope, is spending a lot of time by herself in the lounge. One night, you walk by and see Penelope alone. You notice that it looks like she’s been crying. You ask her what’s wrong and she informs you that her best friend recently passed away unexpectedly.

- **Role Play Scenario 3**
  
  Your resident Max approaches you during your office hours. They inform you that their grandmother, who had raised them since birth, recently died. They are unsure if they will be able to continue their education due to financial worries.

  What do you do to help this student?

- **Role Play Scenario 4**
  
  Your supervisor informs you that one of the students on your floor just experienced a death in their family and asks you to check in with the student.

  How do you approach the student?

Discuss: What was easy/difficult to do in these role plays? How did these conversations make you feel?

Discuss: What are ways you can make sure these students feel valued and recognized in the time following their loss?

**SLIDE 8 (15 minutes)**
**Review and Consolidate**

Facilitators will pass out copies of the opening pre-assessment. Re-taking the test will serve to consolidate the session’s key points, acknowledge the participant’s progress, and highlight differences in opinion a participant may have after completing the workshop.

- What are some emotions that come to mind when thinking about death, grieving, or loss in general?
- Do you know anybody who has lost a loved one? Have you? What do you wish people had said or done?
- Have you comforted someone who dealt with a loss? What did you say or do? Would you do anything differently?
- What are some euphemisms you have heard about death? For example, “kicked the bucket.” What do you think about these phrases?
- True or False…
  - In a 12-month period, between 22-30% of college students on average have experienced a loss. [True]
  - The Five Stages of Grief (Denial, Anger, Depression, Bargaining, Acceptance) are linear and time-bound. [False]
  - Grief is unique for every person. [True]
- Rate your comfortability with the following;
  - Approaching a student in distress
    - Completely confident
    - Mostly confident
    - Mostly unconfident
Participants should compare their progress at the end of the session to their results from the beginning of the session. Time permitting, the facilitator may take an opportunity to ask the following discussion questions:

- Did anything surprise you about the content you learned today?
- Did somebody do a particularly good job during the role play scenarios? What did they say that caught your attention?
- How can practicing empathy benefit you outside your paraprofessional roles?
- Is there anything that wasn’t covered in this session that you think could be useful to know?

As the session concludes, facilitators should thank the participants for their participation and encourage questions. Facilitators should ensure that each participant receives a copy of the Resource Reference Sheet found below.
**Resource Reference Sheet for Supporting and Identifying Bereaved Students**

Grief and loss affect every person differently. Just as no two lives are the same, no two experiences of loss are the same. This worksheet contains helpful materials and references to help support bereaved students.

**Typical responses to grief:**

**Physical:** fatigue, crying, sleep problems, appetite changes, numbness, dry mouth, tightness in chest.

**Emotional:** sadness, guilt, anxiety, fear, anger, depression, loneliness, panic, relief, emptiness, regret.

**Cognitive:** confusion, persistent thoughts of the deceased, lack of control, detachment, forgetfulness, difficulty concentrating.

**Spiritual:** doubt in faith, questioning beliefs, turning to religion for comfort, lack of meaning or direction, blaming a higher power.

**Social:** limit or decline in social contact, withdrawal, feelings of isolation, refusal to participate in social events, won’t initiate social contact.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Helpful responses to a grieving person (Do’s)</th>
<th>Unhelpful responses to a grieving person (Don'ts)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Provide a listening ear for the person to vent their feelings.</td>
<td>• Asking insensitive questions to satisfy one’s own curiosity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Assure the person their feelings are normal and valid.</td>
<td>• Saying “I know just how you feel”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Encourage storytelling.</td>
<td>• Saying “Just move on” or “get over it”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Promote activities that give the griever a sense of control or creativity.</td>
<td>• Dismissing the connection of the deceased to the griever; “It was only your great uncle, didn’t you see this coming?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Encourage and ask questions about self-care routines.</td>
<td>• Stating that the loss is “God’s will”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Connect the griever to counseling support, religious or spiritual services, etc.</td>
<td>• Telling the griever not to cry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Refer to the following campus resources for help: [<em>Campus-specific resources can be included here</em>]</td>
<td>• Avoiding the topic entirely.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Pushing one’s personal beliefs on the griever.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Training Workshop References/Further Reading


Appendix C

Student Support Coordinator Job Description

This full-time, year-round position works with faculty, administration, and staff to provide support, guidance, and representation for students facing bereavement or other circumstances requiring a leave of absence. The position reporting line may vary based on the structure of the institution.

Responsibilities include:

1. Opening lines of communication between students and their faculty.
2. Contacting professors to inform them of an extended student absence.
3. Facilitate communication between professors and students.
4. Maintain an awareness and understanding of the campus policies.
5. Develop, implement, and maintain a student bereavement policy.
6. Facilitate the creation or maintenance of a website with resources for bereaved students.
7. Collecting data relevant to job function.
8. Promoting a campus culture of compassion and empathy.

Required Qualifications:

1. Bachelor’s degree in Higher Education, Counseling, or related field
2. Two years’ experience in Higher Education or related field
3. Excellent written and verbal skills
4. Strong problem solving and decision making skills

Preferred Qualifications:

1. Master’s degree in Higher Education, Counseling, or related field
2. Experience working directly with students in support capacity (Wellness, Advising, Residence Life, etc.)
Appendix D

Example Statement of Bereavement Policy for Inclusion in Course Syllabi

Student Bereavement Policy Statement

College University maintains a commitment to student success, and we recognize that experiencing a loss during college is extremely difficult. If you or someone you know is experiencing or has recently experienced a loss, there are resources available to help. Bereaved students in need of an extended absence, counseling support, or academic assistance may contact the Student Support Coordinator at SSC@CU.edu or Campus Counseling Services at Counseling@CU.edu. More information regarding College University’s bereavement policy can be found online at www.link.edu or in your student handbook.
Appendix E

Example Exit Survey Questions for Student Support Coordinator

After meeting with the Student Support Coordinator, students may anonymously participate in an exit survey to gauge the efficiency of these services and provide insight for future improvements.

Some questions may include the following:

1. How did you hear about this service?
   a. Referral from Resident Assistant
   b. Referral from Faculty or Staff member
   c. Found in course syllabi
   d. Found in student handbook
   e. Accessed through website
   f. Other (please write-in): ______________________

2. In what way did the SSC assist you? Select all that apply:
   a. Referred me to counseling services
   b. Informed my professors about absences
   c. Assisted with Financial Aid Questions
   d. Assisted with Housing Questions
   e. Assisted with Meal Plan Questions
   f. Other, please write-in: __________________

Rate your level of agreement with the following statements, from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree.
3. The Student Support Coordinator was easily accessible and approachable.
   a. Strongly Agree
   b. Agree
   c. Neither agree nor disagree
   d. Disagree
   e. Strongly Disagree

4. I feel as though my concerns were adequately addressed.
   a. Strongly Agree
   b. Agree
   c. Neither agree nor disagree
   d. Disagree
   e. Strongly Disagree

5. The Bereavement Policy outlined by the university is easy to understand and utilize.
   a. Strongly Agree
   b. Agree
   c. Neither agree nor disagree
   d. Disagree
   e. Strongly Disagree

6. I feel as though my needs were addressed in a timely fashion.
   a. Strongly Agree
   b. Agree
   c. Neither agree nor disagree
   d. Disagree
e. Strongly Disagree

7. The Student Support Coordinator helped me advocate for myself.
   a. Strongly Agree
   b. Agree
   c. Neither agree nor disagree
   d. Disagree
   e. Strongly Disagree

8. I am more likely to continue my education/graduate from College University.
   a. Strongly Agree
   b. Agree
   c. Neither agree nor disagree
   d. Disagree
   e. Strongly Disagree

9. I was treated considerately and respectfully by the Student Support Coordinator.
   a. Strongly Agree
   b. Agree
   c. Neither agree nor disagree
   d. Disagree
   e. Strongly Disagree

10. Do you have any feedback regarding the services provided by the Student Support Coordinator?

____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
Appendix F

RA Bereavement Training Assessment Interview

To evaluate the success of the residential bereavement training workshop, facilitators or RA supervisors may consider asking their RAs the following questions. This can be administered directly following the training workshop to assess the learning progress, or at the commencement of the academic year to assess the utilization of the skills learned in the workshop.

Rate your level of agreement with the following statements, from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree.

1. The bereavement workshop was easy to understand and provided useful materials.
   a. Strongly Agree
   b. Agree
   c. Neither agree nor disagree
   d. Disagree
   e. Strongly Disagree

2. I utilized skills from the bereavement workshop in my work with students.
   a. Strongly Agree
   b. Agree
   c. Neither agree nor disagree
   d. Disagree
   e. Strongly Disagree

3. As a result of the bereavement workshop, I felt more confident approaching difficult conversations with my residents.
   a. Strongly Agree
b. Agree

c. Neither agree nor disagree

d. Disagree

e. Strongly Disagree

4. As a result of the bereavement workshop, I have a deeper understanding of grief and loss.

a. Strongly Agree

b. Agree

c. Neither agree nor disagree

d. Disagree

e. Strongly Disagree

5. As a result of the bereavement workshop, I was better prepared to refer my students to resources on or off campus.

a. Strongly Agree

b. Agree

c. Neither agree nor disagree

d. Disagree

e. Strongly Disagree

6. I understand the importance of supporting students dealing with loss.

a. Strongly Agree

b. Agree

c. Neither agree nor disagree

d. Disagree

e. Strongly Disagree
7. I utilized the reference materials provided after the training in my work with students.
   a. Strongly Agree
   b. Agree
   c. Neither agree nor disagree
   d. Disagree
   e. Strongly Disagree

8. I feel as though the session provided ample time to cover the material.
   a. Strongly Agree
   b. Agree
   c. Neither agree nor disagree
   d. Disagree
   e. Strongly Disagree

9. The topic matter was addressed sensitively and promoted an empathetic approach.
   a. Strongly Agree
   b. Agree
   c. Neither agree nor disagree
   d. Disagree
   e. Strongly Disagree

10. Do you have any feedback for the facilitators regarding this session, its content, or suggestions for improvement?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________